Economic and social cohesion: consequences of enlargement, policy after 2006. 1st report

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The committee adopted the report by Elisabeth SCHROEDTER (Greens/EFA, D) drawn up in response to the Commission's 1st progress report on economic and social cohesion. Looking ahead to enlargement, the committee stressed that the solidarity between the wealthy and less wealthy EU Member States which had been a hallmark of cohesion policy must remain an integral part of an enlarged Union. However, cohesion policy needed to be reviewed, improved and adapted to cater for the new, specific needs and socio-economic realities which would prevail after enlargement. Flexibility would be needed in the planning and implementation of the policy, and the committee felt that there should be gradual decentralisation of the management of funds, subject to proper monitoring. Turning to the objectives set out in the Commission report, MEPs felt that, when it came to identifying regions in need of assistance, the per capita GDP criterion should not be the only indicator, as proposed by the Commission; instead, other indicators reflecting regional sensitivities and development difficulties should also be taken into account. They were also critical of the fact that no mention had been made of the Objective 2 regions and stressed the need for continued Community support for those areas. The Commission was urged to make proposals concerning the future of the Objective 2 regions before the publication of its 3rd progress report. The committee also called for the new cohesion policy to accord priority to regions suffering from serious geographical or natural handicaps (remote and island regions, mountainous regions, etc.). The report called for early scheduling for the 2007-2013 period to ensure that EU funds were available to the regions on 1 January 2007 and urged the Commission to propose a suitable time-frame to Parliament and the Council. Other recommendations included introducing the principle of "one programme - one fund", adopting a simple but effective control procedure, ensuring strict application of the principle of subsidiarity and implementing structural policy measures by means of tripartite contracts with the regions and Member States in future. The Commission was urged to come up with proposals for guaranteeing greater consistency of EU policies, to the benefit of economic and social cohesion. Lastly, the committee said that the EU's regional and cohesion policy should draw on the guidelines set out in the European Spatial Development Perspective aimed at promoting polycentric and balanced development of Community territory.