The craft industry and small enterprises: keys to growth and employment in Europe, 2nd conference in Berlin

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Adopting the report by Mrs Helena TORRES MARQUES (PSE, P), the European Parliament approved the Commission communication on the role of SMEs in generating growth and employment but deplored the fact that, despite general recognition of the role played by this sector, incoherence prevailed in the implementation of policies and programmes designed for SMEs. Regretting in particular that the Council had not decided to adopt the regulation on loan guarantees to promote employment (ELISE), it highlighted the fact that small enterprises face a disproportionately heavy administrative burden and called for everything to be done to reduce the costs inherent in this burden. Efforts also needed to be made to simplify regulations without eroding environmental and health standards. The European Parliament also considered that a network of organizations representing craft industries and SMEs needed to be set up in order to identify the needs of these enterprises with regard to certification or standardization. Parliament also considered that programmes devoted to SMEs, especially Community programmes, needed to be better geared to their requirements. SMEs therefore needed to be redefined on the basis of the number of employees (fewer than 10 for micro-enterprises, between 10 and 50 for small enterprises, between 50 and 250 for medium-sized enterprises), the level of tied sales, turnover and the balance sheet. It called on the Commission to ensure that SMEs had better access to various programmes designed for them and to carry out a study into the level of participation in Community programmes. Parliament also emphasized teaching and training, which should be geared towards promoting the spirit of initiative and enterprise; at present a sort of cowardice prevailed in this area. Children of school age needed to be taught how to set up in business and schools should foster the qualities needed to do so and tell children what support they can rely on. Similarly, the Commission and the Member States were urged to revive the interest of young people in a career in the craft industries. Parliament also observed that most SMEs fold as the result of late payments and called for a proposal for a directive to deal with this situation. Efforts also needed to be made to give financial support for environmentally-friendly SMEs and SMEs interested in the information society. Parliament also emphasized the importance of interregional and local SME interfaces and called for action in this area, including action to promote local women's initiatives. Welcoming the results of the round table organized by the SMEs and the banks, it called for mutual guarantee schemes to be introduced and for schemes whereby banks guaranteed SME funding. Measures to reduce VAT where also urgently required. Finally, Parliament emphasized the precarious position of women working in small and medium-sized enterprises and called for initiatives to increase the numbers of better qualified women working in this sector.