AGENDA 2000: economic and social cohesion

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In adopting the report by Mrs Elisabeth SCHROEDTER (V, D) on economic and social cohesion within the framework of AGENDA 2000, the European Parliament takes the view that the European Union's philosophy of integration is credible only if it continues to make economic and social cohesion a political priority. Welcoming the Commission's plan to reform the Structural Funds on the lines of concentration, simplification and efficiency, Parliament calls for account to be taken of the following objectives: - sustainable development, - a high level of employment achieved by paying particular attention to SMEs, - innovation and incorporation of new technologies, - an appropriate level of social protection, - the combatting of social exclusion, - a better quality of life, - an improved environment, - equal opportunities for men and women, - guarantee of a European added value when responsibilities are shifted, as planned, to the Member States It calls for continued priority to be given to aid for Objective 1 regions on the basis of a per capita GDP lower than 75% of the Community average. It believes that 2/3 of all Structural Fund resources should be allocated to these regions. It welcomes the Commission's proposal to allow all regions of the Union which will no longer be eligible under Objectives 1, 2 and 5b a transitional phase tailored to their requirements. It welcomes the idea of providing guaranteed funding for rural development as part of agricultural reform and urges that Parliament be allowed to participate in assessment and budget control regarding rural development programmes. It proposes the splitting of Objective 2 into two sub-categories - industrial/urban and rural and fisheries - with their own specific eligibility criteria, objectives and financial quotas - to ensure specific and guaranteed support for the rural environment. It calls for Objective 3 to be focussed on support for local development and employment initiatives. It calls on the Commission to ensure that resources for Community initiatives which have been limited are allocated only to projects with a European added value. It calls for special aid for regions which, given their geographic location, share an external border with applicant countries, particularly within the framework of INTERREG. Parliament supports moves by the Commission to improve the effectiveness and profitability of the Structural Funds while expressing doubt as to the viability of the 10% reserve system. It expresses the hope that EIB and EIF loans are used as supplementary funding in addition to Structural Fund subsidies. It calls on the Commission not to make savings which undermine the principle of economic and social cohesion by penalizing the failure to disperse appropriations through a decision not to reincorporate those appropriations into the budget in the context of multiannual programming. It suggests the introduction of provisional arrangements for establishing programmes prior to the final adoption of the structural fund regulations so as to guarantee the prompt participation of all parties concerned. It also calls on the Council to adopt structural fund rules in time to ensure that the programming phase can commence on schedule. The European Parliament welcomes the extension of the cohesion fund beyond the year 2000 for Member States whose per capita GDP is less than 90% of the Community average. Concerning enlargement the European Parliament considers that provision should be made for a specific horizontal financial instrument designed to ensure gradual and optimum integration of the applicant countries. In the fisheries sector it calls on the Commission to recognize the particular needs of fisheries areas. Finally, it considers it essential that the Union functions in a transparent manner and to involve the social partners more closely in the activities of the ESF.