

European cultural and architectural heritage at local level: promotion of an unrecognised heritage

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by its chairman, Nikolaos SIFUNAKIS (PES, GR), on the protection of the European natural, architectural and cultural heritage in rural and island regions. The report stressed that the cultural heritage, which encompasses both tangible and intangible elements, is of particular importance in rural areas which "are feeling the effects of abandonment, dwindling populations and economic stagnation", and pointed out that conservation of the cultural heritage could provide a foundation for further social and economic development.

The committee emphasised that action taken in rural and island areas must ensure a sustainable balance between population and environment, an integrated approach to traditionally agricultural areas and participation by the local populace in the drafting and implementation of policies. It proposed a number of specific measures to develop the cultural heritage sector, such as:

- a systematic survey of the rural heritage and the creation of a legislative framework to guarantee its protection;
- funding for the restoration of local monuments and the continuation of traditional farming methods;
- comprehensive restoration of traditional habitats and traditional forms of architecture;
- conservation of local know-how and traditional professions;
- training for professionals involved in the use and management of space, architecture, building restoration and repair and related activities in how to conserve the specific nature of the heritage while meeting present-day needs;
- training for craftsmen and suppliers of traditional materials.

Member States were also urged, in cooperation with the Commission, to promote the protection and conservation of their cultural heritage through the Structural Funds and the existing LEADER +, URBAN II and INTERREG III initiatives, and to support the development of sustainable alternative tourism in small traditional communities with the assistance of various other Community financial instruments. MEPs added that the Commission and the Member States should not provide Community funding for projects which would "demonstrably result in destruction of valuable parts of our cultural heritage".

Lastly, the report called for greater cooperation with the Council of Europe in this field and proposed introducing a 'European Cultural Heritage Year' with the aim of making the European public more aware of the importance of promoting Europe's cultural heritage.