Islands and natural and economic constraints in the context of regional policy

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Francesco MUSOTTO (EPP-ED, IT) on the islands and natural and economic constraints in the context of the regional policy. The report reiterated Parliament's frequently-repeated position that more help was needed to enable the EU's island regions to overcome their difficulties and to reduce regional disparities.

As far as the 2007-2013 Structural Funds are concerned, the committee regretted that the Council had not taken on board certain proposals put forward by Parliament, such as the possibility of increasing the co-financing rate for areas affected by more than one geographical or natural handicap. It said that the 2007-2013 operational programmes for island regions should focus on support for economic diversification and much-needed infrastructure works.

The report stressed the need for more flexibility in the implementation of existing and future state aid policies, and said that the Commission should consider allowing state aid to be granted to islands "where fuel and energy costs clearly adversely affect the competitiveness of the communities living on them", given that fluctuations in fuel costs can make transportation between island regions and mainland Europe "significantly more burdensome". It called on the Commission to include in its next regional state aid guidelines a regime allowing operating aids to be extended to all island regions which are not island states or inland islands. The Commission should also consider what adjustments are needed to the 'market investor' test for state aid to better reflect the realities of life on islands where such investors may be lacking.

MEPs stressed the importance of tourism for the economy of the island regions and called on the Commission to carry out a cross-sectoral study paying special attention to opportunities to support sustainable tourism within the regional strategies of islands that are far from centres of population. The committee also welcomed the efforts made towards a 'holistic' Community maritime policy extending beyond the legal borders of the EU, saying that it would facilitate the development of strong commercial, economic and political relations between the Community islands and neighbouring countries.

Among its other recommendations, the committee urged the Commission to pay particular attention to islands in the context of the European Spatial Observation Network (ESPON) in order to acquire a thorough knowledge of their situation. The Member States should establish specific mechanisms for gathering and sending relevant local data to the Network, while the Commission should update the island statistics last gathered in 2003 and define "more pertinent statistical indicators" better suited to measuring development. The Commission was also asked to undertake and present to Parliament, on regular basis, a 'special needs assessment' study of island regions indicating the issues of specific concern and proposing measures to address them.

MEPs suggested that the Commission should set up, within the Directorate-General for Regional Policy, an administrative unit for the islands along the lines of the existing unit for the outermost regions, to ensure that the special needs of islands and their permanent and seasonal populations are systematically taken into account in policy development. Lastly, given that there has been considerable illegal immigration into the Community island regions within the last year, the report urged the Commission to look into the creation of a European coastguard body to assist the islands, in parallel with FRONTEX, in monitoring the EU's external borders.