Impact and consequences of structural policies on EU cohesion

2006/2181(INI) - 12/04/2007

The committee adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Francisca Pleguezuelos AGUILAR (PES, ES) on the impact and effects of the structural policies on EU cohesion. The report set out recommendations for maximising the impact of the new cohesion policy in social, economic, regional and governance terms.

Emphasising the crucial role played by cohesion policy in supporting the internal market in terms of the trade and jobs created through projects cofinanced by the EU, the report called for the development of an integrated structural policy that combines support from the structural and cohesion funds with the other Community policies. MEPs urged the Commission and Member States to improve the European Social Fund's contribution to implementing the European Employment Strategy by strengthening the relationship between them. This improvement should subsequently be demonstrated using relevant indicators to promote equal opportunities.

The committee urged the Commission to explore new ways of combining structural policies and instruments with other Community policies and instruments so as to increase synergies for promoting competitiveness, sustainable research and innovation. As far as research is concerned, the Commission and the Council were urged to assess whether earmarking at least 20% of structural funds for R&D and innovation for the next programming period was viable, and to focus not only on major projects and centres of excellence but also on smaller projects in less favoured regions, particularly those which contribute to sustainable regional development. Among other recommendations, the committee called for the establishment of regional and local "technology facilitators", using existing resources such as the Euro Info Centre and the Innovation Relay Centre networks, which will be financed by the structural funds and associated with regional projects, technology parks, clusters and networks, and will invigorate innovation for business by facilitating access to European aid schemes and programmes.

The report also called on the Commission, the Member States, the regions and the local authorities to investigate which instruments are best suited to securing a territorial balance between urban and rural areas, encouraging an integrated strategic approach to the development of urban, suburban and rural areas and encouraging the exchange of good practice, especially in regional and sectoral networks for improving the management of funds.

For measuring the degree of cohesion, the committee called for other territorial indicators to be used apart from per capita GDP, such as the rate and quality of employment, the level of disparities in GDP between neighbouring regions, the decentralisation and accessibility index, the infrastructure and transport provision, the level of research/innovation, education and training activity and the diversity of production in the area. The report also encouraged the Commission to analyse the leverage effect of the structural funds in attracting private investments in the context of the new cohesion policy and to underline the need for cooperation between the public and the private sectors.

Given that the shortage of administrative capacity can be a major obstacle to maximising the impact of the cohesion policies, MEPs called on the Commission to develop the instrument represented by tripartite contracts and to continue the process of administrative capacity-building. Lastly, the committee called on the Commission to consider actions to raise the visibility of structural interventions, to monitor more closely the application of mandatory publicity measures and to punish the Member States concerned "in the event of serious breach".