

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Communication from the Commission — Building an inclusive Europe'

(2000/C 317/15)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the Communication from the Commission 'Building an Inclusive Europe' (COM(2000) 79 final);

having regard to the decision taken by its Bureau on 2 June 1999, acting under the fifth paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to issue an opinion on the matter, and to direct Commission 5 for Social Policy, Public Health, Consumer Protection, research and tourism to prepare the opinion on this subject;

having regard to the draft opinion (CdR 84/2000 rev. 1) adopted by Commission 5 on 18 April 2000 [rapporteur: Mrs Hanham (UK/PPE)];

whereas the Communication is addressed to the Extraordinary European Council in Lisbon;

whereas the Communication is one of three, dealing respectively with inclusion, social trends and employment, which highlight forthcoming initiatives to further the common objective of enhancing competitiveness and the cohesion of the Union,

adopted the following opinion at its 34th plenary session held on 14 and 15 June 2000 (meeting of 14 June).

The Committee of the Regions:

- employers,
1. welcomes the Communication and the initiative it proposes which aims to promote more inclusive economies and societies and which is in response to strong expectations expressed by Parliament, non-governmental organisations, social partners and local and regional authorities;
 - providers of local information and research;
 2. welcomes the important recognition by the Commission in the Communication that combating social exclusion is first and foremost the responsibility of Member states and their national, regional and local authorities;
 3. emphasises the key role played by the local and regional spheres of government in implementing the policies designed to attain these objectives, in their capacity as:
 - community leaders and key players in local regeneration partnerships, bringing together the local public bodies and agencies dealing with health and crime, as well as community and voluntary groups,
 - providers and enablers of services to all people in the community,
 - catalysts of economic activity and employment,
 4. agrees that social exclusion is a multidimensional phenomenon (paragraph 2.2) which goes beyond issues of unemployment and access to the labour market, and spans also education (including information technology (IT) illiteracy), health, environment, housing, culture, access to rights and family support. These are all areas in which local and regional authorities are actively involved, often in partnership with other public bodies and agencies and community and voluntary groups;
 5. agrees that the aim of a social inclusion policy should be equal opportunities for all (paragraph 2.2) but nonetheless stresses that the aim should be equal access to quality services;
 6. welcomes the objective to provide access to all to the Knowledge Society and stresses that local and regional authorities have a role to play both in making services accessible to all sections in the community and in taking a comprehensive view of services in their area by using

- information and communications technology to interact more effectively with citizens, to facilitate participation in leisure and cultural activities, to promote active citizenship, and to ensure that people are able to participate in democratic processes;
7. welcomes the recognition in the Communication that the challenge is both to provide better assistance to those who are socially excluded or who are at risk from social exclusion, and to actively address the structural barriers to social inclusion thus reducing the actual incidences of social exclusion;
 8. welcomes the emphasis within the Communication, and in the conclusions of the Lisbon Summit, on mainstreaming the promotion of social inclusion into Member States' employment, education and training, health and housing policies;
 9. supports the concept of all levels of government (local, national and European) proofing policies at an early stage in their development for their impact on poverty/social exclusion;
 10. recognises the relevance of the four broad objectives proposed by the Commission which are to:
 - strengthen the pro-active approach to social inclusion and in particular mainstream social inclusion within the framework of EU policies,
 - develop common social exclusion, as well as social inclusion, indicators in order to analyse and monitor trends and policies,
 - provide access for all to the Knowledge Society,
 - promote growth and take advantage of the economic growth expected for the next decade,

and emphasises the following points in relation to these objectives:

 - the value of developing national, local and regional indicators to enable comparison to be made across Europe of information from these levels,
 - the importance of ensuring that skills are developed at all levels in order to use and interpret common indicators,
 - the importance of ensuring that economic growth is underpinned by sustainable development principles, thereby meeting environmental and social considerations;
 11. stresses that the following factors will facilitate the development of comparable indicators for Member States;
 - the sharing of information across all levels of Government — local, regional, national and European,
 - the development of cross-cutting indicators,
 - the development of local and regional (as well as national) indicators,
 - the involvement of local and regional authorities in developing this initiative (local and regional authorities have valuable knowledge and experience to offer in developing common indicators of social exclusion and social inclusion and how they fit local and regional circumstances),
 - the development of skills to ensure that local and regional authorities, and other agencies and groups have the capacity to interpret and use the data on indicators (with reference to the Fifth framework programme which includes a key action on 'increasing human research potential and the socio-economic knowledge base');

and in particular, requests that the Commission formally involve representatives of local and regional government in consultation on the development of this initiative;
 12. recognises that whilst employment is the route out of social exclusion for the majority of people, there should be adequate social protection for those who are unable to participate in the labour market and for those who move between low paid jobs and periods of unemployment;
 13. welcomes the recognition that social exclusion trends are obvious in rural as well as urban areas (paragraph 2.3.4) and recommends that the Communication states that the implementation of the four broad objectives by Member States and the EU applies to both rural and urban areas;
 14. agrees that 'Discrimination and xenophobia can exacerbate social exclusion, in particular for immigrants' (paragraph 2.2) and recommends that the Communication makes reference to the following issues:
 - language difficulties as a barrier to social inclusion,
 - the importance of access to quality health, education, training and social protection for asylum seekers and refugees,

- the need for this initiative to apply to asylum seekers and refugees as a group within society;
15. agrees that the initiative should reinforce the integration of the gender dimension of exclusion (paragraph 5.2.1) and recommends that a reference be made at this point in the Communication to the particular needs of single parent households and also to exclusion caused by discrimination on the grounds of race, age, disability, religion or belief and sexual orientation, having regard to the package of anti-discrimination measures published on 25 November 1999. If the Charter of Fundamental Rights were to be adopted, it would become the most suitable legal instrument to identify all forms of discrimination;
16. agrees that younger people must have extensive access to basic skills (section 4) but recommends that a reference be made also to the needs of older people, in relation not only to information and communications technology but also to adequate social protection and health care [The Committee of the Regions Opinion on the 1999 International Year for Older People 442/98⁽¹⁾ (Keymer and Haijanen) calls for a positive approach to 'active ageing', including: progressive and flexible retirement schemes to ease the transition from full-time employment; comprehensive strategies for flexible employment and retraining, life-long learning, income maintenance, housing, care and participation; pro-active measures to combat discrimination; and promotion of an inclusive and positive approach to ageing and improved societal perceptions of older people and intergenerational solidarity]. In this context, the Committee hopes that the role of local and regional authorities in giving support to citizens of all ages will be clearly defined. The actions of these authorities do indeed enable different generations to participate in economic and social life. Similarly, solidarity between generations must also have its place;
17. suggests that in order to facilitate the implementation of the identification and exchange of good practice, the Commission should:
- develop a European database of good practice in promoting social inclusion, including a databank of national, local and regional indicators,
 - consult the Committee of the Regions on the structure of this database,
 - seek information and statistics from associations of local and regional authorities in Member States in compiling this database,
 - apply an open method of coordination by combining national and regional policies through setting specific targets and adopting measures taking into account national and regional differences, as recommended in the conclusions of the Lisbon Summit;
18. requests that local and regional government be represented on the High Level Working Party on Social Protection, to be involved in establishing commonly agreed indicators;
19. calls on the European Commission to incorporate the issues raised in this opinion when considering any measures — including the drafting of an action programme — following on from this communication and the Lisbon Summit;
20. calls on the European Council and the European Parliament to recognise their contribution in ensuring that the local and regional role is properly recognised in this policy area.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 374, 23.12.1999, p. 36.

Brussels, 14 June 2000.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Jos CHABERT