1.13. The COR regrets that the projects established under the Commission’s demonstration programme may not continue to exist. Moreover the Committee feels that the expertise and practices gained in these areas will be lost. The Committee therefore reaffirms the desirability of continuing existing appropriate projects and establishing further activities.


The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Jos CHABERT

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on ‘The structure and goals of European regional policy in the context of enlargement and globalisation: opening of the debate’

(2001/C 148/08)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the decision of its Bureau of 13 June 2000, in accordance with the fifth paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to draw up an opinion on the Structure and goals of European regional policy in the context of enlargement and globalisation: opening of the debate and to instruct Commission 1 for Regional Policy, Structural Funds, Economic and Social Cohesion and Cross-border and Inter-regional Cooperation to draw up this opinion;

having regard to the Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 13 April 2000 on the 6th Periodic Report on the social and economic situation and development of the regions of the European Union (CdR 388/99 fin) (1), which finds that regional disparities in Europe have grown over the last ten years;

having regard to the Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 14 January 1999 on the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) — (CdR 266/98 fin) (2);

having regard to the Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 18 November 1999 on the Structural Funds and their coordination with the Cohesion Fund Guidance for programmes in the period 2000-2006 (COM(1999) 344 final) — (CdR 217/99 fin) (3);

having regard to the Resolution of the Committee of the Regions of 10 March 1999 on the Reform of the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund in the context of the political debate on the Agenda 2000 package (CdR 1/99 fin) (4);

(2) OJ C 93, 6.4.1999, p. 36.
(3) OJ C 57, 29.2.2000, p. 56.
having regard to the Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 18 September 1997 on the First cohesion report — 1996 (COM(1996) 542 final) — (CdR 76/97 fin) (1);


having regard to the Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 19 November 1997 on Views of the regions and local authorities on arrangements for European Structural Policy after 1999 (CdR 131/97 fin) (3);

having regard to the results of the seminar on the partnership principle held by the Committee of the Regions in Madeira on 10 and 11 January 2000 in the series entitled the Implementation of the reform of the Structural Funds, 2000-2006 — the contribution of local and regional authorities;

having regard to the draft opinion adopted by Commission 1 on 22 November 2000 (CdR 157/2000 rev. 3) [rapporteur: Dr Karl-Heinz Klär, State Secretary, Delegate for Federal and European Affairs of the Land of Rhineland-Palatinate (D/PSE)];

whereas European regional policy has achieved much, but disparities between the regions are still considerable, so that a European regional policy will continue to be needed even after 2006;

whereas in 1999 the Member States, in the decisions taken on Agenda 2000, essentially left the structure and goals of European regional policy unchanged;

whereas an increase in European support funding is both desirable and necessary, but the continuation of European regional policy in its present form would strain EU finances as soon as a large-scale enlargement takes place;

whereas the outcome of the Berlin conference was a clear regression in economic and social cohesion policies (0.46 % of Community GDP in 1999 as against 0.31 % in 2006);

whereas some regions of the Union which have hitherto been covered by EU regional and structural policy will no longer satisfy the support criteria, although, objectively speaking, there has been no substantial improvement in their position;

whereas, a strict concentration of support on the new Member States and their needy regions would perhaps strain European solidarity, and tend to split rather than integrate the enlarged European Union;

whereas globalisation, i.e. the accelerated, competition-orientated integration of the world economy, necessitates deepening of the European Union and intelligent use, based on division of labour, of all the productive resources of the regions;

convinced that, against this background, a bold, forward-looking reorientation of European regional policy is needed and that this approach has more chance of success than an unimaginative attempt once again to preserve the status quo;

convinced that such a bold new orientation of European regional policy geared to the challenges facing it can succeed only if it is discussed in good time, openly and without petty or tactical reservations between the main policy-makers and beneficiaries and then progressively implemented;

(1) OJ C 379, 15.12.1997, p. 34.
(2) OJ C 64, 27.2.1998, p. 40.
(3) OJ C 64, 27.2.1998, p. 5.
intending to use this opinion to launch a timely debate on future regional policy after 2006,

unanimously adopted the following opinion at its plenary session of 14 and 15 February 2001 (meeting of 15 February).

The Committee of the Regions

1. notes that the processes of globalisation and enlargement of the European Union pose fundamental challenges to future European regional policy. The accelerated globalisation of the world economy and the forthcoming enlargement of the EU will demand strenuous efforts from citizens to ensure that the European Union can continue on the path of economic and social progress. The highly developed regions will need to make a huge effort to adapt if they are to remain competitive, and regions with a great deal of economic catching up to do risk experiencing further competitive disadvantages. Against this background, it would be negligent and irresponsible to squander resources, waste development potential and weaken, rather than strengthen, the sense of belonging of citizens of the Union as a result of unbalanced Community policy.

2. points out that future European regional policy must be better coordinated with other Community policies. Sectoral policy measures must make a greater contribution to the objective of economic, social and territorial cohesion in taking into account a spatial dimension in their conception and implementation.

3. points out that European regional policy can succeed only in conjunction with the regional policies of the Member States and the regions. It should therefore respect subsidiarity, allow scope for and strengthen the regions’ own responsibilities and encourage cooperation between them.

4. argues that European regional policy should on this basis use all its resources to help establish strong European solidarity in keeping with the European social model and promote a dense network of cross-border, inter-regional and trans-national partnerships. Substantial deepening of inter-cultural understanding is therefore just as necessary as stronger economic links.

5. calls for the further development of European regional policy into the integration policy par excellence, aimed at bottom-up deepening and the fostering of an awareness of the Union, to have something to offer all the EU’s regions. In order to do justice to this objective in a changing Union, a debate on the future orientation of the objectives and adaptation of the instruments and procedures is necessary.

6. stresses that the bulk of aid must continue to go to regions with a development deficit and major problems, in order to preserve the principles of cohesion and solidarity between the richer and poorer regions. In future the rule must continue to be that, the more serious the development deficit, the greater the material support will need to be. To this end, it will be essential to conduct a more detailed study of criteria used to date. The aim is to promote competitiveness to ensure sustainable development creating long-term quality employment. This will underpin the prosperity of the EU as a whole in a context of global competition.

7. stresses that the future aid framework will need to be expanded in order to ensure that the needy regions — whether of the EU 15 or of the new member countries — can receive support. This is politically expedient, as a virtual cessation of aid currently received would be enormously damaging to the sense of belonging and attachment to the EU in many regions. But it is also appropriate: if the disparities of development and prosperity in the EU increase drastically as a result of enlargement, more funding, and not less, will be needed in order to pursue the objective of economic and social cohesion and take into account the developing concept of territorial cohesion.

8. notes in this context that statistical changes in the regions do not mean that structural problems have gone away. Material support provided under Europe’s future regional policy must not be guided purely by GDP thresholds. Further criteria capable of objective assessment should be adopted alongside the main indicator, regional GDP as a proportion of the EU average: remoteness/accessibility and demographic trends/sparsity of population for example, but also sectoral and regional deficits relevant to development, inter alia in the areas of training, innovation, research and development and industrial restructuring. In so doing, attempts should be made to develop a system which makes it possible to classify clearly the relative needs of the different regions.

9. suggests that a new crisis intervention instrument be created, making it possible to use EU resources other than those earmarked for structural measures to react to sudden, unexpected, serious, structural crises which the affected regions would be unable to cope with on their own. In the short term such crises frequently lead to disintegration of the regional economic structure with
damaging long-term consequences. European regional policy must attempt to prevent such consequences and establish a good basis for rapid restructuring. Emergency aid is an excellent way of fostering a sense of belonging. At the same time the introduction of such an instrument strengthens the role of the European Commission, which has to take decisions on individual cases.

10. feels that future European regional policy should be based on the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and in particular the polycentric and regional cohesion approaches, in order to create crystallisation points for economic development in thinly populated areas, which will grow into (strong) centres able to raise the prosperity level of the region concerned. In the light of this, future regional policy must be coordinated with development strategies in the field of cross-border, inter-regional and trans-national cooperation, to ensure an improved coherence between sectoral and territorial approaches. In this connection, the work of the European Spatial Planning Observatory Network (Espon) should be taken into account.

11. suggests that Europe's future regional policy should use part of its — increased — resources for geographical integration at frontiers. In order to deepen integration of the European Union in areas where the Member States, even more than elsewhere, have to grow together and show good neighbourliness, the regions at the borders between Member States — including islands and coastal borders — and at the Union’s external borders should receive structural support. Programmes of a cross-border nature or, where a border region is involved, an inter-regional or trans-national nature, and which are, inter alia, intended to alleviate the separation of (coastal) frontiers, insularity or a region’s remoteness, should receive support. The undeniably positive experience accumulated in this area over a period of years should be reflected in Structural Fund support. The European added value of such a reform, compensating for the disadvantages of border location and promoting good neighbourliness, is clear.

12. in the light of this suggestion, advocates the development of mechanisms to tackle problems arising from divergent national structures and responsibilities. In particular efforts should be made to establish a legal framework for joint project administration, a joint budget for the resources available for measures and joint cost and financial plans. The delegation of powers to regional or local level which might result would at the same time further the objectives of proximity to citizens and subsidiarity.

13. suggests a reorientation of the Community initiatives. A key aim should be to promote outstanding achievements in research and in new technologies via cross-border, inter-regional, trans-national and trans-continental joint ventures and to establish a system of networks of excellence. This Community initiative should try to ensure that the benefits of European inventiveness and of the innovative application of inventions are available to as many citizens of the Union in as many regions as possible. It could also generate synergies between European research policy and regional policy, between which there has hitherto been too little coordination. Clearly, an innovation of this kind would confer on the Commission an important role in future regional policy, and this would be welcome.

14. considers it necessary to increase the scope of regional policy implemented at national and regional level. The measures necessarily taken by the EU to encourage the development of the economically weaker regions using Community funds should be matched by the necessary attention to the demands of competitiveness which the economically stronger regions have to satisfy on the global market, whilst also bearing in mind that the success of the stronger regions will make a significant contribution to the growth of the EU as a whole. To this end, Community competition policy should, within the framework of the existing rules, step up checks on abuses and promote competitiveness.

15. calls for Europe's future regional policy confidently to take on a role which in essence it has always had: promoting integration from the bottom up. It will be able to perform this task effectively if in the framework of its objectives, structures and programmes it does not lose sight of the principle of solidarity. Solidarity means reciprocity.

16. announces its intention, over and beyond the scope of this opinion, of continuing to bring its expertise to bear on the debate on future regional policy; it will work together closely with the European Parliament and the Council on the development of policy, involving the regions of the applicant countries.


The President
of the Committee of the Regions

Jos CHABERT