Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘European Metropolitan Areas: socio-economic implications for Europe’s future’

(2004/C 302/20)

On 15 July 2003 the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on ‘European Metropolitan Areas: socio-economic implications for Europe’s future’.

The Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 8 June 2004. The rapporteur was Mr van Iersel.

At its 410th plenary session (meeting of 1 July 2004) the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 129 votes to none with 2 abstentions.

1. Summary

1.1 In this opinion the EESC draws attention to the importance of Europe’s metropolitan regions in the context of EU regional policy.

1.2 Metropolitan regions are of great importance for the future from both an economic and a demographic perspective. These regions face a whole series of major challenges. So far the Union and the European institutions have not shown any particular interest in the subject.

1.3 The EESC argues that the economic, social and environmental development of Europe’s metropolises should be firmly placed on the Community agenda. For this, European data and an exchange of information through Eurostat, as well as the Commission’s specific attention, are essential.

1.4 It is in the Union’s interest that national debates on the future organisation of metropolitan areas be followed up by a European debate to see what added value the European Union can provide. The EESC would refer in particular to the direct connection between the role of European metropolises and the Lisbon Strategy. Indeed, achieving the goals of the Lisbon Strategy is largely dependent on how it is pursued in metropolitan areas.

1.5 The EESC therefore urges that, besides setting up a forum to bring together metropolitan areas and the Commission, this matter also be discussed in the Competitiveness Council and the informal Council for Regional Planning and Urban Issues.

2. Introduction

2.1 The world is changing fast. Everywhere we are facing innovative economic, technological and social developments. These developments do not only have far-reaching consequences for manufacturing, the services sector and labour markets; of course, they also affect the territorial context and society and, consequently, how countries and regions should be governed.

2.2 In this opinion, the EESC focuses on metropolitan areas, i.e. large agglomerations and their zones of economic influence. It does so for three reasons: they are at the heart of these rapid changes; they are important contributors to the European growth strategy; and they are also partners to many smaller centres of excellence in the European Union.

2.3 A metropolitan area is made up of a central core – either an individual town or an urban agglomeration; and a periphery – a group of neighbouring municipalities from which a significant number of residents commute to the central core every day. The notion of ‘metropolitan area’ is thus close to that of ‘employment area’ or ‘functional urban region’ (1). It takes account of the existence of peripheral areas that are highly focused on a centre, and whose growth depends on the development of that centre. In terms of time, metropolitan areas can extend up to a one hour commute. They include urban and rural areas.

2.4 The central core must include a minimum number of inhabitants (2) or jobs in order to be recognised as the centre of a metropolitan area. Similarly, there must be a minimum commuter intensity between a peripheral municipality and the central core for it to be included in a metropolitan area (3). In practice, these minimum thresholds have been set arbitrarily, and are therefore of varying importance. The lack of harmonisation of the definitions at European level restricts international comparisons.

(1) In its opinion of 14 May 1998 on Towards an urban agenda in the European Union, the Committee of the Regions established the notion of a Functional Urban Region to describe a metropolis and its area of influence. It is accepted that cities have become agglomerations and then metropolitan areas which then extended to form urban regions. This concept also underlines the mutual dependence between the territorial units that make up the urban region: labour market, home-work commute, transport networks, shopping centres, localisation of new activity, real estate, parks and leisure facilities, protection of the environment, etc.

(2) For example, 500,000 inhabitants (METREX threshold). A list of European agglomerations with over 500,000 inhabitants is appended.

(3) For example, 10 % of the active population with a job in the central core, resident in the peripheral municipalities (GEMACA threshold).
2.5 A new type of metropolitan area has emerged over the last decade. When several agglomerations operate in network and their employment areas overlap, they make up multi-centre metropolitan areas. Examples are the Randstad, with 7 million inhabitants, the Rhine-Ruhr region, with 11 million inhabitants, the Vienna-Bratislava region with 4.6 million inhabitants, the Oresund region with 2.5 million inhabitants and the Lille region with 1.9 million inhabitants.

2.6 Depending on their size and function, metropolitan areas have regional, national, European or global influence. It is estimated that the enlarged Europe includes some 50 metropolitan areas of over 1 million inhabitants.

2.7 It is important to note that metropolitan areas as discussed in this opinion cover areas and socio-economic situations that do not coincide with the European regional administrative entities defined in the somewhat rigid NUTS system of ‘regions’ (Nomenclature of Statistical Territorial Units) as used for official purposes by Eurostat and the European institutions. The concept of administrative region in Europe is particularly ambiguous as, apart from a few exceptions, the geographical boundaries of such regions fall either outside or inside the boundaries of metropolitan areas. Consequently, it is not useful to use administrative areas to compare the socio-economic development of European metropolitan areas.

2.8 In February 2004 the European Commission published its Third Report on Cohesion. This report opens up new avenues for discussion on regional policy and economic progress. The same applies to a new focus on spatial and urban development. For the future, the Third Report highlights the link between regional policy and the Lisbon Strategy. Competitiveness will join cohesion policy and territorial cooperation and employment policy as the third pillar of regional policy. In this respect, the Third Report underlines in particular the role of cities and major agglomerations.

2.9 The impulse for new approaches and fresh ideas comes chiefly from globalisation, the completion of the single market (including in the new Member States), and from the Lisbon Strategy. Clearly, for metropolitan areas it is not just a question of regional policy, but also industrial policy, expertise, transport and European networks, sustainable development and quality of life.

2.10 A worldwide phenomenon is the increasing attention paid to ‘urban renaissance’, which is on the agenda of most EU members.

2.11 Metropolitan areas and their governance have never been discussed thoroughly at EU-level. Consequently, they have never been specific targets of EU-policies. The EESC feels that the time has come for a deeper analysis and to look into how good regional governance by all stakeholders in these areas can be beneficial for their inhabitants and for the EU as a whole. A situation report on metropolitan areas can only be useful if it is based on reliable, comparable figures on a European scale. Such figures are, unfortunately, currently lacking. The EESC therefore believes that the European Union should ensure that these are provided.

3. Situation of metropolitan areas

3.1 More than three quarters of Europe’s population currently lives in urban or peri-urban areas. There is a direct link between the Lisbon Strategy and metropolitan areas. A large number of the factors underpinning future European competitiveness are to be found in these areas. Metropolitan areas transmit innovation and information to other European cities. The prosperity of metropolitan areas is essential to solving problems of social and territorial cohesion in their own areas and in other European cities and regions.

3.2 Metropolitan areas, in European as elsewhere in the world, are facing a number of major challenges: globalisation, which is linked to the integration of international markets in goods, services, capital, expertise and skilled and unskilled labour, leading to the rapid transformation of their manufacturing systems; sustainable development, which calls for prudent management of natural resources; social cohesion; quality of life; and territorial cohesion.

3.2.1 Many cities and metropolitan areas are successfully adapting their economic, social and institutional structures. These powerful urban areas are national and international communication hubs that are served by all forms of rapid transport and broadband telecommunications networks, and whose economy has long depended on diversification, in particular providing quality services to people and businesses. Industrial regions that were once in crisis are also excellent examples of this type of development. Lille, Barcelona and Bilbao exemplify this restructuring process.

3.2.2 Similar processes are underway in the ten new EU Member States, in particular in the metropolitan areas of Warsaw, Prague and Budapest.

3.3 European regional policy has for years had the objective of improving the climate for growth, employment and competitiveness in the less developed regions. To that end, specific programmes have been set up and a fine-tuned system for allocating financial resources has been put in place. Most of the regions concerned have made economic progress, sometimes even substantial progress, as a result of these EU policies.
3.4 The evaluation of regions in Europe has consequently been confined to an analysis of the regions that have benefited from the Structural Funds.

3.5 The relatively favourable or unfavourable economic and social trends in other regions cannot be ignored. The EESC believes that they must also be analysed in-depth at European level. Such an analysis is desirable anyway in view of the discussion on the Third Report on Regional Cohesion, which is intended to open up new avenues. It could also further our understanding of current economic trends and their impact on the way societies and living and working conditions adapt. Finally, such an analysis could enable some EU policies to be adjusted in order to provide adequate support for specific regional developments and requirements, including those in metropolitan areas.

3.6 It is significant that there is an ongoing debate – in centralised and decentralised countries alike – surrounding the new balance that is needed between centralisation and devolution. The authorities are looking at new approaches from both a bottom-up and a top-down perspective. Clearly, these are often difficult to implement because of governmental traditions and vested interests in the regions concerned. Despite some institutional logjams here and there, there is a clear trend towards recognising the need for integrated management of metropolitan areas, for the welfare and prosperity of citizens and businesses.

3.7 In Europe we can easily distinguish between several different categories of metropolitan area. On the one hand, we have very big metropolitan areas such as London, Paris, the Rhine-Ruhr, the Randstad and Madrid, with a population of over 5 million inhabitants; and on the other, a number of smaller but sometimes successful metropolitan areas with great development potential and ambition. Examples are those around the capital cities and major economic centres in nearly all the Member States.

3.8 As said earlier, some of these economic centres were previously depressed areas. They owe their renaissance to the joint efforts of private and public stakeholders in the region. It should also be said that the metropolitan areas in the new Member States are in a transitional phase, and are working on their comparative strengths to become competitive on international markets.

3.9 There are a growing number of these areas at European level. Since 2003 the German metropolitan areas have been working together on a project called Regions of the Future. In 2003, the British Government asked the relevant regions to define their strategies for becoming internationally competitive. The Danish Government is wholeheartedly behind the spectacular cross-border cooperation initiative to make Copenhagen and Malmö (Sweden) a major economic centre in the Baltic. In the Netherlands, a fairly recent phenomenon is the promotion of the Randstad as an international-scale metropolitan area. In Spain, the regeneration programmes for Barcelona and Bilbao reflect the same ambition. Other examples could be given.

3.10 Another factor which will have an evident impact on how governance is organised in metropolitan areas and on their ability to direct economic development is the increasing transfer of powers to the regions in the EU Member States. At the same time, some governments are taking a pro-active approach to the economic development of major cities. For example, a British Government initiative setting up a working party bringing together the 8 ‘core cities’, 9 regional development agencies and several ministerial departments in order to establish an action plan to improve the economic performance of the metropolitan areas and, consequently, the competitiveness of the country (1). In France, following the publication of a report on European cities (2), the government drew up a national strategy aimed at raising the profile of the French metropolises at European level (3).

3.11 Recent history shows clearly that we are living in times in which a new attitude is emerging towards the development of the major urban areas. Where consultation arrangements exist, they are confined to the national level. Alongside these national arrangements, initiatives have been launched to promote European platforms for key urban development players. These include Eurocities, which focuses on the knowledge society, and the more recent METREX network of European Metropolitan Regions and Areas. Generally speaking, however, meetings and contacts are organised randomly. At the same time, a more favourable climate for more structured initiatives can be observed.

4. Ongoing processes

4.1 The process of metropolisation involves the multiplication of large conurbations and a higher concentration of people, activities and wealth creation within an expanding geographical area with no clearly defined physical boundaries. This growth often brings with it social and spatial fragmentation (social segregation, spatial specialisation, crime and a lack of security). Furthermore, unlike cities, the metropolis has no political institutions. It has to solve its problems through a series of negotiations between different stakeholders. Spatial fragmentation can slow down and hinder public and private investment. Consequently, it makes sense to have a regional policy that aims to reduce this spatial fragmentation by reconciling governance of the metropolitan areas with ongoing processes. The Barcelona and Stuttgart areas are positive examples of this.

(2) villes européennes, une comparaison – Céline Rozenblat, Patricia Ciccle (DATAR 2003).
4.2 Globalisation: European urban regions are structured according to processes and dynamics that exist increasingly at global level. Europe’s major cities are hubs in a constantly evolving global network of metropolises. New York, London, Tokyo and Hong Kong, but also Frankfurt, Paris, the Randstad, Brussels, Milan and Madrid are foremost among these. These metropolises ‘steer’ the world economy through the international institutions, banks and large international corporations which have their command and control headquarters there and thanks to the power of information and communication technologies. In the next few years, the main Asian metropolises will also take their place in this global network.

4.3 Europeanisation: the interactive process of adapting economic, social and environmental and spatial planning policies to European integration and enlargement, the completion of the single market (still ongoing), and the arrival of the euro and enlargement, will contribute even further to the integration and dispersion of economic activity throughout Europe. The more national borders are blurred, the more there will be a natural tendency to strengthen the economic poles across the continent. The gradual organisation of inter-regional poles and even cross-border poles (Copenhagen-Malmö, Dutch Limburg-Belgian Limburg-Aachen, the French and Belgian sides of the Lille metropolitan area) show that economic development will be increasingly blind to the often artificial political and administrative borders bequeathed by history.

4.4 Metropolitan areas are the main focal points of research, innovation and the creation of new activities. It is there where activities with high added value are centred, especially business services. The new information and communication technologies are also playing a key role here. Economic dynamism is concentrated mainly in metropolitan regions, which are focal points for innovation, the knowledge society and training.

4.5 These areas are linked to each other by physical and virtual networks of all sorts, depending on the volume and significance of the economic clusters in the various regions. This process is tending to broaden and to deepen. EU transport policy (Trans-European Transport Networks) rightly encourages these networks, as does deregulation of the airline sector.

4.6 The Lisbon Strategy for a knowledge-based competitive economy that takes account of social cohesion and sustainability is particularly important. Its implementation could herald a new mission for metropolitan areas.

4.7 This new mission is partly an offshoot of the increasing importance of the network society, which creates a changing basis for prosperity, attracts new investments and is leading to new approaches to educating young people and to the labour market at large. Accordingly, there is an interaction between the recent interest in cities and metropolitan areas, and modern applied technology, particularly ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) and broadband internet networks, that has also a tremendous effect on people’s daily lives and on business. ICTs are making a big impact on manufacturing and service structures. Consequently they also influence spatial planning and the way cities and metropolitan areas develop.

4.8 The internationalisation of investment, the mobility of brainpower and the interaction of universities, technology institutes and the private sector could promote economic clusters, as in the famous Porter’s Diamond model. This is a very important basis for the network society, in which metropolitan areas play a key role.

4.9 These metropolitan areas are also important centres for culture, tourism and leisure activities. Their architectural heritage is a major component of their history and identity. Their universities, libraries, museums, theatres, operas and concert halls play a key role in protecting and disseminating European culture and in creating and disseminating culture. It is also in metropolitan areas that major sporting events and concerts are held, pulling in crowds.

4.10 The cosmopolitan nature of metropolitan areas is very important for the development of the media industry. The media industry (i.e. the press, publishing, radio, television, films, video, publicity, telecommunications) and the creative industries as a whole are a rapidly expanding sector of activity in these areas.

4.11 The various socio-economic groups and players and cultural organisations are joining forces to find new avenues for integration and participation. In parallel to the measures taken by the public authorities, civil society is playing an extremely important role in the urban dynamic. In many cases, the success of a metropolitan area is largely due to the collaboration and interaction of public and private stakeholders.

4.12 This cooperation and the interaction of public and private interests are crucial in the context of metropolitan areas. Experience has shown that this can be achieved more readily and more productively in the major geographic areas rather than at national level. The metropolitan area tends to be the right level for establishing the planning objectives for an urban area with all stakeholders, and for putting in place the arrangements to achieve them.

4.13 Unlike the trend in the US, European cities are now developing both as cities and conurbations. City centres still serve as hubs of activity and meeting points. Metropolises also play a crucial part in consolidating a European model of society.

4.14 The European economy is in a major period of transition with enlargement and the integration of the single market. This involves a combination of competition and partnership between regions, and especially between metropolitan areas, which play a decisive role in some complex games. The lack of government at metropolitan area level is a weakness when it comes to establishing and implementing competitive economic development strategies and partnerships.
5. Specific social aspects

5.1 Major cities suffer more acutely than other areas from serious problems of social cohesion and territorial imbalance. Metropolitan areas could provide a good example of how to restore social and territorial equilibrium in the European Union. However, such improvements can only be achieved if accompanied by sustainable economic development.

5.2 Each metropolitan area has its own profile. But notwithstanding differences in culture and in social and economic development, similar phenomena can be observed all over Europe. Fortunately, public and private players are in most cases becoming increasingly aware of the need to improve living and working conditions for all. It must be admitted, however, that there is often still a long way to go.

5.3 In those cases where economic restructuring has taken place or is taking place at the moment, the transition from one business cycle to the next phase of this process has led or is still leading to substantial unemployment, in particular among young people and people over 50. Such a process affects metropolitan areas. It has also to be noted that this process is often leading to the creation of completely new activities with new employment, better equipped for the future.

5.4 Economic restructuring also involves relocation, particularly of labour, and this tends to cause structural unemployment in regions that are dependent on one type of industry. This can also happen in metropolitan areas, despite the fact that they are often able to change their economic base. This modernisation process often sees the switch from a heavy industrial base to a society based on services and hi-tech. Examples of this are Bilbao, Lille and the Rhine-Ruhr.

5.5 The EU is experiencing an ever-increasing influx of immigrants from third countries. Although there are remarkable differences in the way countries and cities integrate immigrants, Europe as a whole is undeniably facing a tremendous challenge in respect and metropolitan areas are a very special case in point. The EESC has on several occasions called on the EU to draw up common immigration and asylum legislation. The EU will have to absorb new economic migrants for demographic, social and employment-related reasons (1). Such migrants will include both highly skilled and unskilled people. Community legislation must promote legal immigration and curb illegal immigration. Moreover, the EU must encourage the integration of immigrants into the host society and do its best to prevent discrimination (2).

5.6 In many cities and metropolitan areas, there is a concentration of immigrants who find it extremely difficult to find good jobs owing to their lack of professional qualifications, poor language knowledge, social discrimination and lack of a proper integration policy. This leads to inequalities in income and, consequently, in access to housing and public services, including schooling and health care. Particular attention should be given to poor areas that are seriously affected by this issue.

5.7 Metropolisation often exacerbates social inequalities and spatial disparities. Less-favoured social groups, e.g. unemployed young people and elderly people on low incomes, tend to gather in certain areas, leading to a concentration of disadvantages. The exclusion of less-favoured sectors of the population and the poor quality of public services in these areas feeds on itself, eventually becoming a trap from which it is almost impossible to escape. Often there is mounting urban exclusion, even where urban regeneration policies have been in place for years. Large-scale action coordinated at metropolitan area level is needed if implementation is to have the best chance of success.

5.8 Law and order issues in metropolitan areas have become a worrying phenomenon, and can have serious repercussions on social cohesion and balanced development. Paradoxically, the assets and demographic features of metropolitan areas make them particularly vulnerable to certain types of risk. On the one hand, the way they operate as a system can be weakened by any attack connected – however marginally – to law and order issues on one of their vital components. On the other, metropolitan features encourage flows of people and goods that are conducive to illegal activity linked to national or international criminal networks. They can facilitate the establishment of activist groups by offering anonymity, logistical support and a recruitment base. The nerve centres of metropolitan areas are a particular target for new forms of terrorism. These trends are worrying in the current international political situation.

5.9 Environmental protection and compliance with sustainable development objectives are another challenge facing metropolitan areas. They must respect international commitments: Kyoto Protocol, Agenda 21, Maastricht Treaty, and the 1993 and 1998 Community programmes for sustainable development. To do this, they need to reconcile economic development and environmental protection, which can be mutually reinforced by organising urban development (transport systems, establishment of centres of habitation, waste and waste water management, noise reduction, protection of city centres, and of the natural and agricultural heritage, etc.).

5.10 The fast growth of a number of metropolitan areas in combination with the widening and deepening of their economies is challenging for infrastructure and for public and private transport. For environmental and economic reasons, congestion calls for hi-tech solutions. All environmental policies are costly for the public and private sectors. Public funds are, as a rule, insufficient, and the success of public-private partnerships has so far been limited.

(2) EESC opinion on immigration, integration and employment, OJ C 80 of 30.03.2004, p. 92.
5.11 Shortcomings in metropolitan areas are aggravated when the administrative management of these areas does not keep pace with economic development and the increase in population, housing and commuting. Often the administrative management within metropolitan areas still reflects bygone times. This in turn hampers effective government and, consequently, effective economic policy. Proper coordination between the administrative management and economic stakeholders and, in broader terms, between the public and private sectors is a prerequisite for good governance in metropolitan areas.

5.12 In this respect situations vary widely. Sometimes the metropolitan area is smaller than the administrative region of which it is a part. More often it embraces more than one administrative region. Nearly always there are more municipalities or other administrative units within one metropolitan area. Most public (regional and national) authorities consider these situations as a matter of fact and not as a subject for discussion.

5.13 Each government has its own method of looking for solutions. Big cities are trying to learn from each other, but there is not enough consultation and exchange at EU-level to promote benchmarks or good practices.

5.14 Although the abovementioned phenomena are characteristic of metropolitan areas, there are substantial differences in the way individual regions handle them. There are outstanding examples in which the regional government, as a rule supported by the national government, together with the private sector and organised civil society, are changing the course of events and are creating a new pattern for the future. In realising such policies the social and economic conditions are improving and such regions are visibly becoming more competitive. The European Union should capitalise on such examples by setting up consultation rounds to identify best practices and discuss how the Union can use the means at its disposal for improvement.

6. Data on European regions and metropolitan areas

6.1 The European statistical system is driven by European policies. Hence, we know the number of cows and pigs per region thanks to the CAP. But we do not know the employment statistics or added value per sector in big cities and their spheres of economic influence because there is no relevant policy and because Europe has until recently devoted to few resources to urban statistics. Eurostat's Cities and Regions unit consists of only 5 people, Eurostat's resources are not at all commensurate with its remit.

6.2 Comparative socio-economic studies of metropolitan regions covering the whole of Europe carried out by institutions involved in economic development and the promotion of the regions, universities, consultants or the European Commission are often nothing more than vague and incomplete descriptions. The fact is, they are based on the regional statistics published by Eurostat. These have the advantage of being harmonised at European level. However, they also have a major drawback: the regional division used by Eurostat, the Nomenclature of Statistical Territorial Units (NUTS), is a patchwork of national administrative units. The divisions reflect the political and administrative history of each country. With a few exceptions, they are geographically inadequate for a reliable picture and comparison of the economic, social and environmental situation in metropolitan areas at European level. The NUTS division was not designed to do this.

6.3 Eurostat statistics do not, then, make it possible to track population trends, activities, unemployment or production in metropolitan areas, nor do they provide for any reliable comparison of strategic indicators such as: population growth rates, production value added, employment, unemployment or overall productivity per job. An analysis of the results of studies into metropolitan areas carried out by private consultants or by national public institutions shows that the lack of any reliable, geographically comparable figures can lead to incorrect or even contradictory conclusions regarding the socio-economic trends that have been ‘observed’ in European metropolitan areas (e.g. with regard to productivity trends within a single region).

6.4 The absence of data on the socio-economic evolution of regions and metropolitan areas in Europe is a handicap for two main reasons:

6.4.1 Metropolitan areas are the engine rooms of growth. The economic activity they generate and the resulting advantages spread to other urban centres in each country. In order to make the most of the constraints and opportunities of the changing international environment, the metropolitan areas need a continually updated performance assessment at European level.

6.4.2 It would also be desirable to have reliable analyses and comparisons at European level on important aspects, including problems linked to immigration, job quality, poverty and exclusion, the environment, security and others.

6.5 Over the last few decades, the US has been producing a large number of up-to-date, comparable data on its 276 metropolitan areas and these are freely available on the Internet (1). In Europe, since every country has its own definition of a ‘town’ or ‘city’ (and sometimes metropolis), it is naturally more difficult to agree on a common definition of a metropolitan area. Given that, with regard to implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, it is now important to have reliable, comparable data on European metropolitan areas, the EESC believes the time is ripe to examine whether the definitions currently in use could be harmonised at European level.

(1) http://data.bls.gov/servlet/SurveyOutputServlet
6.6 The European Commission’s Urban Audit II, now underway, will produce data on the living conditions of people in 258 cities and conurbations. This project is an important step forward in terms of informing the debate on social cohesion. However, it will not deliver comparable Europe-wide socio-economic indicators on metropolitan areas. The indicators are assessed in terms of the cities and conurbations of each country as defined nationally. Moreover, the indicators for London, Paris and Berlin will be evaluated within the boundaries of the respective administrative regions (Greater London, Île-de-France and Berlin Land).

6.7 The aim of the ESPON project (European spatial planning observation network) is to gain a better knowledge of land use. But it is hampered in particular by the lack of economic data at local authority level or at NUTS 3 level throughout the EU. The merit of the project is that it shows up the many shortcomings of the European statistical system.

6.8 All these observations highlight the fact that, if Eurostat is to be able to produce reliable, comparable urban and metropolitan data, it must have the extra budgetary and human resources needed to achieve this.

6.9 A recent study presenting data from the European Union Labour Force Survey, carried out in metropolitan areas with a population of over 1 million in North Western Europe, is worth reading (1). It shows that for the larger metropolitan areas, demarcated according to common criteria, it is possible to produce at a marginal cost a great deal of comparable, European socio-economic data by using an annual survey carried out by the national statistics offices and coordinated by Eurostat.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 The last decade has seen a number of analyses and discussions in several Member States and at regional level regarding the new phenomenon of metropolitan areas in Europe. Although these areas are now more visible at national and international level than was previously the case, their role in implementing the Lisbon Strategy has yet to be recognised.

7.2 Metropolitan areas are crucial for meeting the economic, social and environmental objectives of the Lisbon Strategy and for training, research, innovation, cutting-edge technology, the creation of new activities and the promotion of entrepreneurship. They are also the main transport and telecommunication hubs, making it easier to set up networks of businesses, universities and research centres. The EESC wishes to stress that a more effective mobilisation of the potential for economic growth in Europe depends on the active support of all the public and private stakeholders who are striving to achieve sustainable economic development in metropolitan areas. In other words, given the role played by metropolitan areas in Europe, the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy cannot be achieved unless they are achieved first in metropolitan areas.

7.3 One of the main reasons this development has not attracted sufficient government attention is the fact that the boundaries of the political-administrative regions only rarely correspond to the geographical boundaries of metropolitan areas. As a result, apart from a few exceptions, there is no reliable or comparable data on a European scale that would enable the socio-economic situation and dynamics at work in metropolitan areas to be described.

7.4 The EESC stresses that it is in the interests of the Union that:

— the metropolitan areas in the 25 EU Member States should be defined;

— a set of relevant data on such areas should be produced annually, in particular through the European Labour Force Surveys;

— the main Lisbon Strategy indicators should be evaluated for these areas;

— clusters of activity with high value added should be identified within these areas;

— the Commission should report regularly on the socio-economic situation of metropolitan areas and their ranking.

7.5 Producing such information and making it available for all should:

— contribute towards the recognition of metropolitan areas and provide more in-depth knowledge of their social, economic and environmental situation;

— make it easier to assess the strengths and weaknesses of these areas on a European scale;

— improve the definition and implementation of both European and national policies, adapting them to the specific characteristics of these areas;

— provide local and regional authorities with an assessment of the competitive ranking of their areas on a European scale. Today such assessments are either non-existent or drawn up at huge expense on the basis of incomplete information;

(1) Study carried out as part of INTERREG II by GEMACA (Group for European Metropolitan Comparative Analysis). Published in Les Cahiers de l’IAURIF No 135; www.iaurif.org/en/doc/studies/cessiers/cessier 135/index.htm
— enrich the debate on European regional policy by facilitating dialogue between all the parties concerned on the basis of objective information;
— provide the private sector with information which could prove useful when defining business strategies.

7.6 The EESC strongly supports the proposal made by METREX in 2003 to create a European programme for metropolitan areas (1). This programme – called METROPOLITAN – could be a forum for meetings and discussions. It could also include working parties tasked with identifying and disseminating best practice in the areas addressed in this opinion.

7.7 The EESC welcomes the importance given to ‘competitiveness’ and the link established between the recently framed regional policy and the Lisbon Strategy in the Third Report on economic and social cohesion, which has special significance for metropolitan areas. For these areas, certain objectives under the titles ‘competitiveness’ and ‘knowledge’ could be supported through the European Regional Development Fund.

7.8 The EESC believes it is essential for a ‘metropolitan areas’ unit to be set up within Eurostat, which would be responsible for producing the aforementioned data each year.
7.9 The possible difficulties in defining the geographical boundaries of all the metropolitan areas and producing comparable information and data cannot be allowed to justify inaction. Consequently, the EESC suggests that, in line with the recommendations put forward above, a pilot project should be set up in a limited number of metropolitan areas as soon as possible. It also suggests that this pilot programme should be carried out in partnership with DG Regional Policy, Eurostat, the national statistics offices and the metropolitan areas concerned.

7.10 The EESC hopes that the European institutions will agree with the broad thrust of this opinion. The EESC believes that, against the background of the establishment of a forum bringing together metropolitan areas and the Commission, the situation of these areas should also be on the agenda of the Competitiveness Council and the informal Council for Regional Planning and Urban Issues.

Brussels, 1 July 2004.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Roger BRIESCH

---

(1) METREX – The network of European Regions and Areas – main declared objectives for the METROPOLITAN European programme:
1 – recognise the important role of metropolises in Europe
2 – support the creation of effective metropolitan governance
3 – support the definition by all stakeholders of integrated metropolitan strategies
4 – support metropolitan policies to boost competitiveness and social and territorial cohesion.