

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee: Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion. Turning territorial diversity into strength

COM(2008) 616 final

(2009/C 228/24)

On 6 October 2008, the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

'Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee - Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion. Turning territorial diversity into strength.'

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 5 March 2009. The rapporteur was Mr OLSSON.

At its 452nd plenary session, held on 24 and 25 March 2009 (meeting of 25 March), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion with 88 votes in favour and 11 abstentions.

1. History

1.1 Since it was set up the European Union has had the task of ensuring the harmonious development of economies while reducing regional differences ⁽¹⁾.

1.2 This task, which remained in the background during the first decades of European integration, took on major importance with the 1988 reform launched by Jacques Delors, following the adoption of the Single European Act which established the economic and social cohesion policy.

1.3 The Treaty of Amsterdam, signed in 1997, listed social and territorial cohesion alongside services of general economic interest as expressions of European values ⁽²⁾.

1.3.1 The Treaty of Amsterdam states that 'the Community shall aim to reduce the gap between the development levels of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions or islands, including the rural areas'.

1.4 If the process of ratifying the Lisbon Treaty is completed, the European Union will have a new objective: promoting economic, social and territorial cohesion ⁽³⁾.

1.5 Particular attention will be paid to 'rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions' ⁽⁴⁾.

1.6 In May 2007, at the informal Council of ministers responsible for urban development and territorial cohesion,

the Territorial Agenda was adopted. In this document the 27 Member States undertake to cooperate among themselves, and with the Commission and the other European institutions, in order to 'promote a polycentric territorial development of the EU, with a view to making better use of available resources in European regions' ⁽⁵⁾. They also adopted a work programme for the period up to 2011.

2. General remarks

2.1 On 6 October 2008 the Commission adopted a Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion. Turning territorial diversity into strength ⁽⁶⁾. In this short document it begins by presenting economic and social cohesion from a territorial point of view. It then goes on to identify the strengths and challenges of European territorial diversity in the light of three main policy responses - concentration, connecting territories and cooperation - to which are added specific geographical characteristics such as mountain regions, island regions and sparsely populated regions. It suggests that the optimum approach for achieving the objective of territorial cohesion is to improve the coordination of sectoral policies while expanding multi-level partnership.

2.2.1 The consultation ends with a list of 15 questions grouped under six themes. The EESC will follow the order in which the questions are asked. It notes, however, that the questions are in each case preceded by a sentence which in some cases ought to be discussed.

2.2.2 The Green Paper gives the EESC an opportunity to spell out its thoughts on territorial cohesion, making use of the specific role assigned to it by the Treaties, as well as its composition and the expertise of its members.

⁽¹⁾ Preamble to the Treaty of Rome.

⁽²⁾ Article 14 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

⁽³⁾ Article 3(3) of the future Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

⁽⁴⁾ Future Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

⁽⁵⁾ *Towards a More Competitive and Sustainable Europe of Diverse Regions*, Territorial Agenda of the European Union, informal meeting of the Council of Ministers for urban development and territorial cohesion, Leipzig, 25 May 2007.

⁽⁶⁾ COM(2008) 616 final.

2.2.3 In order to fuel the debate, the EESC will aim to complement rather than support the discussions of the other Community bodies.

2.2.4 It should be borne in mind that the territorial dimension of Community action and sectoral policies, and the territorial approach of economic and social cohesion policy, have been dealt with in several EESC opinions, which provides an extremely valuable source of inspiration.

2.2.5 Thus, the EESC considers that territorial cohesion should be a common objective to which all geographical levels contribute, while respecting the subsidiarity principle, but which can be effectively achieved only if all the levels assume their responsibilities in a coordinated and complementary way.

2.2 The EESC has an essential role to play in encouraging the greater involvement and participation of organised civil society in the European project and, in the case at hand, in facilitating the implementation of policies and actions which promote territorial cohesion. The EESC underlines that **participatory democracy**, recognised as one of the Union's democratic principles⁽¹⁾, is an essential condition for the achievement of this goal.

2.2.1 The trend towards greater economic and social disparities, which is often cumulative in certain areas, carries with it a significant political risk. It is likely to reinforce people's distrust of their political leaders in general, and of European integration in particular.

2.2.2 Conversely, territorial cohesion can make it possible to preserve or **develop social capital**. The richness of relations between the members of a group or community at local level, which is a guarantee of dynamism and innovation in social, economic, political and cultural terms, depends to a high degree on harmonious living conditions and opportunities for exchange with other areas.

2.3 The EESC attaches particular importance to an approach which takes the citizens, their needs and their expectations as the starting point. The living conditions of the people, particularly the **most disadvantaged**, must be at the centre of the discussions and must be a fundamental objective of territorial cohesion. Social progress, supported by economic development, is the fundamental basis for reducing existing disparities, either between individuals or between areas.

2.4 The EESC considers that the **individual and citizenship** must be at the heart of Community policies and actions, the EESC stresses the implementation of the Charter of fundamental rights as an indispensable instrument of territorial cohesion.

2.4.1 It considers that territorial cohesion must be based on **a new contract with citizens and organised civil society**, allowing interaction between bottom-up participatory procedures, also including civil dialogue, and EU initiatives.

2.4.2 It therefore advocates application of the 'think small first' principle in order to design sectoral policies which reflect the needs of citizens and socio-economic actors at the smallest territorial level.

2.5 The EESC is an advocate of a European social model based on **common European values and objectives** which include economic development and social progress. Social policy and economic policy are interdependent and mutually reinforcing and they usually have a specific impact on the ground.

2.5.1 The EESC points out that the concept of territorial cohesion has been enshrined in the EU Treaty for more than ten years, together with services of general economic interest. It therefore calls on the Commission **to take stock** at the earliest opportunity of the practical application of this article **in legal, case-law and economic terms** since the entry into force of the Treaty of Amsterdam.

2.5.2 The EESC draws attention to the fact that the concept of a region is not only a geographical one. It is also concerned with identity. Territorial cohesion is therefore connected with the idea of belonging, and includes all the components of individual and collective life.

2.5.3 For some the region has positive connotations and is a source of pride, when for example people think of their village, town or region, its history, its natural heritage, or its cultural or economic dynamism. For others, it has negative associations, with people tending to think of disadvantages, economic deprivation, social violence, e.g. in the case of disadvantaged inner city areas.

2.5.4 Action in favour of territorial cohesion must therefore be both **multi-dimensional and multi-directional**. At times it must aim to facilitate and maintain the positive aspects, and at other times to remedy or prevent the negative ones.

2.6 The EESC considers that the territorial cohesion objective should be given concrete expression and made **operational**, with a clear **road map** being drawn up. In the past the 'roadmap' approach has proved extremely effective, for example the 92 objective of the single market, the stages of economic and monetary union or the enlargement negotiations with the Central and Eastern European countries. The Committee recommends that at the end of the consultation process a timetable be drawn up together with proposals for instruments and methods for action.

⁽¹⁾ Future Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union.

2.6.1 In this connection it also points out that the current European budget is not sufficient to ensure the proper implementation of economic, social and territorial cohesion in Europe ⁽¹⁾. Moreover, it deplores the fact that too often the unwieldiness and complexity of procedures make it difficult for final consumers - individuals and businesses - to have access to financing.

2.6.2 The EESC welcomes the Green Paper as another step on the road towards European integration and it welcomes the opening of this debate. It recognises that the new objective threatens to give rise to practical obstacles and political opposition. However, the EESC regrets that the document provides insufficient information on existing coordination and cooperation activities and that it does not go sufficiently far in proposing areas for action.

3. Replies to questions

3.1 *What is the most appropriate definition of territorial cohesion?*

3.1.1 The EESC regrets that the Commission has not included the discussions which have already taken place on the subject in the Green Paper, although it proposed definitions in its Cohesion Reports.

3.1.2 It endorses the analysis set out in the Commission's Third Report on Economic and Social Cohesion that 'in policy terms, the objective is to help achieve a more balanced development by reducing existing disparities, avoiding territorial imbalances and by making both sectoral policies which have a spatial impact and regional policy more coherent. The concern is also to improve territorial integration and encourage cooperation between regions'. And 'despite the difficulties of some regions, equality of access to basic facilities, essential services and knowledge - to what are termed "Services of General Economic Interest" - for everyone, wherever they happen to live, is a key condition for territorial cohesion'.

3.1.3 Referring to its previous opinions, the EESC also considers that territorial cohesion must make it possible to adopt a shared vision of the 'European territory' ⁽²⁾. It considers that balanced and sustainable 'regional development within the EU' ⁽³⁾ must help to reconcile competitiveness with economic and social cohesion, knowledge-based ⁽⁴⁾ economic performance with the 'principles and objectives of solidarity and social equity' ⁽⁵⁾.

3.1.4 The EESC considers that the public will not take ownership of territorial cohesion unless it has real meaning for them and unless they participate in its design and application. Finally, the EESC stresses a definition of territorial

cohesion which highlights its 'benefits' from the point of view of the public and the socio-economic players on the ground. **Territorial cohesion must guarantee equality of opportunity and fair living conditions for all Europeans everywhere.**

3.2 *What additional elements would it bring to the current approach to economic and social cohesion as practiced by the European Union?*

3.2.1 The EESC considers that territorial cohesion underlines the need to ensure synergy between economic and social cohesion. In the current situation, with a succession of crises - financial, economic, food-related, property market, climate-related - the Committee draws attention to the unsustainability of the development model we have used for the last 50 years.

3.2.2 The EESC feels that **the three dimensions - economic, social and territorial cohesion - should be simultaneously promoted**, while encouraging the development of a more sustainable development model.

3.2.3 The Committee points out that in the Third progress report on economic and social cohesion the Commission sketched out three aspects for territorial cohesion policy which would have equal weight: the first of these, corrective in nature, was reducing existing disparities; the second, preventive dimension meant improving the coherence of sectoral policies with a territorial impact; and the third, involving incentives, meant reinforcing territorial integration by encouraging cooperation.

3.2.4 This three-pronged approach seems reasonable to the EESC, which would point out, however, that territorial cohesion must under no circumstances be limited to adding an additional dimension to current economic and social cohesion policy. A territorial strategy, to be defined at European, national and even local level, should cover all policy areas ⁽⁶⁾.

3.2.5 With regard to the Union's structural policies (as defined in the Green Paper), the Committee calls for improved integration of the funds, going further than the necessary degree of coordination.

3.3 *Scale and scope of territorial action*

3.3.1 The EESC is surprised that the Commission presents multi-level governance only as a possibility; the Committee considers that it is, rather, a necessity which has proved its effectiveness and is progressively establishing itself as a principle of government in the European Union.

⁽¹⁾ EESC opinion on the Fourth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion, OJ C 120, 16.5.2008, p. 73, point 2.1.

⁽²⁾ EESC opinion on the Territorial Agenda, OJ C 168, 20.7.2007, p. 16.

⁽³⁾ EESC opinion on The CAP second pillar: outlook for change in development policy for rural areas (follow-up to the Salzburg conference), OJ C 302, 7.12.2004, p. 53, point 2.4.

⁽⁴⁾ EESC opinion on Industrial change and economic, social and territorial cohesion, OJ C 302, 7.12.2004, p. 41, point 1.3.

⁽⁵⁾ EESC opinion on the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), OJ C 407, 28.12.1998, point 2.5.

⁽⁶⁾ EESC opinion on the Territorial Agenda, OJ C 168, 20.7.2007, p. 16.

3.3.2 The Committee agrees with the comment concerning an integrated approach but considers, as indicated above, that this should be translated into specific measures, such as the integration of the funds associated with the Union's structural policies. It draws attention to the regrettable fact that current practice falls far short of that used in previous programming periods. The increased complexity of accounting, financial and auditing rules have led to increased administrative checks, resulting in more complex procedures for final beneficiaries.

3.4 *Is there a role for the EU in promoting territorial cohesion? How can the EU make a contribution while respecting the principle of subsidiarity?*

3.4.1 The EESC believes that the focal point of an effective territorial cohesion policy consists primarily in identifying appropriate governance systems in order to take action through the integrated management of complex situations that provide for the co-existence of:

— multilevel territorial interventions and decision-making;

— multiple decision-making centres with their own specificities and priority objectives;

3.4.2 A bottom-up approach involving committed citizens is conducive to the integration of Community and national policies, in particular because civil society organisations ought to have a holistic approach to policies and actions, unlike the authorities responsible for sectoral policies at national and European level. This approach is completely consistent with subsidiarity in all its forms.

3.4.3 The EESC reiterates its call for detailed timeframes for short, medium and long-term objectives and actions⁽¹⁾ and including deadlines and actions already set or proposed by the institutions and the stakeholders, particularly at European and national level.

3.5 *How far should the territorial scale of policy intervention vary according to the nature of the problems addressed?*

3.5.1 For the EESC one of the most important practical expressions of territorial cohesion is **guaranteeing** all the people of Europe **access to SGEIs and SSGIs**⁽²⁾, wherever they may live or work. This is an area which requires a high degree of policy coherence and effective multi-level governance. The current situation is far from satisfactory, particularly for the most fragile regions and for their residents and economic and social actors.

⁽¹⁾ EESC opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on a Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment, OJ C 318, 23.12.2006, p. 86, point 2.3.7.

⁽²⁾ Respectively, services of general economic interest and social services of general interest.

3.5.2 The EESC reiterates its call 'for common benchmarks and standards to be defined at Community level' 'for all services of general interest (both economic and non-economic), including social services of general interest, to be set out in a framework directive, adopted under the co-decision procedure, whereby a Community framework can be established which reflects their specific characteristics'⁽³⁾.

3.6 *Do areas with specific geographical features require special policy measures? If so, which measures?*

3.6.1 With a view to the introduction of true equal opportunities between regions, the EESC advocates the adoption of a specific policy for regions with permanent handicaps, including the outermost regions, based on the principles of permanence (long-term predictability of measures), positive discrimination (regarding budgetary resources and certain legal derogations to common principles) and proportionality (the scale of the measure and its impact must be appropriate to the specific case) in order to take account of diverse situations⁽⁴⁾.

3.6.2 In these regions, which require additional work on development engineering and the preparation of financial projects, the role of the EU must not be to replace authorities and local and regional socio-economic partners, but rather to encourage them strongly to engage in consultation and cooperation.

3.7 *Better cooperation*

3.7.1 The EESC considers that cooperation is one of the pillars of the European social model and an essential instrument of integration.

3.7.2 The EESC considers that territorial cooperation is encountering obstacles as a result of the reluctance of the various levels of public authority to cooperate and share their competences. The EU must promote a culture of cooperation in the regions, facilitating and simplifying the use of existing tools like partnership.

3.7.3 The EESC acknowledges the contributions of the first two dimensions of the territorial cooperation objective, cross-border cooperation and transnational cooperation. However, it also stresses the importance of interregional cooperation – forgotten by the European Commission in the Green Paper – which is a remarkable instrument for exchanges of experience and good practice between non-adjacent regions sharing the same objectives.

⁽³⁾ EESC opinion on the Fourth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion, OJ C 120, 16.5.2008, p. 73, point 3.4.

⁽⁴⁾ EESC opinion on How to achieve better integration of regions suffering from 'permanent natural and structural handicaps', OJ C 221, 8.9.2005, p. 141.

3.8 *What role should the Commission play in encouraging and supporting territorial cooperation?*

3.8.1 The EESC considers that territorial cooperation must be an opportunity for actors and individuals from the less affluent territories to implement their own development strategy and not simply to be placed in a situation of dependence and forced to wait for possible financial compensation. In order to encourage them to exploit their assets and construct their projects, they must have access to specific networks for innovation and exchange of good practice, linking them with other actors from regions facing the same geographical, climatic or demographic challenges.

3.8.2 The EESC is therefore asking the Commission to place greater stress on territorial, social and political innovation in the INTERREG IVC interregional cooperation instrument, to beef up cooperation under the fourth axis of the EAFRD, dedicated to the LEADER programme, and to introduce new arrangements to facilitate the use of the available finance.

3.9 *Is there a need for new forms of territorial cooperation?*

3.9.1 The EESC calls for the (re)establishment of Community initiative programmes as soon as the mid-term review of the structural policies takes place. The dropping of programmes which have proved their effectiveness like URBAN, EQUAL, Interprise and others has been a loss for thematic territorial cooperation and for social innovation, as this role has not been taken over in the mainstreaming of funds or anywhere else.

3.9.2 The EESC stresses that the usual forms of territorial cooperation will need to be adapted in the case of peripheral regions, such as outermost regions in the Caribbean or the Indian Ocean and the regions along the Union's eastern frontier.

3.10 *Is there a need to develop new legislative and management tools to facilitate cooperation, including along the external borders?*

3.10.1 The EESC strongly supports the establishment of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs). It calls for national legal frameworks to be adapted to enable them to be used throughout the EU. As their establishment is barely beginning, the EESC considers that it is too early to take stock or to start thinking about new instruments. This could be done in the context of the road map proposed above.

3.11 *Better cooperation*

3.11.1 The EESC considers that improving territorial cohesion requires a **strategic** approach to territorial devel-

opment through more coherent action, as no individual policy can remedy all the territorial disparities caused by sectoral policies and by the uncontrolled trends of the current development model.

3.12 *How can coordination between territorial and sectoral policies be improved?*

3.12.1 The EESC stresses that all European policies must promote the objective of social cohesion as well as more balanced economic development for the European territory ⁽¹⁾.

3.12.2 Territorial cohesion needs prior coordination of all sectoral policies and different levels of governance, from local to EU level.

3.13 *Which sectoral policies should give more consideration to their territorial impact when being designed? What tools could be developed in this regard?*

3.13.1 The Committee agrees with the European Parliament that an integrated approach to Community policy incorporating the territorial dimension is essential, particularly in the fields of transport, environmental, agricultural, energy, competition and research policy.

3.13.2 The Committee recommends that the discussion of the future of agricultural policy take account of territorial cohesion challenges in view of the importance of agricultural policy in its economic, social, environmental and landscape dimensions throughout Europe.

3.13.3 The legislation, policies and programmes of the European Union should be analysed in terms of their impact on territorial cohesion. The Commission has a particular responsibility for this impact assessment, which should closely involve all the players concerned. Quality criteria should be established for the necessary analysis and evaluation ⁽²⁾.

3.14 *How can the coherence of territorial policies be strengthened?*

3.14.1 The EESC calls for improved coherence and proposes that the Council of Ministers **apply the open method of coordination** ⁽³⁾ for territorial cohesion, with clear guidelines followed by calibration, peer review, exchanges of good practice, indicators and participation of all the players concerned. It recommends that multilevel governance and intersectoral coordination be recognised as being among the guidelines of this method when it is implemented.

⁽¹⁾ EESC opinion on the Territorial Agenda, OJ C 168, 20.7.2007, p. 16, point 7.2.

⁽²⁾ EESC opinion on A new European Social Action Programme, OJ C ... (SC0/295).

⁽³⁾ EESC opinion on the Territorial Agenda, OJ C 168, 20.7.2007, p. 16.

3.14.2 The establishment of the open method of coordination could also be part of the road map proposed above.

3.15 *How can Community and national policies be better combined to contribute to territorial cohesion?*

3.15.1 The EESC draws attention to the progress made by the Member States at the informal meetings of urban development and territorial cohesion ministers in Leipzig, the Azores and Marseille. It calls for voluntary coordination of national policies and integration of sectoral policies, in accordance with the commitments set out in the Territorial Agenda, and for local and regional authorities to be encouraged to apply these practices at their level of government. The Committee points out that, even in the absence of explicit competences, the cultural and natural heritage is a key challenge throughout Europe which requires a coordinated approach.

3.16 *New territorial partnerships*

3.16.1 The EESC considers that **wider participation** when policies are drawn up and implemented is essential to territorial cohesion.

3.16.2 The **social dialogue** must be one of the main pillars of territorial governance. In order to increase the involvement of the social partners, the EESC recommends that the territorial social dialogue be put to good effect and promoted by the Commission.

3.16.3 The EESC welcomes the position of the ministers concerned, who in the First Action Programme⁽¹⁾ stressed their 'belief that multi-level governance is a fundamental tool for a balanced spatial development of the European Union' and expressed their intention of convening with selected stakeholders and local and regional authorities to discuss the implementation of the Territorial Agenda priorities.

3.17 *Does the pursuit of territorial cohesion require the participation of new actors in policy-making, such as representatives of the social economy, local stakeholders, voluntary organisations and NGOs?*

3.17.1 The territorial development pacts offer an interesting approach to the extent that the diversity of situations and specific challenges requires the mobilisation of different

instruments and skills, and in particular **all the stakeholders, especially the social partners, the social economy and NGOs** working in the social environment as well as in the fields of local development, gender equality and lifelong training.

3.17.2 In the light of the restructurings caused by the economic and financial crisis, it is now even more important and even urgent to establish pacts of this kind in the territories concerned.

3.17.3 The EESC supports the idea put forward by the CoR that partnerships between local and regional authorities, on the one hand, and social economy organisations, on the other hand, can be an important tool for bringing about effective socio-economic development in towns, cities or local and regional areas and for promoting territorial cohesion. This partnership approach should be extended to all the new civil society actors concerned.

3.17.4 The EESC draws attention to the importance of the social economy, where 10 % of European firms are believed to operate. It also stresses its role in cohesion and sustainable development, to the extent that it anchors employment at local level, energises rural areas, creates social capital and provides for the sectoral and territorial restructuring process⁽²⁾.

3.18 *How can the desired level of participation be achieved?*

3.18.1 The EESC considers that well-structured consultations can lead to successful partnerships with non-governmental stakeholders and the social partners in the whole chain of defining, monitoring and evaluating territorial cohesion⁽³⁾.

3.18.2 Good 'multi-level governance' also means partnerships with representative organised civil society at regional and local level. By their action these organisations could contribute to the development of a participatory model of civil society in the design and implementation of policies to strengthen territorial cohesion⁽⁴⁾.

3.18.3 Organised civil society should be given the opportunity for responsible and transparent involvement at the regional and local level in planning and implementing territorial cohesion policies and activities⁽⁵⁾.

⁽¹⁾ First Action Programme for the Implementation of the Territorial Agenda of the European Union, 23 November 2007.

⁽²⁾ See the European Parliament's Report on the Social Economy (rapporteur: Patrizia Toia, 2008/2250 (INI) and the Social Economy in the European Union published by the EESC in 2007.

⁽³⁾ EESC opinion on the *Partnership for implementing the Structural Funds*, OJ C 10, 14.1.2004, p. 2 Opinion on Governance and partnership at national and regional level, and a basis for regional policy projects, OJ C ..., points 1.9 and 1.10 (ECO/228).

⁽⁴⁾ EESC opinion on Governance and partnership at national and regional level, and a basis for regional policy projects, OJ C ..., point 1.2. (ECO/228).

⁽⁵⁾ The concept of territorial social responsibility (TSR) developed by the European Network of Cities and Regions for the Social Economy (REVES) is a model of this kind of active participation.

3.19 *Improving understanding of territorial cohesion*

3.19.1 With a view to improving public understanding of territorial cohesion, the EESC stresses the importance of holding an **ongoing debate** at all levels in order to face future challenges and strategic choices in territorial cohesion. The aim of the debate should be to help forge a new consensus on territorial cohesion based on a common commitment by all stakeholders, e.g. civil society organisations.

3.20 *What quantitative/qualitative indicators should be developed at EU level to monitor characteristics and trends in territorial cohesion?*

3.20.1 The EESC considers that new 'well-being' indicators need to be established which are not closely based on GDP/GNP but which make it possible to show progress in the area of the quality of life measured against the territorial level ⁽¹⁾.

3.20.2 The Committee considers that a new series of evaluation criteria for regions are needed as a matter of urgency in order to draw up a new map of European cohesion to determine the eligibility of Community regions for aid, as the GNP per capita criterion alone is a source of relative discrimination in the implementation of structural policies. The skill levels of human resources, income inequalities, infrastructure deficits, including the degree of access to services of general interest and the extent of social protection, the distance from the centre of gravity of the European economy and demographic structure etc are all important factors which need to be taken into account ⁽²⁾. Eurostat, ESPON and their national counterparts should work to consolidate a more complete and precise set of statistical tools. These assessment criteria and the statistical tools will serve as a basis for the open method of coordination indicators proposed above.

3.20.3 The methods established by the regions themselves should be taken into account and good practice disseminated ⁽³⁾.

Brussels, 25 March 2009.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Mario SEPI

⁽¹⁾ EESC opinion on A new European Social Action Programme, OJ C 27, 3.2.2009, p. 99, point 7.11.1.

⁽²⁾ EESC opinion on the Impact and consequences of structural policies on EU cohesion, OJ C 93, 27.4.2007, p. 6, point 1.3.

⁽³⁾ For example the concept of territorial social responsibility developed by the European Network of Cities and Regions for the Social Economy (REVES).