

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on ‘The added value of macro-regional strategies’

(2014/C 114/04)

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. welcomes the Commission's report of 27 June 2013 and its assessments based on the two current macro-regional strategies (for the Danube and the Baltic Sea regions). The Committee also welcomes the Commission's proposals to clarify the concept underlying macro-regional strategies, as well as its recommendations for subsequent measures, bearing in mind the continuing work on the existing macro-regional strategies, and on the action plan for the Atlantic, the strategy now being developed for the Adriatic and Ionian region, the macro-regional strategy for the Alps, and any other strategies that might be developed in future;
2. welcomes the Council conclusions of 22 October 2013 on added value of macro-regional strategies, which emphasise the key role they have played in existing macro-regions and recommend that the Commission and the Member States also adapt where relevant the best practices of the macro-regional approach to cooperation areas of smaller scale and intensity;
3. agrees with the Commission that macro-regional and sea-basin strategy approaches respond to similar aspirations, as they are effectively based on the same thinking, pursue the same objectives, implement the same range of measures in the areas concerned and are part of the same European political framework. Both kinds of strategy allow multi-sector cooperation and multi-level governance. The CoR requests that the Commission clarify how there can be mutual learning during future implementation of both approaches;
4. is pleased with the timing of the Commission's report in relation to the new 2014-2020 programming period, and recalls that the CoR, in its opinion A Strategy for the North Sea-Channel Area (CdR 99/2010 fin), has already called for a Green Paper in which the Commission should investigate and define the role and function of macro-regions more precisely;
5. reiterates its support for developing and implementing macro-regional strategies, and underlines the political and strategic significance of work so far on the Baltic Sea and Danube strategies in promoting cooperation in those macro-regions both within the EU and with countries outside the EU. These strategies blaze a trail by applying new approaches to cooperation and driving European integration forward;
6. notes that the basic principles of work on the macro-regional strategies include the synergies generated by cooperation when seeking solutions to problems affecting one geographical area or ideas for realising the area's potential. Also key are improving the coordination of available resources and stepping up cooperation between existing institutions, especially when it comes to the role assigned to local and regional authorities, without creating an additional level of administration;
7. underlines the added value of the EU when developing and implementing macro-regional strategies, and notes the importance of the European Commission remaining a key strategic coordinating player in cooperation between Member States to develop and implement macro-regional strategies;
8. notes the importance of the Commission's proposal that matters relating to the macro-regional strategies be regularly discussed in the relevant sectoral Councils. By approving and promoting a strategy, the European Commission and the European Parliament play a key role;
9. calls on the European Commission and the Member States to support the development of innovative governance systems and to involve regions, municipalities, and European entities such as EGTCs and other territorial cooperation instruments such as working communities in a real process of co-decision, especially in framing and implementing macro-regional strategies. The Committee of the Regions notes that the added value of EGTCs and other territorial cooperation instruments can be further enhanced by involving them in macro-regional strategies;

10. feels that it is important that cooperation between local and regional authorities be stepped up and expanded to cover the different fields of Union policy, and that it extend across different sectors. Macro-regional strategies should serve as tools for cooperation between the local and regional level, Member States and the EU to support these objectives;

Applying the macro-regional strategy approach effectively — results of the report

11. notes the key observations in the Commission's report on strategy work carried out so far in the macro-regions; this has improved the focus of available resources to achieve shared objectives, promoted a cross-sectoral approach, e.g. to environmental issues and to making regions more competitive, and stepped up cooperation between participating countries and between the various national players;

12. observes, on the basis of this report, that the macro-regional strategy approach has provided definite added value when it comes to promoting social, economic and regional cohesion in Europe;

13. points out that the current macro-regional strategies highlight — exhaustively and from different angles — the priorities requiring close cooperation. The revised Baltic Sea strategy has a total of 17 priority areas and five horizontal actions, while the Danube strategy has 11 priority areas. The themes span the need for cooperation on transport, the environment, business and the economy, skills and culture, and well-being. The action plan for the Baltic Sea strategy lists more than 100 flagship initiatives, while the Danube strategy includes more than 400 cooperative projects, 150 of which are already under way;

14. notes the importance of being able to reassess the priorities of macro-regional strategies as they are being implemented if there is a fundamental change in circumstances, or if lessons learned give reason to do so. This will ensure that resources are targeted effectively during implementation;

15. notes the importance of focusing macro-regional strategies on clearly defined realistic objectives with macro-regional aspects; these should serve as a basis for continuous monitoring and evaluation involving all the relevant stakeholders;

16. underlines the key role played by practical cooperative projects in creating the real added value of macro-regional strategies. During practical implementation, more attention should be paid to ways of generating new and innovative project activity that meets macro-regional strategic objectives in a focused way. At the moment, project cooperation is guided more by the rules for financial instruments, leaving very little room for innovation. This approach is not the best way to support the implementation of macro-regional strategies. In future there will need to be flexibility both within and between individual financial instruments, as well as scope to improve coordination of different financial instruments. More effort should also be made to simplify the rules governing financial instruments. In this context, it emphasises the particular importance of the INTERREG-B programme, aimed at implementing cooperation projects within the macro-regions in the period 2014-2020;

17. stresses that in future a more strategic approach to project work should be taken that dovetails with the Europe 2020 strategy, the general framework of the EU's 2014-2020 programme and national and regional strategies and programmes. In project work supporting the implementation of macro-regional strategies, it is important to enable cooperation across sectors and priority areas and enough flexibility and responsiveness to seize new opportunities and meet new challenges;

18. underlines the need to promote new forms of cooperation and new project initiatives, and notes, by way of example, the importance of seed money in developing new cooperative ventures. The first application round for the Baltic Sea strategy's Seed Money Facility saw funding allocated to a total of 14 preparatory projects for developing cooperative projects to support implementation of the strategy. Support has also successfully been given to similar project preparation work as part of the Danube strategy;

19. encourages Member States that are part of a macro-regional strategy, along with the European Commission, to consider together, when programming the EU's 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework, how best to support the promotion of international project activity as part of national and regional programming. Member States, under the guidance of the European Commission, should clearly demonstrate the link between different EU funding programmes and implementation of the macro-regional strategies, and where possible identify national financial instruments that could be used to this end;

20. underlines the critical importance of cooperation between the coordinators of priority areas and horizontal actions in both the Baltic Sea and the Danube strategies, and cooperation at regional and local level, in generating new project portfolios that help meet the objectives of macro-regional strategies. Adequate operating conditions should also be ensured for these players. The European Commission and the relevant stakeholders are requested to look into all options for simple and reliable financial support for priority area coordinators and horizontal action leaders;

21. notes that, although the Commission has clarified the governance structures for both the Baltic Sea and the Danube strategies and spelt out the tasks and responsibilities of the various players (national contact points, priority area coordinators, horizontal action leaders and flagship project leaders), governance is still seen as problematic according to the survey that it carried out. The Committee of the Regions urges the Commission and the Member States to consider ways of streamlining the current governance structures. The role of the local and regional level should be further strengthened;

22. underlines the importance of communicating the objectives of macro-regional strategies and ongoing cooperation to as many stakeholders as possible, so as to raise awareness of European cooperation and foster broad commitment to implementing the strategies. The Committee believes that guidelines should be drawn up at both macro-regional and national level to support communication and stakeholder activities. More use should be made of the opportunities offered by digital information platforms to share experience and examples of best practice identified during projects;

Leadership

23. notes that high-level political players must show clear commitment and assume a leading role if there is to be progress in implementing the strategy in all participating countries. Commitment should be ensured at Member State level so as to provide the best possible support to local and regional efforts to implement the strategy;

24. welcomes the separate review on strengthening leadership in the current strategies, which is to be carried out in conjunction with the annual strategy forums in 2014;

Multi-level governance: a vital aspect of implementation

25. draws attention to previous opinions on the revised Baltic Sea strategy (2012), on the Danube strategy (2011), on territorial cooperation in the Mediterranean basin by means of the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region (2011), and on the strategy for the North Sea-Channel Area (2010), in which the Committee strongly emphasised the importance of multi-level governance in implementing the strategies. Involving all stakeholders in a consistent and sustained manner is crucial to meeting a strategy's objectives and to its success;

26. considers noteworthy the Commission's proposal to consider including public and other EU institutional forums in the governance of the strategies, and recommends looking into how organisations in particular could be used. Various organisations and cooperation platforms can work even more effectively as tools for engaging players in the implementation of macro-regional strategies. The Committee is prepared for its part to cooperate in various expert forums;

27. notes that a third of respondents to the survey carried out by the Commission for its assessment said that the principle of multi-level governance was not fully reflected in Member State or project-level policy guidelines or in decisions on project implementation. The Committee feels that more emphasis should be placed on strengthening the principles of multi-level governance, especially in strategy implementation. This will require action, particularly from the Member States participating in the strategy, in cooperation with the Commission;

28. suggests that opportunities for involvement not just of local and regional players, but also of civil society players, in implementing macro-regional strategies should be stepped up in accordance with the principles of partnership and transparency. Regular consultations of local authorities and civil society representatives should be introduced at all levels of governance of macro-regional strategy implementation;

New strategies

29. proposes that positive experience with the existing Baltic Sea and Danube strategies be taken into account in work on a strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region, and recommends, especially in this context, closer cooperation between the different macro-regional strategies;

30. refers to its unanimously adopted opinion *A strategy for the North Sea-Channel area* (CdR 99/2010 fin), in which, in the light of the major challenges facing this area, it called urgently for the creation of a macro-regional strategy for the North Sea-Channel area, and regrets that the Commission has not yet published the promised communication on the implementation of an integrated maritime policy for the Greater North Sea;

31. similarly would welcome an assessment of the effectiveness of the 'sea basin strategies' and compare this with the experiences of the existing macro-regional strategies, before further sea basin strategies are developed;

32. reiterates views expressed in previous CoR opinions on how to get different players to really engage in implementation of the macro-regional strategies: there is a need for transparent decision-making, comprehensive information-sharing, and development of a common *modus operandi* at all levels;

33. calls on the European Commission and the Council to support the development of future macro-regional strategies and related action plans in close cooperation with all the relevant stakeholders. This should also provide for innovative governance systems that give local and regional authorities a real role of co-decision when framing and implementing strategies;

34. stresses that macro-regional strategies should continue to be geared to regional challenges that individual Member States are unable to meet or have serious difficulty meeting in their region, or which are so particular to that macro-region that they require special consideration within a broader EU policy framework. Macro-regional strategies should therefore not only address common regional interests, but also account for tailor made response strategies to reflect specific regional challenges. Efficient transport links within a macro-region are one of the basic conditions for cooperation, and the Committee believes this should be taken into account when developing new strategies; another matter of vital importance for the future of many European areas is the demographic challenge, the specific problems of which concern macro-regional geographical areas;

35. agrees with the Commission on the need to seek appropriate methods of enhancing cooperation and regional integration and to continue to support existing cooperation arrangements which have proved useful and efficient, where macro-regional strategies are but one alternative;

36. urges the Member States to assess development of new macro-regional strategies in view of the shared challenges and opportunities of the geographical area in question, taking into account the principles of social, economic and territorial cohesion and consequently focusing particularly on rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition and regions that suffer from severe, permanent demographic or natural disadvantages such as, for example, the northernmost regions with low population density and island, cross-border and upland regions. The local and regional level should be involved in discussion at an early stage when setting a strategy's objectives, as was the case when developing the Baltic Sea strategy, for example. Similarly, civil society involvement in this process must not be neglected either. Local and regional-level and civil society understanding of a region's needs and potential, as well as existing local cooperation networks, provide a solid foundation for framing and implementing a strategy;

Non-EU countries and implementation of macro-regional strategies

37. notes that the Council took account of the views expressed by the Committee in its opinion on the revised EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region (CdR1272/2012 fin) when recommending that action continue so as to make the most of the Northern Dimension and its partnerships in implementing the Baltic Sea strategy. The strategy for the Danube region is of key importance in boosting cooperation between 14 countries, consisting of EU Member States and third countries;

38. stresses that macro-regional strategies should strengthen the position of the EU and the macro-region and their interaction with each other and with regions outside the EU. Whilst these may be EU strategies, many of their objectives will be impossible to meet without cooperation or some agreement on priorities with non-EU partners. Cooperation with regions outside the EU is critical to the work of both the Baltic Sea and the Danube strategies, not just for boosting the macro-region's economic competitiveness and cohesion, but also for developing the EU's external links. Along the same lines, involving third countries, with the ensuing implications in terms of both neighbourhood policy and enlargement policy, can, right from the start, be a key factor in the success of future macro-regional strategies;

Conclusions

39. underlines that work on the strategy to date does not allow far-reaching conclusions to be drawn yet on the impact of this approach in terms of meeting the EU's horizontal and integrated objectives;

40. points out that the new EU financing period from 2014 offers good prospects for more effective and productive work on the strategies. The Committee calls for targeted cooperation between different Member States and funding authorities, both at EU level and in national development efforts;

41. recommends that the Commission continue to consistently monitor implementation of macro-regional strategies but also sea basin strategies and to assess their added value for Europe as a whole, not just from the perspective of individual macro-regional strategies.

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of the Committee of the Regions*
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