

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the governance of macro-regional strategies

(COM(2014) 284 final)

(2015/C 012/10)

Rapporteur: **Mr Baráth**

On 20 May 2014 the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, on the

Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the governance of macro-regional strategies

COM(2014) 284 final.

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 25 September 2014.

At its 502nd plenary session, held on 15 and 16 October 2014 (meeting of 15 October), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 148 votes with 4 abstentions.

1. Opinion and recommendations

1.1 The Report drawn up on the basis of the General Affairs Council's position on strengthening governance of macro-regional strategies is timely, and gives some important guidance for improving the framing of such strategies and governance of their implementation.

1.2 The EESC considers that macro-regional policy should become a fully-fledged EU policy.

1.3 In view of the nature of the objectives, it is disappointing that in the report the concept of 'governance' in relation to macro-regional strategies is confined to political, institutional and administrative/organisational cooperation.

1.4 The 'partners' are only given a very subordinate role in the Commission's report. Economic and social stakeholders are not mentioned, while civil society players are only included as the recipients of information.

1.5 The EESC believes that a new model of governance should be developed, with the involvement of economic and social partners.

1.6 It should be noted that despite European-level cooperation with the EESC, which has been asked to draw up an opinion, at the intermediate macro-regional or regional levels there is no question of partnership either in relation to framing strategies or decision-making.

1.7 This is a particularly serious problem when it comes to implementation, the main beneficiaries of which should be economic and civil society stakeholders. To a large extent, effective and efficient implementation is contingent on prior involvement of partners, who should be properly informed and express their agreement, with their experience being used as input in the strategy framing process. It is legitimate to expect 'European added value', and from this perspective the proposed new model seems promising.

1.8 The EESC notes that macro-regional experiments under the Atlantic and Mediterranean strategies clearly illustrate the potential offered by cooperation with partners.

1.9 The EESC feels that the 'High-Level Group', made up of representatives of the EU's 28 Member States, is an excellent opportunity to compensate for the EU's overly concentrated and administrative governance, complementing it with a policymaking body in line with the often neglected idea of subsidiarity and with consistent application of the partnership principle.

1.10 It would make a big difference if development policy at macro-regional level became an integral part of pan-European policies. For this to happen, European-level evaluation is needed of 'existing' macro-regional links which work well from territorial and sectoral perspectives.

1.11 The EESC recommends taking stock of macro-regional challenges and opportunities, which through their promotion and use could help to foster development initiatives along the lines of 'Connecting Europe', thus strengthening European integration.

1.12 The EESC agrees that it is important to concentrate resources and to ensure effectiveness and efficiency. However, it points out that the analysis does not address issues relating to how the implementation of the strategies and action plans can be measured, nor does it discuss the quantitative and qualitative indicators which are essential in calculating investment returns and thus demonstrating added value. One of the tasks of the 'technical points' could be to set up a uniform monitoring system and prepare *ex-ante* and *ex-post* evaluations.

1.13 The EESC feels that bodies with composite membership at various levels, together with specific forums, could considerably help to strengthen the European identity of civil society, and of economic, social and political players. This could significantly contribute to further development of a European model, deliberately based in part on a 'bottom-up' approach.

1.14 A more precise definition in legal and institutional terms is needed of 'governance' in relation to the framing and implementation of macro-regional strategies.

1.15 For the EESC, the 'three no's' no longer apply: there is funding from the 2014-2020 medium term financial framework, an administrative institutional system is being developed to assist with implementation, and necessary rules are set out in the common strategic framework.

1.16 It is important to allow for various organisational options. At the same time, in order to achieve better coordination and ensure a critical mass for specific initiatives, additional resources are needed to act as catalysts, enabling synergies between the intentions and resources of national, regional and local players.

2. Introduction

2.1 In its analysis, the Commission argues that the two macro-regional strategies adopted to date, the Baltic and Danube strategies, which are already showing results, are meeting expectations of added value 'on the ground'. Significant joint decisions have been taken, and previously unused resources have been deployed, for example in the fields of environmental protection, shipping, flood protection, and maintaining water quality.

2.2 The two recently launched macro-regional cooperation initiatives can draw on previous experiences. Significant imbalances have been identified in the Adriatic-Ionian and Alpine regions in terms of urban structures, as well as of economic and social development. The analysis also discusses how experiences from the Atlantic coastal regions can be used.

2.3 The EESC feels that good governance adapted to specific tasks is crucial when framing and implementing macro-regional strategies.

2.4 The Commission's analysis emphasises three areas relating to governance which are crucial for success:

- political leadership (strategic direction and governance structure), ownership, the importance of identifying with strategies, communication and accountability,
- coordination as a means of implementing strategies,
- management of the implementation process, action plans defining the day-to-day performance of tasks, cooperation, support for cooperation.

2.5 According to the Commission's analysis, 'governance' is an activity determining in general how results are achieved. However, in this connection, there is a major difference between political leadership and the bodies implementing a strategy, which means that the concept of 'ownership' is linked to different types of operators.

2.6 The EESC believes that the framing and implementation of macro-regional strategies requires a specific governance system based on cooperation and coordination. Within this system, ownership of individual programmes, projects and measures can and should be linked with individual specific activities and those who carry them out. Such a system is a prerequisite for the effectiveness and efficiency of individual activities and the basis for their measurability.

2.6.1 The analysis confirms that macro-regional strategies provide a specific framework for cooperation between the European Union, the Member States, their regions and certain third countries within a given geographical area. The action plans are the tools for implementing strategies, enabling participation at economic and social levels.

2.7 The top level of governance is the High Level Group, bringing together the work of Priority Area Coordinators, Horizontal Action Leaders, Pillar Coordinators, and Steering Groups. This institutional structure (network) is complemented by National Contact Points, which strengthen coordination at national level.

3. What is still needed for more effective implementation of macro-regional strategies?

3.1 The EESC feels that the Commission's analysis is an accurate summary of the main areas where stronger governance is needed. Effective implementation of macro-regional strategies requires the following:

- firmer political governance,
- as well as defining and adopting cross-cutting objectives, at national level these should be more closely translated into domestic activity by governments.

3.1.1 The EESC believes that efforts should be made to achieve more intensive implementation of partnership at European level and between European institutions.

3.1.2 Organisations operating at trans-national level in a given region should be involved in developing governance, and given a stake in the process.

3.2 It would be helpful to provide diverse, more easily accessible resources, while developing sector-specific instruments, including those targeted at the private sector.

3.3 Predictability, a secure environment for key stakeholders, ongoing capacity-building, more effective provision of information for civil society while involving it in the implementation of action plans, more intensive use of e-governance and ICT tools, and, in general, a stronger subnational and regional identity and better adaptation to strategies are prerequisites for implementing macro-regional strategies.

4. Recommendations for further development of the main aspects of governance

4.1 Cooperation between political and strategic leaders and **owners — cooperating partners**

4.1.1 While putting forward suggestions for improvement, the Commission's analysis confirms the existing governance structure. It argues that more frequent regular meetings at the different levels, from the strategy-framing stage through the action plans to implementation, will both give key stakeholders a better overview and enable the political level to go beyond declarations and understand the processes better and more accurately assess the value of the work done.

4.1.2 One of the main practical recommendations is for the European Commission to step up the role of macro-regional strategies among EU policies, without overstepping its remit to provide support and guidance.

4.1.3 One major contribution could be to hold thematic meetings to discuss challenges arising during strategy framing and implementation. Such problems have an impact at European level, they affect European policies and are affected by them, and require high-level coordination.

4.1.4 The EESC also feels that the role of the National Contact Points should be stepped up, given that they are the link between the political sphere and the implementation process. In particular, it would like a special representative to be appointed, in order to monitor implementation of individual strategies, to evaluate them and to report back to executive or ministerial consultation meetings.

4.1.5 The Commission report emphasises the importance of ensuring that key players, partners in cooperation and stakeholders in individual countries and regions commit to the process, jointly developing approaches, defining economic objectives and establishing a schedule for implementation, holding regular discussions, raising awareness and generally ensuring effective involvement.

4.1.6 For the EESC, the main stakeholders are national, regional and local decision-makers and civil society, including employers' and employees' organisations and representatives of the scientific and research community and, in general, of non-governmental organisations.

4.1.6.1 Support for participation by these stakeholders is a priority, although many best practices already exist in terms of involving both political actors and civil society.

4.1.7 With regard to the future, the Commission's analysis ⁽¹⁾ attaches great importance to stepping up the activity of successful forums, with closer involvement of parliaments and parliamentary committees. It also emphasises the need for civil society representatives to contribute throughout their macro-regions, raise awareness of their views and become involved in more effectively defining thematic objectives and tasks.

4.1.8 Closer cooperation between theory (academia) and practice (business, SMEs), together with stronger links between students from different universities, could help considerably with framing and implementing strategies.

4.1.9 Last but not least, it is very important for Commission delegations and representations to be involved in the processes, particularly in relation to using IT systems.

4.2 *Coordination*

4.2.1 At present a 'High-Level Group' made up of representatives from the EU's 28 Member States is in the process of being set up, with plans for its first annual meeting. This is needed in order to strengthen European-level coordination with a view to closer synchronisation of day-to-day processes and political levels. One of the tasks of the group is to liaise with other key stakeholders. In the EESC's opinion, the Group's work illustrates the need to frame a pan-European macro-regional strategy.

⁽¹⁾ COM(2014) 284 final.

4.2.2 Similarly to the existing tasks of National Contact Points, the High-Level Group is responsible for ensuring that the funds used to support implementation of European strategies are in step with macro-regional strategies. Institutional structures are complemented by 'national coordination platforms', enabling consultative dialogue to take place between various ministerial, regional, local, civil society and scientific organisations and stakeholders.

4.2.3 The Commission's analysis emphasises the key role played by National Contact Points in terms of coordination. Apart from basic tasks, such as adjusting and coordinating processes, carrying out monitoring, ensuring and overseeing the flow of information between the different decision-making bodies, and keeping political stakeholders informed, National Contact Points are also responsible for reporting on an annual basis to institutions such as parliaments concerned by the macro-regional strategies, as well as being involved in the identification and, where possible, coordination of national and regional resources.

4.3 Implementation

4.3.1 The EESC agrees with the recommendation that significant political and administrative support is needed for stakeholders in implementation, together with increased financial and human resources.

4.3.2 With regard to implementing macro-regional strategies, independent, nationally-recognised persons, well integrated into the local context and with the requisite expertise, are needed to ensure coordination, where necessary with assistance from the relevant steering groups for a given level.

4.3.3 The EESC agrees that the possibility provided by the new rules for using European funding to directly support macro-regional strategies represents a major change.

4.3.4 In its analysis, the Commission notes that individual ministers bear the main responsibility for ensuring clarity among those involved in implementation by providing them with the necessary resources. Unless the relevant conditions for this to happen are met, it is not possible to expect added value.

4.3.5 The coordinators act as a link between the political level on the one hand, and specific projects and their implementation on the other. Together with the steering groups, they make up the real executive authority.

4.3.6 The Commission's analysis points out that significant organisational and financial resources are already available at European level. Thanks to these, duplication and redundancy can and, indeed, should be avoided in the governance, coordination and implementation of strategies, thus achieving considerable savings. Existing knowledge and practices should be further developed.

4.3.7 With regard to implementation, cooperation should be made more substantive, meetings held more frequently, and coordination stepped up between thematic areas, including by means of closer links within the Commission itself.

4.3.8 Cooperation between individual countries and regions varies from one macro-region to another. We need to avoid creating overly conventional institutional structures. Some good examples to follow are the Atlantic Forum set up to develop Atlantic coastal regions, and other innovative initiatives.

4.3.9 The Commission's analysis draws attention to an option which could be implemented by means of cooperation between the various countries, potentially bringing significant benefits. The EESC agrees that the 'technical points' could provide support for information flow, organisational activity, reporting, dissemination of best practices, setting-up of individual committees and working parties, and organisation and documentation of meetings.

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The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Henri MALOSSE
