



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

Reaction by the Assembly of European Regions
*Adopted by AER members gathered in General Assembly
on 13 November 2008, in Tampere, (FIN)*

With regard to :

- the introduction by AER of the concept of territorial cohesion proposed in 1995 in its report entitled "Regions and Territories in Europe – The Regions' view of the territorial effects of European Policies",
- the conclusions of the informal meeting of EU ministers for spatial planning and regional development in Leipzig on 24th-25th May 2007,
- the AER updated definition adopted in Wroclaw (PL) on 10th June 2008,
- the AER position on future cohesion policy adopted in Wroclaw (PL) on 10th June 2008,

the members of the Assembly of European Regions :

Definition

- Welcome this Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion and acknowledge an effort by the European Commission to define the concept,
- Remind that territorial cohesion is an objective to reach, not a tool or a means,
- Consider that agreeing on a common understanding of the concept and delimiting the areas of actions for achieving territorial cohesion should be a priority, before taking any further kind of decision,
- Consider that the increasing disparities between European regions are partly due to a poor and outdated governance and lack of coordination with sectoral policies,
- Remind that the debate on territorial cohesion is going far beyond cohesion policy only,

Equal access to services

- Welcome the reference to services of general interest and the need for all citizens to benefit from an equal access to health and education in particular, irrespective of the place they live in,
- Yet, insist that a strong coordination of the objective of territorial cohesion with other decisions made at EU and national levels regarding services of general interest must be established,

Coordination with sectoral policies

- Agree that the territorial dimension has been at the core of structural policies for years,
- Consider however, that until today, there has been insufficient coordination with other policies that often contradict structural policies or at least did not follow this objective of territorial cohesion,
- Regret that the second pillar of CAP is not mentioned as a clear example of lack of coordination and need for further synergies,
- Consider that integrating this second pillar into cohesion policy measures would partly solve this difficulty,
- Welcome the reference to the European Employment Strategy but insist that it is the whole social policy, including education and training, poverty and exclusion, health inequalities etc. that has to coordinate with a territorial focus,
- Regrets that environmental policy is mainly described as a brake for economic activity,
- Affirm that the quality of the environment does and will even more in the future enhance the attractiveness of a territory and constitutes a key asset for development,

Regions with specific features

- Consider that the issue of regions with specific features should be addressed with caution and on an ad hoc basis,
- Recognise that each Region has particular characteristics, in particular sparsely populated areas, islands and mountain areas, that prove more or less handicapping for their development and need specific adjustments.
- Propose that ad hoc support on the specific difficulties encountered by these regions – i.e. climate change, migrations, access to energy or transport networks - should be encouraged in the future,

Territorial cooperation

- Welcome the importance given to territorial cooperation and insist that territorial cohesion goes through improved and more flexible capacities for interregional cooperation,
- Underline that many of the difficulties faced at territorial level for cooperating with regions outside national borders still depend on national rules and approaches towards regional authorities, which can hamper cooperation, synergies and fluid economic cross-border

relations,

Connecting territories

- Consider that a particular focus should be put on the development of sustainable, affordable and intermodal public transportation means, in order to comply with environmental, economic, social and territorial requirements,
- Insist that the potential of ICTs for sustainable territorial development – in particular to decrease the environmental cost of transportation and the inequalities in accessing services of general interest - shall not be underestimated,
- Hence, suggest that the massive dissemination of broadband Internet access on the whole European territory should be a priority,

Governance

- Acknowledge that territorial cohesion is not about reviewing national patterns of competences and the vertical organisation of governments in EU Member States,
- Insist however on the fact that the key for achieving the objective of territorial cohesion among all European regions is to define adapted governance systems,
- Fear that escaping this topic and avoiding discussion at all governance levels in this respect might hamper the debate on territorial cohesion and prevent any future improvements of the present inequalities between European territories.

The members of the Assembly of European Regions propose, as a complement to this political reaction, their own definition of the concept of territorial cohesion, as an annex to this document.

The Assembly of European Regions will respond to the Green Paper on the basis of the present political reaction and of a broader consultation on the specific questions raised in the end of the Green Paper by the end of the consultation period.



Territorial cohesion

AER definition of territorial cohesion

Territories developing harmoniously and in synergy with each other, heading to common priorities and objectives, by implementing strategies with means and tools adapted to their territorial capital¹, providing an equal access to services and opportunities for all European citizens.

This can only be achieved if:

1. all European member states agree on common objectives of the European Union. Territorial cohesion cannot be a goal in itself, cohesion has to exist around a common objective, which can be the well-being of all communities, sustainable economic development, security and peace... As of to date, there is a general understanding that **territorial cohesion is linked to the objective of ensuring the sustainable (environmental, social and economic) development of our communities.**
2. **a genuine European cohesion policy** is continued, agreed in cooperation with all levels of governance and implemented as close to the citizens as possible; appropriate support should be granted in order to speed up the realisation of the cohesion objective;
3. **Interregional cooperation is supported, made easier and promoted, in line with the process of “synergy”** mentioned in the definition, in order to become the basis of an ongoing (never ending) necessary policy learning process.
4. territories are granted participation in a **multi-level governance** with a strong partnership with higher authorities and bodies (national, European and international levels)
5. cohesion must exist within the territories. Regions are geographical and/or political entities with different groups, communities and stakeholders, sharing a common history, a common territory, common traditions, cultures and ways of life. Diversity is very important within the territories and it is essential to implement a **large horizontal and vertical partnership and have all private, public actors, associations, NGOs, social partners work together within the territory;**

¹ Territorial capital: what makes an area distinct from the others in terms of development potential. It is determined by a wide range of factors, such as geographical characteristics, size, climate, history... This territorial capital gives a region some strengths and weaknesses, generally called “development potential” or “structural difficulties”. The aim of a balanced territorial development is to give each region the opportunity to make the best out of its territorial capital. (Concept elaborated and defined in “The Territorial State and Perspectives of the European Union Document”, drafted by CPG/Editorial Group for the European Council)

6. **a true coordination takes place at all levels of national and European policy-making**, to ensure that both sectoral policies with a spatial impact and regional policies are more coherent, and that social and environmental issues become transversal issues.
7. **a polycentric approach to economic and social development** is adopted in order to avoid concentrating prosperity, growth and people's future prospects in a limited number of areas in Europe; for AER indeed, it is necessary to put the focus on the capacity of all areas to build more efficient regional alliances for integrated development and sustainable growth.
8. **territorial cohesion is assessed according to a series of soft indicators** taking into account access to and quality of education, employment and poverty rates, environmental performances, economic attractiveness of the territory...

*Adopted on 11th June 2008,
AER Bureau Meeting, Wroclaw, Dolnoslaskie (PL)*