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Meeting the challenge of population decline

Michel Barnier in French Guiana and the East Midlands

Mr Michel Barnier, Member of the European Commission, has made several visits in recent weeks to regions eligible for assistance from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). He visited the Objective 2 region of East Midlands in the United Kingdom on 29 June and the French overseas department of Guiana, eligible under Objective 1, on 22 – 24 June.

During his stay in French Guiana, Mr Barnier was able to see for himself the impact of regional policy on one of the poorest regions of the Union. The Commissioner visited several projects financed by the ERDF, including the George Théolade multisports complex at Matoury, which has had a positive impact on school enrolment, the social integration of young people and vocational training.

The focus of Mr Barnier's visit to the East-Midlands was the Mansfield Business Innovation Centre and he also attended the official opening of The Gallery, a cyber café located in the new University of Nottingham. Regional policy initiatives were discussed with Nick Clegg, MEP, and the director of the East Midlands Development Agency, Martin Briggs.

For more information, please go to:
http://europa.eu.int/comm/commissioners/barnier/visit_fr.htm

Representatives of the Member States, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council and the Committee of the Regions attended a conference in Lycksele (Sweden) on 12 and 13 June to address the issue of population decline in the Union, most notably in the south of Europe, the Nordic countries and regions suffering severe industrial decline.

Population decline mostly affects the areas with grave geographical handicaps identified in the Second Cohesion Report as a "priority with a territorial dimension" for the debate on regional policy after 2006.

Despite their diversity, the European regions affected by population decline share a number of things in common: geographical isolation, demographic decline, weak economic activity, poor living conditions and income levels. They are often trapped in a vicious circle where job losses in traditional sectors cause a population drain to the urban centres, which in turn causes labour shortages and blights economic development further. This phenomenon is not new, but it has been getting worse. By 2025 some 90 regions in the Union will be dealing with the problem of population decline.

The ability of a region to retain its population depends not only on the availability of natural, human and financial resources, but also on its effectiveness in putting these resources to work for local economic development. The conference participants agreed that creating the necessary

conditions for sustainable development means both adapting the measures to the particular characteristics of the affected areas and anchoring local and regional partners in the process, along with the private sector, to strengthen the leverage effect of the public expenditure.

The conference participants also expressed the view that joint measures carried out at European level, and matched with exchanges of experience and networking, could also offer concrete solutions to the problem of population decline. They stressed the contribution of cross-border, international and inter-regional cooperation (all provided for under the Interreg III Initiative) to relieving the isolation of depopulated regions and to generating new dynamism based on successful experimentation. They also noted that the ERDF's innovative measures help in this effort, particularly by encouraging use of the new information technologies.

Conference notes and addresses are available on the Inforegio website:
http://www.inforegio.cec.eu.int/wbdoc/docconf/depop/index_en.htm

ON-LINE STUDIES

The following studies, ordered by the Commission with a view to preparing the Second Report on Economic and Social Cohesion, are now available to the public on the Inforegio website: "The impact of Community environmental waste policies on economic and social cohesion"; "The impact of Community environmental water policies on economic and social cohesion"; "The impact of EU enlargement on cohesion"; "Towards a European peripherality index"; "The impact of Community agricultural policies on economic and social cohesion".

The studies are only available in English, at the following address:
www.inforegio.cec.eu.int/wbdoc/docgener/studies/study_en.htm

A happy ending for the Spanish memorandum

On 11 June last, the conclusions of the General Affairs Council, attended by the fifteen Ministers for European affairs, noted the consequences enlargement would have on cohesion policy in the current Member States.

After a discussion of the progress made in the accession negotiations in the first half of 2001, the Council included in its conclusions the following Commission declaration: "The consequences of enlargement for economic and social cohesion were analysed by the Commission in the Second Report on Economic and Social Cohesion. At the Cohesion Forum on 21 and 22 May 2001, the Commission took note of the concerns voiced by current and future Member States and in particular the memorandum submitted by the delegation from Spain."

The memorandum sent to the Commission by the Spanish Government last April had been of some concern, because Spain had suggested that initial financial guidelines for regional policy after 2006 should be set in the context of the accession negotiations. This request from the country with the largest number of people living in regions whose development is lagging behind was prompted by fear of a statistical illusion that could result in these regions' status changing overnight to "nouveaux riches", but without any real improvement on the ground.

The Commission's declaration, relayed by the Council, puts an end to what Brussels and Madrid have agreed to consider a misunderstanding, the most important issue now being to advance debate on what cohesion policy should comprise in an enlarged Union, rather than on its financing from 2007.

Objective 2: Austria and Belgium

The Commission has approved four regional development programmes for Limburg, West Flanders, East Flanders and Antwerp (Belgium). In the case of Austria, the Commission has tentatively approved the urban renewal programme for Vienna.

Austria. The programme focuses on the districts of Brigittenau and Leopoldstadt in Vienna, both of which have relatively high unemployment and crime. The proposed measures will strengthen business dynamism, upgrade vocational skills and identify the needs of the labour market. The Objective 2 negotiations in Austria will draw to a close when this programme receives final approval.

Belgium. The programme for Limburg relates primarily to the former mining area and the rural region of Haspengouw. The focus will be on private investment and employment initiatives, optimisation of the local conditions for economic activity and integrated rural development.

The coastal area of Westhoek in West Flanders will receive transitional aid to develop tourism and improve the local economy. Specific measures will cover sustainable development, improved living and working conditions, training and employment.

Reclaiming former mining industry sites and providing support for local cooperation are the two priorities for Kempen, in the Antwerp region. Urban renewal measures (construction of new public open areas and better services) are also planned for north-east Antwerp.

The development programme for East Flanders relates to particular areas of the city of Ghent and the rural area of Meetjesland. It will focus on developing economic initiatives and employment, improving the quality of life in urban and rural areas and promoting rural tourism.

Programme	Total cost*	Contribution from Structural Funds*
Austria		
Vienna	29,5	18,1
Belgium		
Limburg	240,4	92,7
West Flanders	117,4	33,0
Antwerp	135,8	47,0
East Flanders	59,1	13,6

* EUR million



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