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100 editions of inforegio news, eight years of European regional policy

New on Coneccs, the 'Consultation, the European Commission and civil society' database

A new section on consultative bodies has recently been added to the Coneccs web site. The updated site facilitates access to information about the Commission's formal or structured consultative bodies, in which civil society organisations participate. It also provides information on these civil society organisations. There are three search options: from an A-Z menu, by policy area or via a defined search. The site address is:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/civil_society/coneccs/index_en.htm

Web site of Michel Barnier, Commissioner for Regional Policy and Institutional Reform

The personal web site of Michel Barnier presents a profile of the Commissioner and information about his activities at the European Commission. This includes the texts of speeches and personal notes, press releases, interviews and articles for the press, as well as an overview of the Commissioner's daily activities. The site is updated every Wednesday and Friday and can be found at:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/commissioners/barnier/index_en.htm

It is now more than eight years since the first edition of *inforegio news* was published. Since February 1994, this monthly bulletin has been to the fore in communicating in 11 languages the activities and developments in European regional policy. And so, to mark the occasion of this 100th edition, I would like to take the opportunity to reflect on some of the key developments of this period and to share with you some of my thoughts on the future of European regional policy.

Michel Barnier

Member of the Commission in charge of regional policy and the reform of the institutions

Looking back on the past eight years, it has clearly been a time of important change and of considerable progress. I will give some examples: the establishment of the Committee of the Regions (1994), the publication of the first report on cohesion (1996), the reform of EU regional policy, formalised in Agenda 2000, the creation of the new Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG) in 1994, and the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), which confirmed the importance of economic and social cohesion. In 1999, the Berlin Council approved the reform of the Structural Funds and the adjustment in the operation of the Cohesion Fund, which allowed for the allocation of over EUR 213 billion for regional development for the period 2000–06. During this eight-year period the preparations for enlargement have also benefited from structural assistance, by way of the Instrument for Structural Policies for Pre-accession (ISPA). This instrument facilitates the financing of transport and environmental infrastructure in the candidate countries.

Today, the results of these activities are evident. Recent reports clearly show that the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund are successfully contributing to reducing regional disparities. Progress made in the period 1987–97 was particularly encouraging, with per capita GDP in the EU's poorest regions rising from 54.2 % of the Community average in 1987 to 61.1 % in 1997. At national level, convergence was even more marked for the least prosperous countries of the

Union (Greece, Portugal, Ireland and Spain), with average per capita GDP rising from 67.6 % in 1988 to 78.8 % in 1998.

However, despite these undeniable successes of European economic and social cohesion policy, the gap between the richest and the poorest regions are still considerable. Unemployment also remains a pressing concern and, although substantial progress has been made in basic infrastructure, other imbalances still remain: research and technological development, access to skills and the information society, opportunities for education and on-going training and the quality of the environment.

But the success of regional policy must not only be measured in statistical terms. The Community-wide scale of certain measures (Community initiatives), partnership among the various parties involved, the focus on the environment and equal opportunities, cooperation, networking, exchange of experiences and experimentation with new approaches to development (for example, in the framework of the innovative actions) are all new assets which help the regions to move forward and fully realise their potential.

This is where we find the real 'added value' of Community regional policy, which will become even more important after enlargement of the Union to the east. Regional disparities will be at least twice as significant as at present and, therefore, assistance to the less-developed regions of

an enlarged Union must be an absolute priority for the future.

At the same time, the problems of regions in the current Union still persist. This is the significant task for the future of regional policy — to find solutions that are equitable and as simple as possible for all the underprivileged regions.

Specific problems of run-down urban districts, declining rural areas, areas with natural handicaps, industrial areas undergoing restructuring and border regions deserve a European

response. As I said at a seminar in Brussels on 27 and 28 May 2002, I propose that the future policy offers to these regions a 'menu' of thematic priorities corresponding to their specific needs.

I welcome the fact that these proposals were well received by the participants at that seminar and I look forward to continued constructive debate and consultation in the coming months. This process will contribute to the proposal of the Commission, to be presented at the end of 2003, on the future of regional policy beyond 2006.

E(U) = n + 2

In a communication published on 27 May 2002, the Commission clarifies the so called 'n + 2' rule of the EU's Structural Funds.

This rule stipulates that the annual financial instalment to a programme co-financed by the Funds must be spent before the end of the second year following the commitment ('n' being the year of commitment). Appropriations not used within this period are, unless in exceptional circumstances, lost to

the Member States. For multi-fund programmes, for which commitments were made in different years, the Commission has decided to apply the de-commitment rule to the year of the latest commitment. This rule will apply from 31 December 2002 for the first time.

eEurope 2005: increasing participation in the global information society

At their weekly meeting on 29 May 2002, EU Commissioners adopted a new action plan entitled 'eEurope 2005: An information society for all'.

Whereas the earlier eEurope 2002 action plan focused on extending Internet connectivity across Europe, the new action plan aims to provide a favourable environment for private investment and the creation of new jobs, to boost productivity, to modernise public services and most importantly, to enhance participation in the global information society. By 2005, the Commission aspires to having modern online public services, particularly e-government, e-learning and e-health; a dynamic

e-business environment; widespread availability of broadband access at competitive prices and a secure information infrastructure. The action plan sets out how a wide range of EU programmes, such as the Structural Funds, the forthcoming e-learning programme and eTEN, could be used to reach these objectives. Further information on eEurope can be found at:

http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/news_library/eeurope2005/index_en.htm



European Commission
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