

# **GROWING REGIONS, GROWING EUROPE**

## **PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON THE FUTURE OF THE EU COHESION POLICY**

**Opinion of the  
Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)**

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## PRELIMINARY NOTE

The AEBR is the oldest European regional Organisation (founded 1971) and the only one who is exclusively dealing with questions of border and cross border regions. From this perspective our opinion is developed.

Border regions cover more than one third of the EU's area. Many of them are rural regions. It is of vital importance to preserve and continue developing wealth and diversity of border regions as well as of rural areas.

Europe's border regions, especially rural areas, have to meet greater social and economic challenges than agglomerations or urban areas within the country, e.g. due to underdeveloped transport systems (lack of infrastructure), migration of young and well educated people, the risk of ageing, often one-sided economic structure and often high costs (in particular for social service), but also due to new important tasks (renewable resources being on the rise).

- 1. What lessons can be drawn from the experience of preparing the 2007-2013 programmes? In this context and in the light of the analysis provided by this report, how far is cohesion policy adapted to the new challenges European regions will face in the coming years? For example:**

For the cohesion policy 2007-2013 the change from the up to now rather geographic to clear political priorities is of special importance.

This is an important step to face the new challenges: statistic characteristics and financial resources should only be instruments to achieve political aims.

The inclusion of the whole territory of the EU is just as important, because all regions could contribute to growth and employment. In close association with this is the polycentric development of the territory of the EU.

It is in the political, economic and social interest of the EU and its Member States to foster the new principle of territorial cohesion.

### **1.1. How can the regions react to restructuring pressures from dynamic competitors in low and medium tech sectors?**

Not only agglomerations and urban centres, but also very innovative and successful rural areas and border regions provide a sustainable contribution to growth and employment (Fourth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion and Territorial Agenda). These border regions have shown that they can meet the restructuring pressure with:

- cross-border cooperation in all areas of life,
- selective education and training,
- cross-border investments and projects, which include the potentials of the neighbouring country (critical mass),
- focussing on own strengths, support of small and medium-sized enterprises, which ensure a diversified economic structure (not depending on individual economic branches),
- settlement of research facilities and innovative technologies which otherwise could not be realised, by means of the INTERREG III A programmes,
- sustainable improvement of the infrastructure as a requirement for mobility, cross-border as well as to the national centres: the employable population and trainees can stay in the border regions and / or commute on favourable conditions,
- cross-border cooperation of universities and research facilities,
- utilisation of the innovation potential of subcontracting firms (e.g. to conglomerates) within the region, which thus become more independent from these conglomerates.

**1.2. Given wide differences in birth rates, death rates and migratory flows at regional level, what is the role of cohesion policy in responding to demographic change?**

Cohesion policy with the new political instrument of territorial cohesion and the polycentric development plays a vital role. The innovative ability of the poorest regions, as well as of the border regions and rural areas will be sustainably enhanced by the programmes for 2007-2013.

It is necessary to counter the effects of demographic change on the labour market and provision of basic societal needs by means of polycentric development, in particular by strengthening small and medium-sized centres (urban poles).

Many prosperous rural areas (cf. ESDP, Territorial Agenda) demonstrate that economic growth and prosperity are not directly depending on the level of concentration. They should be used as best practices for the creation of appropriate political framework conditions for these areas in the future.

**1.3. To what extent is climate change a challenge for cohesion policy?**

For Border regions the following structural problems arise:

- possibility of a higher average temperature in Europe,
- droughts (in particular in Southern Europe),
- more frequent, heavy rainfalls (in particular in Northern Europe),
- higher snow line in mountainous areas (lower revenues from winter sport),
- necessity of adjustment activities for farming and forestry in Southern and Central Europe and for tourism in mountainous regions.

Border regions are especially affected by following selective problems:

- possible rise of the sea level,
- floods (in river areas due to wrong settlement policies and in mountainous regions),
- landslides,
- forest fires.

This results in the need to limit the damages by preventive measures:

- improving of coastal protection,
- cross-border cooperation in the case of floods,
- cross-border civil protection and contingency plans,
- cross-border water management, in drought areas as well as along the course of rivers (in case of floods etc.).

## **2. How can cohesion policy further develop an integrated and more flexible approach to development/growth and jobs in this new context?**

Because of their previous regional management to overcome their geographic, demographic and natural disadvantages especially border and cross-border areas (particularly if they are rural) are possessing specific experiences for a sustainable regional development:

- Thinking in long-term cross-sectoral strategies and concepts:
  - development of integrated cross-border models at regional / local level with real objectives, measures as well as project ideas, in sectors such as the economy, innovation and research (e.g. in

- the fields of economy, innovation and research, local planning, urban development, support of landscaping, social infrastructure, technical infrastructure, cultural tourism),
- enhanced cooperation between political, administrative and economic players and non-governmental organisations (great creative potential through cross-border competence circles),
  - enhanced cooperation between communities and regional organisations, new innovative partnerships between urban cities at various levels with the surrounding rural area (even across borders),
  - using the narrow funds, on one hand, for the necessary concentration, on the other hand, for a more adequate distribution of tasks between regions and communities (avoidance of unhelpful competition),
  - creation of cross-border “regions of competence” in (rural) border areas, adapted to the respective border-regional characteristics (e.g. sports, wellness, environment, alternative energies, universities and research facilities),
  - creation of cross-border metropolitan regions,
  - working in partnerships and networks.
- polycentric regional development by:
    - linking of potential of rural areas on both sides of the border (economic, cultural, social and infrastructural), because often this is the only way to achieve the necessary sustainability (critical mass) of reasonable measures, investments, projects (common education facilities, hospitals, services, cross-border research landscapes or life science regions),
    - maintenance of educational and social institutions by developing innovative and creative solutions for provision of basic societal needs (cross-border management),

- diversifying of the sectoral structure in good time (the effects of demographic change only manifest themselves in the medium term);
  - training policy and (adult) education for regional / local development (country and town planning, social development, development of environmental projects, self-help groups in health), working with multipliers.
- adaptation of the educational and social systems:
    - learning the language of the neighbouring country at all school levels;
    - gearing education network planning to future needs,
    - training according to the needs of older people;
    - providing cross-border public and private services;
    - organising cross-border labour markets.

**2.1. How can cohesion policy better promote harmonious, balanced and sustainable development taking into account the diversity of EU territories, such as least favoured areas, islands, rural and coastal areas but also cities, declining industrial regions, other areas with particular geographic characteristics?**

The territorial cooperation shows the great potential which can be used through increasing cross-border exchange,

The territorial coherence and the polycentric development have to be strengthened (see above),

For border regions, especially if they are marked as rural and /or peripheral, further enhancement of accessibility is of fundamental importance: mobility of the population and economy as well cross-border as to the national centres.

Furthermore the often peripheral location has to be overcome by modern telecommunication.

The cohesion policy must strengthen the attempts so far with a view to accommodate the diversity of the regions. This is also feasible through further decentralisation and regionalisation in the programmes of the EU, especially in the case of INTERREG A (improved attention of hitherto evaluations: smaller regional programmes give the best results. Unfortunately for the period 2007-2013 the designated programme areas are more and more large).

**2.2. What are the impacts of the challenges identified in the report for key elements of social cohesion such as inclusion, integration and opportunity for all? Are further efforts needed to anticipate and counteract these impacts?**

In the Mediterranean area and on the external borders questions of social insertion and integration are of special interest for border regions (illegal immigration). Border regions on the internal borders are often used as areas to switch from one European Country to another (social advantages). European and national support is required.

**2.3. What are the key future skills that are essential for our citizens in facing new challenges?**

For border regions education and training (lifelong learning) as well as flexibility are a key to meet the challenges. In addition knowledge of the language of the neighbouring country, cross-border professional education as well as comprehension and appreciation of the neighbour is required as a cultural precondition for cross-border mobility, labour markets and economy.

**2.4. What are the critical competencies that should be developed at the regional level to make regions globally competitive?**

Successful cross-border cooperation reveals that the competence of these border regions is sustainable encouraged and the regions become more competitive on a global scale, if they think regional political and strategic, establish networks, cooperate in partnership and avoid useless competition or double effects just as well as double investments.

In doing so a sustainable strengthening of regional characteristics and competences is essential (cross-border “region of competence”), without making the mistake to create new monostructures.

**3. Following the appraisal of the previous questions, what is the assessment of the policy management system for the period 2007-2013?**

Unfortunately the consistently announced simplification of administration does hardly take place in practice. Application forms are increasing in volume and become more and more detailed, also the manuals. The devolution of competences from the EU to national level does not necessarily result in the required simplification. The numerous and voluminous EU directives have to be taken into account further on. Because “nobody wants to make a national mistake” in practice only a few things will be simplified. Given the fact that in the cross-border cooperation also the administrative systems of two countries with different answers to the same questions have to be considered, is leading to a more complex constellation. The increasing part of costs for management, consultation etc. in the programmes is reflecting this.

**3.1. Given the need for efficient management of cohesion policy programmes, what is the optimum allocation of responsibility between the Community, national and regional levels within a multi-level governance system?**

For INTERREG A programmes it would be ideal to deal with regional specific cross-border programmes respectively sub-programmes. Management and implementation should be transferred to existing cross-border regions.

**3.2 How can cohesion policy become more effective in supporting public policies in Member States and regions? What mechanisms of delivery could make the policy more performance-based and more user-friendly?**

See 3.1.

For the last 7-8 years it can generally be determined: quantity and the correct financial management of programmes and projects seem to be more important than quality and contents. A correct programme and financial management is essential, but may not tie so much capacity, that qualitative results take a back seat.

The actual results and the cross-border character of programmes and projects must be spotlighted in the future (added value of cross-border cooperation).

**3.3. How can we further strengthen the relationship between cohesion policy and other national and Community policies to achieve more and better synergies and complementarities?**

EU programmes ensure a more effective use of public funds (in many member states and regions EU programmes optimise the long-term budgeting and so have an impact on investment flows in favour of higher efficiency and sustainability). Moreover, EU funds tie up for the same long-term period national budget resources, which otherwise would not be available in this amount and for this period.

Coherence and complementarity between different policy areas is indispensable (for cross-border regions e.g. especially between measures of the regional fund, social fund and agricultural fund).

**3.4. What are the new opportunities for co-operation between regions, both within and outside the EU?**

In territorial cooperation the cross-border, interregional and transnational cooperation must be maintained as separated strands further on. But border and cross-border regions must make intensified use of the chance of other cooperation areas:

- interregional cooperation by networking, partnerships between regions with the same interests, exchange of experiences between high developed and still developing regions on special issues,
- utilisation of transnational cooperation (e.g. by linking of cross-border fields of cooperation within a national programme, expedient amendment of cross-border, transnational and international project along a development axis).

### **Final remark**

Border regions and cross-border cooperation create added values: European: political, institutional, economic and socio-cultural.

Cross-border cooperation is not primarily a national priority, but rather a European priority and political task of the EU after 2013 to exploit the potential of all border regions at the internal and external border.