

Own-initiative opinion of the Committee of the Regions 'For a Green Paper — Towards a European Union policy for upland regions: A European vision for upland regions'

(2008/C 257/07)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- recalls the fundamentally positive response from Commission President Barroso to the question asked by the European Association of Elected Representatives from Mountain Areas calling for a Green Paper on *European policies for upland areas* during the Structured Dialogue at the Committee of the Regions plenary session on 7 December 2006;
- notes that upland regions are, on the one hand, areas with permanent natural and geographical handicaps and, on the other, regions with natural and human assets conducive to growth and job creation;
- calls for the European Union to put in place a truly integrated European policy for all upland regions whilst respecting their diversity;
- would support active development by the European Commission and the Member States of the EU of the general objectives of the renewed Lisbon and Gothenburg strategies through a European action plan for the competitiveness and sustainable development of upland areas;
- recommends that the European Commission takes into consideration three major policy areas:
 - (a) improving the attractiveness and accessibility of upland areas for accommodating businesses and people, where this can be done without environmental damage, inter alia by improving land transport and telecommunication links, increasing connections to TENs, and promoting innovation and creativity by making best use of knowledge, human resources and entrepreneurship;
 - (b) considering upland areas on the basis of their own resources, taking into account their specificities, to enable them to overcome the extra costs associated with their permanent natural handicap and to maintain Services of General Interest;
 - (c) developing clusters and centres of competitiveness to bring together and consolidate the various sectors of activity with a view to sustainable development.

Rapporteur: Mr Luis DURNWALDER (IT/EPP), Regional councillor and President of the Bolzano autonomous province

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. recalls the fundamentally positive response from Commission President Barroso to the question asked by the European Association of Elected Representatives from Mountain Areas calling for a Green Paper on *European policies for upland areas* during the Structured Dialogue at the Committee of the Regions plenary session on 7 December 2006;

2. highlights the recognition in the Lisbon Treaty (Article 158), in the definition of the objective of territorial cohesion, of the need for upland areas to be given special attention, along with other regions which suffer from permanent natural or geographical handicaps;

3. recalls that uplands are essential to the life and activity of the entire population of the European Union through their natural resources, their cultural resources such as linguistic diversity and particular skills, and their economic resources such as agriculture, industry and tourism;

4. notes that, as a whole, upland areas are to be found in 21 Member States of the European Union and account for 35,69 % of Europe's surface area and 17,73 % of its population (!);

5. notes that upland areas account for 26 % of the land surfaces of the Earth and 10 % of its population, and are a key part of the sustainable development of the planet, as recognised by Chapter 13 of Rio's Agenda 21;

6. notes that the accessibility of mountain areas is of key importance for completing a true single market and for making the free movement of people, goods and services a reality;

7. points out that upland areas are even more diverse when one looks at the cohesion of mountain massifs defined as supra-regional cross-border or transnational areas taking in mountain areas, valley floors and foothills, urban and rural areas;

8. reiterates that the mountain environment has an incredible amount of biodiversity and is particularly fragile and sensitive to climate change; as a consequence, it constitutes a real early-warning system;

9. states that upland areas have traditionally been in the vanguard of potentially innovative sustainable development in the face of permanent natural handicaps;

(!) Study on *Mountain Areas in Europe: Analysis of mountain areas in EU member states, acceding and other European countries*, Nordregio on behalf of DG Regio, January 2004.
http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/studies/pdf/montagne/mount1.pdf.

10. recalls that local and regional authorities have significant experience in sustainable development in upland areas;

11. recalls the efforts of the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee to encourage more attention to be paid to upland regions in European policies through opinions and studies;

12. notes that, to date, there is no European policy or integrated Community strategy on upland areas along the lines of the ones put in place for maritime regions or urban areas;

To improve the governance of the European Union

13. points out that local and regional authorities in upland areas set great store by their autonomy and by compliance with the subsidiarity principle, reflecting a bottom-up approach to European governance;

14. notes that upland regions are, on the one hand, areas with permanent natural and geographical handicaps and, on the other, regions with natural and human assets conducive to growth and job creation;

15. points out the need to bring European policies together into an integrated sustainable development strategy that can take account of the diversity of massifs;

16. highlights the urgent need for balanced and fair work by the EU to make best use, in a sustainable manner, of the diversity of European urban, coastal, sparsely populated and mountainous areas;

17. recalls the importance of the role and the work of upland populations in managing landscapes and the balance of the upland environment;

18. supports the work by regional and local authorities and the networks that bring them together to exchange good practice in relation to the renewed Lisbon and Gothenburg objectives and aimed at economic, social and territorial cohesion;

19. recalls the relevance of the Lisbon strategy and the 2007-2013 cohesion policy guidelines for upland areas, as for other areas, as drivers of Europe's global competitiveness;

20. recalls the central role of the cross-border and transnational dimension of European policies in European integration;

21. highlights the need to bring the political and administrative side of Europe closer to the daily lives of ordinary people;

An integrated approach for upland areas as a general guiding principle

22. emphasises the added value at European level of working at the level of upland regions (the Alps, the Pyrenees, the Carpathian Mountains, the Iberian Sierras, the Balkans, the Mediterranean mountains including those on islands, the Nordic mountains, the central mountains, etc.) taking account of their cross-border and transnational dimension;

23. highlights the importance of upland areas in terms of their natural and cultural resources;

24. recalls the significant number of national and regional integrated policies for upland areas;

25. takes note of the work of the Alpine Convention and the launch of the Carpathian Convention;

26. pays tribute to the work of the Euroregions and Working Communities in their role as mediators and driving forces in border areas;

27. would like a real European strategy for upland areas so as to complement at inter-sectoral level the progress expected from the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion that is currently being prepared;

The various policies as instruments of an integrated policy for upland areas

28. notes that a European policy for upland areas would involve a large number of sectoral policies that are already covered in part by European legislation but have never been coordinated under an integrated approach;

29. lists below some major policy areas that an active policy on upland areas needs to cover:

- Economic, social and territorial cohesion, including inter-regional, cross-border and transnational cooperation;
- Agriculture and rural development;
- Tourism;
- Industry and SMEs;
- Climate change, renewable energy and natural resources (water, air, high-altitude sunshine, wood, biomass);
- Environment, biodiversity and natural and cultural landscapes;
- Transport and ICT, local accessibility and TENs;

— Competition, Single Market, Services of General Interest and PPP;

— Research and innovation;

— Cultural and linguistic diversity, education and training.

For a European Union action plan for upland regions

30. calls for the European Union to put in place a truly integrated European policy for all upland regions whilst respecting their diversity;

31. would support active development by the European Commission and the Member States of the EU of the general objectives of the renewed Lisbon and Gothenburg strategies through a European action plan for the competitiveness and sustainable development of upland areas;

32. advises the European Institutions to take account of the characteristics of individual area in their work towards 'better lawmaking';

33. calls on the European Commission to recognise the diverse and positive contribution that local and regional authorities make in the field of sustainable development of mountain areas and to include this in the new European policy for upland areas;

34. recommends that the European Commission takes into consideration three major policy areas:

- a. improving the attractiveness and accessibility of upland areas for accommodating businesses and people, where this can be done without environmental damage, inter alia by improving land transport and telecommunication links, increasing connections to TENs, and promoting innovation and creativity by making best use of knowledge, human resources and entrepreneurship;
- b. considering upland areas on the basis of their own resources, taking into account their specificities, to enable them to overcome the extra costs associated with their permanent natural handicap and to maintain Services of General Interest;
- c. developing clusters and centres of competitiveness to bring together and consolidate the various sectors of activity with a view to sustainable development;

35. recommends that the European Commission makes upland regions pilot areas for innovation, the knowledge society and sustainable development;

36. would like upland areas to be able to continue to develop innovation based on their traditions and improve the competitiveness of their SMEs;

37. suggests that the European Commission and the Member States of the EU consider the different needs of different areas as regards employment and training;

38. recommends that the European Commission develop, based on the experience of Nature Parks, an integrated management method for isolated high and medium mountain areas which can combine policies for conserving natural resources, particularly through the Natura 2000 networks, with policies for the enhancement and balanced development of upland regions;

39. advises the European Union to take account of the specific needs of particular areas when framing the Europe-wide organisation of its civil security, given the concentration of natural hazards and the very different constraints, and hence techniques, for the deployment of civil protection and rescue services in upland areas;

40. calls for consideration to be given, as part of the CAP reform, to the strategic role of upland agriculture, pastoralism and winegrowing in maintaining landscapes, the quality of water and the production of high-quality produce with a high degree of territorial traceability. This more locally-oriented Common Agricultural Policy would benefit high-quality, low-yield production, which is a key element of European agriculture and of the utmost importance in environmental terms;

41. calls on the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union to offer a balanced, comprehensive package of measures suitable for backing up steps to phase out the milk quota regime, especially in upland and middle mountain regions. These measures should be financed with resources from market organisation measures which are no longer used, but should not be at the expense of direct payments. In order to maintain agriculture, extensive farming and dairy production in upland areas and middle mountain regions, a more economically-oriented measure in the second pillar should be developed, aimed inter alia at creating market opportunities, thus supporting those types of farming in areas with natural and geographical handicaps, which produce significant benefits for nature and the environment;

42. calls on the European institutions to take into account in their policies the key role of upland forests and sustainable forest management in view of the highly effective protection they provide for the areas of forest concerned and, in particular, residential areas, and their resulting contribution to conserving resources and biodiversity, with a view to combating climate change and preserving air and water quality and the countryside and to the socio-economic development of upland regions;

43. maintains that there is currently too little economic activity related to forestry in Europe, both in terms of its environmental role and of its economic products (energy, construction, raw materials);

44. calls on the European institutions to include in their analysis of European territories the energy needs and renewable energy production capacities (hydro-electric, solar, wind,

biomass and wood) of mountain areas, and their ability to construct buildings to passive house standard;

45. calls on the European institutions, national and regional public banks, and the European Carbon Fund or Bluenext to take into consideration the positive contributions to the quality of the environment (forests, meadows and mountain pastures) made by upland areas in terms of carbon sinks, which could be financially rewarded through the carbon certificate or credit systems;

46. recalls that the energy, transport and ITC TENs must include a genuine territorial dimension and thus take account of the geographical, environmental and human situations of the regions they cross if they are to become genuine European networks for pan-continental communication and exchanges supported by the local population;

47. intends to take an interest in experiments in local and sustainable integrated transport in upland towns as part of the European debate on sustainable urban mobility;

48. stresses the need for a permanent link between upland populations and large population centres in order to achieve the renewed European objectives for growth and jobs;

49. calls on the European Commission to do everything possible to reduce the digital divide and enable all areas and all European citizens to access high-speed, and in the near future very high speed, connections via cable or satellite, inter alia under the i2010 European initiative on e-inclusion;

50. recommends that the upland dimension of certain international geopolitical issues, such as those relating to water and natural resources, respect for cultural diversity and education, sustainable economic development and migratory flows, be included in foreign and neighbourhood policy;

51. advises the European Commission to territorialise its communication strategy so as to draw closer to the daily lives of European citizens;

52. suggests that a stronger territorial dimension be given to European policies, the Community decision-making process and comitology so as to improve European democracy;

53. calls on the European Parliament to identify the budgetary impact on each upland area of the European Union's activities;

54. recommends that cohesion policy be coordinated on a partnership basis in upland regions so as to avoid fragmentation and improve the strategic dimension of structural measures;

55. suggests that the operational programming of other Community policies that have a territorial impact also be coordinated at this relevant level, i.e. upland regions, so as to define cross-sectoral, integrated and partnership-based strategies;

56. supports the measure adopted by the Council of Ministers responsible for spatial planning to study the impact of climate change on upland areas as part of the Territorial Agenda action plan, and calls on the European Commission to take account of this issue in its work and legislative proposals;

57. supports the key role of cohesion policy in this European strategy on upland regions and the leading role of the territorial cohesion objective and Interreg programmes;

58. calls on the Member States and their parliaments, as part of their procedures for adopting the regulation on the EGTC, to consider the vital importance of a common legal instrument to promote territorial cooperation in upland regions;

59. highlights the need to take account in competition and single market policies the crucial role of Services of General Interest and Public-Private Partnerships in upland economies, and of overcoming the permanent economic and social costs in these areas with permanent natural handicaps in order to avoid depopulation and make best use of their assets;

60. calls on the European Commission to consult all the stakeholders and observers involved in the Alpine Convention and the Carpathian Convention in order to study their governance and objectives and to decide, on that basis, whether or not

to ratify the protocols of the former and to sign and ratify those of the latter, and, if so, to play a leading role in these transnational Conventions;

61. proposes that a European year be dedicated to upland areas and that a biennial European conference of upland regions be organised by the Commission, in conjunction with the Committee of the Regions, along the lines of the 2002 conference;

62. calls on the European Parliament and the Council, during the hearings prior to their appointment, identifiably to entrust competence for upland areas to a single Commissioner, who would coordinate the activities of the College on this cross-cutting territorial issue, in addition to his other competences;

63. calls on the European Commission to make proposals in a Green Paper on the future of European policies on upland regions as a precursor to an integrated, partnership-based European strategy for upland areas led by the European Commission, the Member States and regional and local authorities, supported by socio-economic and environmental players, and involving national and European associations representing regional authorities from upland areas.

Brussels, 19 June 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE
