

Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the 'The Alpine Arc — an opportunity for development and integration'

(96/C 204/24)

On 6 July 1995, the Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 23(3) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an Opinion on 'The Alpine Arc — an opportunity for development and integration'.

The Section for Regional Development and Town and Country Planning, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its Opinion on 20 February 1996. The Rapporteur was Mr Masucci.

At its 335th Plenary Session (meeting of 25 April 1996), the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following Opinion by 89 votes for, with 5 abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1. As long ago as 1991, the Europe 2000 report emphasized how a common approach to spatial planning can help maximize the benefits of the single market.

1.2. Four years later, Europe 2000+ took this argument a step further in the light of:

- the objectives of Economic and Monetary Union and the enhancement of economic and social cohesion, as set out in the Maastricht Treaty;
- the need for joint action schemes to boost growth, competitiveness and employment, as set out in the Delors White Paper;
- the imminent accession of Austria, Finland and Sweden and the likely future accession of the countries of central and eastern Europe.

1.3. The aim of the Europe 2000 programme is to hammer out an overall, long-term (extending into the next century) approach to EU spatial planning and to accommodate sectoral trends and the major trans-European networks within this changing spatial framework.

1.3.1. This calls for increasing transnational cooperation into which local and regional authorities and the socio-economic organizations should have an input.

1.4. To this end, the EU was subdivided into eight groups of regions, classified according to geographical location and degree of interlinkages, so that transnational spatial developments could be assessed more easily. The eight groups are:

- the centre capitals;
- the Alpine Arc;

— the continental diagonal;

— the new German Länder;

— the Mediterranean (Latin rim);

— the Atlantic region;

— the North Sea regions;

— the ultra-peripheral regions.

2. Frontier regions: a meeting and integration point

2.1. Over the centuries, frontier regions have frequently changed their political masters; they have also been crossroads for trade and cultural relations, as well as for population movements, and this has enriched and often radically altered their social fabric. Not just armies, but merchants, craftsmen, farm labourers and, later, workmen in search of employment crossed mountain passes and valleys, often settling where they could earn a better living and possibly provide a stable home for their families.

2.2. For centuries, Alpine Europe has been an area of intense trade and travel. In the present century, the region's internal borders have been radically redrawn by two world wars.

2.3. EU enlargement has given the area focusing on the Alps a key role in economic and social integration, as it includes some of the most important regions of the Union:

- in France, the south-eastern regions (Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Rhône-Alpes);
- in Italy, the industrial triangle (Piedmont, Lombardy, Liguria) and the north-eastern regions (Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia);

- in Germany, parts of Bavaria and Baden Württemberg;
- much of Austria.

Alongside these EU regions, mention should also be made of Liechtenstein and Switzerland. The latter is an important player to be considered in any policies that regard the Alpine Arc. Formulation of a new strategy for a region of such vital importance for Europe provides a golden opportunity to work with Switzerland and involve it more closely in the Union.

Lastly, account must be taken of the role of Slovenia and Croatia, which will act as an important bridge with the Balkans.

2.4. The Alpine region is thus highly emblematic, given that it straddles three of the EU's largest Member States (France, Germany and Italy); a fourth country which was a major multiethnic power until less than eighty years ago (Austria); Switzerland, which with its French, German and Italian speaking cantons can be viewed as the epitome of European integration, despite its position outside the Union; and Slovenia and Croatia, two new countries which have emerged from the painful reshaping of Europe that began in 1989.

2.5. The Alpine region is of fundamental importance not only for its historical and cultural resonance, but also for its role in Europe's future development strategies, both because it houses a major part of the Community's productive economy and natural resources (the Alps) and because it provides a bridge to the countries of eastern Europe via the Austrian, German and Italian borders.

3. Economic and social conditions

3.1. Socio-economic data show the Alpine Arc as one of the most developed and prosperous regions of the EU. However, analysis reveals quite significant differences between areas, in terms both of population (demographic growth, employment, per capita GDP) and other economic and commercial indicators, such as traffic flows, which place a considerable strain on the environment.

It is thus possible to identify a number of sub-systems. Their economic and social differences are mostly skewed against the more mountainous areas.

3.1.1. Some Alpine areas are threatened by depopulation or rely solely on tourism for their livelihood; the remoteness of some regions means that even this resource

is denied them, and their sole source of income is a straitened agriculture sector whose special circumstances have been inadequately catered for by the CAP.

3.2. In order to gain a better picture of the problems and possible remedies, the present Opinion proposes a different geographical and politico-administrative definition of the Alpine Arc from that used in the European Commission's Europe 2000+ report⁽¹⁾. The latter risks over-extending the target area (by including the Italian regions of Emilia Romagna and the Marche, and the French region of Alsace) while ignoring regions such as Liguria and countries such as Slovenia and Croatia which have direct economic, social and cultural links with the Alpine Arc.

However, there is no doubting the basic soundness of the introductory words of the analysis contained in Europe 2000+: 'The most striking features of the Alpine Arc region are its modernity, economic diversity, prosperity and development potential.'⁽²⁾

3.3. One problem facing the Alpine Arc is how to handle the effects of its advanced economy and the question of integration, both within the region and with neighbouring regions. In some areas, however, local disadvantages have hampered economic efficiency. Production sectors are at a competitive disadvantage because of the difficulty of overcoming their relative isolation.

3.4. The region's economic strength is broadly based: in Germany, it derives from the strong development of industry and advanced services in Bavaria; in Italy, from the industrial triangle of Turin-Milan-Genoa, and the industrial areas and rich farmland of the Triveneto; in France, from the industrial development of Lyon and the high-tech industries of Grenoble and Sophia Antipolis on the Côte d'Azur. The accession of Austria has brought significant added value and a new force for development that can also extend towards eastern Europe.

3.5. The southern side of the Alps provides a meeting-point with the Latin Arc, and also forms an important link with central Europe.

The French coastal areas in particular — as noted by Europe 2000+⁽³⁾ — 'are marked by large-scale flows of tourists, migrants and goods being transported through the region, but also by under-industrialization. A major problem is to secure a share of the flows for purposes of economic development, which has yet to be consolidated

(1) European Commission, Europe 2000+, 1994, p. 169.

(2) European Commission, Europe 2000+, 1994, p. 182.

(3) European Commission, Europe 2000+, 1994, p. 198.

and which is characterized by a marked dichotomy between high tech and low skill activities'.

4. Managing development: a) the risks

4.1. The Alpine region is thus both extremely wealthy and extremely fragile, and these two features partly stem from the same factors.

The high per capita GDP, broadly-based employment, and high level of industry and advanced services bear witness to the wealth of the Alpine region. But it is also fragile because intense production and commercial activity threaten its environment, population density is high, and freight and passenger traffic is over-concentrated in an extremely limited area.

4.2. First and foremost, there is a danger of congestion. Few regions in Europe — and possibly in the world — experience such intense traffic in such a restricted area.

Freight traffic, both north-south (Italy-Austria-Germany and France-Switzerland-Italy) and west-east (France-Italy-Switzerland-Austria-Germany), combines with very heavy tourist traffic bound for the sea and the major lakes in the summer and the Alps and Dolomites in the winter.

4.3. Again, traffic pressure varies from area to area, in terms not only of volume, but also of the differing levels of freight and passenger traffic. Traffic is particularly heavy along the corridors Lyon-Turin-Milan, Lyon-Marseille, Munich-Vienna and Munich-Verona. The Frejus, Mont Blanc, Saint Gotthard, Simplon and Brenner passes all now carry over 20 million tonnes of freight per year. Traffic is lighter along the Marseille-Nice-Genoa coastal motorway, the Tarvisio pass on the Salzburg-Trieste-Venice route, and the Vienna-Graz-Trieste motorway.

4.4. At the end of the 1980s, 12 % of total intra-EC freight traffic was funnelled through the Alps. The figure has been growing at a rate of some 2,6 % per year. Further increases of at least 3 % for inter-Alpine traffic and over 5 % for international traffic are forecast for the next few years.

4.4.1. At least for the foreseeable future, serious delays (notably in Italy) in implementing combined rail/road schemes rule out the possibility of rerouting a significant portion of this traffic onto rail. Since the end

of the 1970s, the share of road freight has risen from around 50 % to two thirds of all freight.

4.5. Passenger traffic is mainly linked to tourism, and is concentrated in July, August and the winter months.

4.6. Trade within the region is set to increase following the accession to the EU of Austria, the stepping-up of economic and trade links with Slovenia and soon (it is to be hoped) with Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia once peace returns. Trade with the EEA members is also likely to increase.

4.7. Population density is also a problem. It is very high in some strategic parts of the Alpine Arc such as the northern part of the French Alps and the Po and Rhone valleys. This high density could pose a serious threat to the environment. The situation in the Rhone valley, especially between Lyon and Avignon, is particularly worrying, as both manufacturing and service activities are likely to continue to develop strongly.

4.8. The environment is threatened by high pollution levels that are actually a byproduct of positive factors such as intensive industrialization and strategic position on commercial and tourist routes. High traffic density in often extremely narrow valleys and concentration of tourism in certain mountain resorts and along lakesides for limited periods, can pose serious problems if nothing is done to ensure systematic collection and disposal of the large quantities of urban and above all industrial waste produced in the area.

4.9. Upland agriculture plays a vital role in preserving the landscape and natural balance. In some areas, such as the Alpine valleys and Pre-Alpine plains, intensive farming can prove problematic.

4.10. The whole Alpine Arc thus faces serious environmental pressure from the combined effects of transport, urbanization, industry and tourism. Here too, however, a distinction must be made between individual areas.

4.11. The practical difficulties of reconciling a high level of economic development, an international trade hub and a fragile environment are compounded by inadequately regulated protection of natural resources, especially in Italy and France.

4.12. The strong feeling of local identity, found in all border regions, has posed problems of national sovereignty in the past, but is not a real obstacle to cross-border cooperation.

5. Managing development: b) the opportunities

5.1. The Alpine Arc also offers major development opportunities, not just within the region but throughout the EU.

5.2. Due to its central location, this macroregion is an important cultural and social crossroads between central Europe and the Latin countries.

5.3. In economic terms, this location has spawned close cross-border cooperation and enabled the Alpine Arc to build up a unique store of commercial and practical experience. The cooperation which has grown up in recent years between Italy, France, Switzerland and Austria is of immense social value and is an excellent augur for a genuinely frontier-free production and trade area at the heart of Europe.

5.3.1. The Alpine Arc is a perfect example of an interregional area with multi-direction border traffic and a dense network of economic, cultural and social links. Although these links may pose some thorny problems, they are also of great value to the whole EU and the wider European continent.

5.3.2. More specifically, the Alpine Arc can act as a bridge from north and central Europe to the Mediterranean, channelling business and trade through the ports of Marseille, Genoa and Trieste to Africa and the Middle East respectively.

5.4. The dense network of small, family-run businesses, and the strong craft traditions of some key areas, make the Alpine Arc an ideal site for local development. The region already houses some prime examples of locally generated development, and many areas have the cultural prerequisites for such development.

Alongside this, the well-established 'industrial districts' which were central to the economic development of recent years make the Alpine Arc an area of the utmost economic interest and a subject of study by many observers from America, Japan and the developing countries.

5.5. The Alpine regions also form a priceless environmental 'reserve' which must be safeguarded for Europe (see point 8.1).

This is a prerequisite for the development of the other major opportunity offered by the Alpine Arc, namely tourism; the region includes some of the world's most prestigious winter-sports resorts, and is also suited to summer tourism.

5.6. In the area of political, administrative and trade-union activity, it is also worth highlighting the many instances of cooperation between trade unions in the Alpine region. A number of interregional trade-union councils have sprung up in the last few years and these are still growing. They deal with all aspects of the protection of cross-border workers, development of economic and business activities, spatial planning and environmental conservation.

6. Instruments and remedies

6.1. Given their interdependence, close regional cooperation is necessary if the Alpine areas are to maintain and control their development. Such cooperation is already well developed.

6.2. This cooperation must be conducted first and foremost at intra-EU level. It will involve coordinated spatial planning among the different areas; policies for switching from road to rail, sea or inland waterway transport; and common guidelines on environmental protection, maintenance of upland farming and the use of natural resources, including the delicate and topical subject of disposal of toxic and noxious waste and extraction of materials for the construction industry.

6.3. The Community has many years' experience of cross-border cooperation schemes, some of which date back to the 1960s. A major coordinated planning instrument is now provided by the Alpine Convention, which was signed in Salzburg on 7 November 1991, by all the Alpine nations (Italy, Germany, France, Austria, Switzerland, Slovenia, Liechtenstein) and by the EU. The Convention bears witness to the political will for joint development of the Alps, notably by harmonizing transport policies and framing joint guidelines for environmental protection.

6.4. Another important financial instrument is provided by the Interreg cross-border cooperation programmes. The Community's concern for border regions undoubtedly increased with the launch of Interreg in 1990. The programme is designed specifically to speed up and boost the integration of border regions within the single market.

The successes notched up by the 31 operational programmes which used MECU 1 034 between 1990 and

1993 have been repeatedly acknowledged at the highest level, notably by the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee⁽¹⁾ and the Committee of the Regions.

6.4.1. Accordingly, at the Edinburgh European Council of December 1992, the Member States agreed to prioritize schemes of the type funded by Interreg over the 1994-1999 programming period. Interreg II thus continues to support cross-border cooperation both inside and outside the EU, from its budget allocation of MECU 2 400 (1994 prices). Interreg II also covers programmes for education, health, communications, language training, spatial planning and links with the trans-European networks.

6.5. Given the Alpine Arc's pivotal position within the EU, new financial support instruments should be activated. Much of the Alpine region receives aid from the Structural Funds, mainly under Objective 2 (declining industrial areas, especially in Piedmont, Lombardy, Liguria and Baden Württemberg) and Objective 5b.

6.6. Here the Committee would reiterate the need for local authorities and socio-economic partners to have an input into the preparation and implementation of the programmes co-financed by the Structural Funds

6.7. Interregional cooperation and Community financial support are therefore the instruments for tackling the overriding — and closely interconnected — priorities of the Alpine Arc:

- a new transport policy;
- environmental protection.

The special nature of upland agriculture means that it too merits particular attention.

The way in which these problems are addressed will determine the future development of the Alpine regions and the quality of life of their inhabitants.

6.7.1. The Alpine Arc could provide an ideal 'test bed' for strategic regional management schemes covering:

- local economic development objectives;
- transport policy;

- environmental protection policies;
- public service policies.

7. A transport policy

7.1. The completion of the single market and the expected growth in economic ties with the countries of central and eastern Europe and the Balkans are likely to bring a sizeable increase in freight and passenger traffic.

7.2. Positive measures have been adopted in some countries, such as Austria, which has banned night-time journeys by lorries of a gross weight exceeding 7,5 t, in order to reduce pollution from noise and emission gases. However, after a marked initial improvement, environmental pollution has again reached worrying levels, approaching those registered prior to the new measures. In 1995 the ban was extended to the whole of the Austrian road network. Of course, these are emergency measures; they will not solve the problem, which requires structural remedies.

7.2.1. A contributing factor to the steady rise in road-freight traffic has been the drop in road transport prices compared with rail, thanks partly to tariff systems, tax concessions and aid for road hauliers. This trend goes against the basic approach of Community transport policy⁽²⁾, which provides inter alia for 'charging of all costs (including external factors such as environmental and social costs) to the relevant modes of transport'.

With a view to redirecting freight traffic, it is thus desirable to indicate the real costs of road transport, including the external costs.

7.3. A more effective long-term solution might be to devise new routes (southern Alps) and alternative transport modes to the present ones, which are mainly road-based.

This means rethinking transport systems throughout the Alpine Arc, and improving the inter-linkage between road and rail.

7.4. The Commission White Paper and the Christophersen group report included some transalpine links among the priority projects for the trans-European transport networks.

These are the high-speed train and combined transport lines on the Brenner axis (Verona-Munich-Nuremberg-

⁽¹⁾ OJ No C 182, 23. 7. 1990.

⁽²⁾ Report of the Committee on Transport and Tourism on Horizon 2000: European Transport, European Parliament, 1992.

Erfurt-Halle/Leipzig-Berlin) and the Lyon-Turin corridor, with a possible extension to Milan-Venice-Trieste.

Another important project is the Nice-Cuneo road link between the French and Italian motorway networks.

7.5. These projects would have two important effects. They would relieve traffic through the existing passes and ensure that the southern Alps are not marginalized by less adequate transport infrastructure than central and northern Europe. However, the problem remains of how best to secure the requisite funding.

7.6. The rerouting of freight and passenger traffic 'through' the Alpine Arc is thus a top priority, and the focus must be on combined rail-road transport. This is a matter of urgency on both practical and, above all, environmental grounds, in order to preserve natural habitats and areas of vital importance.

7.7. A rerouting of traffic 'within' the Alpine Arc would also be helpful, for instance by reviving cross-border lines that are presently closed or not running effectively, and by the type of scheme under way in the Rhône-Alpes area, whose local communities are debating the future of their 'Alpine corridor' between Geneva, Annecy, Chambéry, Grenoble and Valence.

7.8. A uniform EU transport policy is also needed for improving the quality of transport and the working conditions of the sector's workforce, always with the utmost consideration of the environment.

7.8.1. The competition rules in the Member States and between the various transport modes should be aligned as closely as possible, including all aspects of the operating framework such as tariffs, technical standards and monitoring of social and environmental impact.

7.9. For passenger transport, the international high-speed network should be linked up to a rational network of regional connections. As work-based travel becoming increasingly widespread, an integrated public transport system is needed in urban areas. This means strengthening local and underground railway services and park-and-ride schemes, and offering attractive fares.

7.10. Commercial operators will only be drawn to combined transport if they find it economic as well as useful.

A series of rail terminals is therefore needed at strategic regional points and at key interchange nodes with the road and waterway network.

7.10.1. European standardization of combined-transport containers would also benefit various users by allowing speedier and easier road-rail transfer.

The EU and Member States should introduce new provisions on this at the earliest opportunity.

7.11. National provisions for the transport of dangerous goods such as inflammable gases, liquids and chemicals should be aligned on the most stringent international rules and those should be strictly enforced. Such goods should be carried by rail wherever possible. In the Alpine area, with its particular topography, in cases where no alternative to road transport is available, itineraries should be fixed in advance and monitored, with accompanying vehicles ready to intervene in the event of an accident.

7.12. Unchecked free choice of transport modes and routes could have serious social, environmental and even economic consequences. European transport policy thus needs radical reform.⁽¹⁾

8. Environmental protection

8.1. Cross-border cooperation is necessary for the management of the large natural areas straddling Italy, France, Austria, Switzerland and Germany.

Protection of the Alpine massif is particularly important, this being a unique heritage in terms of relief, climate, hydrology, fauna, flora, landscape and culture.⁽²⁾

8.2. First and foremost, the Alpine Convention should be made operative by resolving the problems, related

(1) Final resolution of the Arge-Alp trade union plenary assembly, Innsbruck, 29 and 30 September 1995.

(2) European Commission, Prospective study of the Alpine Arc and the semi-Alpine regions, 1993, p. 160.

to local authority opposition, which have delayed ratification by some countries (e.g. Switzerland).

To this end, an information and publicity campaign should be launched to show the public that protection of the land and of areas of special environmental importance is closely interlinked with economic development.

8.3. The implementing protocols envisaged in the Convention should be drawn up and approved, overcoming the reticence from some quarters. Implementation of the protocol on nature protection and landscape conservation is particularly important, as this is designed to set out binding international rules for the protection and management of Alpine ecosystems and the conservation of plant and animal life and landscape features.

8.4. More specifically, signatories undertake to cooperate on mapping, selection and supervision of protected areas, creation of biotope networks, and prevention of any deterioration in the natural environment and the countryside. The goal of establishing a transnational network of existing protected areas is of particular interest, with an undertaking by all signatories to extend them and to add new national parks.

8.5. Among environmental protection instruments, the attention of the EU and Member States should be drawn to the French scheme of '1 % for the environment'. The revenue from this is used to fund action to enhance the landscape and environment of areas affected by the building or alteration of infrastructure. The 1 % is calculated, for example, on the total amount of work on the construction of the motorway and related roads in the areas where the infrastructure is being built.

8.5.1. This financial constraint, which might one day profitably be adopted throughout the EU, should be applied to all major infrastructure schemes for transalpine transport. The revenue would fund works to soften the environmental impact of such schemes, and would also offer new local development opportunities.

However, it must be pointed out that the introduction of a '1 % for the environment' scheme would not yield sufficient revenue to fund the contribution of upland agriculture to landscape preservation, and that larger sums are required for this.

8.5.2. In short, it is essential to establish a firm link between transport policy, environment protection and local development. In more general terms, all spatial planning decisions must be accompanied by local development schemes, and the related environmental problems must be addressed.

8.6. An Alpine Regional Forum could be set up by the local and regional authorities to draw up spatial planning strategies.

9. Cross-border employment, interregional trade-union councils, Euro Info Centres

9.1. The question of cross-border workers is too important in social terms to be ignored. Tens of thousands of workers commute to neighbouring Alpine countries.

9.2. They face numerous problems due to differences in social security arrangements, tax systems, health care, worker protection and social legislation in general. Many seasonal workers face special difficulties. Currency fluctuations are also a disruptive factor, and in recent years have produced serious imbalances in the purchasing power of paypackets; the cost of currency-exchange operations is an additional burden.

9.3. Hence it is necessary to guarantee all workers equal treatment as regards respect for employment contracts, social security cover and unemployment benefit.

9.4. With this aim in mind, trade unions from neighbouring countries have stepped up cooperation in recent years and set up interregional trade-union councils with the common objective of defending and promoting the interests of workers in cross-border areas, Euro-regions and socio-economically similar areas separated by national borders.

There are now 29 such councils, including eight within the Alpine Arc.

9.5. These councils have steadily extended their activity beyond protection of the rights of cross-border workers to encompass the wider question of the spatial development of the areas in which they operate and the impact of the single market. They have also assumed an increasingly important role in the delicate field of social and cultural integration.

9.6. Cross-border cooperation is also the subject of a special Community programme, known as LACE, which provides back-up services for cross-border schemes via a network of training facilities, databases, advice and knowhow.

9.7. The councils may also become involved with EU-level employment policies, by taking part in the planning of local development activities and the upgrading of vocational training as an active employment instrument.

9.8. Among the activities promoted by the councils are the Euro Info Centres, which offer cross-border workers information and guidance on legislation, services and job vacancies.

9.9. The council for Piedmont, Val d'Aosta and Rhône-Alpes gives a practical example of the type of activity carried out by these councils. Its work has focused on three areas: employment instruments and the labour market; environment and quality of life; transport and communication links.

9.10. On 15 September 1995, a day of action for cross-border workers throughout Europe was organized by the councils and by the European Trade Union Confederation.

Among other requests, the councils asked to take part in the implementation of Interreg II projects.

9.11. There is also close cross-border cooperation between manufacturers, farmers and service providers; this focuses on information-swapping, technology transfer and transnational facilities for production units.

9.11.1. Such cooperation is particularly well developed along the French-Italian border, where it includes:

- a) the Eurazur cross-border office, formed by the Alpes-Maritimes and Var employers' associations and the Ligurian confederations of trade and industry. The office provides businesses with information on the labour market (social and labour legislation, social security, taxation, training, etc.);
- b) the French-Italian observatory, which provides an economic database for firms from Piedmont and the Côte d'Azur;
- c) the European economic interest grouping (EEIG) for the maritime Alps region, bringing together the chambers of commerce of Cuneo, Imperia and Nice.

9.12. With a view to encouraging the participation of the socio-economic partners in identifying the problems and possible solutions, the proposal — mooted by various parties — to set up cross-border economic and social councils in the 'Euregio' regions should be supported.

10. A policy for upland and mountain areas

10.1. Examination of the problems of the Alpine Arc is an ideal opportunity for a broader consideration of the need within the EU and in the Member States concerned, for a specific policy for upland and mountain areas.

10.2. The need for a separate policy does not stem from the marginal nature of mountain areas. Mountain areas are not necessarily poor; it is just that their special features create specific situations and problems, which the community at the various levels must address⁽¹⁾.

Depressed and disadvantaged areas can cease to be so if adequate measures are taken. However, upland areas are characterized by the 'fourth dimension' of their geography — that of 'slope' — far more than by their altitude, an immutable dimension which sets them apart but does not necessarily signify poverty.

10.2.1. Both the national communities and the EU must recognize this special nature by putting it at the basis of their policy decisions.

10.3. The wisdom of this is now widely accepted, as is clear from the European charter of mountain regions approved by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 8 February 1995.

Article 4 of the charter states that 'Mountain areas require a specific policy framed according to the principles of sustainable development'. Article 6 states 'The Parties shall base their policies, legislation and action regarding mountain areas on the following aims: explicit recognition of mountain regions and their specific nature...'

10.4. The objectives of such a policy have already been identified and described most effectively in the ESC own-initiative Opinion on a policy for upland areas

⁽¹⁾ Third European conference of mountain regions, Chamonix, 15-17 September 1994, general report by Mr Edoardo Martinengo.

(Rapporteur: Mr Amato), adopted in April 1988. The objectives outlined then remain fully valid:

- to save the uplands' natural, human and cultural heritage;
- to end the depopulation of upland areas;
- to follow a development strategy which tackles the structural causes of imbalance and not just the effects;
- to achieve 'competitive' living conditions in upland areas;
- to increase employment ⁽¹⁾.

10.5. Support for the mountain economy is particularly important. The economy of the Alpine Arc is in many respects an agricultural economy, although many farmers also rely on other sources of income. The income/employment relations between agriculture and other economic sectors are extremely important. The incomes of mountain farming communities already depend to a large extent on non-agricultural activities. Family-run farms are vital for keeping Alpine communities on the land and preserving the landscape. A forward-looking support framework is needed with an integrated, regionally based approach that takes account of these circumstances.

10.6. Natural and economic difficulties place upland farming at a local disadvantage which can only be offset to a very limited extent. The scope for rationalization is limited, and production costs are bound to remain higher.

Structural development also has its limits, making an increase in competitiveness unlikely. The main objective of upland farming policy must therefore be to offset local disadvantages.

10.7. The CAP thus takes on particular importance in maintaining agricultural production in mountain areas. As well as structural measures, provisions are needed to offer mountain areas a better guarantee of the requisite share of quotas and reference quantities.

10.8. As advocated in Article 8 of the European charter, other support measures for mountain farming should concern: 'deterrents to the spread of abandoned arable areas and wastelands, the disuse of pastures...'. Encouragement should be given to the development of activities such as agritourism and, more generally, all those activities which would help to keep young people in the area.

⁽¹⁾ OJ No C 175, 4. 7. 1988.

10.9. The production and processing of agricultural products in mountain areas are to a large extent rooted in long established regional traditions. Marketing strategies should take greater account of this regional identity, which is particularly evident in direct sales. The framing of rules to protect product names is vitally important.

10.9.1. Concessional arrangements should also be devised for the transport of farm produce to markets, given the higher costs resulting from the remote and isolated situation of many farms.

10.10. Mountain areas have great potential for biomass energy. The excellent basic conditions mean that regional supply systems using renewable energies could enable mountain areas to save energy and protect the environment. It is therefore necessary to devise regional energy programmes based primarily on local renewable energy sources, which should be promoted much more strongly. Tax concessions should be offered for the use of renewable energy sources.

10.11. A fully fledged upland policy should thus be based on two key principles:

- recognition of the special problems of mountain areas when planning and implementing all sectoral policies and policies for strategic areas;
- pinpointing of local development as a way of resolving the socio-economic problems of mountain areas and thus as the defining methodology for upland policy.

10.12. Upland policy must move from support measures to organization and adding value, from being a 'problem' to being a 'resource' for each country and, in the case of the Alpine Arc, for the EU as a whole.

11. Conclusions

11.1. The present Opinion uses a narrower definition of the Alpine Arc than Europe 2000+, because the Committee feels that this makes it possible to bring out the key issues more clearly and map out possible courses of action.

11.2. The Alpine Arc is a modern, prosperous region which offers great development potential. This status represents both a major asset and a source of great fragility. However, there are also serious socio-economic balances within the region, with some areas in decline and pockets of poverty.

11.3. Taking in hand the development of the Alpine region thus requires clearly focused transnational spatial planning, with a view to relieving the congestion brought by heavy freight and passenger traffic and the worsening deterioration in the environment. It will also open up great opportunities for cross-border cooperation, which is important not only in economic and commercial terms but also on political and social grounds.

11.4. To tackle these problems and grasp these opportunities, the Committee considers that a new transport policy and more resolute environmental protection are an absolute priority. Decisions taken under the Common Agricultural Policy must allow for the special nature of upland agriculture.

11.5. In the transport sector, the Committee calls for the implementation of the decisions which the Community has already made concerning development of rail and intermodal freight transport, and the rerouting of road transport onto new or underused routes. It is also important to impute the full environmental and other costs of road transport.

11.6. The other key issue for Community policy decisions on the Alpine Arc is environmental protection. The Committee calls for full implementation of the Alpine Convention and the framing of stricter and more highly targeted legislation. It also asks that consideration be given to adopting a scheme similar to France's successful '1% for the environment' for major new infrastructure schemes in the more vulnerable parts of the Alpine Arc, so as to ensure that the environmental impact is acceptable.

11.7. The Committee considers that an Alpine regional forum of local and regional authorities could provide a useful instrument for drawing up spatial planning strategies, as in the Alpine Arc such strategies must necessarily be transnational.

11.8. The Committee considers that the cooperation between cross-border trade-union organizations carried

out by the interregional trade-union councils in recent years, including in the Alpine region, has made an important contribution to social integration.

Cooperation and information-swapping schemes are also being pursued by business associations, and these too deserve encouragement and support.

11.8.1. The Committee strongly supports the proposal to set up cross-border economic and social councils to build on these cooperation schemes and provide a permanent forum in which the social partners and socio-economic organizations can discuss shared social and economic problems.

11.9. The Committee considers that the Community and each Member State should further develop their 'policy for mountain areas' to provide support for the mountain economy, particularly agriculture, as farms play an important part in spatial development. The viability of farms in uplands and valleys can be improved by the issue of quality marks for typical farm products, and by the strengthening of related activities such as farm tourism. This can trigger local development mechanisms, as these areas offer ideal conditions for local development. It should also prevent depopulation and encourage young entrepreneurs to set up in the area. In order to ensure the success of these actions and objectives, steps should be taken to encourage application of the protocol implementing the Alpine Convention as regards mountain farming. In particular, cooperation should be fostered between the institutions and organizations which directly represent the interests of their regions.

11.10. Lastly, the Community Structural Funds should be deployed in a manner consistent with the above guidelines and recommendations. Cross-border cooperation with the central and eastern European and Balkan countries should also be stepped up by encouraging the establishment of permanent forums for dialogue and cooperation, with full respect for the principle of partnership with local authorities and socio-economic organizations.

Done at Brussels, 25 April 1996.

The President
of the Economic and Social Committee
Carlos FERRER
