

COM-5/032

Brussels, 5 January 2001

OPINION

of the

Committee of the Regions

of 13 December 2000

on the

European Commission's proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council

establishing a programme of Community action to encourage cooperation

between Member States to combat social exclusion

(COM(2000) 368 final - 2000/0157 (COD))

The Committee of the Regions,

HAVING REGARD TO the European Commission's proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a programme of Community action to encourage cooperation between Member States to combat social exclusion (COM(2000) 368 final - 2000/0157 (COD));

HAVING REGARD TO the decision taken by the Council on 24 July 2000, under Article 265 (first paragraph) and Article 137 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to consult the Committee of the Regions on the matter;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision taken by its President on 3 August 2000, under Rule 39 of its Rules of Procedure, to direct Commission 5 - Social Policy, Public Health, Consumer Protection, Research and Tourism - to draw up an opinion on the matter;

HAVING REGARD TO point 2 of its opinion CdR 84/2000 fin of 14 June 2000 on the Commission Communication entitled "Building an inclusive Europe";

HAVING REGARD TO the draft opinion (CdR 302/2000 rev. 1) adopted by Commission 5 on 23 October 2000 (rapporteurs: **Mrs Hanham** (UK/PPE) and **Mr Sodano** (I/NL)),

adopted the following opinion at its 36th plenary session on 13-14 December 2000 (meeting of 13 December):

The Committee of the Regions

1. welcomes the Commission's programme of Community action to encourage cooperation between Member States to combat social exclusion;
2. welcomes the important recognition by the Commission that combating social exclusion is first and foremost the responsibility of Member States and their national, regional and local authorities (*see point 2 of CdR 84/2000 fin*); Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 14 June 2000 on the Communication from the Commission – Building an Inclusive Europe COM (2000) 79 final);
3. welcomes the overall objective of the Community action programme which is to encourage cooperation which would enable the Union and its Member States to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion as measured by targets agreed by the Council;
4. welcomes the method of achieving this objective, which is through the translation of European guidelines into national and regional action plans by the setting of specific targets, the adoption of measures which take into account national and regional differences and transnational cooperation to improve understanding and practice;
5. shares the Commission's view that the national action plans should reflect the multi-dimensional nature of social exclusion and deal with access to fundamental rights and services including employment, social protection, health, housing, education, training and culture;
6. welcomes the Conclusions from the Lisbon European Council in March 2000 which state that the Community social exclusion strategy should consist of:
 - promoting a better understanding of social exclusion through continued dialogue and exchanges of information and best practice, on the basis of commonly agreed indicators,
 - mainstreaming the promotion of social inclusion in Member States' employment, education and training, health and housing policies, this being complemented at Community level by action under the Structural Funds within the present budgetary framework, and
 - developing priority actions addressed to specific target groups, with Member States choosing actions according to their particular situations, and reporting subsequently on their implementation;
7. emphasises the importance of promoting a better understanding of social exclusion through continued dialogue and exchanges of information and best practice at all levels, on the basis of commonly agreed indicators by involving all the key actors, including local and regional authorities; and suggests that information and best practice is exchanged on new groups of excluded people such as those lacking skills in information technology;
8. emphasises the key role played by the local and regional spheres of government in implementing the policies designed to eradicate poverty and social exclusion, in their capacity as:

- community leaders and key players in local regeneration partnerships,
 - providers and enablers of services to all people in the community,
 - catalysts of economic activity and employment,
 - major local employers, and
 - providers of local information and research (*see point 3 of CdR 84/2000 fin*).
9. welcomes the intention to give particular emphasis within the action programme to integrated, partnership-based and participative approaches. As community leaders and key players in local regeneration partnerships, local and regional authorities have a wealth of experience in developing and leading partnerships involving public sector bodies, all relevant players including the voluntary and community sectors and the private sector and other economic players;
10. welcomes the importance given to ensuring that all the activities covered under the programme will be consistent with other Community policies, instruments and actions, through establishing appropriate mechanisms to coordinate activities relevant to other programmes relating to research, employment, non-discrimination, equality between men and women, social protection, education, training and youth policy, health and in the field of the Community's external relations;
11. emphasises the importance of obtaining maximum synergy between the national action plans (with targets for eradicating poverty and social exclusion) and the Community programmes and funding instruments and reiterates that this can only happen if there is a real dialogue between all the key actors including local and regional authorities;
12. welcomes the overall objectives established in Lisbon to raise the employment rate from a current average of 61% to 70% in 2010, to halve child poverty by 2010 and to reduce the numbers living below the poverty line from 18% today to 15% in 2005 and 10% in 2010, and in particular emphasises that the three strands within the action programme should be applied to the following groups amongst others:
- people who are unemployed and are able to participate in the labour market,
 - people who are unemployed and are unable to participate in the labour market due to a lack of relevant skills and training,
 - people who are employed but who are experiencing social exclusion due to short term employment and/or low wages and/or inadequate in-work benefits,
 - people who are unable to participate in the labour market (for example, due to sickness or caring responsibilities),
 - older people who are experiencing social exclusion due to inadequate benefits/pensions,
 - people who are excluded from the knowledge society,
 - people who are excluded from the labour market due to post-industrialisation;
13. emphasises that the following principles need to be taken into account in implementing the first action strand on the analysis of the characteristics, causes, processes and trends in social exclusion:
- the value of developing national, regional and local indicators, including cross-cutting indicators, to enable comparison to be made across Europe of both national and local

information,

- the importance of information sharing across all levels of government - local, regional, national and European, and
 - the importance of ensuring that skills are developed for all agencies and groups in order to ensure accurate and effective use and interpretation of common indicators (with reference to the fifth framework programme which includes a key action on "increasing human research potential and the socio-economic knowledge base");
14. suggests that in order to facilitate the identification of appropriate quantitative and qualitative indicators (action strand one) and the exchange of good practice (action strand two), the Commission should:
- develop a European database of good practice in promoting social inclusion, including a databank of national and local indicators,
 - consult the Committee of the Regions on the structure and content of this database, and
 - seek information and statistics from associations of local and regional authorities in Member States in compiling this database (*see point 17 of CdR 84/2000 fin*).
15. emphasises the importance of involving local and regional authorities in the development and implementation of the action programme because:
- local and regional authorities have valuable knowledge and experience to offer in developing common indicators of social exclusion and social inclusion and how they fit local and regional circumstances,
 - local and regional authorities can advise on translating European guidelines into national and regional policies by setting specific targets and adopting measures taking into account national and regional differences,
 - local and regional authorities have valuable experience in delivering Structural Fund programmes and this is relevant to the objective of mainstreaming the tackling of social exclusion in employment policy, education and training policy, health and housing policies, and

- local and regional authorities have valuable experience in transnational cooperation projects in the social exclusion field (for example, the former Employment Community Initiative);
16. welcomes the intention to address exclusion issues connected with the emerging knowledge society and stresses that local and regional authorities have a key role to play both in making services accessible to all sections in the community and in taking a comprehensive view of services in their area by using information and communications technology to interact more effectively with citizens, to facilitate participation in leisure and cultural activities, to promote active citizenship, and to ensure that people are able to participate in democratic processes (*see point 6 of CdR 84/2000 fin*);
 17. draws attention to the inadequacy of the Commission's proposed overall budget (70 million euros over five years) as this is unlikely to cover adequately all three strands of suggested activity and to help Member States make a truly decisive impact on the eradication of poverty, and suggests that the budget be increased;
 18. emphasises the importance of all Member States being involved in regular monitoring and evaluation of the national action plans in order to assess and comment on progress made against overall European and national targets;
 19. reiterates that the action strands should be equally applicable to urban and rural areas;
 20. requests that as part of the intention to involve all parties concerned in the action programme, the Commission has a regular exchange of views with representatives from local and regional authorities (as well as with non-governmental organisations and social partners as mentioned in Article 5.1);
 21. requests that the Commission guidelines issued under the programme require Member States to consult with local and regional government in the development of the national action plans under action strand one, and that the Committee of the Regions is involved in the consultation on the development of European wide indicators (reflecting paragraph 4 of the political agreement of the Council of the European Union on 17 October 2000) because for example:
 - some national targets and indicators may be practical for European comparison,
 - local targets and indicators could be disseminated for information through a European databank on targets and indicators, and
 - the experience and ability of local and regional authorities in collecting data will affect on a practical level what data can be collected nationally and at a European level (*see point 18 of CdR 84/2000 fin*);
 22. emphasises the importance of the Committee of the Regions taking part in the annual EU Round Table Conference on Social Exclusion to be organised in collaboration with the EU presidency;
 23. calls on the European Council and the European Parliament to recognise their contribution in ensuring that the local and regional role is properly recognised in this policy area (*see point 18 of CdR 84/2000 fin*).

Brussels, 13 December 2000.

The President

The Secretary-General

of the

of the

Committee of the Regions

Committee of the Regions

Jos Chabert

Vincenzo Falcone

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