



European Economic and Social Committee

INT/264
Tourism in areas in decline

Brussels, 28 September 2005

OPINION

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

on

The contribution of tourism to the socio-economic recovery of areas in decline

(own-initiative)

On 10 February 2005, the European Economic and Social Committee, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion on:

The contribution of tourism to the socio-economic recovery of areas in decline
(own-initiative opinion).

The Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 27 July 2005. The rapporteur was Mr Mendoza.

At its 420th plenary session held on 28 and 29 September 2005 (meeting of 28 September 2005), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 135 votes to 2 with 2 abstentions.

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1. **Introduction**

- 1.1 The European Economic and Social Committee has already drawn up various opinions as a contribution to the creation of a European tourism policy. In this context, the drafting of a further opinion is proposed, which would act as a reference point for certain tourism initiatives – backed by the actions of European, national, regional and local institutions, social partners, other civil society organisations and tourism sector players – in a united effort to offer alternatives to areas in decline, particularly to local people and businesses that are financially dependant on these areas, with a view to maintaining economic activity and all the benefits which this brings.
- 1.2 This document is intended to contribute to the much-needed regeneration of a number of areas throughout the European Union, which are, for various reasons, currently in socio-economic decline. It focuses on the alternatives that the tourism industry can offer these areas.
- 1.3 The following procedure for the drafting of the final version of the opinion is being followed:
 - First study group meeting: drawing up the list of issues to be addressed in the opinion.
 - Public hearing held in Córdoba (Spain) and second study group meeting, which enabled the identification and verification of best practice for initiatives aimed at rehabilitating areas in economic decline through tourism, in line with the opinion's main objective of publicising experiences that can be proved to be effective and serve to boost these initiatives or the development of others in areas that were, are or may in the future be suffering socio-economic decline.

- The third and final meeting: shaping the final document for Section discussion and the EESC plenary session.

1.4 Two situations with mutually complementary features should be taken into account:

- As is apparent throughout this opinion, tourism is a great opportunity and alternative for areas in decline; it can provide them with a source of economic activity with enormous potential for social and business development and job creation. The regeneration of areas in decline can and should bring about the establishment of new industries with better prospects and able to improve the quality of life.
- Some areas in decline may become tourist destinations capable of absorbing the expected increase in global tourism; this should be achieved in a diversified and sustainable manner.

2. **Scope and outline of the opinion**

2.1 The opinion is not intended to be a review of the processes which have brought these areas to their present situation, nor should it analyse restructuring activities carried out in other sectors (industrial, mining, agricultural, etc.), although such activities may provide pointers for our proposals.

2.2 In our analysis, we will begin by distinguishing whether the area in question has undergone specific restructuring or whether it is a deprived area yet to develop major industries, where tourism can provide a starting point and drive more widespread development.

2.3 Hence, our opinion is set out as follows:

2.3.1 Analysis of the situation of areas in decline and the principal issues - social, labour, business and institutional commitment aspects, etc. – which should be taken into account in future tourism proposals. The precise identification of what is understood by the term "areas in decline" is of utmost importance, since diverse circumstances and conditions can lead to different alternatives.

2.3.2 Therefore, our opinion addresses the following aspects:

2.3.2.1 *The situation of areas in decline*: identify these areas' failings from various perspectives, taking account of the following: problems sometimes caused by a history of dependency on one type of industry or business; environmental disadvantages or deterioration; inadequate or ill-suited infrastructures which impede the move into tourism; labour force with a background of skills which cannot be transferred to the tourism sector; social environment unsuitable for integrating new activities such as tourism. The fact that areas in decline are not usually

natural tourism areas should be taken into account in particular, since this makes it especially difficult to find the right form of tourism: cultural and archaeological tourism, sport tourism, education and many other alternative forms of tourism. In particular, "positive experience" is recognised as the basis for all tourism products and should be identified and promoted.

- 2.3.2.2 *Institutional commitment*: this opinion represents a call for the cooperation which is essential between the different authorities and institutions; it should describe the forms, scenarios and models of interinstitutional cooperation as well as the public resources that can contribute to the launch of tourism. Special reference is made to the role of the European Structural Funds in the regeneration of areas in decline. The institutions have an important role to play in providing the training needed to reskill the labour force from industrial areas in decline for jobs in the services sector.
- 2.3.2.3 *Social roots as an objective*: industries in decline have been linked for many years to the areas where they initially developed and subsequently declined. This means that local people have over the years established a bond going back generations from both living and working in these areas. The tourism initiatives that we are setting out should go a long way to maintaining this bond by creating the conditions that make it possible: housing, services, communications, etc. Another way of encouraging this social bond is through the creation of stable jobs. Although tourism is a good source of employment, the serious problem of seasonality can hinder the development of this social bond and cause unwelcome migration at certain times of the year.
- 2.3.2.4 *Social dialogue, vital to the analysis and development of alternatives*: we propose that social dialogue through unions and associations be the cornerstone of the establishment of a commitment by workers and employers to carry out projects and initiatives. This bipartite dialogue should lead to a tripartite dialogue involving the authorities in the search for feasible alternatives. Other civil society and tourism sector organisations should also help to bring projects to fruition.
- 2.3.2.5 *Promoting initiatives committed to sustainable tourism*: despite the social upheaval that socio-economic decline represents for large areas, it is clear that the approach adopted for new development alternatives can not only correct errors in the way previous measures were planned, but also situate new activities within the socially, economically and environmentally sustainable parameters advocated by the EESC for tourism
- 2.3.2.6 The environment as a focus of recovery and planning of tourism activity:
- although this opinion is not intended to examine the origins of an area's socio-economic decline, it can be seen that due to natural, geographic or geological reasons, many areas in decline have developed a dependency on one type of industry. This has often not only failed to respect the environment, but has caused it real damage. The new environmental

criteria and commitments can facilitate the recovery of these areas and help to boost projects' tourism potential;

- our opinion will establish the priorities for environmental initiatives that should complement the development of tourism projects.

2.3.2.7 *Sustaining and increasing business activity and the promotion of productive investment*: we have tried to draw up as specific a list as possible of initiatives supporting entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship in areas in decline is rooted in past specialisation, due to entrepreneurs' direct involvement in the traditional industry or in ancillary businesses. In this respect, the opinion explores various initiatives for establishing and maintaining businesses, business training and capacity building, developing criteria for competitiveness, research and development, design, marketing, etc. It should also encourage approaches such as promotion, partnership and cooperation between businesses and between businesses and the authorities, and the creation of networks between businesses, areas and sectors. Special attention should be paid to micro, small and medium-sized businesses.

2.3.2.8 *Maintaining and increasing employment levels as a priority*: the process of socio-economic decline in businesses and sectors constitutes the greatest social cost due to the loss of jobs; therefore the main objective of regeneration initiatives should be to maintain and, if possible, increase employment in areas in decline. In order to do this, we propose that, in addition to transitional social protection schemes, the development of tourism initiatives should also aim to promote job-creating investment, vocational training and retraining, promotional measures, a culture of self-employment and a social economy.

2.3.2.9 *Integrating all factors that contribute to a tourism policy*: tourism projects for the socio-economic recovery of areas in decline must provide a boost for all the factors, in addition to those already mentioned, which shape tourism policy. Thus, the contribution of cultural, historical, heritage, natural, sporting and other factors must be established.

2.3.2.10 A significant challenge, already successfully met in certain areas, is that of making good use of aspects of previous activities in the design of new tourism alternatives.

2.3.3 It is very important to analyse in detail the diverse experiences of the EU countries, not only to try to adapt them to other environments, but also to support and reinvigorate them. Since positive experiences do not seem to be very common, it is not easy to come up with a very extensive and diverse range of examples of such initiatives.

2.3.4 In particular, account should be taken of the possibility of different tourism destinations in areas in decline operating as a network, providing a strong base for promotion and mutual support.

2.3.5 Fostering self-employment is undoubtedly an important factor in enabling workers to adapt to a new situation. Indeed, the study of this contribution will greatly benefit areas in decline in their transition to tourism areas and to rural tourism areas particularly. The support that this type of employment needs to be an effective instrument in this difficult adaptation process should be studied.

2.3.5.1 Some initiatives to develop in this field:

2.3.5.1.1 At a European level, self-employment is defined as workers' capacity and decision to practice an activity for their own account, either individually or as a group. A self-employed person is above all a worker who, in undertaking an independent activity, maintains civil and commercial relations with suppliers and clients.

2.3.5.1.2 For years, self-employment has represented an effective form of defence against industrial economic crises, since it has made it possible to maintain employment levels and meet the need to create new jobs.

2.3.5.1.3 Self-employment is currently increasing amongst young working people and women.

2.3.5.1.4 To be effective, tourism services based on self-employment must encourage the development of new professional skills. Some, but by no means all, of the new rural professions that can be created, are as follows:

- Specialised trade in local products
- Traditional crafts and food products
- Sports and environmental leisure services
- Audiovisual and virtual reality facilities
- Cultural promotion
- Childcare, campsites and hostels
- Natural medicine
- Aesthetic enhancement
- Traditional construction and revival of trades
- Internet cafés
- Promotion of local property
- Advice on the new activities
- Production of goods and services usually consumed in tourist accommodation
- Specialised attention for the elderly.

2.3.6 Furthermore, social tourism will certainly play a role in the future as an alternative for numerous areas in decline seeking new economic activity through tourism. Due to its distinct characteristics, social tourism is a particularly useful tool in the fight against seasonality and for the staggering of holidays.

- 2.3.7 *The new European scenario for developing tourism alternatives in areas in decline*: the opinion refers to the opportunities that the enlarged Europe provides for establishing general frames of reference for action, exchange of information, inter-project associations, the promotion of best practice, the development of public-private cooperation, etc.
- 2.3.8 *The commitment in the Constitutional Treaty* to citizens, their rights and the most deprived regions and areas, enables our opinion, together with the section on tourism in the Constitutional text, to provide a European response more in touch with national, regional and local situations.
- 2.4 Integration of lines of action that can contribute to an alternative: the EESC's previous opinions, the Commission's and European Parliament's initiatives and the initiatives of institutions such as the World Tourism Organisation and the International Bureau of Social Tourism, are explored in the text of this opinion.
- 2.5 *Experience as a key focus*: this opinion is intended to be practical and useful, particularly for areas that we wish to help recover. Therefore, it will set out a list of best practices in the development of this type of initiative.

3. **Areas in socio-economic decline**

- 3.1 It is not easy to define exactly what is meant by areas in decline as referred to in this opinion's title, not only because of the diversity of their characteristics, the origin and cause of their decline and the scale or range of its effects, their geographical spread, but above all because of the gravity of the consequences for local residents and businesses.
- 3.2 Perhaps the main element that should be studied in order to characterise and distinguish the different kinds of areas in decline is their economic history, in the form of various indicators. This should make it clear whether the situation has arisen recently due to outside technological, social or economic changes, or whether it is a permanent situation and the area has never, at any point in its history, achieved the economic development needed to bring wealth and prosperity to its inhabitants. This difference is undoubtedly very important in identifying the ideal way to tackle the decline and finding valid alternatives. Business experience, the training of the local people and hence the possibility of finding a replacement or new activity all differ greatly from one case to another.
- 3.3 Where areas have not yet achieved a good level of economic development, the causes of the situation can be very varied: a peripheral location, extreme environmental conditions, insufficient infrastructure, a local population lacking in entrepreneurship and finally a whole group of factors that have caused and continue to cause the local population to migrate to areas with more opportunities for economic development, both in their own country and abroad. In short, the progressive depopulation and subsequent social upheaval of large,

mainly rural, areas of Europe is a problem being decisively addressed by EU regional development policies and instruments. Tourism and the development which it brings are the objective of several useful actions in this field.

- 3.4 Where areas have at some time enjoyed strong economic development based on a number of activities (agriculture, mining, the textile, metal or chemical industries for example) and have for various reasons had to abandon this activity, the problem is basically the breakdown of a social model, with all the repercussions of this for the local population and the fabric of the local economy. In these cases, dependence on one type of industry or lack of economic diversification are additional factors that can hinder the search for an alternative to the job losses that economic decline entails.
- 3.5 There are many factors that can and do contribute to the decline of a formerly active, profitable and competitive area, which created both employment and wealth. However, on a global scale, it is possible that the globalisation of economic activity and technological change lie at the heart of these factors. Markets are changing rapidly, often very suddenly, and the stability that industry brought to those nations that knew how to properly apply industrial principles in previous centuries has disappeared and been replaced by technological and social change, expanding markets, real-time information on a global scale, worldwide competition and the relocation of manufacturing and services. The cost of labour has been presented as the main factor in the location of industries, but it is research capacity, development and innovation, the proximity and quality of services, management training, and employees' skills that, together with access to technology, determine the competitiveness of an economic activity. Ending the process of deindustrialisation in Europe and finding alternative ways of creating employment is possibly the biggest challenge facing Europe, as the Lisbon Strategy acknowledges.
- 3.6 The effects of the decline of an area on the local population and businesses are wide-ranging: job losses, general impoverishment, demographic changes, depopulation and the loss of the industrial fabric. However, it is important to point out that these effects reverberate down the generations in many different forms. Those suffering directly from economic decline often find in social protection schemes a type of replacement that is undesired, but needed insofar as the necessary income is received through social subsidies. This is the case when large industrial and mining businesses close down and young and middle-aged people, potentially capable of the work, are forced into inactivity and reliance on social subsidies. Although this situation is undesirable, the problems of the next generation, who do not have jobs or subsidies, are even more worrying. In situations of this type, entrepreneurship, diversification of activities and training are more than an alternative, they are an absolute necessity.
- 3.7 In short, it is for these areas in decline, those that have not achieved economic development and those that have lost it, that tourism can represent a viable alternative, moving their economic development towards a strong, stable industry, with good current and future prospects, which creates jobs and is capable of sustaining an economic, social and

environmental balance. It is clear that the cultural and economic change that this will in all likelihood entail will not be easy and not all cases will be successful, but there are few alternatives for areas in decline and it is possible that those alternatives available would place demands that would be even harder to meet.

- 3.8 It should not be forgotten that sometimes within or near large cities, even cities with a thriving economy, marginalised and run-down areas with little or no economic activity can spring up. In these cases, various international events can assist the economic recovery and revitalisation of such areas. Examples such as the World Exhibitions in Seville and Lisbon, the Olympic Games in Barcelona, or more recently, Athens, have proven essential to physical rehabilitation. They have unleashed a new momentum and created conditions conducive to such areas becoming a new tourist destination.

4. **Objectives and methods of action**

- 4.1 Having analysed the situation, origins and essential characteristics of areas in decline, it makes sense to define the objectives and methods that will facilitate our study, as indicated in this opinion's title, of the contribution of tourism to the socio-economic recovery of areas in decline.

- 4.1.1 First and foremost, it should be pointed out that the main objective of all economic development can only be to provide the population, the people who live locally, with suitable conditions for personal and social development, so they do not feel obliged to emigrate or move. In short, it is to maintain the social fabric that has survived for generations in the area. Therefore, tourism initiatives proposed as alternatives must effectively provide not only the necessary infrastructure, but also stable employment for those people who work in tourism in its widest sense. Establishing tourism products that are sustainable and viable in the long term is vital to offering an alternative to the unemployment brought about by socio-economic decline, if maintaining social roots is to be a primary objective.

- 4.2 The diversification of economic activity is also an objective of all economic development in areas of decline. Should one of the causes for the decline be technological or market changes in areas where economic activity is characterised by dependence on one type of industry, it seems clear that in order to avoid a repetition of this situation, complementary and diversified activities, capable of sustaining the region's economy in the future, should be organised. Because of tourism's cross-sectoral nature involving many players, businesses of all sizes, family and multinational businesses, businesses with wide-ranging social objectives and commercial interests, it effectively diversifies an area's industries.

- 4.3 The sustainable balance of activity, economically, socially and in particular environmentally, is another of the objectives of developing areas in decline. Often, declining industrial or mining activity has led to serious deterioration of the area's environment; obsolete and abandoned buildings, contaminated industrial waste, physical damage and polluted soil are

frequently the result of past industrial activity and are evidently not ideal conditions for the development of tourism, which generally seeks conditions where nature is at its most attractive.

- 4.3.1 In principle, it falls to businesses that have carried out their industrial activity in an area to recapture the original natural conditions or at least rehabilitate them as far as possible. Obviously it is not easy to apply this principle since the very situation of industrial decline inhibits this. Therefore, it is up to the public authorities to provide subsidies and guarantee that the surroundings are suitably maintained. This is particularly important when businesses that are relocating have received public funds on starting up. Businesses' social responsibility should induce them to meet these additional costs of their activity.

- 4.4 In order to achieve these difficult objectives, various methods should be used to bring about success. The first step in the process should be social dialogue: this is key to developing alternatives. Social dialogue between social and economic players, between businessmen and workers through unions and employers' associations, is the cornerstone to the success of projects and initiatives. Civil society - its various community, consumer and civic associations - can and should participate in the process.

- 4.4.1 In particular, however, the authorities need to commit themselves and actively participate in the promotion of alternatives for areas in decline, be it tourism or other industries or services. Cooperation between different levels of administration and public institutions should pave the way for the success of the initiatives; they should, if necessary, support the economic viability of the projects. The EU's Structural Funds are powerful tools for such an action, coordinated at European, national, regional and local levels, for researching and implementing regional development projects and initiatives capable of revitalising areas in decline.

- 4.5 The training of people in areas in decline is one of the building blocks of this regeneration process. Vocational retraining should be guaranteed for the long-term unemployed, to enable them to find work in alternative activities, which are usually very different in their requirements and skills from previous activities. Past experience shows that this regeneration is a huge challenge and that only through intensive and continuous training is it possible to transform industrial workers into service sector workers. The same can be said for the next generation, those that have not suffered directly from redundancy, but who have no employment prospects in the area's traditional industry. Only training can enable them to overcome this lack of job opportunities.

- 4.6 The current process of European enlargement can bring both advantages and disadvantages: on the one hand, there are more areas to be redeveloped with an industrial, mining or agricultural past which is difficult to overcome. On the other hand, it is clear that the demand for mobility in leisure and tourism has been substantially increased, thus strengthening the tourism industry. Activities promoting sustainable tourism throughout Europe, according to

the criteria of the European tourism model, can be a valuable tool in the economic development of some areas in decline.

5. Good practice in the use of tourism in the socio-economic regeneration of areas in decline

5.1 One of the main objectives of this opinion is to bring together and study the various good practices in which tourism has proven a successful alternative for areas in decline.

5.1.1 Therefore, as well as the numerous experiences assembled at the hearing held in Córdoba, organised jointly by the EESC and the provincial authority, other instructive initiatives have been brought together and merit study and analysis, so they can potentially serve as examples.

5.2 The experience of Asturias (Spain): this successful case saw the whole region, formerly characterised by mining and industry, react to decline and job losses in these sectors by choosing to intensively develop tourism. Therefore it is developing tourist brands and products strongly connected to the idea of Asturias and nature:

- Tourism and Nature: Asturias Natural Paradise
 - Tourism and Culture: Asturias Cultural Treasure
 - Tourism and Gastronomy: Tasting Asturias
 - Tourism and the City: Cities of Asturias
 - Tourism and Quality: Stately Homes of Asturias
- Mesas de Asturias (Restaurants of Asturias)
 - Aldeas Asturias Calidad Rural (Villages of Asturias: rural quality)
 - Asturias por la Excelencia Turística (Asturias for excellency in tourism).

5.2.1 This new strategy of local development has been very successful – employment in the region has increased by 8% in recent years. It is clear that, in this case, environmental sustainability has been the basis for high-quality tourism, in harmony with nature, and that both economic and social players as well as public institutions have actively chosen to support this strategic change and new regional model.

5.3 The experience of Zabrze (Poland): throughout the region of Silesia, the transformation of the economy and markets has led to the closure of many businesses, causing the loss of tens of thousands of jobs and the creation of a desolate landscape scattered with post-industrial wastelands. Numerous efforts have been made to promote tourism, but the region continues to suffer from its traditional clichéd image as an industrial region of gloomy landscapes and environmental degradation. Although this image seems unattractive to tourists, it may be an asset for the social and economic life of the region if the area's industrial heritage were exploited for tourism, just as the authorities desire and plan. It is a matter of rehabilitating post-industrial sites by turning them to new uses, which are mainly tourism-oriented and are

not seasonal activities. Thus the industrial heritage and unique character of these regions and cities is conserved.

- 5.3.1 However, this project has a great many obstacles to overcome. Problems relating to the poor technical state and general dilapidation of the sites are compounded by various issues of property ownership, the lack of financial resources and skilled management staff, the under-developed tourism infrastructure and other factors, meaning that only a limited number of industrial heritage sites are able to meet the criteria for becoming successful tourist attractions. The role that the European Structural Funds such as the ERDF and the ESF can play is vital to overcoming the obstacles of capital financing and training the local population.
- 5.3.2 A regional plan for using post-industrial sites for tourism has been drawn up: "The circuit of industrial heritage sites" comprises some 30 sites, selected on the basis of various criteria, such as accessibility, interest, tourist capacity and visitor security.
- 5.3.3 In the specific case of the municipality of Zabrze, a medium-sized city situated in southern Poland, the local authorities have learned to appreciate the importance of industrial tourism and since 2003, Zabrze has been a recognised model of industrial tourism and has received various tourism-related awards. Zabrze has learned not only how to implement its alternative to the decline of its mining industry but has also become a centre for discussion and encouragement of future industrial heritage tourism projects in Poland and throughout Europe, holding the International Conferences to study "The treasures of industrial heritage for tourism and leisure" in September 2004 and May 2005. The fruits of these conferences are the Zabrze Resolutions, which offer a valuable insight into the use of industrial heritage in tourism and leisure. The WTO's willingness to be involved in creating an Industrial Heritage network, which cooperates in product promotion, should be noted.
- 5.3.4 Overall the experience of Zabrze offers a wealth of knowledge and experiences, which can undoubtedly be useful to other similar places that wish to adapt to tourism. The EESC fully recognises, supports and will promote the value of tourism at every opportunity.
- 5.4 The experience of the Museo Minero de Río Tinto in Huelva (Spain): the Río Tinto mine used to be a rich source of precious metals that had generated wealth since Roman times. In 1982 the mine closed and became an economically deprived area. The Museo Minero de Río Tinto today protects the legacy of all these ups and downs. It is an information centre for the Parque Minero de Río Tinto, a theme park made up of the villages and landscape of the mining area. The Parque Minero covers an area of 900 hectares and visitors can take a train ride along the former railway that transported the ore to Huelva, visit former mines, a Roman cemetery and the mining district set up by the English company which owned the mine at the end of the 19th century. In short, a previously disused area has been transformed into a place for leisure, heritage and cultural regeneration. In this case, an "experience" based entirely on attracting tourists has enabled operators to profit from areas where the only other alternative would be abandonment.

- 5.5 The mining and industrial area of Peñarroya-Pueblonuevo (Spain) has a valuable industrial heritage and constitutes the remains of a 20th century manufacturing centre. It is recovering by adapting to provide various leisure activities for the local population and visitors. It should be noted that various villages of the Valle del Alto Guadiato in the province of Córdoba have joined forces in a project to promote attractions such as the Museo geológico Minero de Peñarroya-Pueblonuevo. This initiative seeks to attract tourism capable of revitalising the economy of villages suffering from unemployment due to the mine closure. The upshot is a comprehensive and coordinated initiative, comprising industrial and geological attractions, gastronomy, sport and culture and involving various communities such as Fuenteovejuna, Bélmez and other localities in the area.
- 5.6 The "Sistema del Museo de la Ciencia y de la Técnica de Catalunya" (Spain) is a network covering some 20 points of interest relating to the industrial heritage of the region of Catalonia, including the textile, paper, tanning and transport industries. In centuries gone by, Catalonian industry was undoubtedly of major importance, not only economically but also culturally, architecturally and socially; it forms part of the collective identity of Catalonia. The "Sistema" is intended to promote tourism to all the 20 points of interests and in short, to act as a network of cultural tourist attractions. This model of activity is ideal for other similar projects.
- 5.7 Another interesting initiative is that of the International Bureau of Social Tourism (BITS), which has contributed to the alternative development of a coal mining area in decline in La Roche-en-Ardenne (Belgium), through the creation of a holiday resort for social tourism that is creating substantial employment in the area.
- 5.8 Throughout Europe, there are different innovative tourism initiatives that seek, at least partially, an alternative to economic decline. A good example is that of traditional fishermen who offer tourists the opportunity to join them for a working day on board their boat. In this way, tourists experience professional and cultural contact, which has great tourist appeal and increases the income of an activity in decline.
- 5.9 The EESC supports the joint declaration of the European Federation of Trade Unions in the Food, Agriculture and Tourism Sectors (EFFAT) and the Confederation of National Associations of Hotels, Restaurants and Similar Establishments in the European Union (HOTREC) on Principles and Guidelines for Maintaining and Developing Tourism Jobs in the Rural Areas.

6. **Conclusions**

- 6.1 At the numerous meetings of the study group set up to prepare this opinion and the successful hearing held in Córdoba, it was possible to form not only the views mentioned above but also valuable conclusions and recommendations.

- 6.2 Tourism, as recognised in various Commission and EESC documents and multiple studies, is an economic activity of great importance not only from a strictly economic perspective, but also socially and environmentally. It is especially important to point out that it is a powerful, stable industry with good future prospects, which creates high-quality jobs if developed according to criteria of short-, medium- and long-term sustainability.
- 6.3 The socio-economic decline of areas in various European countries has different causes and characteristics, but in all these areas the fall in employment and absence of economic alternatives are both the most conspicuous and most distressing consequences for the local people, who are frequently forced to migrate in search of different alternatives to the traditional activities of the area. The depopulation of large agricultural or mining areas is the undesired result of structural economic change.
- 6.4 Sustaining the social roots of the local community is the main objective of all policies intended to achieve regional balance and therefore provide viable alternatives for these areas in decline. The European Structural Funds are essential instruments in this policy of maintaining social roots. Preserving or creating employment should be the main priority of such a policy of social integration.
- 6.5 For many different areas in decline, tourism can be a good alternative source of economic activity, with great potential for social, economic and employment development. Numerous experiences at all levels prove and confirm this.
- 6.6 However, areas in decline in search of a tourism alternative still have formidable long-term difficulties and obstacles to overcome. It should be noted in particular that such areas do not in principle "naturally" lend themselves to tourism, but rather the opposite, since they sometimes lack tourist attractions and have dilapidated surroundings. It is very difficult for these areas to recover or create an environment where tourism can flourish. Therefore it is important to create products and services capable of generating demand.
- 6.7 Besides this basically unpromising situation, there are many different obstacles to the tourism alternative that areas in decline must face:
- Financially, a lack of capital to create products and tourism infrastructures.
 - Culturally, the local population do not normally have the skills needed to work in the tourist services sector.
 - With regard to accessibility and mobility, potential tourists must be able to arrive safely to the created or promoted tourist attractions.
 - People and their belongings must be safe.
 - An absence or lack of coordination in the promotion of the tourist destination.
 - A lack of specialised technical advice, which can help to identify those factors which could make the new businesses viable.

- 6.8 But it is precisely this possibility of a tourism alternative, together with the difficulties inherent in the process, which should motivate public institutions, social players and citizens in general to rise to the challenge of making this possibility a reality. European regional policy and other European policies on tourism, culture, employment, transport and infrastructure should work together to meet this challenge successfully. Ignoring the situation of areas in decline or failing to address the risks and difficulties of the tourism alternative does not seem a valid strategy. Alternatives other than tourism for areas in decline are both rare and difficult.
- 6.9 In order that the tourism alternative for areas in decline is viable, it should meet numerous conditions:
- It must promote the cultural, heritage and natural values of the area. Local communities, even in areas in decline, are often the guardians of unrivalled cultural wealth.
 - It should respond to global issues, using integrated development plans to create a diverse range of products and services required by the tourism sector.
 - It should promote tourism products that provide accommodation near a variety of tourist attractions. Tourist accommodation is one of the investments which bring stability to the tourism sector and create additional local business. Hotels and other forms of temporary accommodation are to be preferred to residential tourism, so as to guarantee long-term viability.
 - It should develop according to criteria of economic, social and environmental sustainability, so that this activity brings about the creation of many businesses and therefore jobs or self-employment.
 - It should create a competitive and diversified business environment so that changing market conditions, the globalisation of economic activity and relocation do not affect the area in the future.
 - It should foster, through vocational training, quality in all its forms: in customer service, working conditions and respect for the natural world.
 - It should form links with other, similar destinations in order to create networks that strengthen the promotion of all their products, brands or destinations.
 - It should offer innovative products and services. The extensive and thorough incorporation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) will undoubtedly be an important factor in competitiveness. The use of the internet by large, medium and, in

particular, small tourism businesses is an essential tool for promoting their products and positioning themselves on the market.

- It should guarantee the rights of the consumer since tourism cuts across a wide range of sectors and the businesses involved are usually small.

6.10 Clearly, the tourism products chosen in each area will vary according to multiple factors and it is difficult to identify which is ideal in each case, but as an example it is worth citing some activities that are directly or indirectly linked to tourism and can create an alternative tourist area: agri-tourism and rural tourism, complemented by craft industries, the production and sale of local food products, industrial tourism (for which we have described some examples of good practice), health tourism and cultural tourism. Institutional support for rural tourism is essential for its long-term viability.

6.11 The types of businesses developing tourism products and activities in areas in decline are no different to other tourism businesses, but the following should be noted:

- Self-employment, which has been an effective form of defence against industrial crises and which in a situation where new activities are being created can provide business solutions geared to the most entrepreneurial young people. In the case of rural tourism, self-employment and family employment are more common than in other sectors.
- Cooperatives (workers groups, producers, consumers, advisory, etc.) which are responsible for accommodation (small hostels, campsites, lodges), different tourist services or travel arrangements. The possibility of creating and working within a network is an important added benefit that different countries, such as Italy through Legacoop, have used to boost the number of cooperatives in the tourist sector.
- Collective bargaining agreements would have to take account of the particular situation of micro-enterprises so as to ensure quality of employment and meet their diverse, variable and complex needs.
- The organisations that manage social tourism in many countries can collaborate very effectively to make tourism an alternative for areas in economic decline. The number of tourists that they manage annually can be an incentive for establishing tourist itineraries and products in these areas. The experience of BITS (International Bureau of Social Tourism), for example in the holiday resort of Liguerra de Cinca in Spain, which brings a great economic boost to the region, is very valuable. Furthermore, various holiday resorts in Portugal managed by INATEL provide substantial economic activity for the whole region.

6.12 In order to ensure the viability of tourism businesses set up as alternatives in areas in decline, the creation of diverse and complementary activities, capable of combining for a common

goal, is vitally important; this would develop an authentic "tourism alliance" in which each business should see itself as part of an overall tourist product. Thus, the alliance of gastronomy, culture, nature, accommodation and, in short, all those economic activities aimed at attracting tourists, whether public or private, must be coordinated. This type of alliance, that is sometimes, although not always, used in traditional tourism, is invaluable in the case of new developments in areas in decline, because of the extremely difficult and precarious situation for businesses in such areas. The idea of the "tourist circuit", involving a whole range of businesses, is one way of putting such an alliance into practice. At all events, cooperation between businesses should be encouraged by all economic and social operators.

7. **Final comments**

- 7.1 The socio-economic recovery of European areas in decline is an important and difficult challenge for public institutions at all levels, socio-economic players and citizens, but it is a challenge that cannot be ignored if we are to avoid abandoning some regions to depopulation and their local communities to poverty or migration. The tourism alternative is only one of the possibilities, but its added value, its capacity to create jobs and its future prospects make it the preferred choice.
- 7.2 In fact, both European policies and the documents drawn up by the institutions emphasise this: the European Commission, the Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee encourage and promote this alternative, but financial support from the Structural Funds for initiatives in this field are still insufficient and are increasingly difficult to use as instruments of economic regeneration. It is proposed that the Commission undertake a pilot project, based on successful experiences, to study better ways of using the Structural Funds for the promotion of tourism in areas in socio-economic decline.
- 7.3 Other institutions such as the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) and the International Bureau of Social Tourism (BITS) are carrying out initiatives of great strategic value in that they strengthen and foster promotion and communication networks, which are vital to the viability of tourism projects in areas in decline.
- 7.4 Within Member States, coordination of initiatives at different levels of administration - national, regional and local - should be stepped up. Tourism observatories, which analyse the sector's possibilities and propose different integrated tourism development strategies and policies, are effective instruments for analysis and action.
- 7.5 The EESC, through various opinions relating to tourism, is promoting European policies focused on the creation of a European tourism model, not necessarily based on regulations but on values and principles of sustainability, environmental protection, quality of services, products and employment, consumer safety, public-private cooperation, accessibility for all and promotion of local heritage, cultural and other values to ensure that tourism in Europe and all countries respects and is underpinned by the principles of short, medium and long-

term sustainability. This opinion is an addition to this strategic and policy-oriented body of work and assesses the positive contribution of tourism to the socio-economic recovery of areas in decline as a basic element of the European tourism model.

8. The European Economic and Social Committee will publish and distribute this opinion, which will be the EESC's contribution, entitled "*The Córdoba declaration on the contribution of tourism to the socio-economic recovery of areas in decline*", to the European Tourism Forum 2005, to be held in Malta in October 2005.

Brussels, 28 September 2005

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of the
European Economic and Social Committee

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