

COM-5/019

Brussels, 7 December 1999

OPINION

of the

Committee of the Regions

of 18 November 1999

on the

Proposal for a Council Decision establishing a Community action programme

to promote the integration of refugees

(COM(1998) 731 final)

The Committee of the Regions

HAVING REGARD TO the Commission proposal for a Council Decision establishing a Community action programme to promote the integration of refugees (COM(1998) 731 final)¹;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of the Council of 6 July 1999 to consult the Committee on the subject in accordance with the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of its Bureau of 15 September 1999 to direct Commission 5 "Social Policy, Public Health, Consumer Protection, Research and Tourism" to draw up the relevant opinion;

HAVING REGARD TO the draft opinion (CdR 347/99) adopted by Commission 5 on 6 September 1999 (rapporteur: **Mr von Plüskow, D/PSE**);

adopted the following opinion by a unanimous vote at its 31st plenary session (meeting of 18 November):

1. Background

1. Since 1998 the general budget of the European Union has contained three interlinked

budget headings for measures to help asylum seekers, displaced persons and refugees. So far these measures have been implemented by the Commission in the form of pilot projects. For this purpose the European Parliament provided EUR 10 million in both 1997 and 1998. The pilot projects have been fully assessed by outside experts; the initial results have been published and, according to the Commission, are positive.

2. At the suggestion of the European Parliament, the Commission is now presenting a proposal for a comprehensive plan, based on the measures that already exist. This plan, which comes under the general heading of EU social policy, includes the present proposal for an action programme to promote the integration of refugees in the European Union, based on Article 235 EC Treaty.

The action programme is to run from 1 July 1999 to 31 December 2000. The funds to be provided total EUR 5 million for 1999 and EUR 9 million for 2000. The explanation for the reduced funding is that the programme now focuses on innovative actions with a clear European added-value and not on proposals with a purely local or national impact. However, the programme is also meant to supplement actions at local, regional, national and EU level.

The following measures are planned:

- the setting-up and running of large multi-dimensional, innovative projects with a clear European added-value;
- the setting-up and running of Community-level projects;
- the creation and development of transnational networks;
- the exchange of experience, and the assessment, monitoring and evaluation of projects and practice leading to the identification of innovative approaches to the integration of refugees;
- the collection, compilation and dissemination of data and reports;
- the provision of information on the programme and the dissemination of its results.

A committee consisting of Member States' representatives and chaired by a Commission representative is also to be set up to advise the Commission.

The EU Council of Ministers is to reach a decision on the programme in January 2000.

At a later stage the Commission plans to draft a further proposal for a Council Decision to cover 2001 and beyond. The purpose of this decision is to establish a comprehensive plan for tackling the whole issue of asylum seekers, displaced persons and refugees, with due regard to all developments subsequent to the Treaty of Amsterdam.

2. General comments

1. The integration of refugees is an important task for Member States, resulting - for example - from their obligations under the 1951 Geneva Convention. The EU's decision to back Member States' efforts by promoting and supporting new strategies for the integration of refugees is to be welcomed.
2. Given the growing number of refugees in Member States, Community action to promote their integration is particularly helpful.

3. Specific comments

1. The integration of refugees calls for specific measures which take account of individual circumstances (e.g. refugees' training and knowledge of languages). It is important for the Committee of the Regions that the Commission is to ensure full cooperation with local authorities because they play a central role in the integration of refugees. Social, cultural, economic and political instruments can be developed at grassroots level with the help of the local population. It is also possible in this way to fight discrimination and the causes of discrimination at work, at school and in local administrations.
2. The Committee of the Regions would point out that the most important task when integrating refugees is to find them a job. Most local and regional authorities are employers, and generate employment by promoting public services. They can play an important role in helping refugees to integrate socially and find jobs. They can also promote the activation of instruments for facilitating entry into the labour market. Measures should also be taken to retrain refugees so that they can move into more highly skilled jobs.
3. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the fact that the action programme respects the responsibilities of the Member States and cultural differences within the Community by restricting itself to projects with a "clear European added-value" and not supporting purely national or local projects.

4. Conclusions

1. The Committee of the Regions trusts that further progress will be made in integrating refugees as a result of the action programme, which it therefore approves in principle.
2. However, since this programme is merely a very short-term, transitional measure, it is vital to exchange and disseminate experience about successful projects. Accordingly, it is suggested that the Commission draws up a vademecum of best practice, in conjunction with the Committee of the Regions, with regard to local and regional actions for integrating refugees. This includes examining the effects which different social security and health care systems have on the promotion of integration.

The experience and knowledge acquired in this way should be incorporated in the provisions laid down by the Council of Ministers for the period after 2001, which are to form a comprehensive plan for the whole issue of asylum seekers, displaced persons and refugees. All the measures implemented hitherto should also be evaluated as part of this exercise.

3. The Committee of the Regions trusts that local and regional authorities will be directly involved in the implementation of the action programme, in close cooperation with the Member States and with organisations and institutions involved in the integration of refugees. Local and regional authorities play a major role in the integration of refugees through their actions in the social field. Also, the schemes which they have introduced at a local level may constitute an important breeding ground for projects elsewhere in the European Union.
4. The Committee of the Regions also calls for the following changes and additions to the action programme:

a) **Article 2**

Eligible persons within the meaning of Article 2 should be not only individuals but also whole families. Keeping families together will make it easier to find a lasting solution to the problems caused by refugees' special circumstances.

b) **Article 4**

The planned actions seem to be focused primarily on comprehensive, across-the-board measures. This approach is to be supported in principle, but it must not rule out measures on a smaller scale, which are confined to specific regions and which may offer a swifter and more effective remedy.

Vote on a) and b);

Make the appropriate additions to Articles 2 and 4.

c) **Article 7**

Setting up an advisory committee seems pointless at the moment. Since the programme is a short-term transitional measure, it should be kept as simple as possible. This does not rule out the possibility of setting up a committee when the definitive programme starts in 2001.

Vote on c):

Delete Articles 7 and 8.

Brussels, 18 November 1999.

The President

of the

Committee of the Regions

The Acting Secretary-General

of the

Committee of the Regions

Manfred Dammeyer

Vincenzo Falcone

¹ OJ C 36 of 10.2.1999, p. 20

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