European territorial cooperation - best practices and innovative measures

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The Committee on Regional Development adopted an own-initiative report by Iskra MIHAYLOVA (ADLE, BG) on European Territorial Cooperation - best practices and innovative measures.

European Added Value of European Territorial Cooperation (ETC): the report noted that the ETC budget of EUR 10.1 billion represents 2.8 % of the cohesion policy budget, does not match the great challenges that ETC has to meet, and does not reflect the high level of its European added value.

However, transnational cooperation:

- has helped in terms of supporting research, innovation and the knowledge economy, adapting to climate change, and promoting sustainable transport and mobility through transnational approaches, and has contributed to enhancing institutional capacity;
- has allowed cities and regions to cooperate on a variety of issues and themes, involving exchange of experience and good practices, and that this has improved the effectiveness of many regional and local policies.

Members called on the Commission, the Member States and the managing authorities to work together and exchange information and good practices in order to undertake assessments and issue guidelines as to how results orientation can be adapted to ETC specificities. The report also called for structured monitoring systems and evaluation plans in order to better evaluate the achievements of the results in terms of the Europe 2020 goals and territorial integration.

Contribution to territorial cohesion: Members encouraged the Member States to make greater use of Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), which are not implemented widely enough in the Interreg programmes for 2014-2020. They recommend that special focus be placed on:

- projects that strive to adapt localities and regions to the new demographic situation and counteract the inequalities resulting from it;
- the use of the Funds in island regions, outermost regions, sparsely populated regions and mountain and rural areas;
- the use of Interreg programmes and their urgent implementation in order to respond to, among other things, the challenges of tackling the refugee crisis.

Support for research and innovation: the report stressed the need to create cross-border innovation policy approaches, such as joint research and mobility programmes, joint research infrastructures, partnerships and cooperation networks. It recommended that local and regional authorities take full advantage of the possibilities of combining those funds to support SMEs and research and innovation projects, including cross-border projects.

Governance and policy coordination: while welcoming the simplified EGTC Regulation (Regulation (EU) No 1302/2013), Members stressed that this regulation is not sufficient to overcome all existing legal obstacles to cross-border cooperation. They welcomed, therefore, the initiative of the Luxembourg Presidency, which proposed a specific legal tool for border regions, as well as the Commissions initiative of carrying out, by the end of 2016, an analysis of the barriers to cross-border cooperation that will look at solutions and examples of good practices.

Stressing the ever increasing importance of cross-border labour markets, Members called on the Commission and the Member States to make full use of the opportunities provided by the Interreg programmes to facilitate cross-border labour mobility.

Simplification: Members stressed that the implementation of territorial cooperation programmes should be further simplified. They called on the Commission to propose specific actions to simplify the rules on reporting, auditing and state aid and to harmonise procedures. Arrangements for involving civil society and private stakeholders must be broadened and simplified.

Future recommendations: considering that ETC has proved its effectiveness, Members considered that its potential should be further developed in areas such as the single market, the digital agenda, employment, mobility, energy, research, education, culture , health and the environment.

The Member States and the Commission are called upon to:

- consider preserving ETC as an important instrument, allocating it a more distinct role within cohesion policy post-2020 and significantly increasing its budget;
- exchange information and good practices in order to reduce the administrative burden on beneficiaries prior to the ETC legislative proposal and the programming of the Interreg programmes for the period after 2020;
- pay attention to small cross-border cooperation projects between neighbouring border areas;
- promote cross-border cooperation between mountainous border areas, with rural areas prioritise;
- include cultural cooperation as one of the objectives of European territorial cooperation;
- consider the proposal by the Luxembourg Presidency on the creation of a new legal instrument for cohesion policy post-2020;
- initiate in 2016 a structured multi-stakeholder debate at EU level on the future of ETC post-2020;
- promote the role that the EGTC can play as a tool for greater efficiency in meeting local needs in cross-border regions.

Lastly, the report encouraged the joint establishment of strategies for border areas in order to boost integrated and sustainable territorial development.