

'Interview with Jos Chabert' from Inforegio Panorama

Caption: During this interview with the magazine Inforegio, Jos Chabert, President of the Committee of the Regions from 2000 to 2002, sets out the Committee's priorities in view of enlargement of the European Union. Powers and responsibilities in the areas of consultation and information must enable the Committee to work both towards the promotion of social and economic cohesion, in particular with regard to regional policy but also common policies, and towards the strengthening of the partnership principle so that the regional and local bodies might have greater involvement in the development and implementation of programmes financed by the Structural Funds.

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Interview with Jos Chabert, President of the Committee of the Regions

One of the conclusions made in the Second Cohesion Report is the marked increase in social and economic disparities facing the Union in the wake of enlargement. Given this scenario, what proposals has the Committee of the Regions (CoR) made to maintain and reinforce regional solidarity in Europe?

In future the CoR wishes to see Community regional policy focus all its energies on promoting development in the regions along the lines of the European social model.

In other words, Community regional policy will, in the years to come, essentially continue its traditional role of driving integration from the bottom upwards.

Fulfilling this role, however, will require it to manage its many objectives, structures and programmes with the principle of subsidiarity very much to the fore.

Won't this commitment to developing the regions have consequences for the Community budget?

Yes, levels of development in the regions are dependent on the levels of assistance provided. The financial package for the next period must be expanded further to guarantee that the Union's least developed regions continue to enjoy the same levels of structural funding as its new members. If disparities of development and prosperity within the Union widen sharply as a result of enlargement, continued progress towards the goals of social and economic cohesion and balanced spatial development will be conditional on increased levels of funding.

By ensuring that, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, and deploying its resources to generate cross-cultural understanding and a genuine sense of European solidarity, future Community regional policy could make a unique "European" contribution to regional development, namely by strengthening the bonds between the different peoples of the EU and creating a real European identity.

Strengthening this sense of European identity cannot be created unless the public in these countries is made aware of the contribution made by the EU to social and economic regeneration. Are the members of the CoR conscious of the lack of public awareness about Europe in this respect?

Certainly, public awareness and a locally based approach will be among the Committee of the Region's top political priorities in the coming years. Increasing public recognition of the support channelled through the Structural Funds is part of the local development approach, under which the Committee has a special role as a public sounding board for Union policies.

As regards enlargement, the Committee will be relying on publicity measures and communications to enhance people's sense of belonging to the European Union. The Committee of the Region's 222 members (set to rise to 344 after enlargement) and their alternates are the link between European citizens and Community institutions. Their work is not limited to issuing opinions. One of their chief tasks is to relay to the institutions the public's concern on various matters, while at the same time passing information, from the institutions to the public at large. Since the Committee members represent regional or local constituencies, they are effectively the EU representatives closest to citizens.

The Committee of the Regions has repeatedly called for expanding the partnership aspect of Community operations to give local and regional bodies a bigger role in developing and implementing ERDF-financed programmes. How does the Community of the Regions perceive the decentralised aspect of the 2000–2006 programming period?

The Committee of the Regions insists that local and regional authorities be involved at every stage to draw up, implement and oversee programmes, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity as stipulated in the Structural Funds General Regulation. This decentralised partnership, based on the "bottom-up" approach,

must be put into effect decisively but democratically, as it is the key to better results in creating jobs, honing regional competitiveness and promoting sustainable development.

In fact, only a handful of general provisions in the legislation are needed to put the partnership principle into practice.

The vertical partnership between the European Commission and its Member States must be extended to include local and regional bodies with a view to spreading responsibility more broadly and equitably. At the same time, decision-making powers must be demarcated more clearly to enable local and regional entities to play a full part in general regional programming.

To ensure the greater efficiency of such partnerships, the role of local and regional bodies as managing and paying authorities should be reinforced, management and control procedures simplified, adequate technical support provided so that all the partners in a given area can participate fully, and to ensure the responsibility of roles and responsibilities, organising the work load, powers of delegation and the availability of management resources.

Besides regional policy itself, a number of other Community policies also play their part in reinforcing cohesion across Europe. What do regional and local politicians think of “common policies”, especially the common agricultural policy?

Regional policy is just one way of achieving social and economic cohesion in Europe, arguably the most important — but other Community policies are closely related to it in which local and regional representatives play an important part. This is especially true in fields such as transport, competition, the single market, economic and monetary policy, the common fisheries policy and, of course, the common agricultural policy. An integrated, bottom-up approach can be the best way to harness the synergies of complementary policies.

And, of course, Community action in all of these areas must be based on the principle of subsidiarity and take into consideration the priority accorded to enlargement.

Given the marked agricultural bias in the economies of most of the CEECs, the common agricultural policy will be a vital lever of regional development in the enlarged Union.