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S&D Group task force on the future of cohesion policy

The Future Cohesion Policy, with its revision planned for the next programming period 2014-2020, should continue to follow a strategy based on Solidarity. It should also be a long term, responsive, flexible, modern, EU-wide inclusive development policy in line with the actual/current "Lisbon" Strategy objectives and the future EU strategy (EU-2020). In order to achieve its objectives, the financial instruments and appropriations should be in tune with the level of needs and aspirations, within a set of clearly defined objectives.

Cohesion with its territorial dimension is a common European Policy with synergies with other policies and with multilevel governance. Cohesion policy is a key tool to combine an EU responsibility with the capacity of Member States and local government to tailor interventions to territorial contexts representing furthermore a development strategy aimed at sustainable growth and social inclusion. By adapting this policy to the numerous challenges through an updated set of guidelines and new concepts we should establish a framework with complementary indicators and adjusted criteria for eligibility, implementation and evaluation.

All this has to be possible with a better regulation, further simplification, transparency and flexibility while targeting the advantages and disadvantages of specific regions to create EU added value.

Our project for the future

A Future for Cohesion Policy, for harmonious EU development closer to the citizens

1. Cohesion policy is a central issue for the EU. It is directly linked to a balanced, sustainable, harmonious and fair development. In this way it presents an integrated approach for Europe. As defined in the Treaties, it brings the EU closer to the citizens strengthening thus the European citizenship and ensuring long term development and stability *by using regional potential*. At the same time it is a policy able to respond adequately and in a long term perspective to local, regional or global challenges or crisis.

A reform of Cohesion Policy headed for *further* success

2. The *reform* of cohesion policy after 2013 is suitable and necessary: not only as a simple review and adjustment but also as a further strengthening, improvement, development and an adaptation of *one of the most successful EU policies*. This *reform* should be based on past successes, lessons learned and best practices in order to be able to meet adequately the upcoming challenges.

3. Cohesion policy has to remain the principal instrument for balanced growth *and a more integrated Europe*. The S&D Group proposal for the new EU cohesion policy is based on a clear set of priorities, on strategic guidance and on the process of a simplified and flexible framework to be implemented.

A strategy based on solidarity

4. EU Cohesion Policy is the most visible expression of European solidarity, which helps to create a sense of European citizenship and to foster regional development within a common economic and social framework.

An EU-wide inclusive Cohesion

5. EU Cohesion policy should remain an EU-wide policy giving access to resources, experiences and assistance to all EU regions in a frame of a single and flexible Community policy, capable of intervening at the most appropriate scale. Renationalisation of Cohesion policy is neither an option nor a perspective because this would clearly prevent the regions, especially those most lagging behind, from having the necessary means to pursue common European objectives, and from participating on an equal basis to the benefits brought about by EU policies.

A leverage effect policy for "Lisbon" and EU-2020 strategy

6. Cohesion policy has to capitalize on and use its huge potential in order to contribute to the implementation of the "Lisbon strategy" focusing on areas that historically are the poorest geographically or economically, and on those who have undergone the profound changes linked to globalisation and "structural" modifications. It should sustain an economic and employment revival in the poorest regions and in the regions that have other restructuring problems.

7. The S&D Group vision for the "EU-2020" strategy should become an important axis for the Cohesion Policy. This means a *broader and more* effective coordination of Cohesion objectives with policies on research and development, innovation and creativity, entrepreneurship, and job creation. There should be special emphasis on "green" jobs and those in social and health services, education and training, climate change, renewable energies, and other Union's objectives.

A long term, but responsive, flexible, modern development policy

8. Cohesion policy is a *long-term* a development policy *with a clear strategic orientation combining equity and efficiency. Moreover, a greater capacity to respond* both to actual needs and future or emerging challenges *is also important*. The upcoming thematic priorities, in particular the social-economic imbalances between regions, the impact of financial and economic crisis, globalisation processes, climate change, demographic change, technological progress etc, should be taken into account. All these aspects will have to be included in future programmes, *which have to keep a certain degree of flexibility and margins to be revised in case of new unforeseen challenges*.

Financial instruments and resources to match needs and aspirations

9. Achieving the EU Cohesion policy objectives for the next period depends on adequate financial resources. The Union's budget has to take into account new challenges such as climate

change, globalisation, and demographic change. Consequently, the appropriations have at least to be at the current levels in absolute and relative terms. Effective and fair distribution of those resources has to take into account the specific needs of all regions as well as sufficient transitional periods for regions which will no longer be eligible under new objectives.

A set of clearly defined *core* objectives in line with current and future needs

10. The main objectives of Cohesion policy should be clearly defined and few in number *within a sound strategic framework*. At the programming and implementation level, sectoral or horizontal priorities should be applied, either at EU level or in specific programming areas. The objectives should take account of environmental aspects: climate change, "green" economy, as well as education with stress on vocational training, life-long-learning, research, development, innovation, urban and rural development, *urban requalification* and quality of life.

A Common European Policy with synergies with other policies and with multilevel governance.

11. The future regional policy framework should aim to create an even more effective common European cohesion policy. It should provide for closer relations between EU institutions and national, regional and local authorities, and an enhanced synergy with other policies. *A new integrated approach is needed in order to avoid useless overlapping and to have the most effective and coordinated use of EU funds. To this aim, synergies with other relevant policies (i.e. research and innovation, agricultural and rural development, trans-European network policies) should be taken into account in the definition of the strategic objectives.* It should be assured that the local and regional level is effectively involved in planning, decision making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Structural Funds. However, regional development objectives should prevail and should not embrace objectives from different sectoral policies unrelated to social, economic and territorial cohesion.

12. To achieve the objectives and meet the priorities of the future Cohesion Policy, multi-level governance should be improved: to ensure a coherent and coordinated action between the European Union and all other levels of governance. Local and regional authorities and civil society, including NGO's, play a decisive role in achieving cohesion. An effective, comparable level of administration throughout the EU, is therefore a key ingredient of success.

A stimulus to EU territorial cohesion

13. The territorial dimension of cohesion, explicitly mentioned in the EU Treaties, should be reflected in future Cohesion policy and seriously considered in the framework of all EU sectoral policies. The concept of territorial "solidarity" is about maximising regional potential, exploiting the territorial opportunities in favour of the entire EU, and the territorial approach allows to extract and aggregate the knowledge and the preferences of EU citizens and to accurately respond to their needs.

14. Territorial cohesion is based on the principle of equal opportunities and is focused on three key concepts: concentration, networking and cooperation. Although a proper definition has not been given yet, it means ensuring the polycentric development of the EU as a whole, as well as the balanced and sustainable development of territories with different characteristics and specificities while also preserving their diversity.

Better Guidelines, new concepts and instruments

15. The strong link between regional development and social cohesion - with coordinated measures to tackle unemployment, social exclusion and provide vocational training - should be kept and reinforced, especially in view of globalisation and demographic challenges (ageing, migration, depopulation and urban concentration). To take into account the importance of the urban dimension and guarantee an integral sustainable development of the cities, it should be assured that goals like the promotion of the economic and social regeneration of cities and neighbourhoods are effectively mainstreamed in respective Funds.

16. Importance of gender mainstreaming; equal opportunities, and the special needs of disabled and senior persons should be borne in mind at every stage of the implementation and assessment of Cohesion policy.

17. Infrastructural measures should be available to all regions with special focus on those lagging behind, with priority to investments having a European added value.

18. Rural development programs could be rather better designed and coordinated under a common management under Cohesion policy (together with other structural policy instruments).

19. Cross-border cooperation gives European added value and should be supported and strengthened.

20. New concepts, such as the "Macro-regional" approach, the "Metropolitan Regions" or the "Wider neighbourhood action plans", aiming at developing specific comparative advantages or overcoming particular local-level obstacles, should be considered. Integrated strategies like those of the Baltic Sea, the Alpine area, the Danube Region should be supported but integrated into the Cohesion policy objectives.

Establishing a new framework for eligibility and better adapted criteria, within new indicators

21. It is necessary to elaborate additional indicators *as analytical tools that might complement the GDP, in order to better evaluate the results of the structural measures*, such as relative prosperity, unemployment, environmental quality of growth or the technological gap and other. These complementary and comprehensive indicators should reflect the current state of play and future prospects of the regions. *A stronger emphasis on impact evaluation should be achieved.*

22. The *automatic decommitment* (n+2) rule should be safeguarded and applied with flexibility as it is essential for a maximum absorption of funds.

Better regulation, *subsidiarity*, further simplification, transparency and flexibility

23. Existing obstacles to the effective use of EU structural resources have to be removed. Better regulation, further simplification, transparency and flexibility are indispensable in order to enhance the impact of cohesion policy for the beneficiaries and for the Union as a whole. Higher level of collaboration between European institutions and regional authorities is needed to ensure enhancement of management. Efficient local governance is the best way to reduce errors in implementation.

24. The future delivery mechanism could be based on greater conditionality to deliver certain results while using the EU assistance on the basis of a place-based approach as well as by committing Member States and Regions to establish national and regional targets aiming at improved access to public services, delivery of structural reforms, social inclusion measures, etc.

Targeting the advantages and disadvantages of specific regions to create EU added value

25. The EU has an arsenal of measures to address the needs of outermost regions and other regions with natural and geographical handicaps, such as islands, mountains, sparsely populated regions, regions experiencing depopulation, border regions, peripheral regions, coastal regions. Special consideration should be given to ways of offsetting their handicaps, to convert regional potential into assets and opportunities, and to stimulate their development. At the same time, it is necessary to make the most of their particular characteristics, such as biodiversity, cultural heritage and - specifically for the outermost regions - their role as bridgeheads for fostering relations with third countries.

A High-level political debate

26. A commitment to greater effectiveness of the EU cohesion policy requires a High-level political debate involving the European Parliament, a dedicated Council formation and the Commission. This would make the cohesion policy as the EU development policy more accountable, as well as obstacles and results more clear to EU citizens.