

Third report on economic and social cohesion

Heikki Eskelinen

University of Joensuu, Finland

The third cohesion report seems to have been written primarily as a defence of the structural funds operations. They are promoted as growth policies against the background of the classical economic dilemma, which has been raised recently in some influential and critical analyses of EU regional policies, namely, whether regional policies act as a burden or as a resource from the macro-economic point of view. The report thus attempts to respond to views questioning the need for a regional dimension in EU policy strategies.

Clearly, the setting outlined above also conditions the analyses presented in the report. Regions are investigated primarily with respect to their potential role in upgrading competitiveness and regional divisions from that of policy programmes: Cohesion countries v. the rest of the EU15, Objective 1 regions v. other regions, new member countries v. the EU 15. This orientation is in contrast to the emphases prevailing in the applied research work on reforming regional policies towards spatial policies (e.g., the ESPON programme). In this third report, no new concepts of spatial development and policies are systematically introduced nor consistently applied.

Thus, the third cohesion report sticks firmly to the earlier policies, although a somewhat more comprehensive set of indicators is utilised in the baseline analysis of the European Union territory. The report would thus have benefited from an evaluation of different potential policy strategies.

The following research issues, among others, should have been given a more thorough analysis in the report:

- The macro-regional structure of the European Union territory: Is a polycentric Europe (i.e. a Europe of several prospective growth zones) an unrealisable utopia, or could it actually bring new perspectives to infrastructure policies? This issue is particularly important in respect of the coming enlargement: will it be realised by linking the main urban nodes of the new member countries with the Pentagon, or will more endogenous territorial growth processes be possible in the area at large?
- External borders, especially in the east: Which policy strategies are best positioned to solve the dilemma of the dual nature of the new border? On one hand, it is an exclusive dividing line (between 'us' and 'them') in the classical sense and, on the other hand, it should also be developed as an arena for co-operation. Obviously, new policy initiatives require a broader measure of policy coordination than has hitherto been the case, thus a dialogue between regional policies and (soft) security policies should be developed.
- The concept of territorial cohesion: Illustrative examples of its scope are not sufficient in developing it as a policy target, but its dimensions should

be analysed in a more systematic way. For instance, in Nordic circumstances one can ask whether preserving the settlement structure and basic provision of services should be set as an explicit policy target in all regions which are not excluded from human activity in the name of nature conservation.

Maps are sensitive instruments in policy planning, and the third cohesion report circumvents controversial issues in this respect by taking a very cautious approach. Nor does it pass a further litmus test, as Finland is considered to be a part of Scandinavia, and not a Nordic country with an interesting Russian connection.

26 March 2004