

THE CONFERENCE OF CITIES AND REGIONS: AN OPPORTUNITY TO GAUGE ADVANCES IN FUTURE REGIONAL POLICY PLANNING IN THE URBAN SPHERE

Last 1st and 2nd June, Barcelona hosted the conference “Regions and Cities: Partners for Growth and Jobs”, organised by the European Commission with the support from the Government of Catalonia and the Spanish Ministry of Treasury. The conference brought together more than 500 representatives from national, regional and local authorities, as well as other economic and social stakeholders involved with Structural Funds management.

The moment chosen to hold this event was optimal, both for presenting the principal novelties in the new regional policy and for discovering at first hand the content and present state of the programming process in different European regions.

In her address, Danuta Hubner, European Commissioner for Regional Policy, stressed that *“The new cohesion policy means growth and quality jobs for those towns and cities which will establish partnerships with their regions”*. The Commissioner said that the new regulations increase the importance of the urban dimension and, above all, that they establish the possibility of the cities and other local administrations becoming involved in programming and delivery. Hubner also pointed out that URBACT II could be established in order to promote exchanges of experiences amongst cities, particularly in EU15 and EU25. She also remarked that direct urban related investment over the 2000-2006 period represents 8.5% of total ERDF funding for Objective 1 and 15% of funds under Objective 2. The cities have also benefited from other measures of the operational programmes in such fields as energy, competitiveness and the environment.

However this may be, both Hubner and Anna Maria Leiva, Spanish Secretary General of State for Regional Policy at the Ministry of Public Administrations, insisted on the need to remember that cohesion policy is not aimed only at big cities and metropolitan areas, but must also benefit small and medium-sized cities, which also suffer from structural deficits.

The European Commission representatives also emphasised that the final document on “Cohesion Policy and Cities” would include an annex devoted to the strategic guidelines that the Member States will shortly be called upon to approve.

Some of the main conclusions from the conference that I would highlight here are as follows: a) Although the new regulations make this new urban dimension very clear, the Member States and the regions still have the last word on whether to include it in operational programmes. B) The speeches made by national, regional and local representatives served to confirm that programming is advancing somewhat behind schedule, as there are still many issues to be decided. C) The city-region partnership really exists in some cases, but in others is a fiction due to political disputes at national level. D) The conference

did not analyse in detail the type of projects that can be financed in the new period although, for example, in the case of the Regional Competitiveness and Employment Objective, the European Commission recommended focusing on actions in certain areas and selected themes. The new financial instruments, Jessica, Jeremies and Jasper, were also presented. E) The new regulations offer the possibility of subdelegating programmes to subregional bodies, as some Member States have done during the present period. F) Urban continues to be an example in good practice in the EU, but the conference also enabled us to learn about other types of projects cofinanced by the Structural Funds, such as the Neighbourhood Programme of Catalonia, through which some 800 M€ will be invested in 60 neighbourhoods. G) Although the establishment of the new URBACT II programme was announced, there was little mention of the urban dimension either in the field of crossborder, transnational and interregional cooperation or in such programmes as InterAct.

Most of the participants said that a conference like this should continue to take place to enable us to gauge how regional policy is advancing in the urban sphere and to provide a meeting place for decision makers and practitioners.

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