

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 243 (2007)¹ Ensuring territorial continuity of social services in rural regions

1. Social services are the bedrock of a cohesive society, meeting the needs of citizens with regard to employment, housing, education, social security and care, and access to them should not be conditional upon living in highly urbanised areas.

2. Nevertheless, Europe's rural areas may be faced with higher levels of social exclusion and deprivation than their urban counterparts due to a number of factors (ageing population, inadequate transport systems, diminishing supply of trained professionals, difficulty of access, higher costs, single employment sector) which are often compounded by lower levels and higher costs of social service provision.

3. Attempts by regional authorities to provide the most comprehensive support in the most cost-effective manner means that low-income residents of rural communities may suffer most from diminished service.

4. Furthermore, while social services may usually be regulated and funded by public authorities at national, regional or local levels, the services themselves may be provided by the public or private sector, voluntary or other third sector organisations (mixed economy of care), and close co-ordination and co-operation are required to ensure that those most in need are reached and that access is fairly and transparently organised.

5. Despite this situation, the double disadvantage of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas and the accompanying need for services has rarely been addressed specifically by the competent authorities. Indeed, consensus has still to be reached regarding the definition of a "rural area".

6. Rural service delivery is sometimes distinct from that which is possible in urban areas, and has its own constraints and problems. Innovative ways therefore need to be found and adapted to each region's requirements and specificities to ensure equality of access for all.

7. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, concerned to ensure the sustainability of social services in remote or rural communities and to reduce disparities in levels of development between different regions and within regions themselves, therefore calls on the regional authorities of member states of the Council of Europe to:

a. examine and address rurality as an issue in itself by lobbying for the adoption of a common definition of the term at least at national level;

b. draw up, where these do not exist, a set of performance indicators to evaluate their social services, to enable a proper evaluation of the situation on the ground, in particular with regard to provision of services to the most vulnerable members of rural and remote communities and to facilitate objective and empirical urban/rural comparisons;

c. develop social service policies which are specifically aimed at rural areas and which address key needs, such as childcare and child protection, and obstacles, such as problematic and limited transport and communications infrastructure, by:

i. developing suitable financing instruments at all relevant levels to meet the greater costs inherent in rural service delivery;

ii. taking measures to empower the end-user and all members of rural communities through their inclusion in planning and community-oriented social services development and to this end applying the guidelines for good practice identified by the European Committee for Social Cohesion's Group of Specialists on user involvement in social services and integrated social services delivery (CS-US);

iii. fully involving the different organisations responsible for social service provision in service planning and delivery;

iv. promoting the autonomy of older or disabled people by making greater use of mobile services and home visits;

v. investigating the use of alternative forms of service delivery using the Web or telephone, in compliance with Congress Resolution 231 (2007) on e-health and democracy in the regions;

vi. shifting resources, as appropriate, from centralised centres to networked facilities that are closer to rural users or making, if necessary, specific travel arrangements for them;

vii. creating specific programmes destined to help rural childcare providers become licensed and to provide them with basic training on child safety and development to combat the dearth of skilled and available childcare providers and the lack of childcare centres in isolated areas;

viii. applying an individual approach to minority groups in rural communities to ensure that they are not the victims of a double disadvantage;

d. adopt an integrated approach when thinking of rural health issues and social services and seek to transpose developments in improving rural health care to social care issues, and vice versa, also linking social care service provision with housing and other relevant policies and developments;

e. consider the appointment of an Ombudsperson for Social and Health Services at regional level to monitor respect for the rights of the most vulnerable members of society;

f. institute a regime of "personal care budgets" (direct funding of users rather than providers) at regional level (possibly with mixed state/regional funding) to enable vulnerable citizens to take control of the organisation of their own care and to benefit the economies of rural areas.

8. The Congress, for its part, stresses that one of its priorities for the next few years is an examination of how social cohesion can be achieved through balanced regional development, and to this end it:

a. mandates its Committee on Social Cohesion to organise a conference of regional heads of social affairs to determine the major social issues at the level of the regions and to make the question of service delivery in rural and isolated regions one of the key topics;

b. notes that a complementary report on the balanced distribution of health services is also being presented to the 2007 Plenary Session and a further report on services of general interest in rural areas will be presented by the Committee on Sustainable Development during the 2008 spring session.

1. Debated and approved by the Chamber of Regions on 30 May 2007 and adopted by the Congress on 1 June 2007, 3rd Sitting (see Document CPR(14)5RESREV, draft resolution presented by S. Berger (Germany, R, EPP/CD), rapporteur).