

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Recommendation 224 (2007)¹ on ensuring territorial continuity of social services in rural regions

1. Certain European regions are currently experiencing a declining or stable, but ageing, rural population; others are experiencing a growth in rural population, influenced by outward migration from towns and cities to rural areas. Still other rural regions, particularly in central and eastern Europe, are undergoing major structural transformations.

2. In most cases these changes are mirrored by a steady decline in social services and infrastructure that adversely affects the most vulnerable.

3. Residents of some rural regions may therefore be at risk of social disadvantage as rural areas are transformed and restructured by the processes of internal and external socio-economic and demographic change.

4. Population groups who may face disproportionate social disadvantage in terms of access to services and opportunities include older people (those over 65 years of age), children and young people, women, those on low incomes, people with long-term health problems – physical or mental – and people from ethnic minority groups (such as the Roma community).

5. Social services are important in facilitating social integration and meeting fundamental rights such as personal dignity and integrity. All citizens have a right to enjoy such social support where they live and meeting the needs of rural residents should therefore be seen by public authorities as an integral part of a wider national social cohesion agenda.

6. To date, few states have, however, addressed the issue of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.

7. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe believes that improving the quality and accessibility of social services in the regions should be key policy aims within member states' social cohesion agendas and that rural social services development should be approached as a social investment as opposed to a social cost.

8. Bearing the above in mind, the Congress therefore calls on the Committee of Ministers to encourage member states to develop national social care policies and structures which:

a. ensure co-ordination at national level of local and regional rural development strategies to ensure consistency of approach and dissemination of knowledge and good practice, while aligning national and international policy agendas with strategies at local and regional level;

b. are increasingly integrated in approach, linking social care service provision with housing, health and other relevant policies and practice;

c. include social services policies which are specifically aimed at rural areas and address local needs such as infrastructure support, alongside the identification of rural social work and services as a distinctive area of practice, by devising, delivering and evaluating training for social workers specifically with rural practice in mind;

d. include a strong element of user involvement in which rural communities are consulted on what they perceive as priorities for service development (in compliance with 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));

e. develop suitable financing instruments at all relevant levels to respond to the greater costs inherent in rural service delivery;

f. explore the use of telecare and information technology in providing care and information to rural communities, in line with Congress Recommendation 212 (2007) on e-health and democracy in the regions;

g. address the shortage of care workers and other professionals in rural communities by means of incentive schemes, while respecting an ethical approach to recruitment as practised in certain member states;

h. ensure that, in an increasingly culturally diverse Europe, minority groups do not face double disadvantage in a rural location, by applying a targeted individual approach and tailored action plans where necessary;

i. enable home, as opposed to institutional, care for the elderly and those with disabilities or long-term health problems through the provision of direct payments (or "personal care budgets") to users or care-givers, thus enabling people to stay in rural communities and contribute to rural economies by spending disability-related money in their areas;

j. envisage the appointment of an Ombudsperson for Social and Health Services, who citizens could contact directly.

9. The Congress further calls on the Committee of Ministers:

a. to agree on a common definition of "rurality" applicable throughout the 47 member states;

b. to invite the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies and the Observatory for the Development of Social Services in Europe to use their expertise and resources to extend their area of investigation to the state of social services systems in rural and remote areas of Europe.

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)5RECREV, draft recommendation presented by S. Berger (Germany, R, EPP/CD), rapporteur).