

Chamber of Regions

40th SESSION – 2nd part
Remote meeting, 16 June 2021

CPR(2021)40-03¹
9 June 2021

Introduction to debates on:

Role of regions in ensuring a citizen-centred response to COVID-19 and post-crisis recovery

Territorial solidarity: the role regions can play

Concept paper prepared by the Secretariat

Context

In the framework of the second part of its 40th Session, the Chamber of Regions decided to have as its theme “Regions – central actors in crisis response and post-crisis revival”. With this in mind, two debates are proposed:

- “Role of regions in ensuring a citizen-centred response to COVID-19 and post-crisis recovery”;
- “Territorial solidarity: the role regions can play”.

These debates fall within the framework of the COVID-19 health crisis which has had a profound impact on the territories at both social and economic levels. In the face of this crisis, the regions, thanks to their strategic position between the central and local levels, are in the front line to mitigate the impact of the

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outbreak on their communities and shape the post-crisis future, while supporting co-operation between the different levels of governance to assist territories in need.

The debate on the role of regions in ensuring a citizen-centred response to COVID-19 and post-crisis recovery aims to highlight the key role of the regions in this health crisis, the main issues the regions have faced and how they are rebuilding society. To this end, representatives of three European associations of regions are expected to provide examples of concrete situations and specific actions taken while highlighting the main problems and best practices which enabled them to tackle the challenges.

The debate on “Territorial solidarity: the role regions can play” has as its objective the improvement of coordination mechanisms between regions and states, the analysis and presentation of new instruments for cooperation and equalization between regions and the opportunity to share the best practices of crisis management and equitable sharing of financial supports among regions. During this debate, a report will be presented and submitted to the members of the Chamber of Regions for adoption.

Members of the Chamber of Regions will contribute to the debates by sharing their own experiences and vision with a specific focus on the role of regional authorities, that is the level of governance between the national / central governments and parliaments and municipalities / towns and cities.

Role of regions in ensuring a citizen-centred response to COVID-19 and post-crisis recovery.

The health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic has had serious consequences both for the life of the territories and for the life of citizens. National, regional and local authorities were compelled to take urgent measures and develop a response to limit the spread of the virus and protect the population, and ensure eventually a gradual return to a normal life.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the regions have been key players in managing the crisis. Indeed, in most European countries measures to contain the spread of the virus (lockdown, curfew, closure of shops, suspension of tourism) have been carried out on a territorial basis and could vary considerably from one region to another within the same country.

In addition, regions have been particularly affected due to their predominant areas of competence: economic, health, transport and environmental sectors, cross-border areas, organisation of regional and local elections. The regions then had to adapt to the situation in order to ensure the continuity of public services while responding to the crisis.

This unprecedented crisis has highlighted certain weaknesses in the mode of governance and in particular the complexity of the dialogue with the State and the coordination of action. In this context, the establishment of coordination mechanisms between the different levels of governance is of crucial importance to respond effectively to future crises. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic has led in some cases to a strengthening of multi-level governance and cooperation between sub-national levels.

However, the post-crisis recovery needs consolidated co-operation and solidarity between the State and the local and regional authorities. On the medium scale, regional entities have shown to be best able to respond to emergencies because of their better knowledge of the situation on the ground and of the exact needs of municipalities and provinces or *départements*.

In the post crisis-recovery, the support of the regions has been indispensable. The state needs effective and empowered regional administrations under the authority of elected representatives to respond to crisis situations, and the right balance between centralised and decentralised power. Regional authorities must be equipped with proper competences and means, including the necessary autonomy in decision making and budget allocation, to support the social and economic reconstruction of their

territories, which must entail greater solidarity and co-operation between the different levels: European, national, regional and local.

As Europe is struggling to emerge from the health crisis, a helpful response in the context of COVID-19 has been the development and use of digital technologies to provide citizens with access to services and ensure proper communication with and between them. The new technologies have made it possible to limit the spread of the virus, reduce the impact on economic activities and protect the population through the opportunity to telework or tele-study, to consult specialists without having to travel, or to do their shopping remotely. Digitalisation has also made it possible to tackle a certain "lockdown" of democracy as digital tools were used to ensure public participation in local affairs and increase transparency. At the same time, the crisis has highlighted the inequalities of access to digital technologies and in possibilities for their effective use among different groups of the population that need to be addressed.

The COVID-19 crisis has shown that the digitalisation of territories is today an indispensable axis of regional transformation because, in addition to corresponding to the transition to a society where citizens are highly connected, digitalisation brings many benefits to the territory for both citizens and sub-national authorities because all their fields of intervention can be concerned by this movement of innovation and facilitate the life of the community. Despite its positive aspect during this crisis, digitalisation could have its limits in terms of health, but also in social and territorial terms. The divide between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas could tend to foster the digital exclusion of certain populations and further deepen inequalities between territories. Moreover, the use of new technologies may also be difficult for the elderly people.

Territorial solidarity: the role regions can play

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the critical need for a better territorial cohesion policy and greater territorial solidarity. In this time of post-crisis recovery more than ever, States are facing challenges of social, economic and environmental nature which are affecting also the traditional and social ties between and within the regions. No country or region can overcome this crisis by itself, therefore solidarity must remain strong not only now during time of crisis, but also in the future.

The health crisis did not have the same impact on the territories and therefore has provoked disparities from one territory to another. That is why solidarity must be shown to ensure that all citizens have equal access to public services, mostly during this time of post-crises recovery. Share of concrete help and best practices of crisis management between regions is fundamental and solidarity throughout European regions must be kept strong to face the crisis together. The need for better territorial cohesion policy and greater territorial solidarity is more critical now than ever.

During the health crisis, the co-operation and solidarity have gone even beyond national borders, some cities/regions with low levels of infection supported their counterparts in other countries to relieve overburdened health services. However, especially in cross-border regions, such cooperation has been complicated by border closures, restrictions on movement, and the lack of effective coordination arrangements.

The disparities created during this time have mostly affected citizens living in rural regions of Europe, citizens who are living far from welfare services, and in particular health services. These regions are at risk of seeing themselves excluded from the high decision-making level, and that is why a strong solidarity between stronger and weaker regions is critical, to ensure that every citizen voice is heard and taken into consideration.

While national governments have seen their scope of action limited due to economic difficulties, the increasing role of the EU and decentralisation, the redistribution of services and financial resources between regions can contribute to territorial development. Decentralisation of power in Europe has

shown its importance during the post-crisis recovery, where the Nation State is not always able to take care of every region and city in its territory, creating inequalities in the recovery process.

In this context, regions play a crucial role as the intermediary between national and local levels in reducing territorial disparities by pursuing a wide range of (re-) distributive policies in interaction with various players at the sub-state and supra-national levels. While using new instruments of equalisation, the regional powers can effectively address the challenges that different territories are facing today in order to ensure a greater level of territorial solidarity. In order to tackle the new challenges, it is necessary to promote new methods, by redefining the core sovereign powers of states, by strengthening their role in areas such as security and financial equalisation, while at the same time expanding the role of regional and local authorities in grassroots policy areas such as transport, healthcare, education and the environment.

The solidarity among territories is today indispensable for the full recovery of states, regions and cities from the crisis. Regional solidarity collaborates to the transition to societies where no citizens are left behind, where cities and regions of every state, through local and regional authorities, can bring benefits to the decision-making process at the national and supranational levels.