

# THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

---

## **Resolution 252 (2008)<sup>1</sup> Services of general interest in rural areas, a key factor in territorial cohesion policies**

1. Rural areas are crucial to the well-being and dynamism of Europe; much of the continent's economy is located in rural zones and agriculture, forestry and biodiversity are indispensable for food and other essential goods.

2. Globalisation, economic restructuring and rural exodus have produced major societal changes and the challenge of maintaining sustainable rural areas is vital for the territorial and social cohesion of both urban and rural areas.

3. The trend is towards a vicious cycle of unbalanced exchange patterns between rural and urban areas; out-migration means demographic ageing and social inequalities in rural areas and pressures on towns and cities is creating urban sprawl and diffuse network regions.

4. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe strongly believes that equality and equity of access to services of general interest<sup>2</sup> is vital for territorial and social cohesion. It emphasises that the core mission of all territorial authorities is to ensure that services of general interest are provided to all within the principles of universality, subsidiarity, sustainability, affordability, continuity and transparency.

5. An overall decline in the quality and accessibility of services of general interest is being registered throughout the European territory and is particularly acute in rural and sparsely populated areas where the absence of a critical mass generally leads to inadequate public services in these areas.

6. The Congress observes the current trend towards deregulation and liberalisation of public services and the creation of new forms of partnership for service provision; It considers that the primary concern for all public authorities must be the quality and accessibility of service regardless of the ownership or organisational model for its delivery.

7. Indeed, maintaining an effective and efficient offer of services of general interest throughout Europe is a political challenge which must be addressed at all levels of territorial responsibilities within a framework of social and geographical solidarity.

8. The Congress believes that sustainability should be mainstreamed into all aspects of territorial policy and that services of general interest should be organised in a way to

reduce their environmental impact. This is particularly the case regarding integrated public transport policies which form the backbone of social, environmental and economic sustainability and are essential for local and regional territorial dynamism and equality.

9. The Congress affirms that the principles of subsidiarity and decentralisation as proposed in the European Charter of Local Self-Government and reiterated in Recommendation Rec(2007)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on local and regional public services offer the fundamental structure for an efficient territorial organisation. Close co-operation between all stakeholders is vital for its consolidation and to ensure an adequate assessment of, and response to, the real needs of rural areas.

10. The Congress confirms the need to consider polycentric spatial development models and transborder co-operation to ensure the development of integrated regional infrastructures in sparsely populated and peripheral areas as suggested in its Resolution 245 (2007) on peripheral and sparsely populated regions.

11. *The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe invites local and regional authorities to:*

*a. plan and provide services of general interest which ensure that geographically disadvantaged areas and the most vulnerable populations are not excluded from service provision and which:*

*i. encourage broad stakeholder participation in evaluating service needs;*

*ii. ensure that territorial authorities' retain overall responsibility for the provision of public services regardless of the mode of delivery and financing (in-house, public-public partnerships, public-private partnerships, co-operatives, contracting out to an external operator, etc.);*

*iii. set minimum service standards in order to guarantee continuity in the provision of essential services;*

*iv. implement specific policies to combat social exclusion in rural areas which respond to the problems of low pay, youth migration, feminisation of poverty, access to childcare facilities and the lack of employment opportunities;*

*v. provide financial measures to help maintain rural populations (subsidies, sliding-scale tariffs, social welfare payments, housing assistance);*

*b. make full use of the opportunities offered by the information and communication technologies and all forms of innovation to maintain local services of proximity including administrative, educational, health and social services:*

*– mobile services (libraries, crèches, shops);*

*– one-stop centres and poles of multi-purpose services (banking, post office, shops, administrative uses);*

– sharing of spaces (educational, cultural, medical, fitness and religious uses);

– internet points (internet, electoral, administrative and tele-medicine services);

c. elaborate transportation systems which reduce car-dependency, improve mobility for disadvantaged or vulnerable groups and facilitate polycentric development within, between and around regions.

12. *The Congress decides to* continue its work through its Committee on Sustainable Development on the future of rural zones, the interdependence between urban and rural

areas and the ways of eradicating disparities, particularly in the light of the European Urban Charter II.

---

1. Debated and approved by the Standing Committee of the Chamber of Regions on 13 March 2008 and adopted by the Standing Committee of the Congress on 14 March 2008 (see Document CPR(14)8RES, draft resolution presented by **C. Abela Baldacchino (Malta, R, SOC)** and **M. Neureiter (Austria, R, EPP/CD)**, rapporteurs).

2. Services of general interest include material goods such as public transport, housing, energy, water, waste disposal, telecommunications and banking and non-material goods such as health, culture, education and social services.