

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Recommendation 235 (2008)¹ Services of general interest in rural areas, a key factor in territorial cohesion policies

1. Access to services of general interest² in rural areas is a key element of social and territorial cohesion and should be delivered within the values and principles of equality, socio-geographic solidarity, continuity and transparency.

2. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe is convinced that maintaining and reinforcing effective and efficient delivery of services of general interest throughout the European territory is a political challenge which should be addressed in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity as defined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the work of the Congress on regional democracy.

3. Rural areas in Europe are facing serious challenges from globalisation, economic restructuring and out-migration. These need to be addressed by all tiers of government as the preservation of sustainable rural areas is fundamental for the economic and social cohesion of the entire territory as urban and rural well-being are directly interlinked and complementary.

4. The Congress emphasises that the provision of services of general interest in rural areas cannot be based solely on economic criteria as low population density means that provision in rural zones often entails higher costs. It deplores the overall decline in the quality and accessibility of services of general interest which is being registered throughout the European territory and which is particularly acute in peripheral and sparsely populated areas.

5. The Congress reiterates its conviction that the delivery of services of general interest in rural areas generates sustainable economic growth and job creation in those areas traditionally suffering from highly limited job and training opportunities.

6. It notes that some European territorial authorities are liberalising the provision of public services and establishing new forms of organisation such as public-private partnerships; the Congress stresses that, regardless of the mode of delivery and financing, overall continuity and equity of access to quality services should be guaranteed by public authorities through appropriate legislation.

7. The Congress believes that sustainable development concerns should be mainstreamed into all aspects of territorial policy. An efficient, comprehensive public transport network is essential for improving social inclusion, accessibility for vulnerable groups and reducing urban sprawl, pollution and over-exploitation of natural resources.

8. The Congress welcomes Recommendation Rec(2007)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on local and regional public services and its advocacy of greater decentralisation of public services in order to ensure that such services are adapted to citizens' needs and expectations.

9. The Congress congratulates the European Union on its Territorial Agenda "Towards a more competitive and sustainable Europe of diverse regions" adopted in 2007 which confirms the crucial importance of the territorial dimension in order to promote economic and social wellbeing.

10. *In view of the above the Congress recommends that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe:*

a. support the Congress in its elaboration of a legal instrument on regional democracy which aims to reinforce regional competencies and self-governance;

b. invite the European Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial/Regional Planning (CEMAT) to continue its work on rural zones and to focus on the interdependency between urban and rural areas;

c. develop a common strategy with the European Union, within the framework of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Council of Europe and the European Union (2007) on strengthening territorial governance, regional identities and innovative partnerships as outlined in the Territorial Agenda of the European Union;

d. invite the European Commission to elaborate an instrument on services of general interest which reaffirms the concept of general interest as a fundamental value capable of justifying public choices.

11. *Furthermore, the Congress recommends that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe invite the member states to:*

a. establish clear definitions of the competences of the various tiers of governance for the provision of services of general interest in accordance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government;

b. encourage new forms of organisation for the provision of public services in rural communities from co-operatives, voluntary groups and the private sector and adapt, if necessary, the legal framework for this development;

c. develop the opportunities offered by information and communication technologies to offer efficient and cheaper services;

d. elaborate regulatory and financial mechanisms which enable the different tiers of government to offer support, incentives, grants, subsidies or equalisation measures to ensure adequate access to high-quality services of general interest for all;

e. ensure that the higher costs involved in providing public services in rural areas are taken into account by all levels of

governance and other partners, with the state offering substantial backing.

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)8REC, draft recommendation 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.