



Opinion on

the INTERREG IIC Community
initiative and the potential role for local
and regional authorities



EUROPEAN UNION



Committee
of the
Regions

Brussels, 19 June 1997

OPINION
of the Committee of the Regions
of 11 June 1997
on
**The INTERREG IIC Community Initiative and the potential role
for local and regional authorities**



Memorized text

The Committee of the Regions

- HAVING REGARD TO the guidelines for the INTERREG IIC Community initiative approved in May 1996 and published on 10 July 1996,
- HAVING REGARD TO the conclusions of the European Commission seminar of 3 and 4 July 1996 discussing the INTERREG IIC initiative and the guidelines for the preparation of the programmes and actions,
- HAVING REGARD TO its decision on 15 January 1997, pursuant to Article 198c, paragraph 4 of the Treaty establishing the European Community to issue an opinion on "*The INTERREG IIC Community initiative and the potential role for local and regional authorities*" and to direct Commission 1 to undertake the preparatory work,
- HAVING REGARD TO the opinion of the Committee of the Regions (CdR 340/96 fin) on spatial planning in Europe, the opinion of the Committee of the Regions (CdR 233/95) on the Commission communication on cooperation for European territorial development - Europe 2000+ and its opinion (CdR 74/96 fin) on a proposal for a Commission decision on the allocation of the reserve for Community initiatives for the period until 1999,
- HAVING REGARD TO the results of a survey by the rapporteurs of those involved in the preparatory phase of the INTERREG IIC programme and Article 10 pilot actions, according to the communication of the European Commission of 10 July 1996,
- HAVING REGARD TO the draft opinion (CdR 108/97 rev.) adopted by Commission 1 on 18 April 1997 (rapporteurs: **Mr Chiti** and **Ms Freehill**),
- WHEREAS the European Union has no particular competence for spatial planning however, the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions have recommended the European Commission to get involved in a more operational way in the field of spatial planning,

adopted the following opinion at its 18th plenary session on 11 and 12 June 1997 (meeting of 11 June):

1. Introduction

1.1 The INTERREG IIC initiative represents an important new departure for the European Union and its interaction with local and regional authorities. The initiative establishes a potentially valuable tool for the development of a European dimension to transnational cooperation in the field of regional planning.

1.2 The general aims of the INTERREG IIC initiative are to:

- develop a strategy for the sustainable development of the Union's territory by the ordered and optimum allocation of activities, the development of adequate communication networks and the correction of development disparities;
- foster transnational cooperation by Member States and other authorities with responsibility for spatial planning;
- improve the impact of Community policies on spatial development;
- adopt a preventative and cooperative approach to the problems of water resource management caused by floods and drought.

1.3 The INTERREG IIC initiative, as proposed, has three strands of action, with the following financial allocations:

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|---|---------------------|
| - General transnational cooperation on spatial planning | ECU 120.69 million |
| - Flood mitigation | ECU 148.15 million |
| - Drought prevention | ECU 144.00 million. |

1.4 The general transnational cooperation measures will be implemented within seven territorial groupings, with each area drawing up its own operational programme for the initiative. Third countries in central and eastern Europe and the Mediterranean cooperating in the programme will submit their requests for financial aid under other programmes such as PHARE, TACIS and MEDA. The flooding measure applies to three areas based on the drainage basins of the rivers concerned, whereas the drought prevention actions will be carried out within a national framework on the basis of proposals made by the four appropriate Member States - Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece.

2. General observations

2.1 The Committee of the Regions welcomes the establishment of the INTERREG IIC Community initiative as a potential mechanism for the active involvement of local and regional institutions and authorities, who are often the implementing authorities for spatial planning actions,

in the development of a coordinated EU spatial planning strategy. INTERREG IIC must be responsive to the needs of regions and address issues which are of direct concern to local and regional authorities.

2.2 It welcomes the introduction of INTERREG IIC as it will also reinforce the central role of local and regional authorities in the implementation of Community initiatives.

2.3 The Committee of the Regions would stress that the emergence of information technology will undoubtedly bring major changes to spatial planning policy. As a result the concepts of "time and place" take on a whole new dimension, and geographical borders may possibly disappear. The COR therefore urges that sufficient attention be paid to this in INTERREG II C.

2.4 The COR endorses the expansion of this transnational programme to all areas of the European Union and its inclusion of third countries. This could therefore act as a pre-accessionary programme for potential new members of the Union.

2.5 It recognizes the importance of INTERREG IIC in contributing to the establishment of an innovative and flexible approach to developing partnership, with different actors in spatial planning at all levels. In this regard the COR appreciates the efforts by the European Commission to establish a degree of real prior consultation of local and regional authorities, in developing spatial planning priorities, programme preparation, the allocation of financial contributions and the establishment of implementing and monitoring systems.

2.6 The INTERREG IIC initiative is experimental in nature. This is a vital component of the initiative, given that it will provide a precedent for future EU policy by way of partnership building, programme development and paving the way for legislative adjustment or change in some Member States and a new way of managing the Structural Funds from 1999 onwards, notably as regards interregional, cross-border and transnational cooperation.

2.7 The Committee of the Regions acknowledges that the INTERREG IIC initiative is unique, not least in the areas of cooperation which it has designated, but moreover in its emphasis on transnational, rather than cross-border cooperation over larger areas. The COR underlines that such cooperation on spatial planning will require a greater input from the regions directly.

2.8 It is concerned that the flooding and drought measures, which are essentially national programmes set a precedence for Community initiatives which have a narrow focus and lack the key transnational character which is a central tenant of Community initiatives. These strands, while addressing important issues, increase the number of programmes being implemented under the Community initiatives and in particular INTERREG and create additional administrative structures to allocate what is essentially a very small amount of funding. The COR has in the past cautioned against such a trend.

2.9 The INTERREG IIC initiative should maintain where desirable, from the viewpoint of local and regional authorities, parallels with the development of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), which will be finalized during the course of 1997. In this context, the INTERREG IIC initiative should, the COR believes, provide a vision for the territorial areas within which the actions of the initiative can be strategically implemented. Local and regional authorities must have a strong role in creating such a vision and helping to bring to the fore their priorities for spatial development. An important role for the European Commission must therefore be the creation of a synergy between the top-down and bottom-up perspectives.

2.10 In relation to the provision of information on the initiative, the COR welcomes the production of the Commission's newsletter and supports future such actions.

3. Specific observations

3.1 Budget of the initiative

3.1.1 The Committee of the Regions regrets the low level of finance provided for the budget of the initiative. In light of this it considers that the expectations of the programme should be modest and that the experimental procedures followed in implementing the initiative will be the most valuable results of INTERREG IIC. In this respect the COR considers that the level of active involvement by local and regional authorities, in all phases of the initiative - programme preparation, implementation and monitoring will be crucial to its success.

3.1.2 It is concerned by the relatively low level of finance provided to the general transnational cooperation measure on spatial planning. The COR urges that an early review of the implementation of the programme be undertaken and that priority should be given to this measure given that it has the potential to provide the greatest long-term benefits to the Union.

3.1.3 Also in relation to the financing of the initiative the COR notes with regret that the limited nature of the budget prevents all regions from full participation in all transnational measures of the programme. This is a result of the necessity of Member States to apply strict priorities with regard to the measures within which they wish to participate. This can occur where a Member State will allocate all its contribution to one or two measures, thereby leaving no further matching funding available for transnational activity in unsupported measures. This can restrict the involvement of local and regional authorities given that their limited budgetary resources can give rise to problems of co-financing.

3.2 Territorial designations

3.2.1 The Committee of the Regions welcomes the development of more flexible territorial designations for INTERREG IIC, unlike the top-down designations which have been developed for previous European spatial planning actions, (e.g. Europe 2000+). This has, in the past, resulted in

some regions being isolated from their "natural hinterland". The present system whereby regions may be in two territorial groupings, if considered appropriate, is positive provided that complementarity of actions occurs between the relevant groupings.

3.2.2 The COR however, has reservations about the methods of territorial designations used hitherto both by the European Commission and the Member States. It thus supports the direct involvement of local and regional authorities, in some Member States, in the designation of these territorial areas and calls on those Member States which have not included local and regional authorities in the process thus far to do so, in line with the principle of subsidiarity.

3.2.3 The COR would like to generally endorse the territorial designations of the initiative. While it is inappropriate, at this stage, for the COR to comment on specific geographical designations, it does however consider that the division of strategically important areas, such as e.g. the Alps mountainous area and the Mediterranean, as unfortunate in that it will potentially fragment action in these homogenous areas.

3.2.4 The COR is however aware of the potential importance of these territorial designations, particularly in determining the rationale for the reform of the Structural Funds post-1999 and in facilitating the implementation of the European Spatial Development Perspective. It will also promote a multi-centred approach to European spatial development. It therefore proposes that a mechanism be developed by the European Commission which would provide for interaction between territorial groupings and which would facilitate the development of collaborative projects in sectors such as transportation, energy and communications. Given the limited budget available, the COR calls on the European Commission to establish administrative support to provide for inter-territorial grouping coordination and the encouragement of joint cooperation.

3.3 Participation by local and regional authorities

3.3.1 The Committee of the Regions considers that the implementation of the INTERREG IIC initiative should be a balance between coordination at a European and Member State level and transnational action between local and regional authorities or their representative inter-regional bodies. The essence of the initiative must be bottom-up and driven at the local and regional level.

3.3.2 To provide for this the European Commission strongly recommends Member States to participate in a new type of partnership with both each other and local and regional authorities. This has not always been applied to the implementation of other Community initiatives in the past.

3.3.3 The COR recognizes the emphasis which the European Commission has placed in increasing the involvement of local and regional authorities in the process of INTERREG IIC thus far but is concerned by the imbalance of local and regional authority involvement in some Member States.

3.3.4 Given that the initiative is experimental in nature, the COR considers that there should be coherence between the national, regional and local levels from the outset. At present there seems to be a conflict between the present administrative structures, at both a national and regional level, in some Member States and the structures required to implement the programme, as envisaged by the European Commission and supported by the Committee of the Regions.

3.3.5 The INTERREG IIC initiative should provide a mechanism for the widest involvement of all potential actors in the field of spatial planning and would also regard a formal exchange of experiences and assistance between the various territorial groupings as appropriate.

3.3.6 To provide for this the COR recommends that each of the territorial groupings hold a forum for exchange on experiences and practices undertaken and information sessions to highlight the activities to be funded under INTERREG IIC. This will help develop a participative partnership process essential to the development of the bottom-up approach.

3.4 New administrative structures

3.4.1 The Committee of the Regions underlines the importance of developing suitable administrative and evaluation structures to ensure the coordination of the initiative at both a regional and transnational level. The administrative and evaluation structures should be as simple and unbureaucratic as possible.

3.4.2 It considers that the management structure for each territorial grouping should promote and establish a vision for the territorial areas, which should assist in coordinating the implementation of the entire initiative. This management structure, which should draw on best practice from other programmes, should also provide for common financial management and accounting practices for all groups. This would help simplify regulatory procedures, provide for the efficient implementation of the initiative and avoid the creation of additional administrative structures.

3.4.3 The COR demands that in setting up these structures for implementing and monitoring the initiative that they should comprise of representatives of relevant national, regional and local authorities, to sufficiently provide for a participative partnership approach.

3.5 Interaction between INTERREG IIC and other EU policies

3.5.1 The coordination of the INTERREG IIC initiative with existing programmes such as PHARE, TACIS and MEDA is vital to the success of the initiative. The linkage of these programmes and INTERREG IIC should help ensure that local and regional authorities in third countries have a greater input in the development and implementation of these important programmes.

3.5.2 The coordination of these programmes will act as a support to market economies and democratic practices in recently established parliamentary regimes and will facilitate the creation of free trade areas with third countries which do not have an immediate prospect of joining the European Union.

3.5.3 The COR welcomes the establishment of an inter-services evaluation unit by the European Commission to counter any overlap with actions funded under INTERREG IIC and other measures funded by EU programmes to ensure a level of complementarity of measures. The undertaking of such an evaluation should not however draw on the limited budget of INTERREG IIC but should be funded directly by the European Commission.

3.5.4 The COR believes that the operational programmes of the initiative should where possible be in line with the objectives of the ESDP if the initiative is to contribute positively to future EU spatial development policy. While the ESDP will not be finalized until later in 1997, INTERREG IIC and the ESDP should be mutually supportive.

3.5.5 In this regard the ESDP should provide for a bottom-up approach, similar to the process attempted in the INTERREG IIC initiative.

3.5.6 The COR underlines the necessity for the INTERREG IIC initiative to be complemented by the actions supported under Article 10 pilot actions on spatial planning. While these are national pilot actions, they must have direct links with the objectives of INTERREG IIC.

3.6 Role of the Committee of the Regions

3.6.1 The Committee of the Regions calls on the European Commission to continue to inform the Committee of the Regions on the progress of the INTERREG IIC initiative and in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity the COR should continue to be consulted on and involved in the initial stages of policy making with regard to regional development and spatial planning. This has not always been the experience in the past with involvement by the COR often requested at the final stages of policy decision making.

3.6.2 Given that spatial planning is a prime competence of local and regional authorities the COR requests a direct involvement in the on-going development of the INTERREG IIC initiative, through regular consultation on its implementation and on the level of local and regional authority involvement.

4. Conclusion

4.1 The Committee of the Regions broadly welcomes the introduction of the INTERREG IIC Community initiative to foster cooperation in the area of spatial planning and regional development. It does however, underline the importance of the active involvement of local and

regional authorities in all aspects of the initiative, from programme development, to project selection, financial allocations and programme implementation and monitoring. The COR considers that, given the effectiveness of local and regional authority cooperation in the past, INTERREG IIC provides an opportunity to underline a role for these authorities in the development of an EU spatial planning policy. Local and regional authorities must be the key actors in any EU spatial planning policy.

4.2 The COR points out that the implementation of INTERREG II C provides an opportunity to devise new methods of managing and developing the EU's regional policy instruments, but also to improve the participation of local and regional authorities in these areas.

4.3 The COR does nevertheless consider the budget allocated to the initiative to be inadequate and inappropriate to effectively achieve its objectives. As a result the COR considers that the benefits of the initiative will be in its ability to forge partnerships, develop systems of cooperation and lay the groundwork for future action in the area of spatial planning, and regional development.

Brussels, 11 June 1997

The Chairman
of the Committee of the Regions

The Secretary-General
of the Committee of the Regions

Pasqual Maragall i Mira

Dietrich Pause

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N.B.: Appendix overleaf

APPENDIX

Profile of the territorial areas for INTERREG IIC

Measure: General transnational cooperation on spatial planning

- 1) Western Mediterranean and Latin Alps
- 2) Southwest Europe
- 3) Atlantic space
- 4) Centre and north-west metropolitan area
- 5) North sea area
- 6) Baltic sea area
- 7) Centre, Adriatic, Danube and south-east Europe

Measure: Flood mitigation

- 1) Rhine - Maas
- 2) France, Italy
- 3) Greece - Bulgaria

Measure: Drought prevention

- 1) Portugal
 - 2) Spain
 - 3) Italy
 - 4) Greece
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