

Opinion of the SSPA network on the Regional Development and Cohesion Policy beyond 2020

The Network of Southern Sparsely Populated Areas (SSPA) welcomes the efforts made by the European Commission in terms of simplification and clarity of rules and procedures, the strengthening of local development agents and strategies, the strong commitment to innovation and smart economy (especially oriented towards SMEs), the green economy and connectivity. These improvements represent a great opportunity, properly channelled towards the realities of sparsely populated areas, if Member States, regional and local authorities have political will, strategic vision and are endowed with technical capacities to apply it to their most fragile territories.

Unfortunately, we fear that sparsely populated areas alone may not get our authorities to apply the possibilities and advantages mentioned above on our deep problems and challenges, precisely because of the low population weight and limited ability to influence in the national and even regional context of our States. Therefore, it is necessary for the funds' own regulations to establish -unequivocally and explicitly- the obligation to apply the measures and resources required to tackle the harsh consequences that demographic change has on the rural areas, especially in those areas that have suffered from it long before the EU began to talk about this phenomenon.

There is nothing in the proposal from the Commission indicating that due consideration has been given to the opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – the EU response to the demographic challenge (2017/C017/08) and the resolution of the European Parliament of 14 November 2017, on the deployment of cohesion policy instruments by the regions to tackle demographic change (2016/2245 (INI)).

Therefore, we ask the European Commission

- a. To expand and explicate the scope of the five major political objectives of its proposal introducing explicitly the need to address through them the demographic challenge and, particularly, with regard to sparsely populated areas throughout the Union and territories with serious and permanent demographic disadvantages.
- b. To make also explicit these same goals in the EAFRD regulation and especially in Article 69 of the proposal, which refers to support for economic activities (the new and the existing ones) that are not related to the primary sector and to allocate to this chapter a sound percentage of the resources of this fund.
- c. To earmark the additional amount included in each national envelope resulting from the existence of sparsely populated areas so that it be entirely invested by the Member States in the sparsely populated rural areas of their sparsely populated regions.