

Cohesion policy after 2006

A strategic issue for local and regional authorities in Western Sweden.

Local authorities, county councils and Region Västra Götaland have been firmly committed to the implementation of the European cohesion policy. Our experiences since Sweden joined the European Union are clearly positive in the main, not least through the influence warranted by the principle of subsidiarity and an extensive participation by partnerships. In view of the reformation of the cohesion policy we would like to present our views on development issues and what we consider to be of the highest priority. In this connection we would like to underline the unique role of the local level in the Swedish planning system.

Background

All local authorities in Western Sweden are at present part of Objective 3 and almost 50% are wholly or partially involved in Objective 2. The community initiatives are also important, especially the Interreg III programmes. Development projects amounting to SEK1-1.5 billion are generated yearly in the EU programmes.

The effects of the Structural funds in Western Sweden have been clearly positive, according to evaluations. In the past programme period the Structural funds helped to create some 10 000 new jobs and more than 2000 new enterprises. The work mode using programmes, partnerships and a European connection has also proved an asset in development work. The implementation is done by connecting to local and regional business programmes and in special fields such as tourism, communications, competence centres, education and training and other infrastructure which adds to development in the region.

Cohesion and solidarity

Cohesion policy should also in future have its main focus on the least developed regions (Objective 1). Regions entitled to funding in the accession countries should have high priority while current Objective 1 regions should be offered adjusted intermediate solutions. It has, however, to be stated that the European Union should still have an overall responsibility for economic and social cohesion involving all parts of the Union. Cohesion must imply that weaker regions as well as growth regions and cities should all contribute to development.

Increased responsibility for the regional level

The main focus in designing and implementing the cohesion policy should be on the regional level where a clear responsibility for development issues can be furthered in close co-operation with the local authorities. This is the level where different policy areas meet, are implemented and should be made to form a working unity.

The regions of Europe should be given an opportunity to participate in a policy receiving its strength from combined efforts of the EU, the national level and the development ambitions expressed by publicly elected assemblies at local and regional levels. Development plans and growth programmes should lead the way in the implementation of different EU programmes.

From a funding policy to a policy of growth

The cohesion policy should be redirected to give priority to the fundamental issues of growth. Current subsidiary areas need to be opened up and integrated into a development policy with

polycentric structures in an urban-rural perspective. Infrastructure planning should be part of this with regional and European perspectives. A more integrated planning could add advantages through a networking co-operation between e.g. cities and rural areas and between regions.

A change of policy from geographically directed funding to more growth oriented and regionally integrated policies would be in line with the strategic priorities of Western Sweden.

Co-ordination with national funding

In this connection we would like to emphasize the fact that EU's funding policy must be closely integrated with national forms of funding aimed at enterprises. All funding conducive to activities and jobs being moved between different regions of the Union should be handled very restrictively. The rules and regulations for competition and state grants need to be revised and implemented in a way that does not twist competition.

New Objective 2 – menu systems

The present Objective 2 could well be replaced by a menu system allowing for adjustment to regional conditions and ensuring regional and local influence. All regions should have an opportunity to take part in the policy. The following measures could be part of such a menu system:

- Transformation of the business sector
- Rural development including islands
- Urban regions
- Skills development
- Social integration, especially in the big cities
- R&D/innovation measures

Sector policies

Lack of co-ordination with other important policy areas in the Union is a weakness in the social cohesion policy. Sector policies in areas like SMEs, innovations, research and technical development, communications, information technology, culture and media have an important regional dimension that needs developing.

Make the European dimension more distinct

All contributions to cohesion policy should contain an element making the European dimension more distinct. Thus, co-operation of a transnational, international and interregional nature should in the future be given priority funding special programmes but also by making these aspects permeate all programmes supported by the structural funds. The programmes on Innovative measures have a clear European value added and ought to continue in the future.

Agricultural policies and development

A significant part of EU's budget is at present devoted to agricultural funding. Many measures such as environmental investments and rural development are eligible for subsidies from several funds today. Refinement and concentration should be sought in connection with the reformation of CAP, to change the agricultural fund in parts into a fund supporting environmental and rural development measures aimed at a broader target group than at present.

Planning with the concept of sustainable development in mind

There is a lack of overall vision and strategy for the cohesion policy. One way of approaching these issues is by letting cohesion policy take the sustainability concept as its starting point, to give priority to measures including the social, economic and ecologic dimensions.

Regional development programmes based on sustainability in three dimensions and implemented in all the regions of the EU could be a way of approaching a more integrated type of planning.