



BOOSTING TERRITORIAL COHESION

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Malta's geographical proportions must make us the envy of many in certain respects. In less than 30 minutes' drive, most residents can easily reach the Malta International Airport, or our capital city, our place of work, the general hospital, university, the beach - you name it and it's relatively near.

This is probably not the case for most of the foreign readers who may be sifting through this publication. Up north, the European continent boasts of a quite dispersed population. In the European Union, for example, less than a tenth of the inhabitants live in the larger cities having more than five million residents. Such a situation fosters a number of positive aspects - less overpopulated and over-polluted areas, the protection of rural places and more frequent inhabited areas.

There are however a number of downsides as well, particularly to residents. Access to energy grids, communication and transports networks, as well as the availability of public services may be hampered. And when remote areas are faced with disasters, such as the now recurrent floods and forest fires, such situations could pose a more immediate problem.

It is thus understandable that while much emphasis has been laid on ensuring economic and social cohesion, geography must also be factored in. And here the concept of territorial cohesion comes into play. Coming from an archipelago we can immediately appreciate its importance - it can be witnessed both internally between our islands and externally in relation to the continent.

Better transportation systems and access to broadband internet, among others, can compensate for the distances involved. E-government and localised services are of course also of major help in this respect. But so is cross-border

administrative cooperation, particularly for the more vulnerable regions on the fringe which may, for instance, face environmental difficulties.

The European Commission has recently presented a Green Paper on territorial cohesion, kick-starting a process that should lead to pan-European policy action that tackles the issues on three fronts: density differences, distance and administrative borders. The document advocates for better complementarity between cities and their rural surroundings. This should also lead to higher economic growth as the strengths of each are merged.

The concern about interconnectivity is also addressed. Figures released by the Commission services show that, for example, broadband take-up in remote areas was 15 per cent less than that in the urban regions. And this is only indicative of other issues that could be in existence. Surmounting distance remains a challenge which needs to be prioritised.

The European Union is already working on cross-border cooperation through the INTERREG programmes with different regions zoned together. But it appears that more needs to be done, not only in terms of disaster management, but also on transportation issues, where closer relations between different administrations could be of vital help to residents on the fringes, particularly of Member States.

Territorial cohesion is set to feature in the discussions next year. This Green Paper is but a taste of what is to come and an opportunity for EU citizens to react. A public consultation exercise shall run until the end of February 2009. More information is available online at: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/consultation/terco/consultation_en.htm ■



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