



## **Green paper on Territorial Cohesion**

### **Input from Oppland County Municipality, Norway**

#### **Introductory remarks**

Oppland County Municipality welcomes the initiative from the European Commission. It highlights some of the many challenges faced by European regions and marks a starting point for a more coherent and future-oriented regional policy. This new policy should ensure that European territorial diversity is turned into a competitive advantage and contributes to the sustainable development and prosperity of Europe as a whole.

Even though regional policy is not a part of the EEA agreement, the development in the EU countries will have an impact on Norwegian regions, and we appreciate the possibility to give our comments on the content of the green paper.

#### **Short description of Oppland County**

Oppland County is located in Eastern Norway, covers an area of 25 192 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 183 637. The population density is only 8 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, while the average in Norway is 16. Oppland is the only county in Norway without coastline or border to another country. Oppland is a mountain region - only 5109 km<sup>2</sup> of the total area are below 600 meters above sea level.

Next to Switzerland, Norway is the most mountainous country in Europe. The Norwegian mountain regions are sparsely populated, and the population is decreasing. This trend has grave consequences for the economic development in these regions. There are great distances between rural areas and urban centres in Norway, and this fact creates many challenges for transport, communications and access to social services.

## **EU's role in promoting territorial cohesion**

For the future of Europe and the European Union it is important to promote economic growth and development in the new member states. A positive development in the new member states will ensure stability in Europe, and this should be the overall perspective for future policy making. When talking about the most important means/policy instruments for regional development it is very important to have a differentiated approach. Regions are different and need to get access to different means to make full use of their potential. Regional diversity should be considered an asset! The policy should not be aimed at creating identical development in all regions, but the regions should be given the same *opportunities* to develop according to their priorities and strengths. This being said, there are some common features and some areas where a certain level of access and quality is a prerequisite for development in other areas. This concerns in particular competence, infrastructure & communication and social services.

To be successful in implementing a differentiated regional policy it is essential that there is focus on bottom-up processes. The needs of each region must be defined locally, and there should be a continuous effort to strengthen the local democracy and the regions' influence on their own development.

It is important to bear in mind that regional development is not only about economic and material growth. The development must be sustainable, and there has to be a strong focus on this aspect. The regions will have to make significant contributions in the fight against climate change. Many regions have rich natural resources, which is an enormous asset. It has to be possible for the regions to make use of these resources, in a way that does not violate the principles of sustainability and protection.

## **Areas with specific geographical features**

The green paper defines three areas with special challenges. Oppland County Municipality supports the focus that is put on mountains and underlines the importance of developing a holistic policy for mountain regions. As a member of Euromontana, Oppland supports the statements in Euromontana's contribution to the green paper. It is important to acknowledge mountains as a specific development area, both nationally and on the European level. The economic activities in mountain regions, in particular within agriculture, forestry and tourism, provide services and goods both to rural and urban areas. Mountains represent natural treasures and cultural heritage that define and create identity not only for the mountain regions, but for each nation as well as Europe as a whole. Mountain areas give value to many more than the people who live there. Still, many mountain regions are threatened by marginalisation trends, and

there should be established support programmes to assist these regions in making full use of their potential. Ageing and depopulation are some of the current challenges, and this again leads to a shortage of labour that creates a difficult situation for the development of local businesses. The demographic changes require technological and organisational changes, which can be more challenging for the most sparsely populated regions. Modern technology creates new forms of communication and cooperation and using these possibilities will reduce the negative impacts of remoteness and great distances. A continuous and strong focus on innovation, research and development will be the key to success.

Mountains are fragile ecosystems and an important source of water, energy and biological diversity, as well as being landscapes for tourism, mountain sports and recreation. In many mountain regions there is great potential for the development of new businesses, but there is often a conflict between protection interests and new business initiatives. There has to be an increased focus on finding a balance between protection and use in these regions.

### **Regional cooperation**

There is a need for increased cooperation across regional and national borders in Europe. How can territorial cooperation be encouraged and supported? In Oppland County the 26 municipalities<sup>1</sup> are organised in 6 regions, to facilitate and promote cooperation between the municipalities in matters that are of regional interest. The county municipality cooperates with the regions through partnership agreements that includes financial contributions to regional projects. Each region has defined a priority area that gets a special focus, also when allocating project funding. A similar partnership could be introduced between the regions and the state by establishing county-wise development contracts. This would clarify the regional policies agreed on by the state and the regional actors and contribute to coordinating these policies on the basis of a holistic regional perspective.

Oppland County Municipality participates in both regional, national and international networks. The mountain region network consists of five Norwegian counties with substantial mountain areas. This network promotes the mountain regions' interests towards national authorities. The counties in Eastern Norway cooperate through the Eastern Norway County Network and are co-owners of the Oslo Region European Office in Brussels, which is an important channel to European arenas. Internationalisation is a field where there is a strong need for regional cooperation. European regions should have an increased focus on how to use internationalisation

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<sup>1</sup> Public administration in Norway has a 3-tier structure with the following elements: central government, county government and municipal government.

to promote local initiatives and policy making, but international work is time consuming and requires special competence and skills. Small municipalities do not have sufficient financial or human resources to engage in international projects. Regional cooperation on internationalisation is in many cases a prerequisite for international involvement.

Regions are often organised in networks within national borders. Cooperation across borders should be encouraged and facilitated. There should be programmes to support cooperation projects on a smaller scale than Interreg, to create a less demanding path into transnational cooperation. For many regions the existing programmes are too bureaucratic with extremely time-consuming application procedures. More flexible processes and less complicated guidelines would lower the threshold and make the programmes more accessible, also for small regions.

For Norway as a non-EU member it is important to point out that Europe is more than EU. Increased cooperation between regions in member states and regions in non-EU countries should be a common aim.

Oppland County Municipality has high expectations concerning the further process on a policy for territorial cohesion in the EU. In this statement we have drawn attention to some areas that are of particular importance to Oppland. We look forward to following the process closely and participating actively when possible. The green paper has been subject to a lot of interest, and a lot of time and effort have been spent both in regions, organisations and networks to discuss the content and prepare responses. We hope and expect to see the result of the further process in the form of a white paper from the European Commission.