

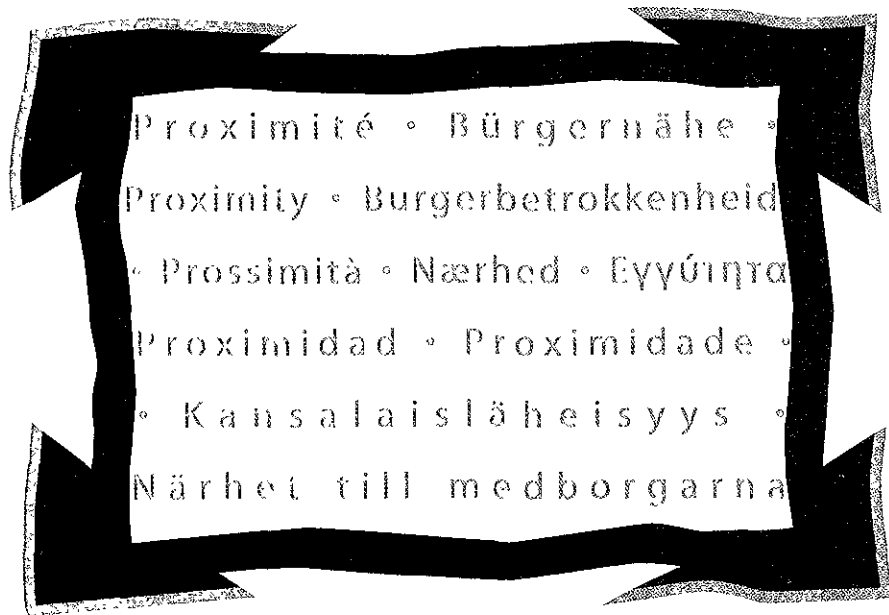
EUROPEAN UNION



Committee of the Regions

Salamanca

21 and 22 June 2001



FINAL DECLARATION

First conference on proximity

I.

The local and regional authorities of Europe, meeting in Salamanca on 21/22 June 2001 at the First Conference on Proximity held by the Committee of the Regions:

- Wish to contribute to the debate on the future of the Union launched in accordance with the Declaration appended to the Nice Treaty at this crucial time when reforms are needed to increase **democratic legitimation and transparency**, which is vital if we are to meet the major challenge of enlargement and at the same time enhance people's faith in the future of the EU.
- Reiterate that local and regional authorities are the bodies that respond most directly to citizens' needs, enabling democracy to be exercised most intensely. **Local and regional autonomy** is in effect a *sine qua non* for European democracy and a component of European citizenship which makes it possible to achieve social well-being.
- Point out that **enlargement** is *the* major challenge facing the Union and both present and future Member States. Political players at all levels of government must strive to strengthen the development of human resources, competitiveness and employment, whilst improving cohesion within an enlarged EU.
- Consider that a European Union in touch with its citizens must be underpinned by local and regional authorities, who wish to be actively involved in creating the Europe of tomorrow; indeed it is they who are in a position to set up networks for mutual assistance and for pooling experience in policy areas closest to the citizen, guaranteeing the conditions for **good governance**.
- Stress that the preamble to the **Treaty on European Union** stipulates that decisions must be taken as closely as possible to the citizen.

II.

In the view of the local and regional authorities meeting in Salamanca, **proximity** is the key objective and at the same time the basis for action by the European Union. People associate a sense of proximity with "**good policy**", i.e. policy that takes account of society's needs and creates **solidarity** between its members. Four aspects are important in this:

- **Efficiency:** the institutional system comprising the EU, Member States and regions must function properly and yield positive results;
- **Clarity:** European policies must avoid bureaucratic complexity and be clear in terms of their objectives, means and results;

- **Proximity:** the policies and decisions adopted by the European Union must be close to the people for whom they are intended, so that they will be accepted and integrated fully into people's everyday lives;
- **Flexibility:** European citizens must have broad scope for participating in the decisions which govern European policy.

Proximity designed in this way is synonymous with recognition of smoothly operating democracy in the European Union. It determines the freedom to adopt policy decisions at the level closest to the citizen in order to provide more effective guarantees of political supervision and influence through democratic decisions.

Grassroots democracy promotes the flow of information and facilitates the consultation of European citizens and their participation in the European Union's policies and institutions. In this way citizens are better able to understand which public decision-making body is responsible for the drawing up and implementation of every act and thus to ensure that the decision-makers are shouldering their responsibilities.

In the opinion of the local and regional authorities, proximity should take the form of responsible policies on the part of the Community institutions; these policies must be transparent in all respects and be approved by the people. If a responsible policy is not recognised as such, this means that communication between political authorities and people is defective.

The following are therefore crucial for a successful proximity policy:

- **democratic legitimacy**, i.e. the citizen must be involved in choosing who will be the political decision-makers, have access to mechanisms enabling him to exert his influence on decisions taken at local and regional level between elections and feel an integral part of the institutional machinery on which democratic societies are based;
- **transparency**, i.e. citizens demand:
 - clearly understandable organisation in which those responsible for every act can be identified;
 - a simple and well organised set of rules and clear procedures to reinforce legal certainty;
 - good communications with and between citizens so that they will feel fully involved in European policies;
- **Efficiency and subsidiarity**: understood in the sense that where action is needed smaller administrative units closer to the citizen are to take precedence insofar as they are in a position to carry out the tasks;

- **Loyalty:** local and regional institutions must be able to play the role assigned to them in the European institutional system, ensuring proximity whilst maintaining loyalty to the idea of the European Union and the *acquis communautaire*. Reciprocal loyalty at all levels of government is essential if the goals of European integration are to be achieved, especially in the light of enlargement.

III.

To bring about a new proximity policy in the European Union, the local and regional authorities gathered in Salamanca consider that the following demands must be met:

1. As agents for proximity and intermediaries in European policymaking the regional and local authorities demand to be involved in decision-making, as provided for in the Treaty. They must be more actively involved in European policy, not only as regards application of the **principle of subsidiarity** but also by involving them as essential players in drafting and implementing EU policies. This presupposes that politicians at local and regional level take over greater responsibility in the European Union and develop a new feeling of loyalty to the Union.
2. The local and regional authorities call on the European Union to give them greater freedom so that they can adapt Community decisions to local circumstances and thus fully exploit their regional development potential, with which citizens must be associated, and call for a **clear division of powers within the EU** that respects the levels of political and administrative responsibility in the Member States and regional and local prerogatives.
3. The local and regional authorities declare themselves ready to make greater efforts to *undertake activities involving regional and local partnerships and cross-border cooperation*. The further development of the European Union is too important to be left exclusively to "high-level politics". People must see European integration as a community task which cares about their concerns and brings them tangible benefits. In this connection it is necessary that the European Union provide more support for **trans-border and interregional cooperation** in the next aid period.
4. The local and regional authorities advocate a **new philosophy of co-operation** between all levels of government within the EU so that the objectives of the Treaties can be achieved. Necessary for this are a better use of existing forms of regional cooperation and a new transnational interregional policy with many multilateral and bilateral contacts across borders. Such future co-operation must be based on the following principles:
 - respect for the competences of the various levels in accordance with the subsidiarity principle;
 - a readiness to learn from each other and adopt best practice;

- responsibility shared and assumed by the players concerned;
- reciprocal loyalty on the part of all levels of administration so as to attain the objectives of European integration.

5. Local and regional government is closely observing the current phenomenon of globalisation, and it notes that it is irreversible and may bring advantages. However, it is also mindful of the dangers globalisation entails - if it is not regulated - for Europe's economic, social and territorial cohesion and cultural identity.

The rapid emergence of a real European political power can open up opportunities for regulating globalisation. However, one must not underestimate the role which local and regional authorities can play to guarantee individuals the security they need to build up confidence in politics. Strengthening an individual's sense of identification with the particular environment into which he was born and in which he grew up confers on him social and emotional characteristics which underpin his cultural identity.

The regional and local authorities are thus the defenders of Europe's cultural richness, as they are able to guide, correct and compensate for current trends towards globalisation.

6. The regions and local authorities are convinced that the new European edifice can endure and develop only if future European citizens develop a **sense of belonging to Europe** and if cultural understanding is developed between citizens by means of a civic education policy at European level.

7. To secure greater **proximity in EU decision-making** it would be desirable to:

- make it easier for citizens to express their needs and exercise their influence as democratically as possible;
- concentrate the European Union's activities on the areas defined in the Treaties and those where its involvement is essential, in strict compliance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality;
- make the best use of local and regional knowledge and experience by asking the European Commission to consult local and regional bodies early in the policy-drafting process;
- encourage the regional and local authorities to be involved at national level in defining each Member State's standpoint in European debates;
- encourage local and regional policy-makers to exchange experiences and views in order to improve their understanding of issues and therefore their acceptance of and responsibility for European policies that must be adopted for everyone's benefit.

8. The local and regional authorities call for the **Committee of the Regions**, which was created by the Maastricht Treaty, to be an instrument that allows local and regional bodies actually to take part in decision-making. It is after all the Committee of the Regions, and no other body, which is responsible for representing regions and localities in all their diversity in the Community institutional system. They consider that proximity will be improved not by creating new institutions or bodies, but above all by properly exploiting and promoting the potential of existing ones. They therefore demand that the Committee of the Regions' powers be increased and strengthened in a number of areas:

a. **as a political institution within the European Union's institutional machinery:**

- the representatives of the regional and local authorities call for the role of the Committee of the Regions in the European Union's institutional structure to be re-examined and for it to be granted institutional status as the assembly representing the democratic authorities closest to the citizen and responsible for the direct management of European policies;
- by giving it, at all events, the right to bring actions before the Court of Justice of the European Communities in defence of its prerogatives;
- by involving it fully in the process of reform launched following the Nice European Council and by granting it the status of full member of the Convention likely to be responsible for preparing the next intergovernmental conference;
- by making it possible for the Committee to participate actively in the work of the informal Councils, particularly those dealing with Community policies falling within the areas in which consultation of the Committee is mandatory and those of particular relevance to the powers of local and regional authorities;
- by introducing a new procedure for early consultation by the European Commission prior to the drafting of new Community policies affecting local and regional bodies;
- by making it obligatory for the EU institutions empowered to consult the Committee to state their reasons for not accepting the Committee's views in the case of opinions for which consultation is mandatory;
- by encouraging the participation of its representatives in committees established by the European Commission to exercise the executive powers conferred on the Commission, when the committees' remit or the issues with which they are to deal are of specific relevance to the local and regional authorities;

- by conferring on it responsibility for monitoring the impact of Community policies on the Union's various territories, in order to strengthen territorial cohesion.

b. as a democratic debating forum

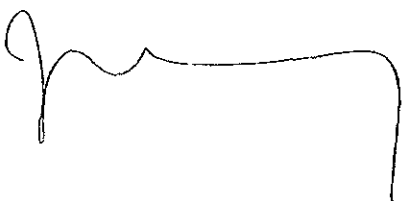
- by encouraging local and regional policy-makers to exchange views and experiences, which is essential if we are to create European solidarity. This is the foundation for further progress on European integration. The Committee's future depends on the introduction of new modes of internal political expression which encourage the holding of large-scale political debates. Moreover, the challenge of enlargement also requires the involvement of representatives of the local and regional authorities of the applicant countries in the debate at a very early stage. The Committee of the Regions is best placed to guarantee them privileged access to the Community debate, a task which it is already performing to the full.

c. as a political channel of communication and European consciousness-raising

- by making the most of CoR members' proximity to citizens; the necessary communication of information on European policies will be really effective only if it becomes part of everyday life. Local and regional elected representatives are in the best position to reach citizens;
- by integrating it fully into the European Union's new framework for information and communication policy.

Salamanca, 22 June 2001.

The President
of the
Committee of the Regions



Jos Chabert

The first Vice-President
of the
Committee of the Regions



Manfred Dammeyer