



Commission des Iles ▶ Islands Commission ▶ Ö-kommissionen ▶ Επιτροπή των Νησιών

Comisión de las Islas ▶ Comissão das Ilhas ▶ Commissione delle Isole

Saarte Komisjon ▶ Kummissjoni ta'Gúejjer ▶ Ø Kommission

Dear Pdt Cesar,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The theme of our conference this year is, as you know:

*“How can islands seize new opportunities in the prospect of a sustainable development?”*

This is a most appropriate theme to discuss in an archipelago like the Azores, for not only are the Azores an areas of great natural scenic beauty, not only do they command one of Europe’s largest maritime “Exclusive Economic Zone” with all its resources, but they also have considerable potential in the field of Renewable Energy.

I understand that some of these points will be illustrated this afternoon by our technical visit to the geothermal plant of Ribeira Grande , and furthermore on Saturday, by our visit to the Furnas Valley.

**May I say, right away, that I suspect that we are all here already fully convinced that sustainable development is an absolute necessity for islands, and that whether in the field of energy, in the field of transport, in the field of tourism, or in any other field of key importance to our territories, it will be a source of new opportunities.**

**So, by making this issue the key theme of our thirtieth annual conference, what are we trying to achieve?**

**We are trying to see how this goal of sustainable development can be blended together with this other, all-important, goal of strengthening the economic, social, and especially territorial cohesion between our island regions and the rest of the European Union.**

I think that it is most timely to hold such discussions at a time when the European Union is implementing its Energy & Climate change package, at a time when it is about to present its proposal for the future post-2013 Cohesion Policy, at a time when debates take place about the meaning of “multi-level governance”.

I will leave it to the various speakers to enlighten us with their viewpoints, or their experience, in the field of sustainable development – be it in the field of energy, tourism, communication -, and will limit myself to recalling the broader political framework.

I am hereby referring to the long-awaited implementation of the Lisbon Treaty which enshrines the goal of “Territorial Cohesion”.

What does “Territorial cohesion” mean to us? How can it be implemented?



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As you will be aware, our past conferences have agreed that **Territorial cohesion can be defined as a Community objective whose purpose is to allow the inhabitants of the different territories of the Union to benefit in an equitable way from the basic freedoms set out in the Treaty and implemented through the Community's policies; bearing in mind the fact that, in practice, people's capacity to travel, their access to goods, to services, to capital or to knowledge are influenced to a large extent by the geographic or demographic characteristics of these territories.**

One must emphasize that Territorial cohesion is not a mere duplication, under a different wording, of economic and social cohesion, even if it is complementary to them both.

Territorial cohesion is something distinct, which needs to be assessed, and addressed differently.

We all know that there are many parts of Europe, such as in the enlargement countries, whose economic productivity is as lower, or even much lower than ours, and where considerable infrastructural needs have to be met.

There are, even in "Old Europe", some urban areas which are riddled with unemployment, and where social problems are far worse than many of us experience.

And also, we are not without our assets and our opportunities: the beauty of our land, the resources of our environment, our culture, our identity...

So, we certainly do not expect to be considered as worst off economically, or more deprived socially, simply because we live on a piece of land surrounded by water (even though this is still the case for some of us). What we expect, before all, is to be accepted as different territorially.

Incidentally, being "different territorially" does not mean that we should all be different in the same way – as a recent Working Paper produced by DG Regio seemed to suggest. Indeed, European islands are all unique, each island being a case apart.

Even within my own archipelago, there are not two islands which are the same. Obviously, this is even more the case with the thousands of EU islands, large and small, with their 14 million inhabitants (21 million if we include the Island States of Malta, Cyprus, as well as Ireland North and South).

**Therefore, it must be made clear that what we are expecting from the EU is not a "one size fits all island policy", but merely a framework (political, legal, and financial) which would ensure that islands, as well as other specific territories, are treated with a modicum of flexibility, even if on a case by case basis.**

**It is my opinion that the setting-up such framework will be of paramount importance to enable the islands to seize the opportunities offered by sustainable development.**

To give but one example, there is no need to talk of the opportunities which Renewable energy can offer the islands if no account is being taken of the fact that many islands have insufficient access to the European grid, or not no access at all – like the Azores!

Island situations call for special solutions financially, administratively, or even sometimes technologically.

If such solutions are not found, and implemented, opportunities will be wasted, or their positive impact considerably lowered.

So, what are the main tools to ensure that the islands are treated with this "modicum of flexibility"?

There are three of them:

**a) Island realities should be assessed with more adapted instruments**

- Territorial cohesion must be based upon a fair assessment of territorial realities, such as accessibility or environmental frailty, and cannot rely solely upon basic social and economic indicators such as GDP/capita or unemployment rates, all the more so when those are calculated on a large geographical scale.
- The statistical level used to assess an island situation should, inasmuch as possible, be the island itself, whenever necessary in the framework of its archipelago. It should rest upon functional areas, and in no case upon statistical units (NUTS) encompassing mainland areas, which have very different territorial realities.
- Specific indicators should be defined by the EU to assess the situation of territories with permanent and severe geographic or demographic handicaps. In particular, due care should be taken of situations where there is an accumulation of handicaps in the same territory (for example, islands with a mountainous configuration), or where individual handicaps are aggravated (e.g.: case of archipelagos, of very small islands);

**b) Islands situations could benefit from better governance mechanisms.**

By “better governance”, we mean that setting-up certain structures, or certain procedures, should ensure that EU legislation is applied to islands with pragmatism. In particular:

- A simple procedure would consist, at the inception of any legislative process, to raise with the Member States the question of the applicability of the proposed legislation to those of their territories which are beset by such handicaps, and to ensure a proper consultation mechanism at a national level.
- The European Commission should set-up of an Inter-Service group whose duty would be to coordinate the framing and the implementation of EU policies in territories beset by permanent handicaps, as well as to suggest possible modifications or adaptations. We understand that moves in this direction are underway, through the setting-up of an Inter-Services Group on Territorial Cohesion.
- The principle of “positive discrimination” should be applied. Let us recall that European Court of Justice Ruling which considers that a discrimination “... consists in treating similar situations differently, and different situations similarly” (*Finding of the Court of First Instance – fourth chamber-, 26 October 1993. Wagner Ruling Cases T-6/92 et T-52/92*). This should be read as authorizing a policy of “positive discrimination”, provided that it is being implemented in proportion with the intensity of existing handicaps.

**c) Europe’s financial instruments should accept that islands’ costs are proportionally higher.**

- In the vast majority of cases, implementing a given policy in Islands will be likely to cost more than implementing the very same policy in an area which is unconcerned by their constraints: transport costs are dearer, economies of scale cannot be made, the nature of the terrain require extra-expenditure, etc.
- If the EU has to abide to its principles of solidarity and of proportionality, it seems fair that budgetary allocations corresponding to the nature and the intensity of those handicaps be considered.

As you may guess, we will certainly come back to this issue in more details when the European Commissions proposals for the forthcoming EU budget, and in particular for the future post-2013 Cohesion Policy, are known.

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In conclusion, having recalled what tools the Islands Commission considers as necessary to implement territorial cohesion (i.e.; a) a better assessment through more adapted statistical instruments, b) the implementation of better governance mechanisms, and c) financial instruments which take the islands' higher costs into consideration) I would like to ask the speakers and the audience to bear these proposals in mind, and to comment them if necessary, when discussing how the opportunities offered by sustainable development should be seized.

Apologizing for not naming them all, I would like to address hereby my thanks to the various speakers who will contribute to our debates, and in particular to the representative from the Portuguese Government, Secretary of State for Energy and Innovation, Mr Carlos Zorrinho, to the representatives from the European Commission ( Mr Roman Doubrava from DG ENERGY and Pedro Ferreira from EUROSTAT), and to the representatives from the European Parliament, Mrs Maria do Ceu Patrao Neves, and Mr Alves.

I would also like to welcome especially Mr. John Johannessen, Chairman of the Committee of Foreign Affairs in the Faroese Parliament, and express the hope that we shall have the pleasure of having the Faroes Islands as a member of the CPMR Islands Commission in the future.

And last but certainly not least, I would like to thank once again President Cesar and the Autonomous Government of the Azores for welcoming us today for our thirtieth anniversary!