



Ajacciu (Corsica) Declaration of European Alliance Group on EU policies for island, mountain and rural areas

The European Alliance (EA) Group at the Committee of the Regions, at its extraordinary meeting in Ajaccio (Corsica) on 3 April 2017, confirmed its commitment to actively contribute to developing EU policies for island, mountain and rural areas and agreed on the following declaration.

The European Alliance Group:

1. recalls that Article 174 TFEU states that island, mountain and rural areas are in need of particular attention from the European Union (EU);
2. regrettably notes that the application of this article has to date been highly unsatisfactory and calls for stronger commitment from the EU to achieve the objective of economic, social and territorial cohesion;
3. stresses that structural natural, geographic, demographic and social constraints of island, mountains and rural areas severely impact on their socio economic development as they lead to regional disparities and higher costs for citizens as well as for entrepreneurs;
4. highlights that the (small) size of the market, remoteness and isolation make it more difficult for local and regional authorities (LRAs) in these territories to provide services in a cost-efficient way to promote economic growth, create sustainable businesses and attract and retain skilled labour and spur innovation;
5. underlines that island, mountain and rural areas offer a showcase of the diversity of Europe's regions unique cultural and natural assets which positively affect the wellbeing of people living in these areas and attract tourists; calls on the EU to support LRAs in the preservation, maintenance and sustainable promotion of their priceless heritage and in the enhancement of sustainable forms of tourism;
6. reaffirms the importance of maintaining economic activity in territories with geographical constraints in order to avert risks of depopulation, territorial divide and reduce brain drain;
7. emphasises that accessibility and connectivity are key to achieve an inclusive growth model whereby citizens in the EU have the same rights and opportunities (education and job, social and health services, etc.) regardless of where they live;

8. recalls that reliable transport infrastructure at a comparable cost to main economic centres as well as broadband access for households are necessary for these areas to develop and be economically competitive; calls on the future Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) programme to pay attention to projects connecting islands, mountains and rural areas;
9. calls on the future Cohesion Policy to take into account the needs of rural, mountainous, insular and remote areas while acknowledging that a one size-fits-all approach should not be applied to all challenged territories due to diversity within specific types of territories;
10. suggests broadening the range of indicators used in the context of cohesion policy as the current method for allocating regional funding, the GDP, fails to fully capture the reality of island, mountain, rural and remote areas; suggests further developing the Regional Competitiveness Index (RCI) and the accessibility (and altitude) indicators that could reflect the additional costs faced by territories;
11. recommends regions develop smart specialisation strategies (SSS) and innovative approaches to build on their specific and unique assets;
12. urges local government as well as national authorities to devise systems of incentives for innovation and investments to boost production and to promote exports in these specific areas;
13. encourages LRAs in mountain, island and rural areas to exploit their environmental, climatic conditions and resources to boost the production of renewable energy and improve energy efficiency; points to the need to promote circular economy models and to introduce innovative practises aimed at reducing waste production while maximising reuse and recycling;
14. highlights the importance of state aid in addressing the challenges linked to their natural and geographic characteristics that constrain the effectiveness of strategically important sectors for the local economy; insists on the necessity to raise the threshold of the "de minimis" regulation for LRAs and businesses located in island, rural and mountainous areas;
15. acknowledges that synergies between the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) and other EU instruments (particularly the ESI Funds) need to be sought to offset the economic impact of the natural constraints which affect island and mountain, rural and remote areas;
16. points out however that the (small) size of projects in these areas often makes it almost impossible to access EFSI financing and EIB loans; therefore recommends the development of technical assistance and cooperation programmes specifically tailored to islands and mountains and rural areas;
17. urges Member States to ensure that the partnership principle is fully implemented in order to ensure that the specific needs of island, mountain and rural areas are taken into account in partnership agreements and national and regional operational programmes;
18. instructs its President to forward the declaration to the CoR President, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council along with National and Regional governments.
