

INFORMAL MINISTERIAL MEETING ON “THE SPECIFICITY OF MOUNTAIN AREAS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION”

(Taormina, 14-15 November 2003)

Presidency conclusions

Ministers and Heads of Delegation participating at the Informal Ministerial Meeting on “The specificity of Mountain Areas in the European Union”, in Taormina, on 14-15 November, 2003, believe that the specificity of Mountain Areas should be, in principle, recognized in the EU, as well as in the framework of existing agreements on cooperation in European mountain areas.

Taking into account article III – 116, 2^o paragraph, of the draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, the opportunity that mountain areas of backward regions could be included under certain aspects and circumstances among the less favoured regions, was discussed. Therefore, interventions, aimed at enhancing of their specificity and their resources, could be justified.

A variety of considerations were made on the possible actions that might be taken to lessen problems and disadvantages characterizing mountain areas.

In particular:

1. participants recognise that mountain areas must not be labelled only as disadvantaged areas, as they also represent a significant resource for the whole of the EU, mainly in the field of water, forests, agriculture, landscape, tourism, biodiversity, cultural traditions and typical local products;
2. participants believe that the enhancement of mountain areas, including protected mountain areas, can effectively contribute to safeguarding, protecting and improving the quality of the environment, to protecting human health, as well as to ensure the sustainable management of natural resources, as envisaged by article III – 129 of the draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe;
3. participants recognise that the strengthening of the economic advantages of least favoured mountain zones can improve the access to services for individuals, families and enterprises;
4. participants believe that the principle of subsidiarity, as reaffirmed in article I-IX of the draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, calls for an increased dialogue and participation of local

- communities, as well as of the inhabitants of mountain areas, to the formulation and management of EU policies, relevant to the issue;
5. participants recognise that geographical disadvantages and greater difficulty to have access to infrastructures and services, which characterise mountain areas, considerably affect the phenomenon of gradual depopulation of some parts of these areas. These areas should instead preserve and enhance their heritage of culture and traditions;
 6. participants agree that, in a spirit of an ever more concrete implementation on the ground of the principle of subsidiarity, existing relations between EU, member States and local bodies, representing mountain communities, be strengthened;
 7. participants agree on the opportunity that the Union and the member States develop suitable measures to increase the level of sustainable development in mountain areas, preserving protected mountain areas;
 8. participants agree on the opportunity that measures aimed at putting into value the resources specifically connected to mountain areas, such as water, forests, agriculture, landscape, tourism, cultural traditions and protection of typical local products, be identified;
 9. participants agree that the protection and enhancement of mountain areas may effectively contribute to safeguarding and improving the quality of the environment as a whole, to protecting human health, as well as to utilizing natural resources coming from the European mountains in terms of sustainable development;
 10. participants agree that the Union and member States, through the reduction of the disadvantages characterising the mountain areas, and the enhancement of their potentialities may contribute to slow down the present phenomenon of progressive depopulation of some parts of the mountain territories;
 11. participants agree that the Union and member States may also carry out initiatives aiming at safeguarding and enhancing cultural diversities and heritage of traditions, expressed by populations living in the European mountains;
 12. participants agree that cooperation between members states in and between the European mountain regions should be further developed.