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CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONSULTATION ON THE FUTURE “EU 2020” STRATEGY

North Sea Commission (NSC) is one of the six geographical commissions of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR). The NSC is an independent regional owned entity in the North Sea Region representing 57 regions in seven countries.

The North Sea Commission was founded in 1989 to facilitate and enhance partnerships between regions which manage the challenges and opportunities presented by the North Sea. The North Sea Commission also promotes the North Sea Basin as a major economic entity within Europe, by encouraging joint development initiatives and political lobbying at European Union level.

North Sea Commission (NSC) welcomes this consultation paper. The regional and local entities should be involved intensely in the further development of the EU-Strategy 2020. The approach will only be successful if it makes use of the potentials, resources and experiences of the regional level. Moreover it should be considered that in many EU member states the regional level contributed significantly to the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy and are prepared to support pursuing the objectives and indicators of the future strategy. There is a need for a concentrated collective EU strategy for sustainable growth. Such a strategy sends important signals within the EU and to the rest of the world.

NSC welcomes that EU2020 focus more on the major collective European challenges than the Lisbon Strategy. We do agree with the three key priorities proposed by the paper: i) creating value by basing growth on knowledge; ii) empowering people in inclusive societies and iii) creating a competitive, connected and greener economy. We share the Commission’s recommendation to come to a stronger interrelation between the economic, social and environmental aspects of the strategy. There is nothing new in terms of priorities and indeed many good EU policies and strategies already exist but to be effective they need to be implemented in full and well resourced.

NSC concurs with the three main priorities in the document – knowledge-based growth, social inclusion and green competitiveness. These priorities lay well in-line with our view on development and how we work with development issues in the North Sea Region. The NSC likes to emphasize the importance of innovation policy at all levels as a survival strategy, not only for the EU internally, but also to be put in a global context.

NSC also agrees in having an ‘inclusive society’ and to focus on ‘green competitiveness’ – the discussions at the COP 15 summit in Copenhagen confirm that sustainable and eco-friendly development is needed and will be a competitive factor for all parts of the world, if we want a sustainable future. However climate change adaptation action is of equal importance to mitigation action in terms of managing the economic and social impact of climate change, and thus the two should go hand in hand. The regions in Europe play an important role in all these areas, and it is vital that the regions are actively involved in developing a new strategy for Europe in these three areas.

NSC agrees that economic growth shall be in the knowledge-based sector. Innovation is a key driver for Europe to successfully exit the crisis and the EU’s research agenda will be central to this. The new EU2020 strategy should take note of innovation models of leading innovation regions, particularly those which foster open innovation, a culture of innovation and creativity in the private, public and third sector, the commercialization of R&D and strong clusters.

Creativity and innovation are underlined as driving forces in the recovery and future development of European economy throughout the document, although creativity probably should be even more stressed as a specific strength of European society and economy compared to other economies, and incentives should be specifically designed to foster even more creativity and probably even more important, channelling creative innovations into industrial innovation.

The creative and cultural sector is also in itself a major asset to European economy, also in terms of tourism, and should also be given incentives to stimulate further innovation and growth.

The role of tourism is not mentioned in the paper, which in many respects is quite strange, as Europe is a major tourist destination for the rest of the world and has a huge potential for further development and growth.

EU Cohesion Policy has become an important part of the European integration process and with the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the objective of Territorial Cohesion should make it even more important after 2013. **Territorial Cohesion reinforces the bottom-up approach, tackling regional disparities and reinforcing the competitiveness of areas facing particular challenges.** The structural funds are key tool, alongside research and education, to deliver the EU out of the crisis as they are instrumental in addressing change management, whether by addressing climate change or industrial change. The principles of the Lisbon Strategy should play an important role in this context. The NSC therefore welcomes the European Council (10/11 December 2009) conclusions which point out that - in context of the EU2020 issues- economic, social and territorial cohesion have to be ensured. For those regions losing the status of a convergence region appropriate transition mechanisms should be foreseen.

Much of the growth projects in Europe take place at local and regional levels through financing and decisions by local and regional authorities. Experience shows that the Member States in the EU who to a higher degree integrate local and regional levels in their growth policies are also those who report the best results. **Management, monitoring and inspection of the programmes should be simplified and concentrate on those regulations that are necessary to achieve the relevant policy objectives.** Today, a stronger centralization, a heavy control system and far too much bureaucracy, has made it more and more difficult for the regions to achieve the best results within the European framework, and this has to be taken into consideration when designing the regional policy after 2013.

European Territorial Cooperation has a high European added value. It should remain an essential part of the Cohesion Policy and should be further strengthened in the future. The current global crises emphasize the importance of good governance at all levels and cooperation founded on trust and mutual dependence between different levels of governance. The subsidiary principle is the basis for the distribution of responsibility between levels in multilateral governance.

The regions play an important part in transferring European initiatives into actual policy for people in all parts of Europe and cross-border initiatives between regions have proved to be an efficient way to exchange best practice and conduct knowledge transfer to the benefit of Europe. Territorial EU programmes, in which regions actively participate in the task of setting priorities, are critical tools. It should remain an essential part of cohesion policy and should be further strengthened in the future.

The regional policy and the structural funds play a very important role in balancing the development policy and territorial partnerships. Therefore it is vital that the regions and institutional bodies like the Committee of the Regions and regional political players like the CPMR and others are consulted, because they have the knowledge of how regional policy works at the decentralized level and where EU citizens live and work.

NSC recommends the Commission to investigate how a macroregional strategy for the North Sea Region can contribute to the definition and implementation of the EU 2020 Strategy. A North Sea Strategy should naturally focus on and take full advantage of the maritime dimension for promoting knowledge-based growth and green competitiveness in line with the key priorities of the consultation paper. A macroregional approach can provide a cross-cutting development strategy based on the specific strengths and challenges in the region. Such an approach can be considered an example for the involvement of the regional and local level, as well as of the civil society in the development of the strategy. The Commission should make sure that the two strategies are compatible and allow for involvement of the regions.

NSC therefore urge the Commission to back-up the EU 2020 strategy with a delivery method based on territories and a credible, inclusive governance system, which allows everybody in the EU to benefit from and contribute to it.