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Joint position

of the Secretariat of COMECE, the Church and Society Commission of the CEC (Conference of European Churches), the Representative of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Kommissariat of the German Bishops

on the role of Church actors in the European Cohesion Policy

The future of the European cohesion policy is presently under discussion in the Council and the Parliament. On 6 October 2011 the European Commission launched its Draft **Regulation with Common Provisions** concerning the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, the **European Social Fund (ESF)**, the **Cohesion Fund (CF)**, the **European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)** and the **European Marine and Fisheries Fund (EMFF)** which are subject to the **General Strategic Framework**.¹

The Secretariat of the Commission of the Episcopates of the European Community (COMECE)², the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CEC)³, the Representative of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD)⁴ and the Kommissariat of the German Bishops⁵ support a strong European cohesion policy and this position paper illustrates the role of Church actors in this regard.

As stated in Article 3, Paragraph 3 of the Treaty on European Union, the aim of the European Union is *“to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion as well as solidarity between the Member States”*.⁶ The aim of regional policy is to reduce the structural disparities between the regions as well as promote balanced regional development and equal opportunities between them. Regional policy is an expression of solidarity within the European Union. For Christians, solidarity is a natural expression of their faith. The Churches are convinced that, particularly at a time when the European unification process is facing a severe test, the European regional policy is of great importance for the cohesion envisaged in the EU Treaty.

¹ COM(2011) 615 final.

² www.comece.eu.

³ <http://csc.ceceurope.org>

⁴ www.ekd.de

⁵ www.kath-buero.de

⁶ OJ C 83 of 30th October 2010, p. 13.

The Churches put their actions at the service of society. The consequences of demographic developments, a just social welfare system and resilient framework conditions for the creation and sustaining of an equal quality of life in Europe are important fields of work for the Churches in Europe in which they not least also realise their public mission.⁷ Right up to the present time the Church actors are active as partners in the Regional- and Cohesion Policies in various ways and at different levels. In this regard, in many Member States they are represented in regional committees that accompany the Regional Policy, they work closely together with local representations and take part in local development. They are engaged in the shaping of Regional Policy at local, regional, national and European levels. The Churches and Church related institutions are key actors in the areas of transnational cooperation, education, culture and social inclusion. Across national borders they are involved in social cohesion in Europe. We intend to illustrate this with concrete examples, as follows.

Church – regional, trans-regional, transnational

The Churches reflect in their structures and traditions the historical, cultural and geographical diversity of the European regions. They maintain contacts and relations among themselves.

These trans-regional relationships take place in different ways. All over Europe there are church community partnerships, close institutional partnerships and encounter structures.⁸ Joint projects are realised in this regard, such as the linking and joint arrangement of transnational pilgrimage trails, like the Camino de Santiago, or energy adaptation and adjustment of church buildings⁹. Furthermore, the Churches support the structuring of macroregional strategies, as evidenced in their support for the EU Danube strategy.¹⁰ From early on the Episcopates of the Catholic Church in the Member States of the EU joined forces in COMECE; as did the Anglican, Old Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches of Europe in the Conference of European Churches (CEC) to provide support for the European unification process. In these diverse ways, the Churches in the EU Member States belong to the established actors that help to shape and mould the regional and trans-regional areas of Europe.

Churches and education in Europe

The Churches assume a responsibility for education in its various ways in the Member States of the EU. Seen from the standpoint of the Churches, an integral understanding of education in all its multiple aspects is crucial. Churches' educational work is directed towards the personal development of the individual and promotes the transmission of values and social skills. It

⁷ Cf. For example: COMECE, [A European Community of Solidarity and Responsibility](#) – Declaration by the COMECE bishops on the Treaty objective of the competitive social market economy (2012); Public Statement of CEC-CEC on the economic and financial crisis, [European concerted action required now – People's Needs first](#) (2011); [Decision of the 11th Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany on the Social Dimension of the European Depth Crisis](#) (November 2011); see also: [Charta Oecumenica](#), 2001, in which the Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe and the Conference of European Churches commit themselves to contribute to the European integration process.

⁸ To give just two examples: see the [list of partner churches](#) of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD); see the [position of the Church of Sweden](#).

⁹ Cf. for example: "Sustainable Churches", a project in the framework of the LIFE Programme.

¹⁰ Cf. [Joint Contribution of CSC of CEC, of the Secretariat of COMECE and of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe \(CPCE\) to the Public Consultation on the EU Strategy for the Danube Region REGIO/E1/EN/NV/OB D\(2010\)](#).

aspires to enable people to encounter the challenges of their everyday lives.¹¹ In addition, education performs, from the Churches' perspective, an important function as a means to equal opportunity; it helps to prevent poverty and social exclusion.¹² Churches and their organisations can be found in all areas of education: they are active in the domain of formal school education¹³, vocational training and higher education, while also offering a broad range of non-formal education services in the areas of children and youth work and adult education. As education providers in the informal system, Churches tend specifically to disadvantaged groups of the population and provide new opportunities for people who have fallen out of the formal education system. The Churches are providers of theological and inter-religious, intercultural and political education, also offering job-related assistance, especially for occupational groups in the area of social services, in addition to vocational training. Churches and their organisations also devote themselves to dealing with current social questions and issues, involving themselves in specialist discourses and working in transnational educational projects.¹⁴

Church and culture in Europe

Christianity had and still has a powerful cultural influence on Europe. It is visible – among others – in Church buildings which characterise the appearance of our towns and villages. They are architectural witnesses to the Christian faith. Besides their being intended for the liturgy, church premises are also used for non-liturgical and parochial events, such as concerts, exhibitions and debates. They are anchor points of individual and collective identity of the human-being and his/her community. They are centres of traditions and popular religiousness, while also being centres of reference of personal life. In addition, churches are also of architectural importance as monuments and are therefore part of the public interest. As historical and architectural-artistic treasures, they are of relevance beyond the Church. The Council of Europe stated back in 1989 that church buildings should, on account of their architectural and historical importance, be preserved as part of cultural heritage.¹⁵ They are often tourist attractions and have a positive economic impact on the entire region.

Furthermore, the Churches create – principally via the parish and church community structure – a broad range of services, thus making an important contribution towards

¹¹ E.g. through confirmation classes (cf.: H. Simojoki / W. Ilg / F. Schweitzer, Empirische Befunde aus einer internationalen Studie – Europäische Impulse für die Konfirmandenarbeit (2010); the study itself is available at: www.confirmation-research.eu.

¹² Cf. COMECE, A European Community of Solidarity and Responsibility – Declaration by the COMECE bishops on the Treaty objective of the competitive social market economy (2012), no. 18; see also: Gerechte Teilhabe: Befähigung zu Eigenverantwortung und Solidarität. Eine Denkschrift des Rates der EKD zur Armut in Deutschland (2006).

¹³ Cf. P. Schreiner, Zur Situation des Religionsunterrichts – Ein Blick auf Europa, Talk given at the conference entitled “Yes to religious education” held in Bad Boll on 30 April 2006, p. 4. Particularly with regard to the importance of religious instruction, the EU has supported a major comparative project on religion and education from EU research funding (European Community Framework Programme for Research, Technological Development and Demonstration, Priority 7: Citizens and governance in a knowledge-based society). Title: REDCo – Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European countries. Coordinated by the University of Hamburg with project partners in Estonia, Russia, Norway, France, The Netherlands, England, Spain and Germany. Cf.: P. Schreiner, loc. cit., p. 10; as well as: http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/projects/234_en.html.

¹⁴ E.g. the St. Marienthal International Encounter Centre in Görlitz under the German-Polish-Czech project “PONTES - Learning in and for Europe” in the Neisse/Nysa Euro-region, funded by the ESF; see for example also: CSC conference “Education for Democratic Citizenship – a role for the churches?” in 2011

¹⁵ Cf.: Council of Europe, Resolution 916 (1989), 41st Ordinary Meeting.

preserving the cultural infrastructure. The Churches contribute substantially to the cultural richness of our society, e.g. via concerts in church buildings. Other examples include choirs and instrumental groups¹⁶, as well as the libraries operated by a large number of parishes¹⁷, which offer to residents local access to literature and other media. Furthermore the Churches conduct an intercultural dialogue in multiple ways on local and regional level and beyond.

In this context Church sports clubs play an important role at the local level.¹⁸ They are open to everyone and furthermore, through participation in these clubs and associations, the development of social responsibility in general. At the same time, in parishes and congregations or church organisations, people acquire important skills which enable and motivate them to become involved outside those communities and realise political or cultural objectives in association with others.¹⁹

Social inclusion

The social services that are provided by the Churches and their welfare organisations are part of the expression of the nature and existence of the Churches and a manifestation of their religious beliefs. Commitment to disadvantaged persons and combating poverty are fundamental areas of work for them.²⁰ Caritas and Diaconia fulfil an essential mission of Churches in the world. They offer their services to everyone in need without exception regardless of his/her religion, nationality and political convictions. The basis for the work of Caritas and Diaconia is the word of the Lord: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Mt 25,40). This is the core of the Christian motivation regarding service to the other and leaves its mark on the social services performed as well as on the respective Church related institutions.

The Churches and their welfare organisations make every effort to identify social problems from the very beginning and to develop suitable responses. The meaningful function of the confessional work finds its expression in the particularity of Churches, for example in the pastoral support of self-help and volunteers groups, in hospice care or in the support with regard to “grieving”.

¹⁶ In Germany, for example, 424,707 amateur musicians have joined together in 18,860 Catholic Choirs and music ensembles; cf.: Koch, Identity in Diversity. The cultural segments of the Church and their structures – facts and figures, in: German Bishops' Conference, *Arbeitshilfe Nr. 212 “Kirche und Kultur”*, 28 September 2007, p. 36, 40; The association of Protestant Choirs counts 250,000 singers, see: www.choere-evangelisch.de.

¹⁷ There are, for example, more than 900 public libraries of the Protestant Church in Germany (Statistik Ev BB 2012); cf. also: Sternberg, Cultural mandate of the Church in the Secular Community – Status quo and future prospects, in: German Bishops' Conference, *Arbeitshilfe Nr. 212 “Kirche und Kultur”*, 28 September 2007, p. 24, 31.

¹⁸ On the Catholic side, these have joined together to form the *Fédération Internationale Catholique d'Education Physique et sportive* (FICEP). Represented in the FICEP are Catholic sports clubs and associations from 9 different EU Member States (Belgium, Germany, Italy, France, The Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Romania, Czech Republic). The Evangelical Church in Germany and the German Bishops' Conference work, for example, closely together with the German Sports Confederation (today: German Olympic Sports Confederation) in working groups and at events.

¹⁹ Cf.: Bishop Mussinghoff, Religiöse Pluralität in der demokratischen Öffentlichkeit, Talk at the meeting of representatives from the German Bishops' Conference and the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany with members of the General and Orthodox Rabbis' Conference of Germany held on 12 March 2012.

²⁰ E.g.: Caritas Europa and Eurodiaconia.

Furthermore the work of Churches contributes an indispensable element to the strengthening of the social culture. This refers in particular to social services, which are performed for example in hospitals, old peoples' and nursing homes and in institutions for disabled persons. With institutions established throughout Europe in the areas of care for the elderly and disabled, as well as institutions caring for young people and families, the Churches' welfare organisations make it possible for the weaker and less well-off members of our society to share and participate in that society. The Churches are also active in the social inclusion of low-income and unemployed people. By providing social housing accommodation, supporting the unemployed and promoting employment, they are also directly involved in overcoming social dividing lines. At the same time, Churches and their welfare organisations assume advocacy for those people who are not able to stand up for themselves. Therefore working with migrants and for the inclusion of the Roma people represents a further focus of Church involvement and commitment²¹.

With and within their activities Churches and their welfare organisations become solidarity-makers, not only motivating people to participate in charity work but also offering them the opportunities for doing this.²² Thus they make a substantial contribution to the social infrastructure in Europe.

European structural policy is an indispensable pillar of European cooperation and requires a firm foundation, solid financing as well as the collaboration of a multitude of stakeholders. Churches and their organisations will be continuously engaged within this field.

²¹ Cf. Secretariat of COMECE/Council of the European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE), Joint Paper "A reflection on the EU Roma Framework" (2011).

²² More than 1,1 million volunteers were counted by the Evangelical Church in 2009, cf. EKD Statistic, Hauptamt und Ehrenamt 2009, Hanover.