

OVERSEAS FRANCE: CALL FOR THE CREATION OF A EUROPEAN COMMISSION TASK FORCE

From a subsidy economy to a project economy

12/04/2017

The historic popular demonstrations in French Guiana are a symbol of a clear failure of the public policy conducted in Overseas France for decades.

This observation calls for a thorough review of the means by which European financing is implemented, a review which must be based on direct strategic dialogue between European institutions and the Overseas Territories, which represent real assets for the Community.



One figure stands out: on average between 50% and 60% of young people aged between 18 and 25 in Overseas France are unemployed. Given that the cost of living is much higher than in Mainland France, this is the powder keg underlying a feeling of growing social injustice that is now developing into revolt, as seen recently in French Guiana.

With the Overseas economies still highly dependent on national and European funding, originally intended

to create a platform for regional development to allow Overseas France to participate in the dynamism of the global economy, the accelerating socio-economic decline of these territories sounds a warning and raises legitimate questions as to the real effectiveness of these structures.

The answer is clear. If this financial aid is not achieving its goals, this must be because holders of economic power locally - even nationally or internationally - have no interest in seeing the region reach the "reference" level of development; were it to do so, this would have the immediate consequence of bringing national and European aid to an end. We are clearly seeing the creation of an economic system that feeds the impoverishment of these regions thus allowing the capture of the resulting subsidies, with all evidence showing that this situational rent benefits only a few favoured actors.

This hijacking of regional economic policies undermines any development momentum and we will continue to see the hopeless continuation of a vicious circle of dependency in the regions of Overseas France.

As the unwilling victims of these dysfunctional systems, the Overseas population observe with dismay that costly projects are being carried out and yet inequality is growing and they continue to suffer, on a daily basis, from very serious shortfalls in the provision of essential services in social support and education, the economy and health. This situation explains why the Overseas Departments and Territories not only have record poverty levels, but also the highest inequality rates in France.

Faced with these structural problems in Overseas France, many European funding mechanisms, set out in the Operational Programme, have been little used or unused entirely. Although FEDER, FEADER and FSE funds are available, local administrative and institutional blockages are preventing their use in Overseas France, thus aggravating the situation in these places.

The distress of the population in French Guiana, and in the Overseas Departments more generally, demands a national and European recognition of the absolute necessity of a strategic reorientation of regional policies for Overseas France.

Although the accumulated development shortfall does not in any sense argue for the ending of this financial support, there is nevertheless an urgent need for these funds to be used for their intended purpose with a view to achieving results that will have a measurable effect for the directly affected populations.

It is no longer tolerable that France, and more broadly the 27 Member States of the European Union should

be involved in a parody of "development aid" in the form of this 'subsidy economy' in Overseas France instead of boosting their development through the creation of a 'project economy'.

The situation therefore calls for a rigorous review of financing mechanisms which must be redirected towards a project-based policy over which Overseas residents can take direct ownership.

The socio-economic imperatives of these regions demand that these issues be addressed with concrete proposals.

In France, during this presidential election period, it is essential that all candidates address these topics and set out an ambitious vision for Overseas France, which is all too often overlooked in the public debate.

Moreover, the search for effective solutions and projects requires the creation of a European Commission Task Force specifically dedicated to French Guiana and the Overseas Territories to allow the implementation of funding structures dedicated to an effective policy of transition and economic resilience.

This development strategy can draw on the innumerable assets of Overseas France in innovative areas such as renewable energy and biodiversity, and the strengths of a civil society that is ready to act to build its future.

National and European leaders must draw on these assets and strengths, ensuring that these regions fulfil their potential as key factors in French and European influence in regions of the world that look to us as an example.

Maryse COPPET

Lawyer at the Brussels bar and the Guadeloupe bar

