Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on ‘Cross-border and transnational cooperation between local authorities’

(1999/C 51/05)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the decision taken by its Bureau on 12 March 1998, in pursuance of the fourth paragraph of Article 198c of the EC Treaty, to issue an Opinion on Cross-border and transnational cooperation between local authorities and to instruct its Commission 4 on Spatial Planning, Urban Issues, Energy and Environment to draw up the opinion;

having regard to the European Charter of Local Self-government adopted by the Council of Europe on 15 October 1983;

having regard to the resolution adopted by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CCRE) on the occasion of the XIXth Europe Day in January 1993;

having regard to the Opinion issued by the Committee of the Regions on the Role of local and regional authorities in education and training for Central and Eastern Europe provided through the European Union (CdR 298/95 fin) (1);

having regard to the Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the Commission’s Communication entitled ‘Towards an urban agenda in the European Union’ (CdR 316/97 fin) (2);

having regard to the Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 20 November 1997 on the Effects on the Union’s policies of enlargement to the applicant countries of central and eastern Europe (CdR 280/97 fin) (3);

having regard to the communication from the European Commission, dated 15 July 1997, on Agenda 2000 (COM(97) 2000 final);

having regard to the interim report by the Commission in December 1995 on the effects on the Union’s policy of enlargement to the associated states of central and eastern Europe (CSE(95) 605, 6 December 1995);

having regard to the report by the European Commission on Ecos-Ouverture — interregional cooperation;

having regard to the draft Opinion (CdR 145/98 rev. 2) adopted by Commission 4 on 2 October 1998 (rapporteur: Mr Niederbremer),

adopted the opinion set out below at its 26th plenary session held on 18 and 19 November 1998 (meeting of 19 November) by a unanimous vote.

1. Introduction: the role of local authorities and the changes which have taken place in the EU in the 1990s

1.1. Cooperation implies combining forces to achieve an objective which is impossible or difficult to achieve separately. The founding fathers of the European Community firmly believed that closer cooperation would reduce the likelihood of future wars within Europe. The establishment of the European Community was therefore based on the realization that cooperation was the most important prerequisite both for peace and economic reconstruction in Europe. The European Community created the legal and institutional basis for cooperation and brought about lasting interdependence through the cession of national sovereignty to the EC.

1.2. Through the Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam, the ongoing process of European integration has in recent years been extended to the regions and local authorities, which play a major part in the direct implementation of EU directives and regulations. Incorporation of the subsidiarity principle in the European Treaties has given local and regional authorities additional responsibilities. The ‘Citizens’ Europe’ is to be achieved through the establishment of decentralized machinery. This process gives a new dimension to cross-border and transnational cooperation.

(1) OJ C 100, 2.4.1996, p. 98.
(2) OJ C 251, 10.8.1998, p. 11.
1.3. Transnational cooperation between local authorities is thus a classic example of a ‘bottom-up’ approach to European integration. The radical structural changes which have taken place in the EU since the early 1990s have demonstrated (a) the fundamental importance which this ‘link with the grassroots’ has for the process of integration, (b) the legitimacy of this process and (c) the clear practical value of the process to the general public. Completion of the internal market also gave local authorities an incentive to modernize and make adjustments in order to safeguard or consolidate their locational advantages.

1.4. The imminent moves towards a deeper Union (currency union) and a Broader Union (inclusion of eastern European states) all pose fundamental challenges for local authorities which they will be unable to resolve adequately with their current resources.

1.5. As Habitat II demonstrates, the growing economic, environmental and social problems besetting urban development in the latter half of the 1990s require new answers. These answers will not only involve a further strengthening of the autonomy of local authorities, backed up by additional financial, administration and technical resources; they will also involve new models for sustainable development and transnational cooperation between local authorities, which may involve problem-solving and a learning process. This is described in greater detail below.

2. General causes of and reasons for cross-border and transnational cooperation between local authorities

2.1. The issue of cross-border and transnational operation has become much more important since Maastricht and Amsterdam. The strengthening of the subsidiarity principle has given local authorities additional responsibility and scope for action. The trend towards decentralization is increasingly impacting on local and regional authorities.

2.2. New laws at national level have given local authorities and regions greater responsibility for organizing basic services, promoting strategic planning and facilitating ongoing development at local level. Increasingly decentralized systems will bring government closer to the people and further efficiency and democratic responsibility.

2.3. Town-twinning is an initial step towards transnational cooperation; these schemes have had considerable success, particularly in the areas of culture and sport. There are, however, frequently inadequate funds available to enable the schemes to be firmly underpinned for a long period of time. Many town-twinning schemes have begun to redirect their activities by expanding previous links based mainly on cultural and youth exchanges to include aspects of transnational cooperation.

2.4. The reinforced town-twinning projects which have developed during the 1990s between many municipalities in northern Europe (including Sweden, Finland and Denmark) and municipalities in the Baltic Sea Region and Poland show how town-twinning can be developed into an important tool for increasing skills in the applicant countries of eastern and central Europe. Town-twinning projects have provided both large-scale transfers of knowhow and support in the development of a democratic local level in those countries.

2.5. Town-twinning schemes are a good starting point for transnational cooperation. Transnational cooperation between local authorities does, however, extend far beyond town-twinning schemes. In some cases the legal, institutional and financial situation of local authorities will have to be improved if transnational cooperation is to be secured. This is a matter primarily for the Member States, regions and localities.

2.6. The process of globalization which gained considerable momentum with the removal of the Iron Curtain in 1989 has made it even more necessary to learn from the experience and know-how of others.

2.7. In the age of the information society increased transnational cooperation, particularly in the economic, scientific and research field, is an absolute prerequisite for safeguarding competitiveness.

2.8. The rapid progress in the fields of communications- and information-technology clearly demonstrate how exchanges of experience and expertise can be of mutual benefit. It is likewise becoming clear that if the necessary technological facilities are not available and if the authorities do not have inter-cultural and administrative powers, cooperation between cities and regions is difficult to organize.

2.9. Transnational cooperation in the EU has become ever more important for enabling common problems to be resolved jointly and therefore more efficiently.

Two examples to illustrate the importance of transnational cooperation

— Transnational cooperation will enable local authorities with similar economic structures to tackle the problems and consequences of structural change more effectively. Exchanges of experience and methods of problem solving (‘best practice’) with a view to safeguarding jobs and creating new sustainable jobs in regions with similar structures are a fundamental part of cooperation. Local authorities
will need to establish closer economic links if there is to be effective cooperation in the economic and employment fields. The economic potential and strength of cooperating regions should be exploited, in the interests of all the parties involved, in order to strengthen competitiveness and thereby significantly improve the labour-market situation.

Transnational cooperation on the environment is of tremendous importance. Environmental pollution transcends local frontiers. Similar problems often have to be faced and local authorities can exchange useful tips. In the environmental field the transfer of knowledge can, by providing information on best practice, help administrations and economic players to resolve environmental problems in an effective and cost efficient way, or to avoid such problems in future.

2.10. As at EU level, cooperation between local authorities also has to contend with how to resolve the conflicting interests of employment, the economy and the environment; it is also sometimes difficult to find examples of best practice which may serve as a model for decentralized solutions.

2.11. The success of transnational cooperation depends crucially on whether cooperating local authorities can pool resources and achieve synergies through a coordinated ‘division of labour’. Local authorities seeking to take part in transnational cooperation must also satisfy minimum requirements as regards legal institutions, organization and funding.

3. Prerequisites for transnational cooperation

3.1. Conditions in respect of legal institutions (‘Local autonomy’)

3.1.1. The Committee of the Regions endorses the definition of local self-government set out in the European Charter of Local Self-Government adopted by the Council of Europe on 15 October 1985. This definition is as follows: ‘local self-government denotes the right and ability of local authorities, within the limits of the law, to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population’.

3.1.2. The Committee notes that twelve years after the adoption of this charter there are still differences in the legal situation of local authorities. Transnational cooperation between local authorities in the EU has set itself the goal of implementing the Citizens’ Europe; the above-mentioned prerequisites in respect of cooperation and readiness for Europe therefore need to be met forthwith. The European Parliament resolution on partnership in the EU also needs to be implemented; this resolution called upon the governments and Member States of the EU to remove all administrative barriers to the establishment and operation of partnership between local authorities.

3.2. Organizational prerequisite (‘Human and Technological Resources’)

3.2.1. In the age of the information society it is becoming increasingly more important for local authorities to meet the staffing and technological requirements of transnational cooperation. In a Europe which is becoming ever more closely-knit, local authorities should be organized in such a way as to enable them to cope with the European dimension. Administrative structures should be adjusted in order to render transnational cooperation feasible.

3.2.2. Local authorities should ensure that training procedures produce staff who are both qualified and capable of dealing with EU matters. It is also necessary for European training to be developed in the Member States. Cooperation capacity can be substantially enhanced by consolidating knowledge about Europe which is mutually compatible.

3.2.3. The rapid advance of the new IT technologies make it necessary for local authorities to carry out constant, frequently expensive, adjustments in order to keep pace with prevailing standards. This is however necessary to enable local authorities to cooperate efficiently on a transnational basis. In the past the need for compatibility between communications equipment used by cooperating authorities was all too often ignored. Expensive machinery could not always be used for transnational cooperation. Using electronic systems which are not compatible will inevitably create misunderstandings.

3.3. Financial prerequisite

3.3.1. The European Charter of Local Self-government states that: ‘local authorities shall be entitled... to adequate financial resources of their own of which they may dispose freely within the framework of their powers’. The Charter goes on to point out ‘the financial systems on which sources available to local authorities are based will be of a sufficiently diversified and buoyant nature...’. The Committee of the Regions endorses this call and urges the European Parliament and the European Commission to step up their lobbying vis-à-vis the Member States in order to ensure that local authorities receive adequate funds for cross-border and transnational cooperation, as another way of supporting the resolution adopted by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CCRE) on the XIXth Europe Day in 1993.
3.3.2. Whilst the abovementioned prerequisites may create the requisite basis for any transnational partnership, they do not provide adequate guarantees that such cooperation will be both effective and successful. In order to meet these additional conditions, there is a need to examine the specific objectives and the ‘added value’ of such partnerships. The contents of added value basically depends on the ability of the players involved and the form, type and quality of the transnational cooperation between local authorities.

4. The role of local authorities as players in the field of transnational cooperation: problems and opportunities

4.1. A purely quantitative analysis of the players involved in transnational partnership shows that 80% of the local authorities involved in twinning schemes are small towns or municipalities (with less than 30,000 inhabitants); most of the local authorities participating in EU programmes have less than 200,000 inhabitants.

4.2. A further factor is that larger cities do not necessarily have greater devolved powers or more technical and financial resources. The level of financial resources depends largely on the legal and/or de facto situation of local authorities, as defined in their respective local government legislation, and on their general level of economic and technological development.

4.3. The conditions for access to partnership schemes need to be redrafted if the learning benefits of transnational cooperation schemes are to be expanded and intensified. In this context the European competence of small and medium-sized cities, in particular, should be enhanced by:

— enabling representative associations to take part in the programme-planning and implementation phase carried out by the Commission and strengthening the role of representative associations in the administration of individual programmes;

— establishing decentralized general information and advisory bodies for such players with a view to:
  (a) facilitating access to individual programmes;
  (b) supporting attempts to find suitable partners and
  (c) providing technical and administrative back-up for projects. Attention is drawn to existing cooperation and groupings of regional and local authorities which would provide an appropriate basis for such action. In the case of multilateral cooperation geared to networking, these information and advisory bodies could be developed into coordination bodies with little extra outlay in terms of staff and funding. Account should also be taken in this respect of work carried out by the CEMR and the United Towns Organization;

— simplifying administrative and financial control systems, including auditing of local projects;

— enabling more small local authorities to have access to EU-programmes. Conditions in respect of minimum population numbers should, in particular, be dropped.

5. Transnational cooperation between local authorities — forms and types of cooperation and scope of cooperation

5.1. Forms of cooperation: partnerships and town-twinning

There are basically two forms and five types of transnational cooperation between local authorities, with some differences in legal, administrative, organizational and financial scope and with different qualitative and quantitative criteria. A distinction should be drawn between (a) town-twinning schemes and (b) partnerships. The latter schemes cover specific partnerships for particular administrative, technical and economic projects, mainly carried out under EU programmes; town-twinning schemes are, however, contractual agreements between local authorities designed to promote inter-European understanding at grassroots’ level and to promote the ‘Citizens’ Europe’. These schemes can also involve either bilateral or multilateral links. The reinforced town-twinning system is a halfway house between partnership and traditional town-twinning. Assessments have shown that the reinforced town-twinning system has provided both large-scale transfers of know-how and support in the development of a democratic local level.

5.2. Types of transnational cooperation between local authorities and the scope of such cooperation

Five types of cooperation can be identified under the following criteria: scope, quantity (volume of tasks) and quality (internal and external added-value). The five types are as follows:

— Type 1: transnational (cross-border) cooperation between neighbouring local authorities straddling national frontiers;

— Type 2: transnational cooperation between non-neighbouring local authorities;

— Type 3: trans-European cooperation between cities or urban regions;

— Type 4: trans-European cooperation within and between networks of cities;

— Type 5: global cooperation (global networks of cities and transnational NGOs).

In practice, the above types frequently overlap (e.g. one local authority may be involved in types 1, 3, 4 and 5). The Committee’s views on measures to promote
cooperation, integration and strategic measures will concentrate on those types of cooperation which have so far neglected the transnational dimension.

Types 1 and 2 may be described as the basis for transnational cooperation; as in the case of inter-regional and cross-border cooperation between regions, there are of course differences as regards objectives, scope, areas of activity and form.

The COR stresses the need for EU action which addresses the real importance of big cities and urban agglomerations, by considering cities in the context of the development of the region in which they are located, and by encouraging transnational cooperation between these wider regions, on the basis of practical criteria and not of geographical proximity.

5.2.1. The practical need for cross-border cooperation between neighbouring local authorities

Unlike Type 2 cooperation, transnational (cross-border) cooperation between neighbouring local authorities (Type 1) has the ultimate objective of integrating a common area — divided by national frontiers — which faces common problems requiring common solutions, e.g. waste disposal, prevention of water pollution, infrastructure problems and competition to attract industry. Cross-border cooperation between neighbouring local authorities ultimately requires joint cross-border land-use planning and development-planning; transnational cooperation between non-neighbouring local authorities is not, however, geared to small-scale integration between players and their habitat, but is aimed rather at large-scale networking (in the interests of both parties). The first type of cooperation has been addressed in detail in the report issued by the European Parliament’s Committee on Regional Affairs on cross-border supra-regional cooperation (the ‘Myller Report’)(1). Such cooperation attracts assistance under Interreg II A and Article 10 of the ERDF. It is proposed that Type 2 cooperation, namely transnational cooperation between non-neighbouring towns, cities and local authorities, be promoted, in the light of the fact that it stimulates large-scale networking.

5.2.2. Transnational cooperation between non-neighbouring towns, cities and local authorities — an innovative part of internal development policy

The successful work which has been carried out to date under town-twinning schemes should be promoted and stepped up. These schemes focused primarily on cultural and administrative contacts with the main purpose of promoting the post-war concept of European under-

6. Objectives and ‘added-value’ of transnational partnerships between local authorities against a background of change

6.1. Changed emphasis in the objectives of transnational cooperation between local authorities in the new European context

The Committee of the Regions broadly endorses three objectives of transnational cooperation between local authorities in Europe, namely the promotion of understanding, integration and development (responsibilities). Up to the early 80s the emphasis was clearly laid on promoting peace and understanding; from the mid-80s the promotion of development as a key, practical instrument of integration came increasingly to the fore. In this field, too, cooperation and development focused on exchange of information and joint projects designed to reduce economic disparities in the long term and to promote economic and social cohesion between devolved tiers of government (local authorities and regions) within the EU. This cooperation reflected (with varying degrees of emphasis) the ‘European competence’ and ‘added-value’ involved in transnational partnerships. EU programmes, such as Pacte, ECOS and Recite, which are geared to the acquisition of know-how and the implementation of innovative projects, have contributed to the achievement of these goals.

6.2. EU programmes having a bearing on transnational and cross-border cooperation between local authorities: analytical criteria

A total of 12 EU programmes play a significant role in transnational cooperation between local authorities. These programmes, which cover different geographical areas and have different goals, are as follows:

— The town-twinning programme;
— Ecos-Ouverture (in pursuance of Article 10 of the ERDF Regulation);
— Recite II;
— Interreg II A and C;
— Tacis-City Twinning Programme;
— Phare democracy programme, Tacis democracy programme and Phare-Institution Building;
— MED-Urbs;
— URB-AL;
— ASIA Urbs;
— EU-China links between local authorities.

(1) Doc-EN RR/23561, PE 221.020 fin.
6.3. The impact of Agenda 2000 on cross-border, transnational and inter-regional cooperation


These proposals call for the key objectives of the Structural Funds to be reduced from seven to three; the fields covered by the Community initiatives are also to be reduced from 13 to three, with a total budget of 5% of Structural Fund appropriations.

The Community initiatives include the projected initiative on cross-border, transnational and inter-regional cooperation which, under the Commission’s proposal, will in future constitute a purely ERDF initiative; this initiative should receive increased funding.

The Committee notes that the new Community initiatives comprise three forms of cooperation which have hitherto been funded from three different sources, namely:

— cross-border cooperation, funded to date under Interreg II;
— transnational cooperation, funded to date under Interreg II c;
— inter-regional cooperation, funded to date under Article 10 of the ERDF.

The Committee of the Regions welcomes the Commission call for cross-border, transnational and inter-regional cooperation to continue to be funded via a Community initiative. The Committee of the Regions also notes with approval the Commission’s intention to take account of experience with the Pacte, Recite and Ecos-Ouverture programmes with a view to further simplifying and speeding up the implementation of procedures in connection with the organization of inter-regional cooperation. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the Commission’s intention to place implementation of this cooperation on a more decentralized basis than has hitherto been the case.

7. The added-value for the EU of town-twinning schemes

7.1. The Committee of the Regions endorses the assessment made by the associations of European municipalities in regard to the added-value for the EU of town-twinning schemes. Between 1989 and 1990 some 20 000 European cities have been assisted under the EU’s town-twinning programmes. As of 1997 there was a total of 7 621 town-twinning arrangements between the 15 EU Member States and a total of 2 581 twinning arrangements between EU Member States and central and eastern European countries (CEEC) qualifying for EU aid.

7.2. Town-twinning schemes promote the implementation of EU programmes in the following ways:

— they make members of the public more interested in transnational cooperation and, consequently, foster understanding of measures taken by local authorities to promote such cooperation;
— they help people to acquire the necessary skills (foreign languages and experience in negotiating with representatives from other countries);
— they generate trust between local authorities in different countries which is vital to major, expensive projects;
— they can play a key role in the EU enlargement process by alerting local authorities in the EU Member States and the accession states to the scope for cooperation.

7.3. Some two-thirds of local authorities participating in the Pacte and the ECOS EU aid programmes have taken part in twinning schemes. The Committee endorses the EU’s programme on town-twinning in Europe which, in 1997, had an annual budget of ECU 7.5 million and comprised four types of measures: exchange schemes for residents implemented under existing twinning arrangements, conferences, further education seminars and innovative projects. The following facts should however be pointed out: cooperation often operates at the lowest common denominator, twinning arrangements are not planned on a long-term basis and do not embrace a cross-section of projects; and there is a lack of consensus on their added-value. The Committee therefore calls for the programme structure to be modified in order to remedy these shortcomings; it also calls for increased funding for the EU programme on town-twinning in Europe.

8. Specific partnership schemes carried out in pursuance of EU aid policy — added-value and problems of these schemes

8.1. Given its funding (ECU 6 million) the Pacte II-interregional programme for the exchange of experience (implemented under Article 10 of the ERDF regulation and the Phare regulation) can be regarded only as a back-up programme for long-term specific partnership schemes. The internal appraisal report points out that since 1990 (Pacte I), 350 projects have been concluded. 85% of the participants expressed satisfaction with the programme which was wound up in 1997. In the light of the positive response, the Committee calls for the Pacte-programme to be continued.

8.2. The added-value provided by all the above-mentioned programmes is summarized below but the quantitative and qualitative contribution of individual programmes to this list of benefits varies considerably.
This added-value may be improved if existing shortcomings in the administration of the programmes by the Commission are ironed out:

— The European Commission has so far not always ensured that contractual agreements in respect of deadlines and the making of payments on time are respected. In many cases participants in projects do not have at their disposal a contact person at the European Commission, in a position to take decisions, who is able to help them resolve individual problems without delay;

— EU-aid programmes help to ‘Europeanize’ local authorities, and encourage them to expand their horizons and to acquaint themselves with other styles of administration, in order to enhance their ability to solve problems;

— European projects give innovation an impetus which could not be provided by national aid alone. This impetus is facilitated by (a) the transnational partnership principle advocated by European projects, and (b) the requirements in such projects as regards assessments and the transfer of project experiences to transnational partners;

— they may create synergy and further cooperation in other areas;

— they enhance the ‘transnational profile of local authorities’.

8.3. The Committee highlights a number of problems which have arisen with the implementation of the programmes, namely:

— problems of coordination in implementing partnership projects brought about by differences in technical and legal responsibilities and by staff turn-over in administrations and other bodies;

— qualitative differences in the way the project objectives have been achieved; these differences are due to variations in technical expertise and a failure to obtain additional funding and technical resources;

— the fact that the partnership programmes have placed excessive demands on smaller local authorities;

— mistakes in selecting partners (partners failing to live up to expectations and to meet requirements for implementing transnational partnership arrangements);

— conflicts between the inter-departmental European units and the specialist departments of local authorities, which are chiefly responsible for organizing individual projects; these conflicts are triggered by information and communication breakdowns;

— a lack of transnational and inter-cultural experience, particularly as regards small and medium-sized local authorities and their delegates and staff.

9. Provisional appraisal of transnational cooperation and future points of emphasis from ‘peace through cooperation’ to ‘promoting the internal development of local authorities through external (transnational) cooperation’

9.1. Given the record of EU aid policy to date, the Committee recommends that overlapping programmes be tightened up and focused on achieving, for example, ‘new added-value’ and ‘internal development through external cooperation’. The following points should be borne in mind:

— particular key objectives should be identified which may provide blueprints for future urban development and for European powers for local authorities;

— programmes for specialist partnerships and town-twinning should be coordinated and cultural and economic objectives should be regarded as two sides of the same coin;

— bearing in mind the above differences, cross-border cooperation between neighbouring local authorities should be reviewed to see if it is applicable to transnational cooperation between non-neighbouring local authorities;

— partnerships and projects should produce reciprocal learning processes which would promote not just the development of intra-local authority structures but also integration on the wider plane (e.g. the accession of the applicant states to the EU). The general objective here is to strengthen the European responsibilities of local authorities;

— special training measures, backed-up by appropriate aid, should be provided for small and medium-sized local authorities;

— the geographical aspect of providing assistance for cooperation with local authorities in the applicant states should be emphasized. Such cooperation may provide a basis for future integration and serve to promote the reciprocal exchange of experience on appropriate, cost-effective problem solving;

— transnational partnerships must be organized on a long-term basis; this requires a long-term approach and intensive learning processes, particularly in the case of partnerships between local authorities with different levels of development;

— the preparation and planning of partnerships should be improved or revamped in the light of external appraisals of the programme.
10. Models for transnational partnership and innovative ways of achieving added-value: sustainable urban development, transnational learning and the European responsibilities of local authorities

10.1. Sustainable urban development should be promoted as a blueprint for the new added-value provided by transnational partnership. The results of the Habitat II, Local Agenda 21 and the key stages in its implementation in Europe, the Aalborg Charter of 27 May 1994 and the Lisbon Action Plan of 8 October 1996, all illustrate how the internal objectives of transnational cooperation can be redefined. Sustainable urban development is a joint objective recognized by all European and transnational organizations (UN), which may be promoted by exchanges and the transnational learning process.

10.2. The establishment of networks of cities forms part of this objective; smaller local authorities may also be able to benefit from the relevant know-how. Networks of cities have a number of advantages: because they are established by the cities themselves, rather than being set up in pursuance of the policy of an association, they are able actively to pursue directly-defined objectives; they are also able to achieve synergy in carrying out their work. The specific tasks and goals of these networks are geared to a variety of aspects, such as size (e.g. Eurocities), economic and geo-cultural factors (e.g. Union of Baltic Cities), specific objectives (e.g. car-free cities) or umbrella objectives (e.g. sustainable cities).

10.3. The European campaign for ‘sustainable cities and towns’ is therefore not an organization but rather a concerted action which now brings together 350 local authorities. Given the different structures of local authorities and different economic, social, cultural and ecological circumstances, common problems must first be defined before multi-lateral cooperation can take place.

10.4. Cooperation for mutual benefit involves the exchange of administrative, technical and specific responsibilities and, where possible, the adoption of best practice, in areas such as local public transport and infrastructure development.

10.5. The policy of sustainable urban development is not confined solely to particular fields; it also involves examining all decisions involving structural change in the long term to ensure that their compatibility with the principle of sustainable urban development.

10.6. A link can thus be established between, for example, the global concept of sustainable development and the local concept of the ‘learning city’. Transnational cooperation between local authorities is a major element of this learning process, insofar as it involves local authorities.

10.7. Successful transnational cooperation between local authorities highlights a further aspect of added value, namely the acquisition of European responsibilities by local authorities. The three main plants of town-twinning schemes and partnership arrangements are:

— the internal, innovative development potential of local authorities which provides the incentive for taking part in partnership schemes which hold out the prospects of increasing the responsibilities or enhancing the development of participating bodies;

— the ability to see transnational partnerships as providing a template for promoting further development and problem-solving skills within local authorities;

— local authorities can use their experience of transnational cooperation in order to get involved in European networking.

10.8. The aim of transnational cooperation here is to secure reciprocal consolidation of internal and external potential whose benefits include the acquisition by local authorities of European responsibilities.

11. New prospects for transnational partnership and evolutionary strategies

11.1. Formal participation by local authorities in the EU opinion-forming process, e.g. via the Committee of the Regions, is the political aspect of the subsidiarity principle. The development of European responsibilities by local authorities can be seen as the practical implementation of this principle.

11.2. The establishment of legal and administrative responsibilities (self-government), political responsibilities (the strengthening of the principle of vertical democracy), economic responsibilities and environmental responsibilities (backed up by endogenous, financial, technical and organizational resources), are areas in which transnational partnerships can promote learning. The linking of measures to promote understanding and internal development through external cooperation and of steps to combine the forms and objectives of town-twinning with those of partnership arrangements should play a key role in future planning of cooperation between local authorities. Mutual learning from successes and failures will enhance the general problem solving ability of local authorities.

11.3. Learning processes are not geared to short-term success, which can jeopardize lasting solutions, but rather to the long-term and to the achievement of sustainability. New partnerships should therefore be built on a step-by-step approach:

— the first step should be ‘basic’ cooperation involving optional exchange of information and experiences and getting to know each other. This inter-cultural understanding can provide the basis for further unilateral or multilateral cooperation, the second step;
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— the second step involves ‘temporary’ cooperation on the basis of fixed-term pilot projects; this process and the appraisal could form the basis for the next step, namely:

— ongoing cooperation; this step involves sustained, major cooperation which may embrace substantial infrastructure projects. Multilateral cooperation at this level leads to:

— transnational networking.

11.4. The experience gained by the associations of European local authorities, along with appraisals of transnational programmes involving local authorities shows that the abovementioned steps cannot be implemented systematically; instead they provide guidelines for practical action, which protects inexperienced players from excessive burdens. The decisive factor here is the quantitative and qualitative conditions which enable the players successfully to implement partnership schemes.

12. Additional problems and possible solutions

12.1. The efforts to strengthen the European competence or responsibilities of the different players with a view to extending their EU role, involve action on three fronts:

— legal action geared to the removal of legal barriers to transnational cooperation;

— political/administrative action to address the differences in administrative powers vested in local authorities under the different national constitutions;

— technical action on the technical, social and cultural training of the players involved.

12.2. The Committee endorses the Council of Europe Charter of Local Self-government and the additional protocol on a European framework agreement on cross-border cooperation between local authorities, signed in Strasbourg on 9 November 1995. The Committee recognizes that these basic declarations will have to be fleshed out.

12.3. The two models set out below exemplify the action which may be taken in this area:

— the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CCRE) have drawn up a programme covering municipal transnational cooperation (MIC) and an implementing strategy (Capacity and Institution Building — CIB) aimed at strengthening the hand of local authorities; the Committee of the Regions welcomes the programme;

— the programme for Municipal International Cooperation (MIC) has the following objectives:

• planning national policies and programmes for decentralization;

• structuring/restructuring local systems of democratic administration;

• the consolidation of administrative and institutional structures in local authorities;

• better training for public servants and better services for local authorities;

• strengthening the position of local authorities vis-à-vis central government;

• appraisal of the effectiveness of the democratic process at local level;

• enhancing the role played by women in the public administration sector and in local decision-making processes;

• consolidating the role of local authorities with a view to achieving sustainable local development, thereby combatting poverty and promoting social cohesion.

12.4. The European Network of Training Organizations for Regional and Local Authorities (ENTO) set up by the Council of Europe is a valuable instrument for helping the players involved to solve their problems. ENTO is a non-profit organization comprising 70 affiliated organizations drawn from the 40 Member States of the Council of Europe (1998). ENTO’s tasks include:

— the establishment of contacts throughout Europe for the purpose of compiling information on institutions and identifying points of contact;

— the establishment of a pool of experts comprising specialists in the fields of training, development, research, public administration and qualifications;

— the establishment of bilateral and multilateral partnerships with a view to pinpointing and processing aid programmes and applications for aid;

— the organization of staff exchanges and secondments with a view to promoting training and further training for local government officials.

13. Focusing on cooperation with local authorities in the accession states

13.1. The Committee welcomes the measures taken by the EU to strengthen democracy and local authorities. Cooperation with the local authorities in the accession
states should be further stepped up over the next decade. This recommendation is based on:

— the intermediate report issued by the Commission in December 1995 on the impact on EU policies of the enlargement of the EU to include the associated countries of central and eastern Europe (1);

— the Commission communication of 15 July 1997 providing for impact assessments within the framework of Agenda 2000 (Volume II);

— the COR Opinion on the Role of local and regional authorities in EU programmes for education and training for central and eastern Europe (2);

— the COR Opinion on the Effects on the Union’s policies of enlargement to the applicant countries of central and eastern Europe (3).

13.2. The applicant states of central and eastern Europe are being assisted in the task of incorporating the existing body of EU law into their national legislation and implementing EU laws by the EU policy for preparing applicant states for EU membership. Preparations for EU membership involve successfully carrying out the dual task of transformation (of the systems of the applicant states into democratic structures and market economies) and integration (harmonization of standards and social systems). Towns and local authorities are also directly involved here. Most of the CEEC have ratified the European Charter of Local Self-government, but they do not yet have the necessary powers and resources to implement it.

The Committee of the Regions welcomes the fact that, under the new Commission guidelines in respect of the Phare programme, 30 % of Phare funding is allocated to the strengthening of democratic institutions. This funding is to be used, inter alia, to: establish more efficient and more democratic administrations; to enable the accession states to incorporate the existing body of EU legislation, particularly in the fields of justice, internal affairs and measures to combat fraud and organized crime; and to promote participation by the CEEC in EU programmes such as Socrates, Leonardo, Media, etc.

The proposed measures in connection with the Phare programme, particularly those relating to (town-) twinning schemes and the dispatching of experts to work in the CEEC for long periods of time, should be set in train as soon as possible.

Furthermore, it should be possible to back up existing cooperation in the fields of finance, the environment, agriculture, courts and internal affairs with cooperation in other fields, such as that of young people and the social field, in accordance with the needs of the accession states.

The Committee of the Regions also believes it to be important that the programme should not be confined to the establishment of national ministries but should also cover twinnings and traineeships at regional and local level.

13.3. The Committee draws attention to the inadequate administrative capacity and the transport infrastructure, particularly in the smaller towns and rural districts. The Committee is convinced that the proposed partnership schemes will go beyond a one-way flow of traditional (western) development aid. Local authorities in the EU states may also learn lessons from such partnerships, such as how to find simple, cost-effective and lasting solutions to problems besetting local authorities with relatively few resources. When determining the added value of such partnerships, attention should be paid to the time frame; these partnerships frequently only bear fruit in the long term, after ten or more years.

13.4. The Committee urges that these aspects be taken into account when EU programmes, such as Phare/CBC and ECOS are being revamped.

14. Cooperation with the other CEEC and other states

14.1. In view of the growing problems in fields such as the environment and migration, there is a need to step up cross-border and transnational cooperation with local authorities in those states which have not yet applied to join the EU or which lie outside the area concerned. Attention is drawn in this context to the important role played by the following cooperation programmes: Interreg IIA and IIC, Phare, Tacis and Ecos-Ouverture.

14.2. The Committee of the Regions therefore calls for transnational and cross-border cooperation between local authorities to be promoted under existing EU programmes, including:

— MED-URBS, which establishes links and networks between local authorities in the EU and non-EU Mediterranean states. The Committee calls for the MEDA programme to be reinstated and funding be made available so that already selected projects can go ahead and new projects could be submitted (see also separate Commission 4 Opinion on Mediterranean cooperation);

— URB-AL, which promotes cooperation between towns, regions and local authorities in the EU and in Latin America. The Commission should either simplify the overall programme or allow for separate and more small-scale projects under the heading, because the size of the programme is likely to appear overpowering to local authorities;

(1) CSE(95) 605, 5.12.1995.
(2) CDR 298/95 fin — OJ C 100, 2.4.1996, p. 98.
22.2.1999 EN C 51/31 Official Journal of the European Communities

— ASIA-URBS, which promotes decentralized cooperation between local authorities in EU and Asian states engaged in long-term programmes on the environment, industry and urban poverty. The COR calls for the speeding-up of the implementation of the programme which has been in the pipeline for more than a year and has been delayed several times;

— the EU-China programme, which promotes links between local authorities in the EU and China. The COR calls for continuation of the programme to allow for more long-term planning by local authorities.

14.3. The Committee of the Regions also welcomes the establishment of supra-regional working groups, such as that set up in the Danube Basin. Nine cities are currently cooperating on over 240 cross-border projects designed to coordinate economic and environmental interests. The establishment of such associations should be promoted.

15. Conclusions and recommendations

15.1. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the fact that, against the background of a European Union which is becoming increasingly close-knit, the reinforcement of the subsidiarity principle has given local authorities additional responsibilities and opportunities to organize essential services, promote strategic planning and facilitate sustainable development at local authority level.

15.2. The Committee of the Regions supports measures which give local authorities both the statutory right and the ability in practice, to regulate and organize a substantial segment of public administration, including cross-border and transnational cooperation.

15.3. The Committee takes the view that cross-border and transnational cooperation between local authorities is an increasingly important tool for enabling local authorities to participate in the EU’s decision-making and action processes.

15.4. The Committee identifies the following objectives for cross-border and transnational cooperation:

— at intercommunal level: steps to promote sustained urban development, geared to a sustainable quality of life;

— at intercommunal level: going beyond limited projects to include the launching of transnational learning processes designed to strengthen the European role of the players;

— at the EU level: to create the Citizens’ Europe.

15.5. The Committee would reiterate the fundamental importance of interregional cooperation between the regions and the local authorities in providing a strategic axis for the promotion of social and economic cohesion and homogenous, overall development.

15.6. The Committee believes that, against the background of the drive towards integration in the closing years of the 20th century, cross-border and transnational cooperation between local authorities in the EU and China, and in Cyprus, will give a significant bottom-up boost, to the policy of preparing the accession states for EU membership.

15.7. The Committee highlights the importance of strengthening the European powers of local authorities in order to enable them to take part in cross-border and transnational cooperation in Europe. Creation of the necessary legal, institutional, organizational, technical and financial conditions is a sine qua non. Under the European Charter of Local Self-government, adopted by the Council of Europe on 15 October 1985, the Member States are required to remove all administrative barriers to the establishment and operation of partnerships at local level.

15.8. Transnational and cross-border cooperation between local authorities should be included in the existing EU aid policy as a ‘new added value’. In this context the Committee urges that overlapping programmes be tightened up and focused on the same objective, i.e. promoting long-term cross-border and transnational cooperation. It is vital that the specific funding for local authority and transnational partnerships is included, in particular for partnerships with accession states.

15.9. The decentralized supervision of aid projects has proved its worth. The Committee of the Regions therefore calls for the system of decentralized supervision of projects to be maintained since it ensures that aid projects are in touch with the needs of the people.

15.10. The Committee trusts that basic EU programmes for promoting cross-border and transnational cooperation will receive more funding in order to enable a wider range of local authorities to take part.

15.11. The Committee of the Regions also calls for improved funding for the programme to promote twinning arrangements between local authorities. Instead of having a budget heading which has to be reauthorized each year, a long-term programme should be introduced. Attention should be paid to ensuring that funding under the proposed programme is distributed equally.

15.12. The Committee calls upon the European Commission and the Member States (in consultation and
partnership with national local government associations) to promote the establishment and development of information and advisory centres for local authorities; this would not only facilitate access to individual programmes but also assist the search for appropriate partners and provide technical and administrative back-up for projects. In the case of multilateral cooperation geared to networking, these centres could be transformed into coordination bodies with little outlay in terms of staff and funding.

15.13. The Committee draws attention to the fact that a number of Community programmes, such as European Voluntary Service, could make a valuable contribution towards the establishment of cross-border and transnational partnerships between local authorities.

15.14. In this context, the Committee urges the European Commission to simplify the administrative and financial control systems, including auditing arrangements of EU schemes for local projects, in order to enable local authorities to cooperate effectively and without delay. The European Commission should have the final say as regards control over these projects.

15.15. The Committee of the Regions calls upon the Commission to ensure careful programme management so as to uphold the political importance of cross-border, transnational cooperation.

15.16. The Committee advocates greater cooperation with umbrella organizations representing EU local authorities, such as the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), the United Towns Organization (UTO) and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CCRE), with its telematics network ELANET, in order to promote Municipal International Cooperation (MIC). The European Network of Training Organizations for Regional and Local Authorities (ENTO), set up by the Council of Europe, and the Assembly of European Regions (AER) should also be involved, in the light of the forthcoming enlargement of the EU and bearing in mind its wide range of contacts with the regions of central and eastern Europe.


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of the Committee of the Regions
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