Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on Decentralised cooperation in the reform of the EU’s development policy

(2006/C 115/09)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of its Bureau of 5 July 2005 to instruct its Commission for External Relations (RELEX) to draw up an own-initiative opinion, under the fifth paragraph of Article 265 of the EC Treaty, on decentralised cooperation in the reform of the EU’s development policy;

HAVING REGARD TO the External Relations Strategy of the Committee of the Regions: Guidelines (DI CdR 8/2005) adopted on 30 June 2005 by the RELEX commission for submission to the Bureau;

HAVING REGARD TO the work programme of the RELEX commission (CdR 62/2005 item 8 appendix 6) adopted by the Bureau at its meeting on 12 April 2005, in particular Article 1.3;

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion of 23 February 2005 on the Communication from the Commission on the social dimension of globalisation (CdR 328/2004 fin) (1);

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion of 9 October 2003 on the Communication from the Commission on trade and development — assisting developing countries to benefit from trade (CdR 100/2003 fin) (2);

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion of 3 July 2003 on the impact on local and regional authorities of the negotiations on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) at the WTO (CdR 103/2003 fin) (3);

HAVING REGARD TO Articles 177 to 181 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

HAVING REGARD TO the Conclusions of the Council of 23 and 24 May 2005 endorsing the Commission Communications of 12 April 2005;

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee on Speeding up progress towards the Millennium Development Goals — the European Union’s contribution COM (2005) 132 final of 12 April 2005;

HAVING REGARD TO the results of the consultation on the future of EU development policy launched by the Commission on 7 January 2005;

HAVING REGARD TO the Conclusions of the Brussels European Council of 16 and 17 June 2005 (10255/05), in particular Point IV;

HAVING REGARD TO the revised Cotonou Agreement signed on 25 June 2005;

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Proposal for a joint declaration by the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission on the European Development Policy ‘The European Consensus’ COM(2005) 311 final of 13 July 2005;

HAVING REGARD TO the report presented on 21 March 2005 by the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the progress made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals, discussed at the UN Summit in New York in September 2005;

HAVING REGARD TO its draft opinion (CdR 224/2005) adopted on 15 September 2005 by the Commission for External Relations (rapporteur: Ms Juliette Soulabaille, Mayor of Corps-Nuds, FR/PES);

(1) OJ C 164 of 5.7.2005, p. 82.
WHEREAS

1) the Committee of the Regions should speak out on an institutional level about the specific nature of the decentralised development cooperation projects carried out by European regional authorities;

2) it is important to take into account the specialised contribution of actors who, by definition, are experienced in development and in organising democracy which meets public needs and expectations, in order to ensure that the EU’s work towards achieving the global objectives of the fight against poverty is both relevant and effective;

3) the Commission has submitted its proposal for a joint declaration by the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission on the European Development Policy ‘The European Consensus’ COM(2005) 311 final;

adopted the following opinion unanimously at its 62nd plenary session, held on 16 and 17 November 2005 (meeting of 16 November):

1. Views of the Committee of the Regions

1.1 European Development Policy

The Committee of the Regions,

1.1.1 recalls that the Community’s Development Policy is enshrined in Articles 177 to 181 of the Treaty and that it constitutes a key component of the European Union’s external action;

1.1.2 supports the reform of the European Development Policy adopted in November 2000, which was conceived in a spirit of partnership with beneficiary countries, focussing on the fight against global poverty and reaffirming its commitment to democracy and human rights; highlights the importance of the UN Millennium Goals and their focus on fighting poverty; underlines that these ambitious goals cannot be achieved without the active participation of local and regional authorities; this should be stated clearly and local and regional authorities should be given an explicitly important role in development cooperation efforts.

1.1.3 welcomes the measures taken to increase the visibility and effectiveness of European aid, as well as its appropriation by beneficiary countries (the drawing up of real, multi-annual development strategies, the creation of EuropeAid and the now effective deconcentration of European programmes to the Commission Delegations);

1.1.4 notes that the European Union’s Development Policy today concerns an internationally agreed list of 151 countries and territories, and operates through multiple geographical and thematic programmes and, in the case of the ACP countries, through the Cotonou Agreement;

1.1.5 regrets that the Commission, in its Communication of 2002 on the participation of non-state actors (NSAs) in EC development policy (4) and commitment, expressed therein, to the ownership of its programmes by the citizens of the countries concerned, has only taken civil society organisations into account, overlooking the contribution of local authorities;

1.1.6 therefore welcomes the new direction brought to this approach by the recent amendment of the Cotonou Agreement at its midterm review (5), particularly in Article 4, which extends the provisions previously only laid down for NSAs to ‘local decentralised authorities’.

1.2 The role of decentralised cooperation

The Committee of the Regions,

1.2.1 defines decentralised cooperation as international cooperation led by European local authorities (as defined by the respective Member State’s legislation) under the direction of their democratically elected executive and involving local stakeholders distinct from both central state government and civil society;

1.2.2 regrets that European local authorities’ contribution to the European Development Policy, as to other external assistance policies, continues to go largely unrecognised;

1.2.3 notes that, in particular, this lack of recognition leads to local authorities being assigned changing roles within the different programmes connected to development policy, i.e.,

a) certain programmes, such as Urb-Al or Asia Urbs (henceforth part of Asia Pro Eco II), assign them a specific role,

b) in the Communication from the Commission of 2002 on the participation of non-state actors (NSAs) in EC development policy, and in the Cotonou Agreement signed in 2000, the local ‘authorities’ are grouped with state actors, rather than NSAs (non-state actors),
c) while in the Regulation on ‘decentralised cooperation’, the same ‘local (including municipal) authorities’ are included in a long list of civil society actors;

1.2.4 hopes that, when development players other than governments are taken into consideration, a better balance will be established between the various civil society organisations classified as ‘non-state actors’ and local authorities. This is entirely compatible with the partnerships that are often established by authorities with NSAs as part of their decentralised cooperation.

1.3 Local authorities as players in development policy

The Committee of the Regions

1.3.1 stresses that, according to their Member State’s national provisions, European local authorities have for many years maintained cooperative links with their counterparts in non-member countries, particularly in developing countries;

1.3.2 notes that whatever the degree of initiative afforded the authorities, the Member States often offer them various types of support aimed at strengthening the effectiveness of their decentralised cooperation and encouraging its coordination with national development cooperation, thus recognising the added contribution of the authorities;

1.3.3 recalls that authorities bring know-how and experience to decentralised cooperation due to the diversity of their activities in: public health and education services, urban services (water, waste), territorial economic development, including through trade, together with the provision of institutional support for local management, experience of local and regional democracy and functioning democratic institutions, and fostering heritage, not to mention the role they can play in to support peace (‘diplomacy of the cities’). Therefore, their actions are especially valuable in helping ‘decentralised local authorities’ of developing countries, to better fulfil the responsibilities conferred on them by decentralisation;

1.3.4 stresses that local authorities are perfectly placed to bring the issue of development aid to the attention of European citizens and to encourage them to take action;

1.3.5 acknowledges that the diversity of the national provisions, the variety of fields in which local authorities cooperate, the characteristics of each authority and the varying amounts of human and financial resources dedicated to decentralised cooperation have formed a rich and complex picture;

1.3.6 believes that clarity is a key element in the recognition of the contribution made by authorities to the fight against poverty and to the promotion of democracy, for it allows decentralised cooperation to be seen not only as a simple proliferation of actions or programmes but as a local dimension of a global strategy for national or regional development;

1.3.7 welcomes the initiative of local authorities in both European and developing countries in structuring their cooperation on a thematic or geographical basis;

1.3.8 welcomes the creation in 2004 of the international organisation ‘United Cities and Local Governments’ (UCLG), now recognised by the United Nations as a representative body, founded on values of peace, local autonomy and solidarity and uniting the governments of all regions of the world around the issue of international cooperation;


The Committee of the Regions

1.4.1 thanks the Commission for sending its Proposal for a joint declaration, which is of great political importance, to the Committee;

1.4.2 welcomes this submission, considering that in itself it constitutes a recognition of local authorities as players in European development policy;
1.4.3 shares the general perspective of the text that ‘globalisation is a positive force for all of mankind’, a position it adopted itself in a previous opinion (6):

e) recognises that better governance is key to a successful development policy and believes that the key element of good governance is a recognition that decisions are best made at the closest level possible to the citizens;

1.4.4 welcomes the desire to strengthen consistency, within the European Union’s development activities, between internal and external policies (particularly necessary in the fields of international trade and agriculture) and between action by the Commission and that of Member States, through the establishment of a ‘thematic framework’ to guide priority selection:

2.2 proposes adoption of the following measures, using the organisations already established by the authorities to structure their decentralised cooperation on development, particularly as part of United Cities and Local Governments, as well as bodies working to foster decentralised cooperation:

2.2.1 regarding European local authorities:

a) identify decentralised cooperation operations, a precondition for increasing appreciation of its richness among Community partners, and for encouraging exchanges of experience and synergies between authorities. The example of the Observatory on Decentralised Cooperation between the European Union and Latin America (following a call for projects launched as part of Urb-Al) should be welcomed and considered as a model for other areas of the world;

b) encourage the creation of a platform similar to that for NGOs (CONCORD) to establish political dialogue between Community institutions and local authorities focussed on development;

c) facilitate exchanges of information and discussion between authorities by providing funding for twinning programmes between authorities in the EU and in developing countries;

d) examine in the form of a study the different legislative and regulatory provisions which, in the different member States, influence local authorities’ actions on international cooperation;

2.2.2 regarding local and regional authorities from developing countries, application of the general principles of aid to European development using a decentralised approach:

a) with regard to the deconcentration of the Commission’s activities: the Commission delegations should be more aware of the local dimension, emphasising the complementary nature of decentralised cooperation compared with that conducted at state level, and its relevance, given the needs of the local authorities of the countries concerned, to advancing democratisation and decentralisation. In this sense, guidelines could be laid down to monitor this aspect at every stage of a programme’s creation from its conception up to funding at the implementation stage;

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b) to strengthen regional integration, the creation of associations and networks of local elected representatives could be encouraged and aided by their European counterparts;

c) to harmonise aid, 'country forums' bringing together European local authorities that are active in a given country could be organised. These might be considered for the four countries where, following decisions made at the March 2002 Barcelona Council, the harmonisation of aid between Member States is being tested;

2.3 recommends the inclusion of local authorities in driving forward European development policy envisaged by the Commission; they already know how to play a role, working with NGOs, in raising public awareness of the issues surrounding the fight against global poverty through specific actions aimed at their citizens, especially young people;

2.4 The Proposal for a joint declaration by the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission on the European Development Policy 'The European Consensus' COM(2005) 311 final

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2.4.1 is concerned about the changes to be made to the 'decentralised cooperation' budget heading from 2007, given the emphasis placed on countries that have 'difficult partnerships' with the European Union; this heading is currently (7) reserved specifically for such countries, despite being allocated a clearly insufficient amount;

2.4.2 calls for budgetary aid, which should become increasingly important in European aid arrangements, to provide an opportunity for beneficiary governments to transfer, from the national budget to local authorities, funds appropriate to the responsibilities conferred on them by ongoing decentralisation measures;

2.4.3 calls on the Commission, at this new stage of the European Union's development policy, to take into consideration the recommendations made in this opinion.

Brussels, 16 November 2005.

Peter STRAUB