Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on ‘The EU — a global partner for development: Speeding up progress towards the Millennium Development Goals’

(2009/C 76/06)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

— welcomes the Commission’s growing awareness that local authorities ‘are increasingly vocal in their wish to become stakeholders and actors in development’ but stresses, that local and regional authorities are not newcomers to this sphere; they have already been active for decades and are both committed to and interested in participating as active players in development cooperation, its funding and its reform;

— reiterates the need to set up a ‘stock exchange’ (bourse/electronic internet portal) for local and regional authorities that are actively involved in decentralised cooperation on the basis of a system established at local and regional level. It will notably ease exchanges of information among European local and regional authorities active in development cooperation and allow matching between local and regional authority projects in Europe and in developing countries. This would facilitate the development of decentralised cooperation projects and improve their coordination, create synergies and avoid duplication; welcomes the cooperation with DG Development in this respect;

— draws attention to the fact that many of the EU’s local and regional authorities have development-based links with their counterparts in the developing world, and thus acquired expertise, especially in such spheres as education, health, municipal services (water and waste management), small-scale fishing and aquaculture, infrastructure, transport, communications, the environment, rural development, regional economic development and supporting the development of local bodies and political decentralisation;

— notes that the involvement of local and regional authorities in the recipient countries must be taken into account when trying to make development policy more effective and coherent.
General comments

1. welcome the Commission’s communication, since development policy is urgently needed to combat worldwide poverty and its causes and achieve equality. Europe cannot cut itself off from the problems of the rest of the world;

2. hopes that 2008 will mark a turning-point in EU development efforts, which aim to make the Millennium Development Goals a political priority;

3. is concerned to note that the volume of European development aid has decreased for the second year running and that only a few countries (e.g. the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark) are fulfilling the international commitment in relation to the amount of aid given;

4. also laments the fact that not only is the amount of aid granted by the European Union too low, but it is also not sufficiently effective;

5. considers the communication to be very important for local and regional authorities and therefore welcomes the Commission’s recognition that the EU must adopt an inclusive approach that involves local government and civil society, both in Europe and in the developing countries;

6. welcomes the Commission’s growing awareness that local authorities ‘are increasingly vocal in their wish to become stakeholders and actors in development’ but stresses, that local and regional authorities are not newcomers to this sphere; they have already been active for decades and are both committed to and interested in participating as active players in development cooperation, its funding and its reform; points out that some European counties and regions are already fulfilling their proportional contribution towards the target of spending 0.7 % of gross national income on development cooperation;

7. is pleased about the fruitful cooperation between the Committee of the Regions and the Commission, which demonstrates that the role of the Committee of the Regions and of local and regional authorities in development policy is receiving increasing recognition. Local and regional authorities should be regarded as important partners who are involved in EU development policy;

8. calls to mind the principle that good governance is decisive for the success of development policy and that a key aspect of good governance is an awareness that the best decisions are taken as close as possible to grassroots level;

9. recognises the importance of budgetary and sectoral aid, in particular for the poorest countries, but urges that a mechanism be created in relations between central government and civil society players whereby a new culture can be developed in the use of aid. This might take the form of a scheme at local and regional authority level to link central government and civil society development aid;

10. notes that a stronger and more effective partnership between European players would ensure that measures are complementary and strategically sustainable, especially in relation to aid management;

11. urges the Commission to give priority to the inclusion in the Community budget of the European Development Fund (EDF) and to coordinate it with the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) within the enlarged European Neighbourhood Policy, in order to improve the coordination of the EU’s development cooperation policy activities;

Specific comments

12. welcomes the Commission’s recognition that in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals the EU must adopt an approach that encourages participation and that it invites local and regional authorities and civil society to be involved in development policy both at European level and in the developing countries;

13. calls for local and regional government as well as civil society organisations to be treated as actors in their own right, each of which has an important but distinct role and relevance in relation to development efforts and calls for their action to be coordinated, complementary, effective and efficient, transparent and participatory;
14. reiterates the need to set up a ‘stock exchange’ (bourse/electronic internet portal) for local and regional authorities that are actively involved in decentralised cooperation on the basis of a system established at local and regional level. It will notably ease exchanges of information among European local and regional authorities active in development cooperation and allow matching between local and regional authority projects in Europe and in developing countries. This would facilitate the development of decentralised cooperation projects and improve their coordination, create synergies and avoid duplication; welcomes the cooperation with DG Development in this respect:

15. welcomes the initiative taken by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) to develop an Internet portal for municipalities to help them to find a twinning partner in Europe; welcomes the extension of the twinning portal managed by the CEMR, which enables twinning between European municipalities with municipalities in developing countries; the Committee should consolidate and encourage the work carried out by the CEMR.

II. THE LOCAL AND REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

European players

16. emphasises that all Europeans, including public authorities, the private sector and individual citizens, must share responsibility for global development issues;

17. notes that although — depending on the Member State — not all levels of local and regional government necessarily have competence for development cooperation, this means that there is a need for collective responsibility for development issues at European level. Development cooperation must in one way or another be incorporated into the activities of local and regional authorities, even if this does not happen directly through financial aid projects with the partners in the developing countries. Ways of doing this could be presented at a special exchange ‘forum’;

18. sees as positive from the perspective of local and regional government that the Commission recognises the need to include local and regional authorities in development cooperation, and welcomes the Commission’s communication in particular from this point of view;

19. draws attention to the fact that many of the EU’s local and regional authorities have development-based links with their counterparts in the developing world, and thus acquired expertise, especially in such spheres as education, health, municipal services (water and waste management), small-scale fishing and aquaculture, infrastructure, transport, communications, the environment, rural development, regional economic development and supporting the development of local bodies and political decentralisation;

20. believes that these projects will give local and regional authorities legitimacy, expertise and experience in those areas that are particularly important for the economic and social progress of the developing countries, and that it is therefore vitally important to give them a more significant role and to draw on their experience in development policy;

21. points out that in many EU Member States, local and regional authorities have a legal right to take part in national development policy on the basis of decentralised cooperation. They can therefore be regarded as direct players in EU development policy and external affairs;

22. points to the advantages of decentralised cooperation and draws attention to the need to promote it, since many local and regional authorities directly fund and implement development policy. The have a complementary role and make development policy more coherent;

23. stresses that municipalities and regions wish to strengthen their involvement based on partnership and expertise by making efforts above all in the specific areas covered by local and regional government. They will also work together with development cooperation actors to raise people’s awareness of solidarity with developing countries;

24. believes that the closeness of local and regional government to the people and the subsidiarity principle mean that its role is, at its best, a multi-level perspective, which is part of national, European and global development policy and ensures and improves the effectiveness of aid;

25. stresses the important role which local and regional authorities in the outermost regions can play as privileged partners in the development of the EU’s cooperation policies with neighbouring third countries, while also serving as laboratories for projects requiring appropriate coordination of the European Development Fund (EDF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF);

Third country players

26. notes that the involvement of local and regional authorities in the recipient countries must be taken into account when trying to make development policy more effective and coherent:
27. stresses that local ownership and decentralisation should be guiding principles in relation to development efforts and development policy;

28. would like to see an approach promoted which would enable local and regional government in Europe and the developing countries better support development stakeholders and players;

29. shares the view that democracy does not just mean free choice, but is built on a daily basis — reflecting economic and social development, in which local and regional government plays a key role;

30. notes that the added value of local and regional authorities is particularly evident in their role, which is ideally to establish democracy and good governance, and to promote the decentralised model of government;

31. stresses that representatives of European local and regional authorities do not work solely with their counterparts in the South, but also with the rest of civil society;

32. draws attention to the problems that arise from aid being dependent on a one-sided, top-down system, which is the most common approach used by even the European Commission to deliver aid. Real partnership and involvement of the local level and organisations representing it (i.e. associations of local and regional authorities) are absent, which means that funding does not have an effect at local level. At the same time the effects of aid provided by NGOs, which is generally local, do not necessarily extend to public authorities, local and regional authorities and institutional mechanisms, which further hampers the long-term impact and effectiveness of aid;

33. feels that the top-down system does not result in adequate involvement of local and regional authorities, and involvement of the right people, nor allow for different approaches and breadth. Therefore, a bridge is needed to connect central government and the grassroots level. In many of the developing countries receiving aid, local government and support for it could produce tangible solutions, which must obviously be implemented on a case-by-case basis;

34. is convinced that granting development aid to local and regional authorities within the recipient country would in many cases produce better, more transparent and more sustainable governance. Care must be taken to ensure that the cost to the donor is kept within acceptable limits.


The President
of the Committee of the Regions

Luc VAN DEN BRANDE