Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on the Tenth anniversary of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: A work programme to meet the challenges of the next five years

(2006/C 81/12)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on the Tenth anniversary of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: A work programme to meet the challenges of the next five years (COM(2005) 139 final);

HAVING REGARD TO the European Commission’s decision of 3 June 2005 to consult it under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of its Bureau of 12 April 2005 to instruct its Commission for External Relations to draw up an opinion on this subject;

HAVING REGARD TO its outlook opinion of 21 April 2004 on The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and local and regional authorities: the need for coordination and a specific instrument for decentralised cooperation (CdR 327/2003) (1);

HAVING REGARD TO the Conclusions of the conference Towards a new Euro-Mediterranean Area which, on its initiative, brought together local and regional representatives in Livorno, Italy on 31 October 2003 (CdR 350/2003);

HAVING REGARD TO the Conclusions of the First Session of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly held in Cairo in March 2005;

HAVING REGARD TO the Conclusions of the 7th Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference, held in Luxembourg on 30 and 31 May 2003;

HAVING REGARD TO the report on Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, Ten years after Barcelona: Achievements and Perspectives, prepared by FEMISE;

HAVING REGARD TO the report on Barcelona Plus: Towards a Euro-Mediterranean Community of Democratic States, prepared by EuroMeSCo;

HAVING REGARD TO the declaration of Euro-Mediterranean mayors approved by the Eurocities’ Euromed Commission in Byblos on 27 September 2003;

HAVING REGARD TO its Resolution on the 6th Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference (CdR 357/2003) (2);

HAVING REGARD TO its draft opinion (CdR 142/2005 rev. 1), adopted by the Commission for External Relations on 30 June 2005 (rapporteur: Ms Terron i Cusi, Secretary-General of the Patronat Catalá pro Europa — Government delegate of the Generalitat de Cataluña in Brussels (ES/PES));

unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 61st plenary session, held on 12 and 13 October 2005 (meeting of 13 October):

1. Views of the Committee of the Regions

1.1 General comments

The Committee of the Regions,

1.1.1 welcomes the Commission’s Communication and greatly appreciates its continued full commitment to the Euro-Mediterranean partnership;

1.1.2 agrees that the Barcelona Process has developed a strong partnership on a basis of joint ownership, dialogue and cooperation;

1.1.3 stresses that the strong links that exist between the EU and its Mediterranean partners are historical and strategic in nature, but that the EuroMed partners are also interdependent due to trade, financial, tourism and migration flows;

1.1.4 supports the idea that the tenth anniversary of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership provides an opportunity to further develop cooperation between the two sides of the Mediterranean and give a new impetus to the Barcelona Process;

1.1.5 notes that the record of the 10 years is in general positive and shows significant achievements, although advances in some important matters have followed a very slow path;

(2) OJ C 73 of 23.3.2004, p. 77.
1.1.6 acknowledges the ambitious and well prepared work programme proposed by the Commission;

1.1.7 stresses that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership is a very important dossier for the CoR and that from the start of the Barcelona Process it has backed and encouraged cooperation between the two sides of the Mediterranean;

1.1.8 notes that further efforts have to be made in order to involve sub-state actors in the Barcelona Process, since they are key players who should contribute to the deepening and enhancing of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership;

1.1.9 points out that it has consistently called for greater involvement of local and regional authorities in the Barcelona Process;

1.1.10 welcomes the Conclusions of the 7th Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference regarding the role of regional and local authorities, which need to be more closely involved in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in order to take stock of their common challenges, and exchange experiences and best practice;

1.1.11 expresses its willingness to strengthen cooperation with existing institutions involved in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

1.2 Stocktaking of the Barcelona Process

The Committee of the Regions,

1.2.1 agrees that cooperation has improved in the political and security dimension, although the pace has been slower than hoped for. On the positive side, one major achievement has been the creation of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly in 2004 together with the operation of some confidence-building measures;

1.2.2 considers that the Barcelona Process has not resulted in a significant advance in democratisation and has not had any direct effect on the major unresolved conflicts in the region, and especially on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict;

1.2.3 endorses the view that progress in the Partnership has concentrated on the economic and commercial objectives of the Barcelona Declaration aimed at creating a Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area by 2010. The network of bilateral Euromed Association Agreements is now almost complete and tariff barriers for industrial goods have disappeared or are progressively been dismantled;

1.2.4 stresses that insufficient progress has been made in achieving reciprocal liberalisation of agricultural trade, that foreign and domestic private investment in the partner countries remains low, and that the prosperity gap has not been reduced;

1.2.5 considers that the limited progress in South-South integration is due to a number of factors, and notably to the low level of institutional development in the Mediterranean partner countries;

1.2.6 notes moreover that foreign direct investment has increased very little. South-South integration has not improved. The ‘Agadir’ agreement signed in 2004 between Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Egypt has not been ratified yet;

1.2.7 agrees that in the human, cultural and social dimension, education is a key element. Cooperation with civil society has been strengthened, and the creation in 2004 of the Anna Lindh Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures will further promote exchanges in those fields;

1.2.8 welcomes the substantial progress that has been made in the financial aspects of the partnership through the creation of FEMIP (the Euro-Mediterranean Investment Facility), and in speeding up project and programme implementation of MEDA II;

1.2.9 reiterates that the lack of coordination between MEDA II and INTERREG III has limited involvement by local and regional authorities in the southern Mediterranean countries in cooperation projects implemented under INTERREG III owing to the lack of European co-financing for the Mediterranean partners; reaffirms the need for crossborder cooperation, and suggests that the new ENPI financial instrument be used for this purpose;

1.2.10 reiterates that, as a consequence, this has prevented the dissemination, in accordance with the Barcelona spirit, of experience and good practice relating to the partnership at local and regional level, despite the fact that many regional and local authorities in the EU have forged close links with their counterparts on the southern side of the Mediterranean.

1.3 Proposed initiatives and work programme

The Committee of the Regions,

1.3.1 agrees that in the field of human rights and democracy, further efforts have to be made in promoting gender equality, fundamental and social rights, independent judiciaries and pluralism, and in striving towards common views of the challenge of democratisation;

1.3.2 stresses that, to that end, the involvement and engagement of sub-state actors (regional and local), together with civil society and social partners, is crucial to reach achievements in this field;
1.3.1.0 offers its Mediterranean partners; 

1.3.1.1 endorses the importance of launching a regional cooperation programme for rural development;

1.3.1.2 welcomes the proposal to engage in a dialogue with partner countries and Member States in order to increase bilateral cooperation in the sector of education and vocational training, with a view to achieving three goals by 2015: eradication of illiteracy in the region; all students without distinction of gender to be enrolled in primary school; and the elimination of gender disparity at all levels of education;

1.3.1.3 emphasises the primary importance of the agricultural issue for Mediterranean partners;

1.3.1.4 considers, therefore, that there is an urgent need to refine the CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) and to open the Community’s market to Mediterranean products, and to install an EAGGF-type instrument for these products in order to facilitate unavoidable adjustments;

1.3.1.5 endorses the importance of launching a regional cooperation programme for rural development;

1.3.1.6 believes that a truly regional market can only be achieved by strengthening integration among Mediterranean partners, deepening reform through a comprehensive approach, involving civil society and sub-state actors, and showing a strong political will;

1.3.1.7 thinks that association agreements are bilateral in nature and do not really provide the Mediterranean partners with instruments for regional integration, which is a necessary step towards the creation of a truly regional market;

1.3.1.8 considers that the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) can contribute, through action plans, to qualitative changes in EuroMed relations, but that this must not be done at the expense of the multilateral dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The Barcelona Process should remain the central instrument for partnership and dialogue for the region;

1.3.1.9 points out that the creation of the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENP), which replaces existing programmes such as MEDA, calls for a renewed interest in fostering cooperation with the Mediterranean partner countries in order to complete the set of proposed action plans with them, without diluting the regional component which was present in the MEDA programme or reducing (in absolute or relative terms) the financial aid which the European Union offers its Mediterranean partners;

1.3.1.10 stresses that the creation of FEMIP and its provisions for co-financing bring an urgent need to assess the practical possibilities for setting up a Euro-Mediterranean Development Bank;

1.3.1.11 endorses, therefore, the Commission proposal to submit an assessment in consultation with the EIB in 2007;

1.3.1.12 welcomes the idea that the EU and the Mediterranean countries should agree to negotiate on the liberalisation and integration of trade in services and establishment, and regrets that the Commission has not yet carried out a study of the impact of establishing the free trade area; this should take into account the five challenges to be tackled by MEDA II: population, employment and migration, globalisation, dwindling of resources, and the environmental challenge; recalls that this document has been expected since the Malta conference (Barcelona II, 1997) and has been requested on several occasions by it and the European Parliament;

1.3.1.13 notes that the Mediterranean is a pre-eminent area for dialogue between cultures and civilisations; and calls for continued support for initiatives designed to create a common audiovisual area, to enhance understanding amongst societies, and to fight racism and all forms of xenophobia, including Islamophobia and anti-Semitism;
1.3.21 regrets that the Commission’s Communication of 12 April 2005 contains no proposal to increase the role of sub-state actors in the partnership or to establish consultation mechanisms with the existing EuroMed institutions; nevertheless welcomes the important sub-state regional programmes, such as MEDACT and MEDPACT, for stepping up this action;

1.3.22 agrees that the visibility of the partnership needs to be improved in both the EU and partner countries, and that this requires a number of jointly agreed, clear and consistent messages to be addressed to ordinary men and women using the most effective means of communication and dissemination;

1.3.23 stresses that local and regional authorities, on both the northern and southern sides of the Mediterranean, provide a functional, political and territorial link between central government and civil society;

1.3.24 recalls, finally, that all the areas mentioned in the Commission’s Communication as key areas for cooperation in the Barcelona Process are ones where local and regional authorities can offer the greatest expertise:

— fostering democratisation;
— reforming institutions;
— policies promoting SMEs;
— policies promoting investment;
— agriculture, fisheries and rural development;
— policies promoting employment;
— regional and spatial planning;
— urban planning;
— environment, resource management and prevention of natural disasters;
— the sub-regional dimension of transport and energy;
— cultural and sporting initiatives;
— policies for safeguarding and fostering heritage;
— social proximity policies;
— education and training;
— health;
— managing immigration flows, reception and integration policy;
— increasing the visibility of the partnership.

2. The Committee of the Regions’ recommendations

The Committee of the Regions,

2.1 underlines the potential role of local and regional authorities in strengthening the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership;

2.2 emphasises, therefore, that the contribution of those authorities is vital in order to make progress in human rights and democracy, economic and social development, and cultural dialogue and understanding, which form the key guidelines underpinning the Barcelona Process and the main priorities of the work programme for the next five years;

2.3 reiterates its call for steps to be taken to increase the involvement of local and regional authorities in the Euro-Mediterranean Process, since they are prime movers in the establishment of an area of peace, stability and prosperity in the Mediterranean region;

2.4 stresses that regional cooperation at the political and, official level is good policy, and that civil society networks provide good partnerships. However, these need to be backed by other mechanisms, including sub-state partnerships;

2.5 calls for the creation of a new forum in the Euro-Mediterranean institutional framework, with the task of promoting territorial and decentralised cooperation, encouraging the partnership, developing programmes that include schemes to be undertaken all over the Mediterranean region, and analysing the functioning of association agreements with Mediterranean partners. The forum could include local and regional authorities from both sides of the Mediterranean;

2.6 suggests that the Commission note the call made to local authorities at the first session of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly, asking them to contribute more to building networks of contacts for promoting dialogue and mutual understanding and exchanging experience and best practice;

2.7 stresses that involvement of social players and civil society is central to the success of the partnership and to the achievement of its goals, but that this cannot be accomplished without involving regional and local institutions and authorities;

2.8 believes that there is a need to transcend the traditional limits of centralised cooperation and that local and regional authorities are the most appropriate level for decentralised cooperation;

2.9 notes in this context that there is scope for action by local and regional authorities that complements and goes beyond the traditional limits of cooperation at central-government level;
2.10 **believes** that the creation of instruments to promote crossborder and transnational cooperation could promote territorial cooperation in the regions of the Mediterranean basin;

2.11 **points out** that the decentralised cooperation practices developed in recent years have highlighted the responsibility that local authorities bear in their role as a catalyst for these new cooperation processes, as was also acknowledged by the Commission in its note on decentralised cooperation in January 2000;

2.12 **notes** that while the crucial role played by local and regional authorities has been acknowledged by many Member States, it should be harmonised and better clarified at EU level; it should also be stated explicitly that their partners in the southern Mediterranean countries should represent decentralised bodies, directly elected by citizens in the regions concerned, and not — or not only — officials who are local representatives of central government;

2.13 **recommends** that the Commission acquire a more in-depth knowledge of the functions and powers of sub-national institutions in the southern Mediterranean countries by carrying out a comparative analysis of local and regional authorities and the reforms under way in the region.


The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Peter STRAUB