

Outlook Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and local and regional authorities: the need for coordination and a specific instrument for decentralised cooperation

(2004/C 121/05)

The Committee of the Regions,

HAVING REGARD to the letter of 5 September 2003 from Mrs de Palacio, Vice-President of the European Commission, to Sir Albert Bore, President of the Committee of the Regions, inviting the Committee of the Regions, in accordance with Article 265(1) of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to draw up an outlook opinion assessing the progress made in the Barcelona Process, analysing the functioning of the association agreements in force with the Mediterranean partner countries and to provide insights, drawn from the experience of the CoR, on the development of cooperation between EU regions and regions of the southern Mediterranean countries or between the southern Mediterranean regions themselves;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision by its Bureau on 6 November 2003 to instruct the Commission for External Relations to draw up an outlook opinion on the matter;

HAVING REGARD TO the Protocol governing arrangements for cooperation between the European Commission and the Committee of the Regions, signed by their respective presidents on 20 September 2001 (DI CdR 81/2001 rev. 2);

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on strengthening the Mediterranean policy of the European Union: Proposals for implementing a Euro-Mediterranean partnership (COM(1995) 72 final) (CdR 371/95) ⁽¹⁾;

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion on Local authorities and the Euro-Mediterranean partnership (CdR 125/97 fin) ⁽²⁾;

HAVING REGARD TO its resolution on Decentralised cooperation and the role of regional and local authorities in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership (CdR 40/2000 fin) ⁽³⁾;

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion on Regional and local authorities and the European Union's common strategy for the Mediterranean (CdR 123/2000 fin) ⁽⁴⁾;

HAVING REGARD TO the European Parliament resolution on the Commission Communication on relations between the EU and the Mediterranean: reinvigorating the Barcelona partnership (A5-0009/2001);

HAVING REGARD TO the European Parliament report on the annual report on the MEDA 2000 programme (A5-0114/2003);

HAVING REGARD TO the European Parliament report on Wider Europe (A5-0378/2003);

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission on Wider Europe — Neighbourhood (COM(2003)104 final);

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion of 9 October 2003 on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on Wider Europe — Neighbourhood: a New Framework for our Relations with our Eastern and Southern neighbours (CdR 175/2003 fin) ⁽⁵⁾;

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

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 126 of 29.4.1996, p. 12.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 64 of 27.2.1998, p. 59.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 156 of 6.6.2000, p. 47.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 22 of 24.1.2001, p. 7.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ C 23 of 27.1.2004, p. 36.

HAVING REGARD TO the conclusions of the conference Towards a new Euro-Mediterranean area, which brought together local and regional representatives in Livorno on 31 October 2003 at the initiative of the Committee of the Regions (CdR 350/2003);

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament To prepare the VI Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Naples, 2-3 December 2003 (Barcelona VI), which the Commission referred to the Committee of the Regions on 5 November 2003;

HAVING REGARD TO the conclusions of the Interinstitutional Conference to re-launch the Mediterranean dimension, Palermo, 27-28 November 2003;

HAVING REGARD TO its resolution on the VI Euro-Mediterranean Conference in Naples on 2 and 3 December (CdR 357/2003 fin) ⁽¹⁾;

HAVING REGARD TO the Report by the High-Level Advisory Group on the Dialogue between Peoples and Cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean Area of 2 December 2003;

HAVING REGARD TO the Commission's Third report on economic and social cohesion, in particular its reference to the need to promote a neighbourhood policy and establish a 'Grand Voisinage' action or instrument for the outermost regions of the EU;

HAVING REGARD TO its draft opinion (CdR 327/2003 rev. 2) adopted on 1 March 2004 by the Commission for External Relations (rapporteurs: Mr Jacques Blanc, President of the Languedoc-Roussillon Regional Council (FR/EPP) and Mr Gianfranco Lamberti, Mayor of Livorno (IT/PES));

Unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 54th plenary session, held on 21 and 22 April 2004 (meeting of 21 April):

1. The Committee of the Regions' views

The Committee of the Regions

1.1 welcomes the fact that the Commission, under the Protocol on Cooperation with the Committee, has requested it to draw up an outlook opinion on the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and decentralised cooperation, so that an assessment can be made of the experience of the partnership between the northern and southern sides of the Mediterranean from the viewpoint of the regions and local authorities;

1.2 warmly welcomes every new opportunity and initiative for cooperation between local and regional authorities in the EU and their counterparts in Mediterranean partner countries;

1.3 considers that the relations which local and regional authorities and cities in countries on the northern and southern sides of the Mediterranean have already established over the past two decades or more constitute a 'common heritage' of know-how, knowledge and exchanges. In the view of the Committee of the Regions this heritage, which must be built on and fostered, is a key pillar of the partnership, not only in social and cultural terms but also in terms of promoting political stability and security, which has not yet attained an adequate level;

1.4 notes that EU enlargement poses a double challenge for the EU institutions as regards:

— implementing development and cohesion policies designed to bring about integration between 25 states;

— managing a new framework for relations with our new neighbours in eastern Europe and the southern Mediterranean, in the light of the strategy for an enlarged Europe;

In a recent speech in Alexandria, President Prodi stated: 'This means establishing ever closer and stronger relations with all our neighbours, creating a "ring of friends" with whom we can share all the benefits of membership, barring the Union's institutions';

1.5 points out that, as long ago as 1995, in its opinion on strengthening EU Mediterranean policy, it stressed that the Mediterranean Basin was a strategically important region – both for the EU and its present and future Member States – in which it was necessary to construct a strong economic area capable of contributing to the Union's regional balance by pursuing peace, stability and prosperity as the key objectives;

1.6 considers that, in creating an area of peace, stability and prosperity in the Mediterranean, the fact cannot be ignored that the Kingdom of Morocco has an Atlantic coast that borders the EU. Cooperation between this area and nearby European territories, some of which are outermost regions, must therefore be promoted;

1.7 feels that failure to take account of the Euro-Mediterranean dimension would create instability and insecurity on the European Union's southern fringes, from Morocco to Turkey and from the Sahara to the Caspian Sea. Cooperation in the Mediterranean area is essential for peace and stability. 'To try to build the new Europe while neglecting "the cradle of civilisation" would be grave error' (Romano Prodi, Bologna, May 2003);

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 73 of 23.3.2004, p. 77.

1.8 believes accession of Cyprus and Malta to the EU can bring a positive impetus to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Wishes also in this respect for a successful conclusion to the current negotiations on a reunification of Cyprus;

1.9 stresses that, in view of the situation in the countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, the European Union must significantly step up its action in this region. The Mediterranean cannot be both the 'cradle of civilisation' and a peripheral region; it cannot be considered both a top priority for action to promote coexistence and cooperation between peoples and cultures, and solely a security issue. Moreover, the Mediterranean is characterised by its wealth and diversity, its regions steeped in history, and also its vulnerability;

1.10 emphasises that, as concerns the strategy of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation: 'The EU is committed to the promotion of democracy, good governance and the rule of law as well as the promotion and protection of all human rights: civil, political, economic, social and cultural ... In particular, the EU places great importance on: the abolition of the death penalty, the fight against torture and inhuman treatment, combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination against minorities, the promotion and protection of the rights of women and of the child and the protection of human rights defenders. The EU fully recognises the crucial role played by civil society in the promotion of human rights and democratisation';

1.11 points out that, already in its opinions on Local authorities and the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and Regional and local authorities and the European Union's common strategy for the Mediterranean, the Committee considered it necessary to promote dialogue between cultures and religions.

Continuing and strengthening the Barcelona Process

The Committee of the Regions

1.12 believes that, because of its strategic dimension, the Barcelona Process represents the key framework for dialogue and cooperation between the EU and its Mediterranean partners;

1.13 recalls that, in keeping with the 'Barcelona spirit', the Euro-Mediterranean partnership is structured on two levels of action – bilateral and regional – in three equally important areas, viz.: political and security cooperation; economic and financial cooperation; and cooperation in the sphere of social, cultural and human relations. Launched in 1995, this strategy is gradually becoming imbued with the spirit of sustainable development, which should be at the heart of all Euro-Mediterranean cooperation at sub-national level, as it is in the action plan initiated by States under the aegis of UNEP (United Nations Strategic Action Plan for the Mediterranean);

1.14 stresses that the 27 Euro-Mediterranean partners have set three priority objectives: 1) the creation of an area of peace

and stability founded on dialogue; 2) the creation of an area of prosperity based on free trade; 3) mutual understanding and closeness between peoples and cultures in the Mediterranean Basin;

1.15 notes that the Barcelona Process, as also pointed out by the Commission and the European Parliament, has not evolved linearly or produced the hoped-for results, despite the partners' efforts: 1) the conflicts and tensions in the Balkans, Algeria and the Near and Middle East (including the war in Iraq) have hampered the creation of an area of stability while the Israeli-Arab peace process is seriously stalled; 2) with the signing of new association agreements and an increase in the volume of trade, the economic disparity between the two sides of the Mediterranean countries has widened. On the one hand the economic dependence of countries in the South on those in the North has increased; on the other hand the food self-sufficiency of countries in the South has decreased⁽¹⁾; 3) some progress has been made in the area of cultural and social dialogue. However, freedom of expression is still not fully respected in many countries. In addition, dialogue must extend beyond the elitist circles of politicians, civil servants and intellectuals to embrace civil society and local and regional institutions, which are closer to citizens. Hence our specific proposals in this regard;

1.16 thinks that the Valencia Action Plan, by providing for the creation of Euro-Mediterranean institutions on an ad hoc basis and supporting the Eurocities' proposal for a Euromed Pact, is an important milestone in re-launching the Barcelona Process;

1.17 endorses the support expressed by ministers at Valencia for the Agadir process and all 'South-South' initiatives aimed at extending free trade agreements to partners in the Maghreb and Near East, including integration at the sub-regional level such as the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), noting, however, that the fact that borders still remain closed between some partner countries has impeded integration;

1.18 welcomes the fact that, following in the wake of Valencia, the decisions taken at the Sixth Euro-Mediterranean Conference in Naples led to the setting up of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly as a forum for political dialogue;

1.19 notes the decision taken at the Naples Conference to strengthen the European Investment Bank's Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership (FEMIP) and to evaluate, by the end of 2006, the possibility of introducing a subsidiary instrument;

1.20 is following closely the case for establishing a Euro-Mediterranean Investment Bank;

⁽¹⁾ Cf. T. Schumacher, *Programma Mediterraneo*, Istituto Universitario Europeo di Fiesole, Livorno, 31 October 2003.

1.21 warmly welcomes the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue of Cultures, which will contribute to the development of the civil society chapter of the Barcelona Process, and asks to be involved in future activities;

1.22 welcomes the report by the High-Level Advisory Group on the Dialogue between Peoples and Cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean Area, drawn up in December 2003 at the initiative of the President of the European Commission ⁽¹⁾, which proposes an action programme for this Foundation;

1.23 notes with satisfaction that, at their meeting in Naples (Barcelona VI), the Euro-Mediterranean ministers took note of the conclusions of the conference Towards a new Euro-Mediterranean Area, which was held in Livorno on 31 October 2003 at the initiative of the CoR. The conference called for new impetus to be given to the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and the closer involvement of local and regional authorities as key players in realising an area of freedom, stability, prosperity and peace in the Mediterranean;

1.24 regrets, however, that the request made repeatedly by the CoR since 1997 for the creation of a body representing local and regional authorities was not taken up by the Euro-Mediterranean ministers at their meeting in Naples.

The MEDA programme: a mixed record

The Committee of the Regions

1.25 recalls that association agreements are currently in force with Tunisia, Israel, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan, whilst the agreements with Egypt, Lebanon and Algeria are awaiting ratification; negotiations are currently under way with Syria;

1.26 stresses that the main objectives of the MEDA programme are to support reforms of economic and social structures in partner countries, improve the living conditions for disadvantaged groups and mitigate the effects of the liberalisation of the economy on the social fabric and territorial balance, with a view to establishing a free trade area by 2010 ⁽²⁾;

1.27 believes that the free trade area is a necessary stage in implementing the three pillars of the Barcelona Process and not 'an end in itself'. It must be conceived in accordance with the principles of sustainable development and an awareness that the transitional phase entails risks for countries on the southern side of the Mediterranean: 1) major social imbalances, resulting from the restructuring of the economic and productive system; 2) new polarisations and spatial concentrations with the potential to exacerbate existing territorial imbalances; 3) increased

pressure on the environment, as a result of an expansion of trade, the creation of energy and transport infrastructure, increased land use and higher levels of waste production;

1.28 agrees with the Commission 'that economic cooperation with those countries was relevant, that overall effectiveness of the EC economic cooperation with MED partner countries was reasonably good but it did not achieve all its potential, while the management of the programmes revealed inefficiencies' ⁽³⁾;

1.29 regrets that, in the third strand of the MEDA I programme, the involvement of local and regional authorities on the two sides of the Mediterranean, has faced serious obstacles;

1.30 notes that under the MEDA I programme (1996-99) the EU used EUR 3.5 billion out of total appropriations of more than EUR 4.68 billion for the Mediterranean partners, whilst it has allocated funds totalling some EUR 5.35 billion for MEDA II (2000-2006);

1.31 feels that these sums are insufficient, given the ambitious aims of the Barcelona Process and the huge demand for cooperation and resources by the countries of the southern Mediterranean;

1.32 regrets the fact that – despite the improvements under the MEDA II programme (with a payment-to-commitment ratio of about 50 % in 2001 and about 70 % in 2002) – the situation is far from satisfactory; calls upon the EU Commission to intensify its information campaigns and other measures aimed at improving the percentage of appropriations used;

1.33 welcomes the regional cooperation initiatives complementing bilateral programmes, such as Euromed Heritage, MEDA Democracy and the Euromed regional programme for local water management, but draws attention to the low profile of these programmes among partners and citizens in the countries of the southern Mediterranean;

1.34 deplores, however, the minuscule share of funding allocated to the Mediterranean countries from the horizontal programmes under the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which has taken over from the MEDA democracy programmes following the introduction of MEDA II;

1.35 recalls that partners in the southern Mediterranean countries report real difficulties in the implementation of bilateral cooperation, which they attribute, inter alia, to red tape and the slowness of project appraisal; regrets the absence of an institutional mechanism dedicated entirely to partnerships ⁽⁴⁾;

⁽¹⁾ Euromed Report No 68, 2 December 2003.

⁽²⁾ This date is indicative as the agreements provide for the entry of Tunisia into the Euro-Mediterranean free trade area in 2008, Libya in 2014 and Algeria and Syria at a later date.

⁽³⁾ Evaluation of Economic Co-operation between the European Commission and Mediterranean Countries (12/1997) — 951645.

⁽⁴⁾ H. Abouyoub, Moroccan ambassador to France, Le partenariat euro-méditerranéen, Travaux des tables rondes des Assises de la Méditerranée, Marseille, July 2000.

1.36 notes the reform which led to the creation in 2001 of DG EuropeAid, involving a devolved approach to the management of funds whereby responsibilities are transferred to the delegations, in line with the principle that 'everything that can be better managed or decided close to the field should not be managed or decided in Brussels'; joins with the European Parliament in emphasising that this new devolution procedure requires constant monitoring and greater involvement in programmes and projects by authorities in the partner countries;

1.37 regrets that the Commission has not yet carried out the study evaluating the impact of establishing the free trade area; the evaluation 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 the CoR and the European Parliament;

1.38 stresses that EU local and regional authorities have not found the MEDA programme to be an appropriate vehicle for making their contribution to the partnership. Local and regional authorities have gradually acquired expertise which could be used to contribute effectively to the implementation of partnerships, exchanges and cooperation in specialist fields and to help promote proximity policy and plan the reception of immigrants from the southern side of the Mediterranean;

1.39 deplores the lack of coordination between MEDA and INTERREG, despite a specific request by the CoR for a section on decentralised cooperation to be included in the MEDA programme, a request which was reiterated by the European Parliament in the run-up to the Valencia Conference.

Decentralised cooperation: the added value provided by local and regional authorities

The Committee of the Regions

1.40 wishes to share with Mediterranean partners the experience gained by its members as result of their contacts with local and regional authorities in the candidate countries during the enlargement process;

1.41 believes that local and regional authorities are the most appropriate level for decentralised cooperation;

1.42 recalls the areas where the expertise of local and regional authorities has most to offer:

- regional and spatial planning;
- urban planning;
- agriculture, fisheries and rural development;
- environment, resource management and prevention of natural disasters;

- the sub-regional dimension of transport and energy;
- policies promoting SMEs;
- policies promoting employment;
- cultural and sporting initiatives;
- policies for safeguarding and fostering heritage;
- social proximity policies;
- education and training;
- health;
- managing immigration flows, reception and integration policy;

1.43 regrets 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;

1.44 regrets that, as 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;

1.45 considers that there is an urgent need to launch an initiative by 2006 that will help to make the EU's strategic and macro-economic objectives under MEDA (bilateral section of MEDA) compatible with the expertise that EU local and regional authorities possess in terms of initiative, local governance and their special relationship with their Mediterranean counterparts;

1.46 feels that, after 2006, this strategy must lead to the establishment of a financial instrument that is tailor-made for decentralised cooperation and intended for use by local and regional authorities in the Euro-Mediterranean region, a real tool that is sufficiently well-funded to be able to pursue a truly ambitious programme that warrants the designation MEDPLUS;

1.47 believes that this financial instrument will have to: 1) extend beyond the exchange of experience to the implementation of projects that are of tangible significance for the general population (which must be considered the primary beneficiaries of cooperation); 2) build on the pilot experience gained from MED-projects, which, despite the obvious criticisms, have helped to establish links and promote practical measures in several fields, involving institutions, local and regional authorities, NGOs and civil society; 3) rely for funding not only on its own resources but also those of the European Investment Bank's Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership (FEMIP) and a possible Euro-Mediterranean Investment Bank;

1.48 recalls that there is scope for action by local and regional authorities that complements and goes beyond the traditional limits of cooperation at the level of central governments. Indeed, it is at the level of local and regional authorities that the new neighbourhood policy advocated by the Commission can really be effective. Therefore it is necessary to 'transcend the traditional limits of centralized cooperation. Steps can thus be taken to overcome the problems of traditional development models, develop existing networking between cities, with a view to producing real tangible development projects and meet the challenges of sustainable development, in the urban and rural context';

1.49 feels that there is an urgent need to improve local, regional and urban governance, health and social protection, and prevention of natural disasters in the countries surrounding the Mediterranean, a sea that is enclosed and under threat. This should be part of a policy of long-term development. The Institute of Mediterranean Regions for Sustainable Development (IRMEDD) ⁽¹⁾ is a good example of how to link up analysis and coordinate action and exchange of experience between local and regional authorities on the northern and southern sides of the Mediterranean in the field of sustainable development;

1.50 considers that it is essential that funding be earmarked for spatial planning not only at State level, but also and above all – in a an effort to improve efficiency – at the level where proximity really works, i.e. local and regional authorities and their networks of research institutes and foundations. For example, in the field of maritime safety, the LEM (Livorno Euro Mediterraneo) foundation works in close collaboration with numerous partners ⁽²⁾ to promote the spread of the culture of maritime safety throughout the Mediterranean;

1.51 feels that the INTERREG III programme represents a benchmark in terms of the potential it offers for cooperation between local and regional authorities on the northern and southern sides of the Mediterranean. For example, more than 60 % of the projects conducted in the Médoc area under INTERREG III B involve one or several Mediterranean partners from European regions outside the Médoc area. However, the lack of European co-financing limits the financial involvement of partners on the southern side of the Mediterranean; ⁽³⁾

1.52 is pleased that the European Commission decided to launch a MED'ACT pilot project for cooperation between Euro-Mediterranean cities; hopes that the interest displayed by the European Commission leads to a broad-based regional programme aimed at cooperation between Euro-Mediterranean local authorities within the framework of MEDA;

1.53 points out that the decentralised cooperation practices developed in recent years have highlighted the responsibility

⁽¹⁾ The IRMEDD was set up by the CPMR in Ioannina on 17 September 2002 and commenced operations in Montpellier on 19 December 2003.

⁽²⁾ Including the Tuscany region, the University of Pisa, the Intermediterranean Commission of the CPMR, the Italian Ministry for Transport.

⁽³⁾ Cf. R. Favresse, *Analyse des partenariats entre les pays de l'espace Médoc et les Pays tiers méditerranéens au sein du programme Interreg III B Médoc*, Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations, November 2003.

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;

1.54 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 represent decentralised bodies, directly elected by citizens in the regions concerned, and are not – or not only – officials who are local representatives of central government.

2. The Committee of the Regions' recommendations

The Committee of the Regions

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

2.2 regrets that, although the Barcelona Declaration envisaged the holding of meetings between representatives of local and regional authorities, to date no such meetings have been held, despite repeated calls by the CoR (CoR documents CdR 125/1997; 40/2000; 123/2000; 173/2003; and 357/2003) and declarations by Euro-Mediterranean ministers from the Stuttgart conference (Barcelona III, 1999) until the Naples conference (Barcelona VI, 2003);

2.3 recommends that EU local and regional authorities be consulted on the neighbourhood policy, particularly with regard the definition of objectives, benchmarks and the timetable for implementing action plans, in keeping with the role attributed to them by the Commission in the White Paper on European governance (COM(2001) 428 final);

2.4 urges the Commission to set up a forum designed to represent – as institutions involved in the Barcelona Process – sub-national decentralised authorities (municipal, provincial and regional) in the Member States and in partner countries in the Mediterranean Basin;

2.5 proposes that this body be devoted to discussion of operational problems and actively contribute to the exchange of ideas on subjects in the area of decentralised cooperation (including, training, project management, cultural arbitration and communication, natural disasters, sustainable development, etc.);

2.6 calls for the coordination of MEDA and INTERREG as rapidly as possible, inter alia by incorporating the 'neighbourhood' strategy in the Commission's new guidelines; in this context emphasises that MedAct is a good example, at another territorial level, of 'single projects' involving Euro-Mediterranean cities (including Bordeaux, Rome, Brussels Capital region, Tunis, Sfax, Casablanca). The Euro-Mediterranean mayors also called for the inclusion of the urban dimension in MEDA in their declaration on the eve of the Naples conference;

2.7 proposes that a specific Community Initiative Programme be launched to maintain, develop and facilitate dialogue between cultures in the Mediterranean Basin, based on cooperation projects that would pave the way, by 2006, for the coordination of the MED and INTERREG programmes;

2.8 requests that MEDPLUS, the new instrument for sub-national Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, be launched right away on a trial basis and include the outermost regions located in this geographical area, and that the CoR be consulted regarding the definition of the new 'neighbourhood instrument' for the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, which it is planned to introduce in 2006, and in this context be given the opportunity to contribute its practical experience of governance at local level. Similarly, the experience accumulated by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and the wide network of international and national associations of local and regional authorities on both sides of the Mediterranean (including AER, CEMR, CPMR, WFUC, AEBR, REVES, Eurocities and the Latin Arc)⁽¹⁾ should be harnessed, on the basis of both the expertise which local and regional authorities in the EU have acquired in their relations with each other and with their counterparts in the candidate countries. With this in mind, the CoR recently commissioned a study on the present state of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and decentralised cooperation;

2.9 believes it is important to overcome the present fragmentation of programmes and measures in the field of decentralised cooperation;

2.10 suggests that the Commission show a keen interest in all action planned at Mediterranean level and that such action be coordinated and centralised in just one Directorate-General;

2.11 requests that EU local and regional authorities be allowed to co-manage, in partnership with the European Commission, the resources allocated for decentralised cooperation, along the lines of the partnership established under the Integrated Mediterranean Programmes (1986-92); believes that local and regional authorities are the appropriate level of

governance for strengthening dialogue and cooperation, in that they can more easily overcome constraints of a macroeconomic and geostrategic nature;

2.12 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. At the moment there is no comprehensive and exhaustive overview of these institutions and the way in which they have evolved. This would meet the request made by the European Parliament to the Commission 'to submit to it a report on the progress made in the beneficiary countries in the field of institutional reforms';

2.13 believes that decentralised cooperation fosters the democratisation of local and regional authorities in the southern Mediterranean countries, thereby reinforcing their institutional role vis-à-vis central governments and decentralised State authorities⁽²⁾, and legitimises their activities in the eyes of the general population;

2.14 therefore calls for support to be given to the decentralisation reforms and steps under way to make local and regional authorities in the southern Mediterranean countries fully-fledged players in local governance, at the same time ensuring that there is greater involvement in centralised cooperation by elected bodies rather than dealing primarily with decentralised authorities and State officials;

2.15 emphasises the need to provide for a new legal basis for the support of town-twinning schemes, which are an intrinsic element of the partnership; recalls in this regard that at their meeting in Crete (26-27 May 2003) the Euro-Mediterranean ministers for foreign affairs asserted that 'the local and regional authorities could also contribute significantly to the dialogue between cultures and civilizations through a decentralized cooperation and through town-twinning actions, and, in this context, be closely involved in this mission which constitutes an essential part of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership';

2.16 stresses that, in the free trade area, the aim should be to build on territorial and environmental diversity and differences in identity so that trade flows (North-South, South-North and South-South) are based on complementarity, in line with the principles of sustainable development;

2.17 reiterates the request made above for a study to be conducted on the socio-economic and environmental impact of the creation of the Euro-Mediterranean free trade area by 2010;

⁽¹⁾ Assembly of European Regions, Council of European Municipalities and Regions, Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe, World Federation of United Cities, Association of Frontier Regions in Europe, European Network of Cities and Regions for Social Economy.

⁽²⁾ For example, the Wilayas (governorships or prefectures) which exist in most countries on the southern side of the Mediterranean.

2.18 believes that immigration policy must be based on social inclusion and cultural integration. Immigrants in the EU could constitute a natural "bridge" for the approval and development of the planned cooperation initiatives;

2.19 proposes that 2008 be designated 'Neighbourhood Year'. With this in mind, it calls for the establishment of programmes run by local and regional authorities and involving NGOs, civil society and citizens from both the EU and the surrounding countries. The initiatives could reach out to a wider section of the population through cultural events that would showcase the new cultural and economic dimensions in and around Europe. Prior to exhibitions, a series of themed

conferences could be organised by local and regional administrations, which could involve the wider public;

2.20 supports the activities of local and regional bodies such as the IRMEDD in Montpellier, the LEM Foundation in Livorno, the Three Cultures of the Mediterranean Foundation in Seville, the Mediterranean Laboratory Foundation in Naples, the Catalan Institute of Mediterranean Studies and Cooperation in Barcelona, the Institute of the Mediterranean in Marseille, the Mediterranean Institute of European Studies in Valencia, MedCities in Barcelona, etc; strongly encourages the role they play in research, exchanges of experiences and cultural dissemination, with a view to their participation in the initiatives of the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation set up at the Naples conference.

Brussels, 21 April 2004.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Peter STRAUB

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Proposal for a Council Directive on Implementing the principle of equal treatment between women and men in the access to and supply of goods and services'

(2004/C 121/06)

The Committee of the Regions,

Having regard to the 'Proposal for a Council Directive on Implementing the principle of equal treatment between women and men in the access to and supply of goods and services' (COM(2003) 657 final – SEC 2003/1213 – 2003/0265 (CNS)),

Having regard to the decision of the European Commission of 5 November 2003 to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community,

Having regard to the decision of its President of 7 May 2002 to instruct its Commission for Economic and Social Policy to draw up an opinion on this subject,

Having regard to its draft opinion (CdR 19/2004 rev. 1) adopted on 2 March 2004 by the Commission for Economic and Social Policy (rapporteur: Ms Norrman, Member of Jämtland County Council (S/PES),

adopted the following opinion unanimously at its 54th plenary session on 21-22 April 2004 (session of 22 April).

1. Committee of the Regions' viewpoints

sions made to various interest groups with regard to the scope of the proposed directive.

1.1 The Committee of the Regions would express its disappointment at the limited scope of the proposal. The Committee notes that the Commission has been unable to fulfil the task entrusted to it by the Heads of State and Government in Nice in the year 2000, viz. submitting a proposal for a directive to promote equality outside the workplace, based on Article 13 of the Treaty on European Union. The CoR regrets the conces-

1.2 The CoR wishes to work to remove shortcomings in equal opportunities between men and women and actively promote equality by, inter alia, supporting the EU Treaty, the Nice Treaty and the framework strategy in the Fifth Action Programme (2001-2005), where the two-pronged approach involves mainstreaming equality issues in all policies and specific measures focusing on women.