

Euro-Mediterranean integration: The role of regional and local authorities

This draft report was prepared by rapporteur Jihad Khair, Mayor of Beit Sahour, Palestine, and revised following the fifth meeting of the ARLEM Commission for Sustainable Territorial Development in Brussels in October 2019, with a view to its adoption at the 11th ARLEM plenary session in Barcelona on 23 January 2020.

Introduction

This report covers Euro-Mediterranean regional integration and the role of local and regional authorities (LRAs) in helping to stimulate it in a tangible way by promoting decentralised cooperation and territorial diplomacy.

The common framework for action at all levels of government is the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals. Working towards ending poverty, protecting the planet from degradation, laying the foundations for prosperity and promoting peaceful societies will also foster regional integration in the Mediterranean region.

The report begins by explaining the current global and regional geopolitical context to show how it affects the Euro-Mediterranean integration process. Then, it outlines the overall institutional framework of Euro-Mediterranean integration in order to identify the position given to decentralised cooperation and to place ARLEM in its role of mediation in synergy with the Euro-Mediterranean institutions and in particular the UfM.

This report advocates the Social and Solidary Economy (SSE) as well as climate action at local and regional level as promising paths for action, within the framework of decentralised cooperation by LRAs.

We will explain why they have been chosen as courses of action with an operational scope, and propose recommendations that can help achieve the common objectives.

I. The global and regional geopolitical context and its impact on Euro-Mediterranean Integration

The modern world is facing multiple challenges, such as violent conflicts, wars, terrorism, climate change, new forms of security threats such as cyber-attacks and manipulation of public opinion, the increasing gap between rich and poor, etc.

The Mediterranean region is at the heart of major global and regional geopolitical turbulence. Middle East conflicts remain the thorns standing in the way of integration. Wars in Syria, Libya and Palestine have played a major role in causing life to come to a halt in these countries, as world powers are working for their own strategic benefits in these regions, causing a total disruption of life and insecurity in these three nations.

Today, the European integration project is experiencing obvious difficulties that may threaten its future and thus hinder progress towards Euro-Mediterranean integration. The rise of populism and the refugee crisis are all elements that pose a risk to the European integration project, the cohesion of the EU and its readiness to bring its influence to bear at global and regional level. By the same token, they also run counter to neighbourly relations, including with the southern and eastern Mediterranean countries (SEMCs).

II. The institutional framework for Euro-Mediterranean integration

Euro-Mediterranean relations are governed by several institutional frameworks:

- The Euro Med or Barcelona process initiated in 1995 and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) set up in 2008;
- The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) created in 2008 and revised in 2015.

Although, overall, they pursue similar objectives of making the Mediterranean an area of peace, security and shared prosperity, they are different in terms of institutional structures. The Euro-Med partnership is an EU partnership with 14 SEMCs; this led to the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean as an intergovernmental organisation of 43 countries. The ENP is a unilateral EU policy towards its neighbourhood.

Euro-Mediterranean integration is based on variable geometry and the degree of integration depends on each country. The structures and forms of integration can be improved and are open to review, but they have still led to some achievements. They remain below what has been envisaged since the launch of the Barcelona process in 1995, but they still continue to provide hope for Euro-Mediterranean countries to consider jointly balanced reciprocal commitments, with a shared responsibility for the relaunch of the Euro-Mediterranean regional integration project.

It is precisely here that actors below state level as well as civil society must play an active role in supplementing or complementing the activities of governmental or intergovernmental actors. Local and regional authorities have the freedom to encourage and boost decentralised cooperation and territorial diplomacy through a number of joint operations and operational projects in many important areas and thus to contribute to Euro-Mediterranean regional integration.

III. Decentralised cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean region, an asset for regional integration: local governance and priority areas

Euro-Mediterranean regional and local cooperation is admittedly influenced by obstacles at the macro level, but it is also, to a large extent, dependent on the level of decentralisation and local and regional governance (transparency, autonomy, accountability) achieved by the various partners.

Decentralised or sub-national cooperation presupposes a certain degree of politico-institutional decentralisation, giving LRAs room for manoeuvre and scope for non-formal but effective autonomy, in order to be able to undertake bilateral or multilateral international diplomacy. However, it must be recognised that situations vary among European countries themselves, and even more so among the SEMCs, where the processes of decentralisation and governance based on the principles of accountability and transparency have advanced to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the country.¹

ARLEM wants to strengthen the role of local self-government in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and give a territorial dimension to the UfM, providing a framework for cooperation on issues of common interest and operational projects in the region. Among ARLEM's priority areas of interest, and for which LRAs have a potential and favourable comparative advantage over central public authorities in contributing to Euro-Mediterranean integration, we have identified two key areas:

- Unemployment, the informal economy and migration, with the social and solidarity-based economy as an important lever for community and local development.
- Climate change.

¹ For an overview of how competences are allocated across governance levels in both the EU Member States and in SEMCs, please refer to the CoR's "Division of Powers" analysis (<https://cor.europa.eu/divisionofpowers.go>).

IV. Priority areas

1. Unemployment, information and migration: The social and solidarity-based economy is an asset for decentralised cooperation and Euro-Mediterranean integration

By virtue of its history, and because of the current economic situation and future challenges, migration is one of the key dimensions of cooperation/integration in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The Arab Spring and the refugee crisis following the Syrian, Libyan and other conflicts have exacerbated existing tensions in the management of migration flows and their control around the Mediterranean. As a result of public opinion becoming more and more receptive to populist arguments and far-right movements, European countries have been forced to change their migration policies (even if they are imbued with human values and fully support the rights of migrants). Although they are not yet harmonised, even within the framework of the European Union, these policies now include more restrictions on and obstacles to the reception of migrants, even if they are genuine humanitarian refugees.

These imbalances and the differences in living standards between the north and the south are inevitably a major reason for human displacement to areas of prosperity and can hardly be tackled by drastic approaches focused on security and regulation alone. The only alternative remaining is to organise these flows and to act on their structural causes through a voluntary cooperation policy which can put into practice the common wishes expressed in Barcelona through co-development, with a view to shared prosperity.

The security approach to migration cannot be the only alternative, as foresight studies show that Europe, as a result of its demographic deficit, will need millions of foreign workers in the coming decades to ensure the balance of its labour market, particularly for highly skilled workers in several areas, including the most advanced. It will be able to support them only by means of a contribution from workers outside the EU.

Free movement of people is one of the basic foundations of regional integration. Although often neglected because of the implementation of other freedoms (exchange of goods, services and capital), the fact remains that it constitutes the bond linking the building blocks of regional groupings and reinforces the links of solidarity and social cohesion in those groupings.

As a result, cooperation between cities and local authorities, particularly those in regions experiencing a high propensity to migrate and those with a high immigration burden, is therefore more than necessary. With this in mind, it is proposed to promote economic projects to create jobs and income sources in regions with a high propensity for migration, with a view to creating dynamic local and community development. The encouragement and promotion of the social and solidarity economy would be the appropriate way of establishing such projects.

Combating unemployment and poverty and gradually formalising economy by boosting economic activity and contributing to the creation of income sources in poor and marginalised regions, in particular through social and solidarity-based economy initiatives, are a powerful alternative, which is more efficient, fairer and more humane than approaches limited to security and coercion. In this way, the tendency to migrate can be reduced and the causes of migration can be tackled. That is why we believe that cooperation in this field is a key lever for the economic and social development of regions with high migratory pressure, and for reducing the tensions that hinder regional integration processes.

Further, ARLEM recommends exchanging experiences and best practices on agro-ecology and preservation of ancestral techniques, controlled designations of origin and rational exploitation of

natural resources in farming and rural areas, through representatives of local organisations and communities of farmers, fishermen and craftsmen. Women's communities could be the priority beneficiaries.

Initiatives for the exchange of young people and volunteering for cultural or environmental activities must be developed as they are likely to strengthen direct relationships and synergies between youth associations with a view to promoting values of tolerance, mutual assistance and solidarity. The preservation of shared civilizational heritage or the safeguarding of the environment, in particular our common sea, could be a focal point.

2. Climate change and the role of LRAs

A recent study on the challenges of climate change in the Mediterranean² showed that the Mediterranean basin is considered to be one of the 25 climate change hotspots in the world. The increase in temperature, the corresponding disruptions in rainfall and hydrological cycles as well as the intensity and frequency of extreme weather events, will affect coastal zones in particular (hosting 33% of the total population), but also hydrological basins (hosting 50 % of the total population).

While European (Mediterranean) territories in general benefit from an advanced and structured legal framework with many media sources, support tools and funding tools, there are significant disparities between the commitments of European cities and communities. However, the gap between the framework and the means in the territories at European level, and those of the southern and eastern Mediterranean countries, is even more significant.

Thus, decentralised Euro-Mediterranean cooperation has a potentially significant role to play in supporting the transition of the territories on the southern and eastern shores, reducing disparities rapidly and establishing solidarity between Mediterranean territories³. This is where LRAs' role appears to be essential in initiating or strengthening joint actions that contribute to regional integration.

Indeed, there are a number of specific, noteworthy Euro-Mediterranean mechanisms related to climate issues that directly affect Euro-Mediterranean territories, such as the Covenant of Mayors and specific climate-related EU projects addressing the local and regional level. Indeed, the Covenant of Mayors is a prime example of local action to achieve universal goals, thus localising the Sustainable Development Goals.

We therefore recommend:

- a.** Enhancing knowledge and understanding of the climate/development challenges, both of citizens and of local representatives and staff;
- b.** Enhancing technical expertise at the level of cities and regions for project implementation and monitoring;
- c.** Mobilising the financial sector towards climate actions and projects.

Overall, the further rollout and development of useful tools, such as cross-border cooperation programmes and the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation, would provide good prospects for further integration.

² — “ENERGIES 2050”, FEMISE — INSTITUT DE LA MÉDITERRANÉE 2018.

³— See “The Euro-Med governments in the fight against climate change”, ENERGIE 2015, FEMISE — INSTITUT DE LA MEDITERRANÉE 2018

ARLEM can contribute to the emergence of a shared vision and stands ready to provide political support for joint initiatives in these priority areas.