



Commission Méditerranée

United Cities and Local Governments
Cités et Gouvernements Locaux Unis
Ciudades y Gobiernos Locales Unidos



3rd Forum of Local and Regional Authorities of the Mediterranean

Concept note

Stages in the recognition of local and regional authorities in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership

One of the missions entrusted to the Mediterranean Commission of UCLG upon its creation was the organisation of the permanent Forum of Local and Regional Authorities of the Mediterranean (FLRAM). The Forum is an opportunity for political expression, debates and exchanges between local and regional authorities from the three shores of the Mediterranean. It is also an event during which they contribute to define and promote policies for local and regional development and governance. Finally, it is a special occasion for local governments to address themselves to national and international bodies voicing their opinions and aspirations.

The first Forum was held in June 2008 in Marseille a month before the summit of heads of State and Government of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). The final declaration of the Forum was directly addressed to the heads of State encouraging them to reinforce the role of local and regional governments in the implementation of a renewed Euro-Mediterranean partnership capable of reaching shared objectives of sustainable and inclusive economic growth and stability for the region. Local and regional authorities also called for the creation of an organ that would formally represent local and regional governments in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership.

The second Forum took place in May 2010 in Barcelona, also before a summit of heads of State and Government of the Union for the Mediterranean that was to be held a month later. The summit was postponed, but the Forum was largely devoted to Euro-Mediterranean issues and provided an occasion to examine the changes that had taken place in the partnership and to take stock on the role of local and regional authorities within this framework.

Developments between 2008 and 2010 fostered hopes for a partnership that would be more locally oriented and a governance that would take better account of decentralised levels.

The effective creation in 2010 of the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (EMRLA) gave local and regional governments the possibility of bringing a local and regional dimension to the UfM and its projects. The priority sectors identified offered multiple opportunities for the participation of local and regional authorities. Lastly, the prospect of a UfM project on sustainable urban development was seen as particularly favourable for the participation of decentralised authorities as well as relevant, in view of the crucial challenges that need to be addressed in the Mediterranean region.

However, reasons for concern were also raised. The world financial and economic crisis had a negative impact on the already fragile situation of the population, economic actors and local governments in the region. To address this urgent situation, it seemed essential to formulate and give priority to the implementation of policies for social cohesion and economic development, and to make provision for additional financial resources.

Moreover, at the end of the Barcelona Forum, local and regional authorities drew attention to the fact that the Mediterranean did not seem to be a priority in the future European Neighbourhood

Policy (ENP). More in general, they remarked it was not likely that their role would undergo a positive change during the 2014-2020 period.

A New Situation North and South

Since the second Forum, the Mediterranean region has experienced momentous changes. The most significant, the Arab Spring, has generated since the beginning of 2011 a wave of revolutions and revolts. An initiative of the region's youth and the population neglected in local development policies, these movements are mainly motivated by the exasperation of the people faced with social, local and economic inequalities, and by their aspirations to contribute to a democratic process and to the development of their region, and in general, of their country.

Some southern and eastern Mediterranean countries have initiated constitutional reforms or have intensified an ongoing process. All reforms are not being implemented at the same pace, but overall their objective is building democracy, and some include decentralisation measures.

In most of these countries, civil society continues to reaffirm its will and its right to play an active role in current reforms. And although each situation is different, there is a general trend towards structuring civil society and multiplying citizen initiatives.

At European level, the initial response to these events was to increase allocations within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) for the period 2011-2013 in order to address the most urgent situations (mainly in Tunisia). Several mechanisms and programmes were launched in 2011, including the SPRING (Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth) programme and a "Civil Society Facility".

In other more structural measures, the European Union decided to reorient its ENP after the first revolutionary movements by emphasizing the policy's political dimension. The importance of democracy in the construction of a prosperous and stronger Euro-Mediterranean region was reaffirmed¹ and presented in the form of a conditional approach. According to the "more for more" principle, those countries that engage the most active political reforms to build deep democracies may receive more funding.

There are strong expectations for democracy and peace in the Mediterranean, but the economic and environmental situation in the Euro-Mediterranean region is also an urgent concern. The North Mediterranean is going through recessions, their macro-financial stability is menaced, and unemployment rates are increasing dangerously. In spite of higher growth rates, most southern and eastern Mediterranean countries are faced with consistently high unemployment rates (particularly youth unemployment), marked regional imbalances and sizeable populations living under the poverty threshold.

Towards a Third Forum

The Mediterranean context, highly complex and unstable, encourages assembling local and regional authorities to debate on the multiple challenges they are currently facing.

Some of these challenges concern decentralisation and local democracy. Once again, crucial issues that affect local and regional authorities are currently being considered in constitutional reform processes. Now, more than ever, debates should be organised on reinforcing autonomy, the allocation of financial and human resources and the consolidation of elected representative bodies. These conditions should be met today in order to empower local and regional authorities to effectively respond to the strong expectations of their populations.

As part of the incentives to build sustainable democracies, the European Union explicitly provides for support to central States to carry out institutional reforms, and for assistance to structure civil society. Even though these new policies do not seem to concern directly local governments, it is specifically stated that: "*local and regional authorities have a key role to play in narrowing the gap*

¹ See the Joint Communication by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission, "A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood", of 25 May 2011.

between the population and institutions, promoting a culture of political participation at local level and ensuring that policy decisions take local needs into account”².

Together with their cooperation partners, local and regional authorities can play a key role providing support on the ground to citizen initiatives, accounting for citizens’ aspirations and promoting citizen participation in local democracy. This is a particularly favourable time to build more inclusive local governance models. Local and regional authorities may seize the opportunity to reinforce their role as powerful links connecting Mediterranean democracies.

Democracy and decentralisation are indeed particularly important, but there are also other challenges to be tackled in terms of local economic development. On this front, the reality shared by most southern and eastern Mediterranean countries requires the recovery of the local sphere and particularly rural and less central regions that have until now been neglected. It confirms the importance of formulating and implementing decentralised development policies that take into account local specificities and that integrate economic, environmental and social aspects. The formulation of these policies offers an opportunity to all local actors (elected representatives, the private sector and civil society) to devise a common development strategy.

Local and regional authorities may play a crucial role to bring together all actors to engage joint efforts and to establish links between all levels of governance. In terms of youth unemployment, education and the integration of young people into working life, the situation is exceedingly worrying, and existing mechanisms to promote youth employment are clearly ineffective. It is therefore particularly important that these issues be included in local development strategies and policies.

It is also essential for local and regional authorities to address these issues and to identify innovative solutions in collaboration with their partners, particularly through decentralised cooperation.

Considering urgent environmental matters in the Mediterranean is just as crucial. Natural resources—water above all—are scarce, degraded and under increasing pressure. Desertification coupled with urbanisation exerts strong pressure on agricultural land and deepens regional imbalances. This widely shared observation and the environmental projections for 2030 require more than ever devising or consolidating sustainable local development policies and multi-level governance. Local and regional authorities of the Mediterranean are engaged in these thematic areas and have already issued recommendations to this end through their contribution to the water strategy of the Union for the Mediterranean. They have prepared reports through EMRLA and also contributed to prepare the 6th World Water Forum and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio+20).

Building stability and peace in the Mediterranean region is one of the main objectives of development actors and international cooperation. But wide gaps still remain in a region currently going through drastic changes. New instability has been added on top of protracted tensions and conflicts that have defined to some extent the region’s geopolitical structure. In this context, local elected representatives have a role to play in restoring and maintaining dialogue and diplomacy. By engaging in the construction of a shared space of peace, local and regional authorities can contribute to give full meaning to political action and to re-establish trust between elected officials and the population by interweaving new solidarities.

Finally, the political agenda is particularly favourable for local and regional authorities to analyse how the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and, in general, Euro-Mediterranean cooperation have contributed to the region’s development. As it happens, the European Union is reviewing all its policies, including its neighbourhood policy. Moreover, a general Secretariat is now in charge of implementing the action plan of the UfM that could be reinvigorated under its European co-presidency.

² See the Joint Communication by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission, “Delivering on a new European Neighbourhood Policy”, of 15 May 2012.

Key events, including several meetings organised by networks, will punctuate the coming months. They will all provide opportunities to prepare future meetings of local and regional representatives and particularly the next Forum of Local and Regional Authorities that will be held in Marseille on 3 & 4 April 2013.

It is absolutely essential for local and regional authorities to exchange their views on political, economic and social issues and to make a constructive contribution to development and peace initiatives, but this Forum will also be the occasion to clearly highlight the presence of UCLG in the regional Mediterranean sphere.

Technical Secretariat of the Mediterranean Commission of UCLG / July 2012