

European Union



Committee of the Regions

**Speech by the CoR President,
Mercedes Bresso**

**CONFERENCE ON "LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY:
A PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT"
AND LAUNCH OF THE WTD PROJECT: *WORKING TOGETHER
FOR DEVELOPMENT* BY THE ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL
DEMOCRACY AGENCIES (ALDA)**

Brussels, 28 March 2012

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am glad to be here today to open the conference on "Local authorities and civil society: a partnership for development" organised to launch the *Working Together for Development* project – a project which will help local and regional authorities and civil society organisations to become more efficient in their development-related activities, a multi-actor and a bottom-up approach to which we, territorial representatives at the Committee of the regions, fully adhere.

I welcome you today in my capacity as President of the Committee of the Regions and co-president of the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM), two political bodies that carry the same commitment to democracy and through which EU elected representatives engage together with partner countries in favour of democratisation, good governance and development.

Even though external action lies almost exclusively in the remit of national governments, the role and the added value of initiatives carried out by local authorities and civil society within EU external cooperation, in particular in the field of development, respect for fundamental rights and freedoms and democratisation, have been recognised and the CoR is active in developing and encouraging them.

As regards Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, the CoR established the **Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM)** which is the territorial dimension of the Union for the

Mediterranean (UfM) and which has obtained an observer status within the Union for the Mediterranean. ARLEM brings together local and regional representatives from the EU and the 16 Mediterranean partner countries, providing conditions for dialogue and overcoming the constraints and bottlenecks of intergovernmental cooperation.

We attach the same importance to the cooperation with our Eastern and Southern partners. Therefore, we have launched the **Eastern Europe and South Caucasus Local and Regional Assembly (CORLEAP)** which serves as an institutional platform for a regular dialogue and cooperation between local and regional authorities from the EU and the Eastern partner countries. Its inaugural meeting was held in September 2011. I am pleased to say that CORLEAP established an excellent cooperation with the Civil Society Forum which obtained a permanent observer's status at the CORLEAP and which contributed to the CORLEAP action plan. We hope that we can further deepen the synergies.

Dear Colleagues,

The European Union has been a catalyst of change in the countries that successfully joined the EU and those that are in the accession process, and the CoR pays special attention to the territorial dimension of the enlargement policy.

Our assembly has created the so-called **Joint Consultative Committees (JCC) and Working Groups (WG)** aiming at

political dialogue and cooperation between local and regional authorities from the EU and from the candidate countries for the EU accession. Their meetings constitute an important political platform for the exchange of experiences, good practices and for the transfer of know-how between CoR members and the participants from the enlargement countries.

But this institutional work can not replace the important action civil society is achieving on the ground. Both are complementary. Your project, for instance, aiming at developing the capacity building of local and regional administration is crucial to enhance development all over Europe. The Committee of the Regions has always supported the European programmes favouring exchanges between stakeholders to foster decentralisation and to reinforce the capacity of local and regional administration.

Let me briefly mention two other very useful political activities carried out in the framework of the enlargement policy, namely the **Technical Assistance and Information Exchange Instrument (TAIEX)**, which, nevertheless, should focus on the sub-national level and be extended to European Neighbourhood Policy countries, and the **Local Administration Facility (LAF)**, run by the DG Enlargement in close association with CoR. The latter supports study visits of elected local politicians and senior staff from accession and pre-accession countries to Brussels, allowing them to get acquainted with the work of the EU institutions and with EU policies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The CoR is investing a lot of resources and effort into the development of the local and regional dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. This is because the partner countries face challenges related to development, democratisation and decentralisation and we strongly believe that local and regional authorities are instrumental to achieve these objectives and to help the partner states to modernise. It is also crucial that they get the necessary support from the existing Commission programmes and institutional settings.

Democracy-building and democratic transition begin first and foremost at the grassroots level and cannot be imposed from above. That is why the CoR calls for promoting local ownership and inclusiveness so that local and regional authorities can get involved in establishing multi-level governance, adapted of course to the context of the Southern and Eastern partner countries, but stemming from the same principles and values, and for the reinforcement of the civil society which is necessary for the success of democratic transformation.

Over the last years, the CoR has been working of developing the idea of multi-level governance. We are currently working on putting this political project into practice by elaborating an EU Charter for Multi-level governance. This approach aims at involving

all competent levels of government in the EU decision-making process.

Decentralisation and regional development have always been priority areas of the CoR actions. It is important that we enhance cooperation between the EU and its neighbouring states which embarked on political and economic reforms and which need the EU support. Nevertheless, we have to bear in mind that decentralisation can be successful only if, firstly, it is accompanied by the institutional reinforcement of regions and local bodies so that they can consolidate skills in public administration and obtain sufficient resources and autonomy to implement their tasks and, second, if citizens are actively involved in the process.

Dear Colleagues,

I would like to congratulate you on the project you are launching today. I can assure you that the Committee of the regions will give it its full attention and support. I also believe that the European Commission's Communication "Civil Society Organisations in development cooperation", to be adopted later this year, will be an important step forward to facilitate collaboration and allow partnership-based relations between the European Union institutions, civil society organisations and local authorities in Europe and in partner countries.

Thank you for your attention.