

Social Cohesion in Latin America on Local and Regional Level

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Report

From 23 to 27 June 2008 the European Office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung organised a Study Trip and Dialogue Programme for five representatives of local government organisations from Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Mexico and Guatemala taking place in Berlin and Brussels.

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During their stay in Brussels our partners have developed a comprehensive understanding of the European Union and the internal working mechanisms and organizational structures of its institutions. Special emphasis was put on information transfer and exchange of views of the European Union's external relations with the respective Latin American countries.

Through several bilateral meetings with representatives from the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, dealing with relations to Latin America within their institution, our partners experienced the whole picture of EU institutional and political relations with Latin American countries.

The meetings served as an opportunity to receive and exchange information about the EU's new external assistance architecture, including the new financial instruments, programmes and EU funding opportunities for Latin American Countries related to social cohesion and decentralisation such as EuroSOCIAL and URB AL III.

Within the framework of Mercosur-EU relations several memoranda of understanding between the DG REGIO and RELEX and several Latin American countries defining additional ways of cooperation at the regional level have been introduced. During a meeting at the Committee of the Regions they became acquainted with a platform facilitating projects of decentralised cooperation between Europe and their region through exchange of information and giving access to its members.

In the bilateral meetings our partners also actively addressed issues of specific and common concerns about the focus and emphasis of EU external assistance programmes targeting Latin America as well as to present their experience and perception of the European Union policies targeting Latin America. This first-hand experience and presentation of the political situation in the respective countries present also an opportunity for the interlocutors in the European Institutions to receive first hand information and to broaden their perspective and knowledge on specific political and socio-economic trends in LA. Our partners also aimed at

emphasizing the importance of local governments for the creation of more democratic, equal societies given their element of proximity.

Finally, the dialogue programme aimed at broadening the delegations knowledge on EU funding opportunities and the role the Brussels office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung can play in facilitating the access to such programmes. Given that one participant is working within an EU-KAS-co-funded project in Guatemala the participants profited extraordinarily from this first-hand experience within their own rows.

The programme was completed by a half-day workshop giving the delegation another opportunity within a wider audience to present the challenges and potentials for their countries to tackle social cohesion on local and regional level in Latin America. Moreover, they could exchange views with European representatives directly involved in decentralised cooperation between the EU and Latin America, namely the Coordinator of the URB-AL programme in the European Commission, Luis Esteire Guereca, and Marga Barceló from the representation of the city of Barcelona, reporting on the project of the Observatory for Decentralised Cooperation which is run by her city.

Martinez Ferrer, working for the University of Cordoba, reported that Argentina is characterised by an enormous heterogeneity with regards to the levels of human development, a great variety of levels of autonomy of the provinces and dual objectives of local governance. These characteristics are completed by different local management styles and a great difference with regards to financial and economic resources, resulting in a need to develop a framework for sustainability. A first step of his university institute is to train both members of NGOs and municipal officers in order to create the conditions for the development of a "Forum for Civil Society in the Region".

Regarding the situation in Peru, **Alvaro Ugarte Ubila** stated that despite an increasing GDP poverty in Latin America has not been substantially reduced. Low confidence in public institutions and unequal distribution of royalties between the municipalities are further problems. He pointed out that social cohesion can only be established with the joint effort of the central government and citizenship, therefore it is necessary to develop mechanisms of participation in order to ensure a sustainable environment. As a consequence his organisation INI-CAM aims at promoting the political debate on decentralization as well as empowering local authorities through capacity building.

In his detailed description of the political and economic situation in Mexico, **Alejandro Mejía** stressed that the macro-economic discipline the government pursues intends to create a more equal society. However, despite being a pre-requisite to development it is not a sufficient condition, given the fact that not sufficient employment has been created to reduce the unequal distribution of income. As the latest economic crisis displayed it is still the poor who are affected the most. The main challenges for Mexico therefore is to integrate the south into the "global economy", to extend liberalization to sectors that remain protected (energy, telecommunications, transportation) and to carry on reforms to promote competitiveness e.g. labour market flexibility, educational system, competition policy.

First hand experience how an EU-co-funded project of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Guatemala contributes to social cohesion was given by **Cecilia Umul**. Guatemala's development is still affected by the 36 years of armed conflict, which has divided the country, with the poor part of the population mostly living in the North of the country. The major problems are high malnutrition, insufficient secondary schooling and a high state of insecurity. FEDEPMA tries to address problems of social inequality though supporting Mayan coffee producers and crafts man in establishing their business and thus improving their living conditions. Moreover, given the organisational structure of FEDEPMA it has the capacity to promote participation of civil society in general and women in particular, to develop strategies for international cooperation based on new laws for decentralisation in the region, to support local authorities in developing strategies for poverty reduction, to foster strategic alliances between different

sectors and actors in the municipalities and to promote illiteracy and nutrition projects. As conclusion of her experience she stressed the importance FEDEPMA has in institutionalizing democracy, equality between men and women and in an intercultural citizenship, in which everyone is a protagonist of Guatemala's development.

With regards to the situation in Brasil, **José Mario Brasiliense Carneiro** pointed to a miss perception within the population, based on the assumption that the poorest people in Brazil live in the North of the country, however, in fact it is in the metropolitan area. Brazil's major obstacles to social cohesion are social injustice and centralization. Although 90% of its municipalities have a population of less than 50 000, the problems are concentrated in the large municipalities (> 350 000) e.g. water supply. Moreover, municipalities have many responsibilities (primary education, health, urban services and infrastructure, security, environment), however, the majority of taxes collected and budget spent is by the central government. He therefore shares the opinion that it is of utmost importance to put the process of decentralization forward. Oficina Municipal aims to support this process based on the principals of human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity and common good.

An example of the actual state of EU cooperation in the region with regards to social cohesion and of decentralised cooperation between EU Member States and Latin American countries was given in the second panel by Luis Esteire Guereca and Marga Barceló. The strengthening of local actors is certainly a priority of the EU having recently had the deadline for its third call for proposals of the URB-AL programme. This is manifested by the fact that the Commission is expanding the average budget of each project in order to have a bigger impact as well as to consolidate processes of previous stages of URB-AL and thus having greater sustainability. However, as Barceló pointed out most cooperation is still a bilateral one, as opposed to cooperation within networks and from the European point of view, cooperation with Latin America is concentrated among Spain, Italy, France, Germany and Portugal. Nevertheless, the database of the Observatory creates greater visibility and data exchange of decentralised cooperation between Europe and Latin America and promotes the exchange of best practises.