

Social Cohesion in Europe and Latin America: The EU-LAC Summit in LIMA (May 15/16, 2008)

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Next year, the strategic partnership between Europe and the states of Latin America and the Caribbean will celebrate the tenth anniversary of its foundation. The two regions are linked by intense cooperation in the economic, political, scientific, and cultural sphere. Many of the partnership's ambitious goals have already been achieved; however, much remains to be done: talks about an association agreement between the EU and Mercosur are bogged down, and relations with the Andean Community are anything but unproblematic. What is more, the number of European diplomatic missions in the region decreased, as did the number of cultural facilities and development-policy mediators and projects operated by Europe.

The summit meeting of the heads of state and government held in Lima in mid-May offered an opportunity to take a step forward: it was planned to address and discuss important subjects at the highest level and to develop new common goals. In the course of the summit, it became apparent that the wish to promote and intensify common goals definitely exists. In the concluding declaration of the summit, the countries confirmed their willingness to continue and expand their existing cooperative partnership. Not only environmental protection and climate change, the current key issues, were addressed at Lima but also the question of social cohesion. A common approach towards poverty alleviation, social injustice, and the exclusion of certain parts of the population from social participation are issues that greatly concern both regions. Diverse studies show that social inequality has a negative impact on economic growth, for example. In moral terms, misery and marginalization starkly contrast with the basic values of human dignity.

European integration rests on social cohesion as one of its fundamental values. Europe's social model even forms part of the historical, cultural, and political identity of the continent. The EU's heads of state and government formulated a strategy for economic and social development in the Union early in 2000 in Lisbon. It is not least thanks to sustainable investments in EU cohesion programmes that the infrastructure, the human resources, and the modernization and diversification process of the economy in the European regions have been advancing.

However, the situation has changed: now that the EU has recently been enlarged and the number of the European regions grown to a total of 268, and as the population is expected to decrease while economic pressure from international competitors is growing, the European cohesion policy needs revising. The fourth report on economic and social cohesion adopted by the EU

Commission in May 2007 provides not only an analysis of the successes achieved so far but also an outlook on new challenges. Its core subject is the consequences of declining populations, emigration, and differing demographic developments in the regions. It addresses the impact of the climate on cohesion policy and the question of creating a flexible concept for development, growth, and employment based on EU standards. And it addresses the question of how to manage cohesion policy and optimize the distribution of jurisdictions.

To be sure, Europe is no model, but exchanging knowledge and expertise is indispensable. Thus, it was as early as 1995 that the EU Commission declared measures to fight poverty and marginalisation an essential element of development cooperation with Latin America. Under its cooperation programme EUROSociAL, the EU provided 30 million Euro for social-cohesion measures in 2004 alone.

Latin America still is one of the continents where social disparity is greatest. To be sure, the region has been experiencing considerable economic growth lately, but its blessings did not reach the poor, so that social differences hardly changed. With a share of 40 %, Europe is the biggest development cooperation donor in the region. However, to reduce inequalities sustainably, the existing structures will have to be changed. It is the task of the people living in the Latin American countries to open the door to change. Many of the projects and measures initiated so far met with little lasting success. The reasons for this are democratization deficits, lack of institutional structures, intransparent political processes, expanding populist trends, and the alarming state of constitutionalism and governance in the region.

The final Vienna declaration of 2006 refers to the necessity of engaging in the abolition of poverty, inequality, and social marginalisation. In 2007, the EU-Latin America Forum on Social Cohesion in Santiago de Chile specified the goals set in Vienna: access to adequate education, employment promotion, participation in social and economic rights, equal opportunities, and social protection in the fields of health and social security. In Santiago, it was decided that the key points to be discussed in Lima would be the development of measures against poverty and inequality together with social protection, access to education and employment, the development of social-protection mechanisms, financing political objectives, the question of governance and institutional capacity, and exchanging experience in the field of social cohesion.

By now, the Lima summit has ended. It has shown that the agenda needs to be implemented by concrete measures that lie within the responsibility of the governments. Moreover, it was decided that the European-Latin American network should be expanded and enhanced by new dialogue mechanisms.

The next summit of the heads of state and government is scheduled for 2010 in Spain. At this meeting, any success and progress in implementing the agenda compiled in Lima will be reported.

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