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Opening remarks on Cross Border Co-operation under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Plenary session, European Parliament

Strasbourg, 23 September 2010

Mr. Van Nistelrooij, Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

Cross Border Co-operation has been one of the main innovations under the Instrument for European Neighbourhood Policy (ENPI). Back in 2006 we adopted a Regulation which, for the first time, saw the “full” transposition of EU Cross Border Co-operation experience in an external relations environment.

We wanted the new programmes to be jointly designed and jointly managed by Member States and Partner countries. We wanted to fully involve local actors and ensure that projects were jointly selected and implemented. We saw this as a way of empowering local authorities, promoting local development and ultimately strengthening local democracy.

We never said that this was going to be easy. We never said that this was going to be quick. Borders are basic elements of sovereignty.

The benefits of CBC and the way it works had to be explained to partner countries, its implementation mechanisms adapted to take into account their administrative and legal constraints. A way around sensitive “foreign policy” issues had to be found... and this was not always possible:

- It was not possible to persuade Morocco to participate in programmes where Ceuta and Melilla were eligible.
- It was not possible to persuade Azerbaijan to participate in the Black Sea Programme alongside Armenia.
- It was not possible to find a way to overcome the political and technical obstacles which led Russia to decide not to participate in the Baltic Sea Programme.

This is regrettable, but as you can see we are confronted here with long-standing policy issues reflecting core national interests.

But the glass is more than half full. As we speak we have 13 programmes operational. They cover the entire EU land border, the sea crossing between Italy and Tunisia and the three big Sea Basins the EU shares with its neighbours: the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean Sea.

Russia has also agreed to co-finance the programmes in which it participates with over 100 million Euros.

Under all of these programmes we have now launched calls for proposals for an amount of 275 million Euros. The response to these calls for proposals has not been poor. On the contrary it has been excellent. We are receiving hundreds of applications. Almost six times more than we can finance. 598 proposals were submitted under the 'accompanying measures' programme (MEDA) only.

We expect that the funds will start to flow to the beneficiaries soon and we foresee no absorption problems.

The Commission is now in the process of undertaking a Mid Term review of the CBC Strategy Paper and the Indicative Programme. There are a number of adjustments we need to make including to the budget.

Firstly the two programmes between Spain and Morocco will be cancelled. The European Regional Development Component of the budget will go back to Spain to be used by Spain in accordance with the Structural Funds Regulation. The ENPI component has been reallocated to other ENPI programmes in the Southern Neighbourhood.

Secondly we are considering reducing the ENPI allocation to the Baltic Sea programme. This may provide some extra funds to increase the budget of other Sea Basin programmes. Given the small amount involved we do not expect equivalent matching funds from ERDF.

I understand you have concerns about duplication of financing between CBC and other ENPI programmes. We will also review that aspect, but I have to say that the risk is small because

(a) CBC programmes have a clear territorial focus and

(b) we systematically screen all the selected projects to avoid that problem.

The Commission is about to start a reflection on the ENPI in view of the legislative proposal for a revised regulation that it intends to table in late 2011. In this context we will consult practitioners and stakeholders to see what shortcomings have been identified and how they can best be addressed.

Mr. Van Nistelrooij, Honourable Members,

Implementing the ENPI CBC component has been an enormous challenge. We have lived up to it and we are about to see the results. I am persuaded that it will be a success.

We are about to review the way ENPI works, and there we share the same goals: the Commission as much as the European Parliament wants to have programmes that are easier to prepare and can be implemented faster.

The Commission is ready to work in close consultation with the practitioners, the stakeholders and the European Parliament to that effect.