

## OPEN FORUM

# Local and regional authorities and cross-border cooperation: Good tools for development

By Ignacio Sánchez Amor and  
Martín Guillermo Ramírez (\*)

The internal borders of the EU (particularly within Schengen) do not look like any more how they used to be, though they still are evident in the rest of the world. The Union shapes a softer system than traditional boundaries, and cross-border cooperation (CBC) has become a success story within the European integration process. An enormous cumulated expertise is shared by politicians and experts, especially amongst local and regional authorities (LRAs). However, long-lasting, proved and successful European best practice cannot be directly implemented in other continents so easily. CBC, as it is understood in Europe, could only be implemented in other parts of the world within comparable processes of supranational integration, where tailored EU-like solutions for specific problems can be explored.

European Territorial Cooperation Policy in general and CBC in particular, are the consequence of the European integration process, but they are also catalysts for it. European treaties have been made by member states (top-down), but Europe has been sewed up at every border by many stakeholders (bottom-up). Very few Europeans are aware of the complexities of the Union's political process, but most of them clearly perceive how most of the undesirable effects of the border have vanished. Freedom of movement for citizens, goods, services and knowledge plus a common currency in most of the Schengen countries make the average European feel Europe in his borders and in his pockets.

CBC should play a stronger role in the bilateral agendas of the EU with third countries and their supra-

national integration processes (Mercosur, Andean Community, Central American Integration System, African Union). It works with the EU's Eastern neighbours, but in other continents there are very few EU agree-



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ments. CBC is taking off anyway and the European institutions, as well as LRAs and networks, follow these processes with increased interest. The Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) has prepared for the European Commission a road map for CBC in some selected Latin American key border areas. Other European networks, national cooperation agencies and NGOs develop related CB analyses and activities too, but this activism is still far for being coordinated.

Some initiatives are also being developed in Africa, like the African Union Border Programme, established in 2007 with the support of the German Agency for International Cooperation. It is still mainly concentrated on border delimitation and demarcation, but it has also established the need to develop CB integration dynamics, a wide CBC capacity-building process and the preparation of an African legal instrument for CBC.

The Commission's support to this territorial approach to development is being promoted mostly by the Regional Policy. But the Commission's Development Policy only walks

on tiptoe over such a significant issue. The recent green paper, submitted for open consultation at the end of 2010, comes only two years after a communication supporting European LRAs as main actors in cooperation for development, but ignores this fact. The EU should definitely incorporate European LRAs in its Development Policy and in its agendas for integration processes, including its role as a social cohesion element. And this should also be the case of universities, business associations and the civil society living in and acting on both sides of the borders.

Networking is also crucial. Associations for CBC should be supported, as AIDELTRA (Association for Iberian-American Local Development), promoted by the Spanish region of Extremadura and many Latin American partners. Their cooperation with related platforms, such as OLAGI (Latin American Organisation of Intermediate Governments), national associations of municipalities and regions, and similar structures in other continents is also important. Other European initiatives are aimed to promote LRAs' networking and cooperation in a global scenario, like PLATFORMA (European Platform of LRAs for Development), and FOGAR (Forum of Global Association of Regions). Without this territorial stitch, national boundaries will keep on being strong lines of divide in maps, but also in our minds, despite the solemn declarations expressed in the treaties. ■

(\*) Ignacio Sánchez Amor is chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the Regional Parliament of Extremadura and is a member of AIDELTRA. Martín Guillermo Ramírez is secretary-general of the AEBR.