

Cross-border co-operation and resilience – a European experience

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The Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) follows the implementation of the African Union Border Programme and the growing importance paid by some regional institutions, like ECOWAS, to cross-border cooperation (CBC) with its own initiatives for now quite a few years. The Sahel and West Africa Club of the OECD is a major bridge between West Africa (WA) and Europe, and CBC plays a role of growing importance in this agenda.

This is a great step for integration, but citizens should be in the centre of these processes. Persons living in border regions face different challenges than those in more central locations or in urban areas. After close study of African border areas, the AEBR concluded that there are very promising spaces to develop practical integration and produce results, due to already developed and well established trade and social networks across borders. However, some of these border areas present also unstable scenarios facing many risks. Pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial issues must be taken into account to appreciate the localized impact of borders.

CBC in West Africa will be sustainable and its impact will be guaranteed through a stronger participation of the sub-national level and civil society. Their empowerment in the implementation of CBC projects and programmes, and their ownership of the outputs, would be crucial to enhance the impact of CBC strategies and their sustainability.

CBC can be the best example of South-South cooperation, placing border areas more central in a continental or sub-continental logic. Opening channels for CB exchange of information (and people-to-people projects) will lead to CB solutions to handle main problems and increase resilience to food security, extreme poverty, health care, etc.

There is political will amongst African ministries in charge of border issues, decentralization and spatial planning. Territorial elected representatives and their associations are paying a growing attention to border issues too, and many develop very interesting CB initiatives. There are research organizations, public and private enterprises, international institutions and many organizations of civil society involved in CBC.

In Europe we can assure the manifold benefits that decentralization opens to solve daily issues for citizens living in areas which are far away from national capitals. Creativity plays a role, even taking advantage of the location close to a national boundary to open new ways for development. We have the experience of a complex process of integration where resilience to this transfer of sovereignty to the top (EU) and to the bottom (decentralization) has played a basic role in all levels of administration. Both top-down and, even more important, bottom-up processes make subsidiarity come true and take the citizens effectively into account through their closer public authorities. Now it is the time of citizens: civil society organizations play the most growing role. The key issue is to offer all territories the possibility to grow and exploit their full potential. It is not only about provision of financial means, but also about identifying threats and opportunities, providing common concepts and proposals, exploiting synergies, and networking at all levels.

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The European experience of territorial cooperation, one of the few success stories in the long and winding road to European integration, has become a major source of inspiration for other integration processes in the world. Our President, Karl-Heinz Lambertz, has insisted on many occasions on the question: Shall we just contemplate from Europe this fact with self-satisfaction? Not at all. Resilience is dropping in the EU, and we have a great opportunity to share and confront our views about the role of local and regional authorities with other integration processes, how to strengthen this role, and how to take further advantage.

We need useful tools for CBC, having had the chance to see different views and experiences from every continent, clearing the European way to CBC, while also identifying several African, American and Asian initiatives. All of these are very different processes, with their own logics, and provide very solid elements for supranational integration, peaceful neighbourhood relationships and sustainable development of territories.

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