

Interaction between the Associations of Local and Regional Governments and European Union (EU) delegations in the framework of the programming process of the EU Cooperation (2021/2027) in Africa

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On Thursday 07 May 2020, UCLG Africa organized a webinar on the **Interaction between the National Associations of Local and Regional Governments and the European Union (EU) delegations in the framework of the programming process of the EU Cooperation (2021/2027) in Africa.**

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, UCLG Africa organized a webinar attended by over a hundred people including Presidents of the National Associations of Local Authorities of the five regions of the continent, African Mayors, as well as guests including representatives of the European Commission's Directorate for International Cooperation (DEVCO), Representatives of the world Organization of Local and Regional Governments (United Cities and Local Governments, UCLG) and experts who facilitated the event.

In his opening speech **Mr. Léandre Nzué**, Mayor of Libreville and President of UCLG Africa invited his colleagues to take this opportunity to make National Associations of Local and Regional Governments aware of the programming process of EU cooperation. Since the adoption of the 2013 Communication, the European Commission has recognized Local and Regional Governments as state actors and must now be involved in defining the priorities of European cooperation for the period 2021-2027 in the same way as National Governments.

The agenda of the Webinar was presented by **Mr. Jean Pierre Elong Mbassi**, Secretary General of UCLG Africa, who said that although the priority of leaders of Local and Regional Governments is the implementation of concrete projects to solve people's problems, the continuity and sustainability of these projects need permissive conditions, in particular institutional and financial conditions negotiated at the level of different actors and stakeholders, for their implementation. UCLG Africa has been active on this front at the level of the African Union and the European Union.

On the African Union level, UCLG Africa was the initiator of the African Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralization, Local Governance and Local Development, adopted by the Heads of State and Government of the African Union at their Summit held in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, in June 2014. This

Charter is a fundamental tool for the definition, implementation and strengthening of decentralization policies in African countries. It is a powerful advocacy document that Local and Regional Governments should adopt to get all actors and stakeholders to support decentralization processes in their respective countries.

To date, the Charter has been signed by 15 Member States of the African Union and ratified by 6. To become an official instrument of the African Union, the Charter must be signed and ratified by at least 15 Members States and these instruments deposited with the African Union Commission. UCLG Africa has set itself the target of the end of the year 2020 for the Charter to become an official instrument of the African Union.

Similarly, UCLG Africa has worked to ensure that Local and Regional Governments are recognized as public authorities at the level of the European Union. This effort began during the structured dialogue that brought together EU institutions, EU Member States, Civil society organizations (CSOs) and Local Authorities. Previously, Local and Regional Governments were categorized as non-state actors, with non-governmental organizations at their core. UCLG Africa has tirelessly advocated for the recognition of the public authority nature of Local authorities, which must therefore be distinguished from NGOs and recognized as State actors. This effort has resulted in the inclusion of Local authorities among the beneficiaries of the thematic budget line reserved until now for Civil society organizations. Some African Local and Regional Governments and their Associations have benefited from this budget line and have been able to implement concrete projects thanks to the funding they have been able to access following calls for proposals reserved for Local authorities.

Another important outcome of the dialogue was the adoption in 2013 of the European Commission's Communication on "Empowering Local Authorities in Partner Countries for better governance and more concrete development results". This policy reference document marks a major change, because for the first time, and from now on, the EU Commission officially recognizes Local and Regional Governments as a public authority and state actor and abandons their inclusion among non-state actors. This improvement has led the European Commission to conclude a framework partnership agreement for five years (2015-2020) with five international and continental Associations of Local and Regional Governments, including UCLG Africa.

This change in the status of Local and Regional Governments from non-state actor to state actor has the following consequences:

(1) From now on, any negotiation of EU cooperation programs must include Local and Regional Government representatives alongside National Government representatives, thus forming an alliance of the two levels of public

governance to negotiate with the European Union. For this alliance to be balanced, Local and Regional Governments and their Associations need to bring themselves up to date with knowledge of the EU's policy environment and ecosystem and the challenges of the new EU cooperation. This was the purpose of the presentation by **Mr. Jean Bossuyt** from the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM);

(2) Local and Regional Governments must convince the National Government of their added value and contribution to the implementation of national development policy and of their input into the definition of EU cooperation priorities for the period 2021-2027. **Mr. Jorge Rodríguez Bilbao's** presentation deals particularly with this aspect.



The first presentation made by **Mr. Jean Bossuyt** from the ECDPM focused on the topic: **“Influencing the future EU programming guidelines: How can it be done?”**

Mr. Jean Boussuyt pointed out that since the EU Communication in 2013, there has been a growing interest in Local and Regional Governments, however, this interest has not always manifested itself in political decisions. The challenge now for Local authorities is to be integrated into the programming process in order to influence the directives that the European Union delegations will implement with an aid envelope over the period 2021-2027.

The Associations of Local and Regional Governments are called upon to

advocate to influence the guidelines so that their priorities are among those retained in the framework of the EU cooperation agenda, the political heart of which is the Agenda 2030 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. For the expert, **Agenda 2030 is the priority box that Local and Regional Governments should target for their advocacy, given that 80% of SDGs are implemented at the local level.**

In the new EU cooperation instrument (NDICI), there is no longer a thematic envelope dedicated to Local authorities. The EU now chooses to include Local authorities in the definition and implementation of all the headings selected as priorities for intervention of the geographical component in each country. In each country, Associations of Local and Regional Governments will be invited by the EU delegations to take part at the negotiating table alongside the National Government to define the priorities of European cooperation projects and programs. **National Associations of Local and Regional Governments must demonstrate their ability to do planning and programming properly, otherwise they risk being overlooked.**

In their advocacy activity, National associations must recall the 2013 Communication which is a major political document, the need to localize national policies, with the consequence of systematically integrating a local dimension for their implementation, ("**mainstreaming**"), taking into account the territorial approach in the drafting of the guidelines of the programming process.

The second presentation made by **Mr. Jorge Rodriguez Bilbao, consultant**, was on: "**Understanding the added value of LRGs and their NALAs in the development and cooperation agenda of Africa countries**".

Mr. Rodríguez Bilbao invited NALAs (National Associations of Local Authorities) to play a leadership role in the programming process in negotiations with their National governments and EU Delegations. The NALAs must promote the territorial approach to local development (TALD). The TALD approach aims to show the two fold dimension of the contribution of Local and Regional Governments to national efforts to promote national development, by localizing national development policies and strategies for greater efficiency and better territorial justice; and by bringing additional richness to national development through the development of local potentialities and the mobilization of local vital forces for their realization. NALAs are invited to talk about what they do, in terms of promoting access to basic services, and to present how Local and Regional authorities contribute to the implementation of SDGs and also the mobilization of local resources. **For National associations, this means presenting themselves as entrepreneurs, no longer solely as managers of transferred competencies, and positioning themselves as developmental agents.**

Questions allowed participants to underline the fact that the EU does not seem to consider the specificity of the decentralization process in each of the countries and the inequalities of the territories. Countries have different models of decentralization, and National associations would like this specificity to be taken into consideration by the EU delegations during the negotiations.

Mr. Armand Pierre Béouindé, President of the Association of Municipalities of Burkina Faso (AMBF) and Mayor of Ouagadougou shared with his peers the example of two projects: Upgrading two neighborhoods of his city and setting up an urban information system that has benefited from European Union funding.

Mr. Mohamed Boudra, President of UCLG and President of the Moroccan Association of the Presidents of Communal Councils (AMPCC), welcomed the initiative of UCLG Africa to assist its members by video conference during the COVID-19 pandemic. *“All associations need to make an action plan for video conferencing and distance working in the face of this situation. We can win the first round on the health side, but the second round will be the most difficult economically and socially. We have to learn to network via video conferencing,”* he emphasized.

The representative of the Botswana Association of Local Authorities (BALA) noted that the management of the COVID-19 crisis had shown that Local authorities were implementers of National government decisions. In reality, we are facing a recentralization of power whereas, "Local authorities must be partners of Central governments and this, from the policy making level," as pointed out by **Mr. Steve Pheko**, Secretary General of BALA.

In response to questions raised by participants, **Mr. Bossuyt** recalled that EU delegations have a relatively good knowledge of what is happening in the field of decentralization in each country, which makes it possible to calibrate support according to the realities of decentralization. It is therefore no longer a question of underlining the more or less important merits of the different countries' levels of decentralization, but rather of defining European cooperation support for each country's situation, according to the priorities defined by each country and based on the general guidelines for European cooperation considered in the NDICI.

Mr. Bossuyt recalled that the programming process starts with a phase of discussion between the EU delegations and the EU Commission's headquarters in Brussels on the political priorities to be considered in the cooperation between the European Union and individual countries. This pre-programming is supposed to be completed and the document mentioning the political priorities selected for each country by the EU must be available at the level of each delegation. It is on the basis of this document and the priorities defined by each country that the priorities for European cooperation included in the programming are defined. For his part, **Mr. Rodriguez Bilbao** emphasized the opportunity

offered by the 2013 Communication, in which Local authorities are considered a priori as a public actor. The success of this advocacy depends on the capacity of the National associations of these authorities to convince their respective National governments of the added value of such associations, and to approach the EU delegations with credible proposals, so that this opportunity can be materialized through the effective inclusion of Local authorities in the European cooperation programming process for the period 2021-2027.

In conclusion, the Secretary General of UCLG Africa, **Mr. Jean Pierre Elong Mbassi** invited the National associations to read the working documents provided by UCLG-Africa before and during the webinar, and to immerse themselves in the content, which will help them to advocate within their respective National governments and the EU delegations. To succeed in this advocacy, it is essential that National associations:

- work on development proposals, in close partnership with their members and the national government;
- It is essential that National associations make proposals arising from the political economy analysis of decentralization in the context of their respective countries, as well as from an in-depth diagnosis of the way in which the contributions of local and territorial authorities are considered in development and cooperation policies in their respective countries;
- It is essential that the national associations quickly contact their respective governments and the EU delegations in their countries through their national association to request the inclusion of local authorities in the programming process for EU cooperation for the period 2021-2027.

Furthermore, **Mr. Elong Mbassi** reiterated the availability of the UCLG Africa secretariat to support National associations of Local and Regional Governments in the implementation of national consultations with their members via the platform used for this webinar for those who do not have the possibility to have their own platform. He also recalled the availability of UCLG Africa to accompany the national associations in the preparation of the dialogue with the national government and the technical support for the consultations with the EU delegation.

The President of the Rwanda Local Government Association (RALGA), **Mr. Innocent Uwimana** concluded the exchange by inviting his colleagues to start the work in view of the upcoming negotiations.

Find the full video of the webinar [here](#).

