

**SECOND CONFERENCE OF AFRICAN AND EUROPEAN  
REGIONAL AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES**  
**“The Impact of the Economic and Financial Crisis on Decentralized Governance in  
Africa: the Response of Local Authorities to the New Development Challenges”**

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Mr Chairperson

Excellencies and Distinguished participants

It is an honour to represent the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA) at this important conference. I congratulate the organizers, and in particular the Regional Council of Tuscany, the Mayor of Firenze Commune, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Euro-African Partnership for this initiative. I welcome the participants from so many countries and I look forward to hearing about the practical experiences of decentralized government in many different contexts.

● The Euro-African Partnership for Decentralized Governance

This Second Conference of African and European Regional and Local Authorities is a direct follow-up to the First Conference on: “*Decentralization: the New Dimension of Peace, Democracy and Development*” which was organised by UN/DESA, the Regional Council of Tuscany and the Conference of European Legislative Assemblies in September 2004.

The successful outcome of that event encouraged African and European participants to recommend the establishment of a permanent observatory of regional and local entities to foster decentralization processes and decentralized co-operation between local and regional authorities. In October 2005, the UN/DESA and the Tuscany Region decided to support the initiative “The Euro-African Partnership for Decentralized Governance” (EUAP) ([www.euroafricanpartnership.org](http://www.euroafricanpartnership.org)), financed through a contribution by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Euro-African Partnership for Decentralized Governance (EUAP) aims to strengthen local institutions in Africa, particularly through the development of partnerships with local and regional authorities in Europe. The partnership has established structured relationships with local authorities in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Rwanda, Mali, Senegal, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, South Africa, Liberia, Niger, Uganda, Ghana, as well as with the National Associations of Local Authorities of Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Senegal, South Africa, and Tanzania.

The activities of the Euro-African Partnership have supported capacity building processes for local authority employees and partnerships and network-building on decentralization processes and strengthening of local government in Africa and

achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

### ● The recognition of the important role of decentralization and local authorities

The fundamental role of decentralization and of local authorities has been highlighted in a number of important international and regional contexts. In 2005 United Nations World Summit outcome underlined the “*important role of local authorities in contributing to the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals including the Millennium Development Goals*”<sup>1</sup>.

In 2005, the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan commented in an address to local government leaders “*How can we expect to reach the MDGs (...) without making progress in areas such as education, hunger, health, water, sanitation and gender equality? Cities and local authorities have a critical role to play in all of these areas (...) While our goals are global, they can most effectively be achieved through action at local level.*”

In March 2007, a European Parliament resolution strongly emphasized the role of local authorities in development cooperation. It recognized that the involvement of local authorities in development practices is essential for achieving the MDGs and ensuring good governance.

The European Commission Communication “*Local Authorities: actors in development*” of October 2008 stated that: “*Local authorities are bringing unique added value to development processes (...) and “have direct experience of and valuable skills in territorial development, decentralisation and strengthening democratic governance.”*”

Decentralization is also strongly supported by both bilateral and multilateral agencies – including the United Nations, the World Bank and the European Union (EU), as well as national associations of local government authorities and civil society organizations.

### ● The evolution of the processes of decentralization in Africa

In many African countries, decentralization is increasingly considered one of the most important modes of governance, valued as an instrument for sustainable democratization and the empowerment of citizens.- even though the United Cities and Local Governments has noted that “*To date, less than 40% of African constitutions mention local governments as a specific level of governance*”<sup>2</sup>.

In recent years almost all African countries have taken reform measures, attributing a more central role to local authorities. These processes are differentiated by various stages and levels of development and implementation.

The holding of regular administrative elections in many countries in Africa represents a milestone in the consolidation of decentralization. The election of local

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, 60/1, 2005 World Summit Outcome

<sup>2</sup> Decentralization and local democracy in the world; First Global Report by United Cities and Local Governments, pg. 26

administrators by citizens directly affects the relationships between authorities and citizens.

There have been a number of strong regional commitments to decentralization and recognition of the important role of local authorities in Africa. In June 2005, the first Pan African Conference of Ministers of Local Governments in Kigali explicitly recalled the First Conference of the European and African Regional and Local Assemblies, and the outcome stated that "*decentralization is an essential instrument for the consolidation and strengthening of democracy, good governance, local governance, peace building, economic growth, poverty reduction, and sustainable development, thus, it should be a tool for socio-economic transformation*".

At the second EU - Africa Summit in Lisbon in December 2007, the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) noted that: "*local authorities (are) at the center of current development challenges*".

#### ● The importance of cooperation at local authority level

The process of decentralization can be facilitated by exchange and cooperation between local authorities within and between countries, and across regions. Such "decentralized cooperation", or cooperation at local and regional levels, is rapidly gaining recognition as an important means of consolidating decentralized governance, promoting local development, and introducing innovations in international cooperation.

"Decentralized cooperation" involves the establishment of effective and sustained relationships between networks of local and regional authorities and other stakeholders – which can be "south-south" or "north-south" relationships.. Such relationships strengthen the effective implementation of decentralized policies, within the context of national priorities and practices.

The experience from the decentralized cooperation and partnerships between local and regional authorities promoted in the context of the "Euro-African Partnership for Decentralized Governance", are proving to be an effective way to support the promotion of local development and achievement of the MDGs. Promising practices in this respect will be shared at this conference.

#### ● The importance of a gender equality perspective on decentralization and local governance

The initiative to increase the focus on gender equality perspectives in decentralization and local governance - including through the Pre-Conference on this issue just prior to the main conference - is very welcome, and I congratulate the organizers on taking this step. It is widely recognized that ensuring the full participation of women in decision-making at all levels, including local and regional levels, is critical for democratization. There are important development and democracy dividends from increasing women's participation and strengthening attention to their priorities, needs and contributions; and conversely there are significant losses and costs from not doing so.

Despite significant evidence on the importance of women's participation and contributions, women continue to be excluded from important decision-making processes, particularly in the allocation of essential resources. There are multiple obstacles to women's participation which need to be explicitly addressed – including gender stereotypes on the expected roles of women and men in public life, inequalities in access to education and training, lack of finance and support systems, and unequal sharing of unpaid domestic work which significantly limits the time women have for employment and public involvement outside the home.

Local and regional authorities have important roles to play in increasing women's participation, and ensuring that there is adequate attention to the priorities, needs and contributions of women as well as men. Efforts are needed to develop legislation and policies; and to ensure equal opportunity and affirmative action measures are in place, as well as to provide gender-sensitivity training for all local and regional officials and leadership training and mentorship programmes to support women in taking on new roles.

Gender analysis must be a required part of all initial planning processes and systematic gender-sensitive evaluations must measure progress in increasing women's participation and attention to their concerns and interests. Collection and use of sex-disaggregated data should be increased. Gender-responsive budget processes should be initiated to ensure that policy commitments on gender equality and empowerment of women are matched with sufficient resources. The implications of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) at local government level should be identified and efforts made to ensure its full implementation. These issues would be well suited for increased decentralized collaboration between local and regional authorities in Africa and Europe. Exchange of experiences, lessons learned and promising practices on these issues at local level would be beneficial for all involved in the partnership.

● The Second Conference of African And European Regional and Local Institutions focus on the financial and economic crisis

The focus of this conference on the impact of the financial and economic crisis is particularly timely. Although positive developments have been recorded in establishing and sustaining effective decentralized partnerships and collaboration in this programme, the current economic and financial crisis can become a serious obstacle to carrying out the needed institutional reforms aimed at strengthening decentralization and local economic and social development, both in Europe and Africa, including through a weakening of the capacity of local authorities to respond to citizens' needs.

There is no doubt that the impact of the multiple crises (the food, energy, and financial and economic crises and the challenge of climate change) will affect the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including the MDGs, in Africa. This will narrow the policy space for the implementation of local development strategies and may lead to a reduction of the confidence of citizens in local authorities.

It is important to keep in mind the significant gender equality implications of the crises. Past experience in economic crises in Asia and Latin America has shown that women as well as men may face loss of employment. Even where men experience greater unemployment, it is often women who have to find alternative sources of income to sustain the households, in many cases through vulnerable employment in the informal sector with low wages and poor working conditions. In many contexts, basic services, for example child and health-care, are cut or costs are significantly increased. Women increase their unpaid work to compensate for the loss of these basic services and to ensure the wellbeing of their families.

Many of the responses to economic crises in the past, in particular employment creation or infrastructure programmes, have ignored the needs of women. Stimulus packages designed in response to the crisis should provide investments in both physical and social infrastructure and in employment that benefits women as well as men.

In addition, in the context of Africa, it is critical to give attention to the challenges women face in agriculture – particularly in relation to accessing critical resources - in addressing the multiple problems posed by the food and energy crises as well as the challenges of climate change, in both the short and long-term.

The Second Conference of European and Africa Regional and Local Authorities aims to raise awareness about the difficulties encountered by local authorities – those institutions closest to citizens - in responding to the development challenges posed by the multiple crises. The purpose of the Conference is to provide an opportunity for national and regional authorities and civil society, as well as international organizations and senior managers of public institutions and/or programmes on decentralized governance, to review the current situation and make specific proposals for reducing the impact of the crisis.

Through this Conference, UN/DESA, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Region of Tuscany, within the framework of the Euro-African Partnership for Decentralized Governance and Decentralized Cooperation, intend to examine the impact of economic and financial crisis on local governance in Africa. At the same time, the Conference aims to assess the specific role that local institutions, and enhanced collaboration among such institutions - can play in facilitating decentralized governance and contributing to economic growth and development at local level.

The Euro-African Partnership Project strongly believes that closer exchange and cooperation between local and regional authorities in the South and North can lead to creative and effective solutions for local development issues, including the achievement of the MDGs, and particularly the eradication of poverty.

Thank you.