

Andris Piebalgs

European Commissioner for Development

Structured Dialogue on the
involvement of Civil Society and
Local Authorities in EU development
cooperation

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

Final Conference of the Structured Dialogue
Budapest, 17 May 2011



Minister, Honourable Members of the European Parliament, Your Excellencies, Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be in Budapest today, and thank the Hungarian Presidency for co-organising this conference. I am also very proud to be personally linked to the Structured Dialogue with civil society and local authorities active in development, all together to discuss today.

More than a year ago I was with you to endorse this ambitious process, which marked a shift in the way we work together. Now, fourteen months later, we are here to close that chapter. Yet as this chapter closes, so a new chapter begins.

We are here to talk about the future. The world around us is changing, dramatically. Countries around the world, in particular now on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, are witnessing inspiring people-led movements for freedom against oppression and misuse of resources, which are undermining their societies' developments.

For me it is clear that no society can hope for real sustained development progress unless it embraces good governance, human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

You, civil society and local authorities, are fundamental in this. You are the essential component of any working democracy, by promoting universal values that are also at the core of EU policies. And your work contributes to poverty reduction in our common efforts to meet the MDGs.

Civil society organisations promote public accountability. They encourage broad-based ownership of national development strategies. And as democracy watchdogs and advocates for the disadvantaged they act as fundamental drivers for change in development and governance processes.

For their part, local authorities are key to enhancing local governance by delivering public services and bolstering local economic development.

You are all champions of innovative ideas and projects also through the funding you give. In short, you are all our essential partners in development.

With events changing quickly in the world, and with our own internal changes taking place – notably with the welcome creation of the European External Action Service – I felt it only right that we should reflect on reforming our development cooperation agenda to do things more effectively. The ensuing large-scale public consultations on the future for EU development policy, the future of budget support and funding for the EU's external actions after 2013 have given us a sound basis for shaping an effective and relevant development policy for the future.

Our Structured Dialogue fits in perfectly with our reform agenda and forward thinking. Its outcomes will be reflected in that future development policy and in the EU position on Aid Effectiveness ahead of the High-Level Forum in Busan later this year.

The Structured Dialogue, discussing EU working relations with civil society organisations and local authorities at global level, has been both very challenging and highly remarkable.

In our many meetings with all relevant players we have sought to review our cooperation "to and through" civil society and local authorities. By this I mean geographic, bilateral and thematic programmes. But we have gone far beyond mere technical meetings.

The Structured Dialogue has pinpointed the roles, responsibilities and synergies of all development actors. It has reflected their increasing importance in the local governance agenda, and has allowed us to find better ways to support them.

We recognise, now more than ever, that common efforts are needed to foster an enabling and democratic environment for civil society organisations and local authorities. Your roles in owning your countries' development agendas are fundamental. The EU must remember this in its political dialogue with partner countries. Dialogue is essential to better define priorities for intervention, but there is need for dialogue at every level: with local citizens, with national and regional authorities and with international institutions. The EU acts at every level, and at every level needs credible and representative partners to develop strategic partnerships.

I am glad to see that, in the context of the Structured Dialogue, you have stressed the importance of the concept of "democratic ownership" of policies. This concept allows us to reconcile the need to be more effective, by aligning to partner countries' systems and priorities, with the need to ensure that those policies stem from true and inclusive dialogue held at partner country level with legitimate and representative actors.

In fact, the local dimension is clear in the Structured Dialogue. Local actors are primarily responsible for defining their needs, and we have to promote this with capacity-building and support schemes.

The Structured Dialogue has also enabled stakeholders to reflect on how to improve their own operations in cooperation with other international forums.

The inclusive and innovative spirit of this year of dialogue without doubt marks a milestone in our relations. We will not let this year's achievements slide. I hope you will help us build on them.

The Structured Dialogue ideas must trigger a shift in our engagement with one another. In this regard I am glad to announce that, in response to the European Parliament's call, next year we will come forward with a Communication on Engagement with civil society & local authorities in development cooperation. In that document we will take stock of the results of the Structured Dialogue and of its supporting initiatives.

These ideas will be reflected both at policy level and in our operational aspects. As part of the transfer of responsibilities from Headquarters to EU delegations, and following the creation of the External Action Service, our internal guidelines for implementing programmes and for fostering dialogue at local level will need updating. This process will take stock of some excellent practices that have been highlighted and put forward by you and by EU Delegations.

On another practical point we need to adapt our aid delivery mechanisms as well. We will simplify our procedures and make full use of the variety of support schemes available. The Commission manages thousands of projects each year with the clear objective of poverty alleviation and there is always room for improvement. I am determined to ensure that the EU continues to advance towards delivering high-impact aid.

Let me give you just one example of how we are committed to putting the results of the debates into practice as soon as possible: from this year on the call for proposals system will take into account some of the needs expressed in the Structured Dialogue, such as support to umbrella organisations.

Beyond this, in the future we will also open up the range of possible alternative options for aid delivery and selection mechanisms, in order to better respond to your needs. These options will cover our direct work with civil society and local authorities, as well as the so-called "New Aid Modalities", including general or sector budget support, in order to better involve civil society and local authorities in their monitoring role. This should guarantee public accountability on how funds are used and how programmes are implemented.

Let me be clear, however: while there could be an enhanced role for you in new aid modalities like budget support, the Commission will continue its practice of providing support to civil society organisations and local authorities. Those two approaches are simply two sides of the same coin.

In all this, dialogue is of paramount importance –at local level, where EU Delegations work closely with local realities, and in Brussels itself.

For this reason I am pleased to announce the establishment of an institutional space for it in Brussels, to allow for systematic debate with civil society and local authority representatives' groups. I would also be pleased to see other institutions associated with this process in the future. Indeed representatives from the Economic and Social Committee, of the Committee of the Regions, the EEAS and of the European Investment Bank are already involved, which is a welcome development in my eyes.

I am thankful to you for the commitment with which you have put forward your constituencies' positions during the debates. I very much appreciate all your contributions and your dedication.

And your diversity. A diversity that has fostered a rich, fruitful and free debate, with the intention of developing a shared idea, a common understanding.

For me this shared idea is that development aid spent in an effective way is simply the best investment in our future. True and effective partnerships are essential in this and I appreciate your efforts to build our future, with a diversity of ideas, but a common goal.

Our reflections and discussions have only just started.

Thank you.