



**European Committee
of the Regions**



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EURO-MEDITERRANEAN REGIONAL AND LOCAL ASSEMBLY

Recommendations for 2021

To be adopted at the 12th ARLEM Plenary session on 22 February 2021 in Brussels, Belgium (online)

Twenty-five years after the Barcelona Declaration set the goal to create an area of peace and shared prosperity around the Mediterranean, many objectives remain to be reached and challenges have increased. Celebrating this anniversary at the Regional Forum in November 2020, the co-presidency of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) encouraged the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) to continue to amplify the voices of local and regional authorities and to promote the territorialisation of the Euro-Mediterranean sectoral policies.

Ten years after mass protests in the Arab world, remarkable political transformations in some Southern Mediterranean countries contrasted with a sluggish pre-COVID 19 economic development that then turned into a shrinking economy due to the pandemic. While the entire economy suffered from lockdowns, the vital tourism sector has been particularly impacted. Vulnerable groups have been the hardest hit by the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and poverty rates have gone up. The more than six million Syrian refugees remain without a viable prospect of an early return, and partially without access to education and social services in host countries, in some of which the strain on public finances and service delivery has caused tensions.

At the beginning of 2021, local and regional representatives on the three shores of the Mediterranean that come together in ARLEM look back to a year of a pandemic crisis unprecedented in recent history with a devastating human, economic and social impact that has not been the same for all, but has been markedly felt by all. And they look ahead to steer the way together to developing resilience and building back better, in a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach and guided by the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals.

2021 also marks the beginning of a new long-term EU budget (or "multi-annual financial framework") for 2021-2027 with a significantly revised funding structure in which the geographic approach is significantly reinforced in the new Neighbourhood, Development, International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI).

The COVID-19 pandemic has only underlined the relevance of the three fields of action identified in ARLEM's 2020-2022 action plan: sustainable economic development, climate action and women's empowerment, that each need to be enhanced to reflect the needs of our respective communities, including in terms of economic recovery.

The Nicosia initiative of cooperation with Libyan municipalities that was launched five years ago at the ARLEM plenary session in Nicosia has shown how peer-to-peer cooperation can contribute to bridging divides and improving services delivered to the population.

Representing the territorial dimension of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), ARLEM can support the cooperation between the EU and its southern neighbouring partners on a local and regional level.

ARLEM RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2021

Towards a renewed partnership between the European and its Southern neighbours

1. The EU must enhance its assistance with its neighbours and help them in strengthening their resilience facing societal challenges: this includes involvement of local and regional bodies into the green and digital transitions and into a strategy for open and strategic autonomy. ARLEM therefore welcomes the EU's reinforced commitment to its Southern neighbours expressed in the joint communication by the European Commission and the European External Action Service on a renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood published on 9 February 2021, as especially at this moment, delivering tangible outcomes through cooperation is crucial to find a way for a more prosperous, equitable, sustainable and safer future for the Mediterranean region.
2. ARLEM calls on the EU and its partner countries to systematically take into account local and regional authorities as drivers of a territorial development that is close to the people, when planning economic development, trade and investment in this context. Cooperation benefits must reach beyond the capitals. The existing huge territorial disparities within neighbouring countries must not be increased, but reduced by new initiatives.
3. ARLEM strongly holds that social development must go hand in hand with economic development to reply to legitimate claims of the populations and to counteract the increasing and dangerous socio-economic inequality that has only been deepened by the COVID-19 crisis.

COVID-19

4. ARLEM is worried by the risk of vaccination-divide and urges political actors to facilitate fair and equitable access for health care workers and those most-at-risk in all parts of the Euro-Mediterranean region to vaccines against COVID-19, irrespective of nationality, ethnicity or prosperity. Along with resilience and preparedness, solidarity is key to mitigate the public health and economic impact of the pandemic. Joint efforts for schemes such as COVAX need to be stepped up.

5. Governance should be adequate and measures appropriate especially in times of crisis. Rule of law, human rights and freedom of expression must not be undermined in the name of public health.

Sustainable economic development

6. Economic development must be accompanied by inclusive, sustainable social development to contribute to the resilience of the population and overall stability. To this end, public institutions including at the local or regional level should both be strengthened and monitored in their delivery of basic public services.
7. To recover from the COVID-19 crisis and provide a viable perspective to the big share of young people among the populations of the Southern Mediterranean countries, both public and private investment must be harnessed to boost development now. Increased regional integration would unlock a huge economic potential.
8. The need for the digitalisation of the economy and services has been strongly underlined by the COVID-19 pandemic. With its report on the digitalisation of the SMEs in the Mediterranean region (rapporteur: Lizzy Delaricha, Ganei Tikva/IL), ARLEM provides very practical support to mayors who want to seize the potential that lies in digitalisation for the SMEs in their constituency.
9. ARLEM calls on the Mediterranean region's central governments to involve local authorities more in development of business friendly strategies and to develop smart specialisation strategies to help create strategic autonomy and synergies in key areas for local and regional development.
10. ARLEM calls for the creation of an EU initiative to facilitate growth and job creation by improving the local business environment, stimulating entrepreneurship and attracting investment for sustainable economic development in the South Neighbourhood, like the one existing for the Eastern Partnership (Mayors for Economic Growth).
11. As a concrete contribution towards youth entrepreneurship as a key factor in economic development in the Mediterranean region, with the ARLEM Award: Young local entrepreneurship in the Mediterranean, the assembly contributes to showcasing successful examples of young entrepreneurship in the Mediterranean region as an inspiration to others. It furthermore aims at demonstrating the positive impact that local and regional authorities in Mediterranean partner countries can have on the entrepreneurial ecosystem and highlighting how young entrepreneurs in Mediterranean partner countries actively take the future in their hands and create jobs for local economic development. The UfM might consider creating an entrepreneurial community of the Mediterranean among the winning and shortlisted candidates, stemming from different sectors and levels of innovation.

Climate action in the Mediterranean

12. Concerning the critical nexus between climate change, agriculture, water and food security in the Mediterranean, ARLEM promotes the Mediterranean diet and contributes a specific set of recommendations through its report by Ms Rampal (FR/EPP) just before the second UfM ministerial meeting on environment and climate action.
13. ARLEM calls for the full involvement of the LRAs in the implementation of the Euro-Mediterranean water agenda, which establishes an essential framework for the collective management of water and should make it possible to advance on the protection of the environment in this region so affected by the damaging effects of climate change.
14. ARLEM recommends that cities and regions in the Mediterranean region further commit to enhanced action on climate, notably through the Global Covenant of Mayors, for which ARLEM expresses its full support. ARLEM looks forward to building a strong partnership of local and regional authorities towards the 26th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 26) to the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) in Glasgow in 2021, in order to support cities and regions' role in contributing to the UN's SDGs and with a view to enhancing its global governance to improve its inclusiveness.
15. Following the adoption of its report on Blue economy for local authorities in the Mediterranean (rapporteur Vincenzo Bianco, member of Catania City Council and President of the National Council of ANCI, IT/PES), ARLEM will continue to work for a smart and resilient blue economy in terms of the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs, and ocean ecosystem health.

Women's empowerment

16. ARLEM strives to promote women's empowerment and gender equality, in terms of rights and opportunities, as an essential asset to foster regional stability and socio-economic development. The obstacles to women's active participation in politics should be addressed and any legal and other barriers to women's political participation in election processes and representation in election results, including in leadership positions, should be eliminated in order to encourage more stable, prosperous and inclusive societies.
17. The promotion of women's role in the public political sphere must go hand in hand with their liberation from sexual and domestic violence, their enjoyment of civil liberties and closing the gender employment as well as pay gap. ARLEM welcomes the EU's push for more and faster progress towards gender equality expressed in its Action Plan III for 2021-2025, seen that the health and socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis are disproportionately affecting women and girls also in the Mediterranean region.

New EU financial framework 2021-2027

18. Considering the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), with EUR 17.2 billion for the EU's cooperation with the neighbourhood countries,

ARLEM welcomes the fact that at least EUR 500 million will be foreseen for local authorities under the geographic pillar. In view of the reinforced geographic approach, ARLEM calls on the EU delegations to consider local and regional authorities and their associations as key drivers for a sustainable development, and as partners in programming.

Sustainable urban development

19. Ahead of the third UfM ministerial conference on sustainable urban development to be held in 2021, ARLEM welcomes the UfM Strategic Urban Development Action Plan 2040 and its Housing Action Plan given their high relevance for the Euro-Mediterranean region, and hopes for the envisaged urban projects in the pipeline to be inclusive of the local communities.
20. A comprehensive urban development will be particularly necessary in Beirut after the two explosions of 4 August 2020 destroying the port and a hospital, killing hundreds, injuring thousands and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. Good governance on all levels as well as international cooperation and solidarity continue to be needed to mitigate the dire impact of the Beirut blast in a situation compounded by a pre-existing economic crisis, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and a recent major inflation of food prices which plunge many Lebanese into extreme poverty, and to create building blocks towards a better future.

Nicosia initiative

21. Five years after its launch at the ARLEM plenary session in Nicosia, the Nicosia initiative of cooperation with Libyan municipalities will enter a new phase in 2021, with different and substantial new projects funded mainly by the EU starting for capacity-building for municipal staff, local economic development as well as local governance. ARLEM welcomes this visible recognition of the successful cooperation and results reached through it, as well as the shift from incremental to more structural support.
22. ARLEM commends the fact that in the REBUILD project, Libyan municipalities for the first time figure not as mere beneficiaries, but as partners and co-applicants in a true spirit of cooperation that has guided the initiative from its creation. ARLEM notes proudly that for Libyans, the Nicosia initiative has become the instrument to coordinate both international and intra-community cooperation, which demonstrates how trust across political conflict lines could be built up through this initiative.

Day of the Mediterranean

23. ARLEM shares the objectives of fostering a common Mediterranean identity and increasing the visibility and ownership of regional cooperation and therefore welcomes that the 5th UfM Regional Forum in 2020 launched the 28th of November, date of the Barcelona Declaration, as the Day of the Mediterranean. ARLEM encourages its members to hold cultural events in their constituencies with a view to strengthening ties, promoting intercultural exchanges and dialogue and embracing the diversity of the region.