EU Development Cooperation in Central Asia: Regional Programmes

The enlargement of the European Union in 2004 has brought the EU closer to Central Asia – geographically, politically and economically. The European Commission has consequently intensified support programmes to strengthen its relationship with the Central Asian countries.

Since 2007, the new policy framework is the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI – replacing the former TACIS programme) aimed at increasing the ownership and impact of the cooperation programmes, with a focus on poverty reduction, economic and social reforms, good governance and institutional changes, in line with EU values.

A key component of the EU Cooperation agenda is the Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia (2007-13). Its objective is to better support Central Asian countries in their pursuit of sustainable economic development and poverty reduction, facilitating closer regional cooperation both within Central Asia and between Central Asia and the EU. An indicative, global budget of €719 million has been earmarked, for the period 2007-13, for financing cooperation programmes at both national (bilateral) and regional levels.

At the political level the European Council adopted in June 2007 the EU Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia.

Cooperation through dialogue
At national level, dialogues take place within the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement structures.

The priorities for regional cooperation in Central Asia are closely linked to those defined within the Eastern Region strategy of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI EAST). This is due to the fact that the EU policy development framework, in particular concerning the overall development of the network infrastructures – covering the energy, transport and telecom sectors – is basically built on the same principles and overall strategic guidelines for both regions.

Energy and transport integration
Cooperation with Central Asia in the energy field is aimed at the promotion of a regional approach to the key energy policies and the progressive integration of Central Asian energy markets into the European one.

The Central Asian Energy Programmes build on the EU-supported ‘Baku Initiative’ which continues the INOGATE cooperation framework and programmes. Likewise, the Central Asian Transport Programmes, which notably support land, maritime and air transport safety, are part of the Baku Initiative on Transport, which continues the TRACECA cooperation framework and programmes. TRACECA aims to develop economic relations, trade and transport communications along the Europe-Caucasus-Asia transportation corridor – the old Silk Road.

An important new EU-funded action concerns the establishment of a specific Central Asia Investment Facility (CAIF), which will support and leverage, through grants and technical assistance, the loans from European IFIs, development banks and other finance institutions. The CAIF will focus primarily on investment in the energy and environment sectors.

The Central Asia Invest programme is a regional project which aims to promote the sustainable economic development of Central Asian countries by encouraging the development of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs).
In particular it supports capacity building projects for business intermediary organisations with a view to upgrading skills and reinforcing networking.

**Environment**

Central Asia has to face many environmental challenges ranging from deforestation to air and water pollution. The EC-funded Central Asia Environment Programmes focus especially on the key water supply issues, particularly facilitating solutions to problems affecting transboundary waters and integrated water resource management at river basin and inter-state level.

A good partnership has been established between the various national and international donor organisations on water governance issues.

Other environmental areas for future co-operation with Central Asia include: Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (FLEG), biodiversity, environmental monitoring, adaptation to climate change and impact mitigation.

**Education**

The programme aims at helping to modernise the education systems, whilst fostering in parallel international and regional cooperation in education and research networks. The focus is on higher and vocational education and related training systems.

In the Central Asia region, the two most important EU-funded projects in the field of higher education are Tempus and Erasmus Mundus. The Central Asia Tempus programme supports the modernisation of higher education through the modernisation of curricula, teaching methods and quality assurance. Erasmus Mundus’ Partnerships Action 2 is a mobility programme for students and academics covering all levels of higher education.

Education is also covered by several cooperation programmes conducted on a bilateral basis.

Finally, the new Central Asian Research and Education Network (CAREN) will connect universities and researchers in the five Central Asian countries by high capacity Internet. At the same time, the CAREN programme will enable them to work jointly with EU centres on international research projects. It will be accessible to one million students and researchers in over 200 universities and research institutions in Central Asia through connection to the high-speed pan-European GÉANT network.

**Border security**

The EU has been investing heavily to improve border security in the Central Asian states. Through the border management (BOMCA) and drug control (CADAP) programmes, the EU is seeking to improve the capability of local law enforcement agencies through training, equipment and infrastructure.

The BOMCA programme has introduced European-style Integrated Border Management (IBM) methodologies, ensuring that borders are open for trade in licit goods and legitimate movement of persons, and closed for trafficking in illicit goods and attempts to cross borders illegally.