EC/developing countries relations: support for regional economic integration efforts

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Adopting the report by Mr Clive NEEDLE (PSE, UK), the European Parliament saw the main purpose of regional economic integration among developing countries as being to reduce poverty and to promote sustainable economic, social and human development, whereby the integration of developing countries into the world economy was a means but not an end. Integration should be seen as a tool for economic promotion as well as a means of bringing people closer together and reinforcing peace. Parliament supported the Commission's efforts to monitor integration programmes but called for better coordination with the other donors and agencies involved. It considered that, where the conditions for integration were not in place, other forms of cooperation could be supported and that regional economic integration should be based on: - an understanding of regional specificities (historical, economic, political, social and institutional); - an evaluation of the degree to which the pre-requisites to economic integration were in place in the various regions of the developing world (as opposed to operational regional cooperation programmes); - a realistic evaluation of the timetable and stages in the regional cooperation process on which integration could be built. It also considered that efforts to achieve integration should include a whole range of preferential measures to support weaker economies. In this respect, Parliament considered it essential for integration agreements to allow countries to achieve greater economic and trade integration than the WTO required, provided that these liberalization agreements did not lead to increased protectionism against outsiders. It also felt that the impact on each country of abandoning unilateral preferences should be studied. It was also of the opinion that the increase in the number of regional organizations in Africa was resulting in a costly dispersion of effort and efficiency and called for support and backing for efforts to rationalize the current number of organizations, provided that the countries in question so wished. It also called for the Commission and the Member States only to support organizations capable of making a sustained contribution to improvement in these countries. Particular attention also needed to be paid to enhancing regional cooperation between the outermost regions of the Union and neighbouring territories. Parliament emphasized that regional economic integration could prove to be the best way of developing the Maghreb, the Mashrek and the Near East and called on the Commission to make provision for the application of cumulation of rules of origin to the main exports from the Mediterranean basin and for the procedures and provisions governing cumulation laid down in Lomé IV/2 to be simplified. It was also in favour of action which allowed these countries to make more flexible use of rules of origin and supported cumulation at sub-regional level. Parliament also called for an agency with greater environmental responsibility and for national economic reform programmes to take account of the regional dimension, vulnerable groups, women and children. Finally, the European Parliament called on the Commission to present a new report on a series of points not addressed in its document (infrastructures, political, cultural and ethnic aspects).