EU/Pacific Islands relations: a strategy for a strengthened partnership

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Nirj DEVA (EPP-ED, UK) in response to the Commission communication on EU relations with the Pacific Islands - a strategy for a strengthened partnership. It welcomed the Commission's initiative to develop the first EU strategy for the Pacific after 30 years of cooperation, following on from the signature of the first Lomé Convention in 1975 and the Cotonou Agreement in June 2000.

The report said that, as a major donor to the region, the EU has an opportunity to create a strategy that will support the island countries of the Pacific in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It also emphasised the heterogeneity of the region and therefore called for flexibility in the Commission strategy to ensure that development assistance is channelled according to national and regional priorities, thereby achieving maximum benefit for both the more developed and less developed countries of the Pacific.

The committee recommended that more developed Pacific island countries continue to develop local processing, thereby creating more employment, and explore the possibility of European Investment Bank soft loan lending to small and medium-sized enterprises owned by Pacific island interests so as to increase processing capacity in order to bring increased revenues to the region.

The committee drew attention to the economic importance that tourism has for the region, given that one of the main assets of the Pacific islands is their idyllic setting. It also stressed that any encouragement of tourism in the region must go hand in hand with increased local ownership of tourist services, to ensure the sustainability of the tourist sector and to maximise the benefits to the local economy. The report recognised the benefits that the setting up of low-cost airlines servicing the region had brought to the Pacific island economies, and called for impediments to "open skies" policies to be eliminated while developing air transport rationally so as to minimise emissions and other environmental impacts of increased air travel. The committee stressed that, in the majority of cases, only the richer countries with more developed infrastructure and more frequent air connections attract significant numbers of tourists each year, and said that in these cases development assistance must continue to be used to finance infrastructure and to encourage sustainable tourism.

MEPs called on the Commission to initiate policies to tackle the rapid spread of HIV/Aids in the region, and to develop programmes to tackle the problem of malaria in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Timor-Leste, including such measures as the supply of anti-malarial bed nets to these countries.

Among other points, the report endorsed the Commission's view that the Pacific island countries have a major stake in tackling climate change, given the potential effect on the region of rising sea levels. It called for increased dialogue between the EU and the Pacific region with a view to tackling climate change and related concerns.

Lastly, MEPs stressed that, in order to ensure the efficient delivery of aid, the promotion of good governance throughout the Pacific region was vital in order to prevent corruption, one of the key obstacles to meeting the MDGs, and in order to achieve sustainable development. They called for "national institutions and transparent and robust procedures" to be put in place, and also stressed that the strengthened partnership between the EU and the Pacific island countries must be reflected in increased

support for the parliaments of the states concerned with a view to strengthening their capabilities and their role in fostering regional political stability.