



EUROPEAN NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY: SOCIAL ISSUES

FAIRNESS MATTERS



European Neighbourhood Policy

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European Commission
Directorate-General
for External Relations
B – 1049 Brussels
enp-info@ec.europa.eu

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Partners in development

Chefchaouen, with its beautiful white and blue houses, is situated in Morocco's breathtakingly stunning Rif Mountains. However, this relatively remote and testing landscape presents major challenges to local communities and there is widespread rural poverty.

With EU support, a major scheme covering hundreds of square kilometres of Chefchaouen's hinterland is working to improve livelihoods. "Our main objective is to raise incomes and preserve natural resources," explains Abdelsalam Chriqi, who heads the initiative.

One of many such schemes in the Maghreb region, the programme supports more productive sustainable farming, reforestation, animal husbandry, infrastructure, health-care, the development of the region's natural park, and fairs for regional products, etc. "The participation of the local community is an essential pillar of our activities," points out Hassan Berhili who coordinates the management of the various projects in the field.

The fruits of co-operation

Mohamed Bouqaydi is an industrious small-scale farmer. In this tough mountain terrain, he owns olive and carob trees, keeps bees and herds goats in order to make ends meet.

Bouqaydi is jubilant because a new co-operative olive press employing state-of-the-art technology has opened up in the Chefchaouen area of the Rif. "We own a traditional family press but we prefer to use the modern one because it produces better quality oil, in larger quantities and with less labour," he explains.

With traditional methods, the ratio of olives to oil is around 14%. With the new press, this has risen to 21%. In addition, the resultant oil is more consistent and has much lower acidity, which boosts its quality. With the help of the co-operative, which has developed its own distribution network, Bouqaydi's oil is now fetching up to 60% more than before. "I'm using the extra income to improve life for my family," the beaming father says as he pats the shoulder of his son.

The EU-funded co-operative also provides farmers with a comprehensive range of support services. "We work to raise awareness among farmers that good olive oil also depends on the right agricultural techniques, proper storage and transportation," explains Abdel-Rahman el-Khawaja who heads the co-operative. "We provide them with support and training in these areas." The press has just wound up its first season during which it extracted 40 tonnes of oil from nearly 220 tonnes of olives on behalf of most of its 70 members and 205 non-members.

Hive of activity

Thanks to this programme, Chefchaouen has become a centre of co-operative activity. It hosts co-operatives for beekeepers, goat herders, rabbit breeders, and others. One beekeeping co-operative produces, year-round, an entire range of forest honey. Depending on the season, the bees feed on lemon, eucalyptus, thyme, or carob trees, thereby producing different flavours of honey.

"The shifting of beehives to different surroundings in the forest... is one of the greatest innovations this co-operative has brought about. It has also made it much easier for us to buy materials, introduce new techniques and market our output," says Azhar el-Azzouzi, a member of the co-operative. "In the six years since we started, our output has risen tenfold."

Goat husbandry is one of the mainstays of the local economy. In order to help herders make the most of their milk, a co-operative goat's cheese factory recently opened.

"We set up this association with the participation of local husbanders," explains Mohammed Boueissa who manages the factory. "We also help farmers improve their goat husbandry techniques and share experience and know-how."

The modern factory buys the goat's milk from farmers at above-market prices and uses it to produce soft and matured cheese. The facility employs up-to-date hygiene and quality controls. "We carry out analysis along the entire production line," describes Zeinab Rati, one of the factory's young lab technicians. She is thrilled that she managed to find a job, her first, to match her qualifications.

Following a thorough study of the Moroccan goat's cheese market, the co-operative now distributes its brands all over the country.

The majority of European Union citizens, a recent survey found, are in favour of closer co-operation with neighbouring countries. They believe that closer ties could strengthen peace and democracy.

This is precisely what the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is about. Developed in 2003/2004 with the aim of drawing the enlarged EU and our neighbours closer together, the ENP is about taking concrete action to support reforms and to enhance prosperity: to improve the daily lives of people in our neighbourhood.

So how does it work? The EU and each of its neighbours agree on how to build closer relations and support reforms over a three-to-five-year period. The joint commitments are spelled out in so-called Action Plans. Expertise and funding (almost €12 billion from 2007 to 2013) is available under the 'European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument' (ENPI) to assist with modernisation and reform.

Ludmila Gvozdik has lived with her husband and family at an IDP centre since the early 1990s.



A better society for all

Every society faces challenges created by poverty, lack of education, marginalisation, disease, etc. Refugees, internally displaced people, disadvantaged children, impoverished rural and inner city communities have all benefited from EU support.

A place like home

As she sings a popular song about Tbilisi, Ketevan looks like many other happy and carefree 11-year-olds in the Georgian capital. However, 'Katie' has spent her entire life in an accommodation centre for internally displaced people (IDPs).

Her family, like a quarter of a million ethnic Georgians, fled the violence which broke out in the separatist region of Abkhazia in the early 1990s. Many thousands continue to live in converted hotels, hospitals and even army barracks. The war in August 2008 has only worsened the situation.

Her parents, Irma and Merab, are determined not to allow this to stop them leading normal lives. They have even transformed a section of their modest house into a classroom where the local children can engage in extra-curricular activities, such as painting, drawing, singing, dancing and computing.

"The children just love coming here after school and at the weekends," enthuses Irma, who volunteers her time as a teacher. An EU-backed programme helped her to equip the classroom.

Laying down roots

The project empowers internally displaced people and helps them find dignified housing by providing advocacy training, information and legal aid, explains its coordinator Rikke Johannessen of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). It helps in particular those displaced people who are threatened with eviction from facilities that are being privatised.

Nunu Sanaya – who lives in a centre hosted in a hospital where she also works as a nurse – has received advocacy and other training from professionals, including the Georgian Young Lawyers Association. "We are determined to make the voices of IDPs heard and to ensure that suitable alternative accommodation is found for people like me," she emphasises.



Learning is a girl's best friend

Maha, 16, lives in the village of Abusir, which lies near some of Egypt's most famous pyramids. Although it is the summer holidays, this motivated young woman goes to school three days a week.

The Abusir Girl-Friendly School caters for local girls who have dropped out of the mainstream primary system or live too far away from other schools. It is part of Egypt's flagship Girls Education Initiative which aims to narrow the gender gap in primary education. The EU has constructed and equipped 200 such schools as part of the Children at Risk programme.

"I used to go to an ordinary school, but I had to drop out," Maha recalls. "But I still wanted an education. One day, as I was passing this school, I talked to the teachers and they helped me to convince my father and enrol."

The art of persuasion

Since the school opened in 2004, the staff have been engaged in a campaign to win locals over. "At first, many parents had reservations for financial and social reasons," explains Iman Saber, the school's supervisor. "Now the school is so popular that we have a waiting list."

The one-classroom school, with 36 girls, follows a novel approach. "Here, we don't have teachers, in the traditional sense, but facilitators who are trained in student-centred teaching to meet the specific needs of the girls," Saber points out.

The age discrepancy can also be a challenge. "We encourage the girls to think of each other as sisters and friends, and that their age doesn't matter; the important thing is that they are here to learn," she adds.

Maha, one of the oldest girls in the class, will soon graduate. "I dream of going on to university. I'd love to become a teacher because I like what my teachers do here," she says enthusiastically.



Dr Naira Aptsiauri greets patients in Kakheti.

The right medicine

Dr Elza Togonidze was very pleased when, in December 2007, the new primary healthcare centre in the small village of Eniseli in Kakheti (Georgia) opened to serve more than 4 000 in the surrounding countryside.

"We have all the equipment and facilities we need to deal with the primary health needs of our patients – everything from pregnancies to diabetes," she observes. "The locals are very pleased. In fact, the clinic's reputation has become so good that even some people who are not sick come in for consultations," she laughs.

This is a far cry from the previous centre whose crumbling building still stands behind the current one as a poignant reminder of the ailing state of healthcare in many parts of the country.

Prescribing a better health system

"As part of this pilot project, the ministry of health developed a complete master plan to build and rehabilitate facilities, to train and retrain staff, and to raise awareness and promote healthcare among local communities," explains Dr Giorgi Shavgulize, head doctor at the Kvareli ambulatory clinic.

The pilot project has funded the construction or refurbishment of 52 health facilities, supported the training of 360 health promotion volunteers, and the establishment of 76 village health committees. In addition, a mobile theatre group has been touring the region to promote the importance of preventive healthcare.

"We are not just stopping at primary healthcare. There is a nationwide campaign to build more than 100 state-of-the-art hospitals, several of which will be in Kakheti," says Shavgulize proudly.