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# Process of *Partnership*

**Stavros Dimas** describes how, after thirty years of regional cooperation, the EU is more committed than ever to sustainable development in the Mediterranean region

**T**he countries surrounding the Mediterranean Basin have always been united in a common destiny by their common sea. The unique environmental characteristics of this largest European sea – with its rich biodiversity, regular mild climatic conditions, and specific coastal biotopes and landscapes – have had an essential role in shaping European history. Thanks to it, the Mediterranean region is one of the world's most valuable, but also most vulnerable, regions.

Three Mediterranean countries – Cyprus, Malta and Slovenia – were among the ten new Member States that joined the European Union (EU) last year. In a bid to create a true “ring of friends” around its new external frontiers, the enlarged EU launched a new European Neighbourhood Policy, which can build on existing close cooperation in the Mediterranean region.

The 1975 Barcelona Convention has become one of the world's most successful regional environmental conventions – especially now that it fully incorporates the concept of sustainable development. Another major achievement, the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development is due to be adopted soon. In bilateral and multilateral fora, the EU consistently encourages our partner countries in the region to ratify and implement the Convention and its main Protocols.

Twenty years later the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was signed, also in Barcelona. Often called ‘the Barcelona Process’ it forms a wide framework of political, economic and social relations between EU Member States and partners of the Southern Mediterranean. Within it, the Union has supported actions to improve the Mediterranean environment, including regional projects financed under the Short and Medium Term Environmental Action Programme, the common basis for environmental policy orientation and funding.

Considerable funding has been invested in the water sector and related urban and regional projects through the national programmes of MEDA, the Partnership's main financial instrument, which committed a total of 5, 458 million euros in co-operation programmes, projects and other supporting activities from 1995 to 2003. Many environmental projects have also benefited from low-interest loans from the European Investment Bank, which has created the fast expanding regional financial network, the Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership.

Despite the achievements of the past decade, considerable challenges must still be tackled to ensure the environmental protection of the Mediterranean Sea and the sustainable development of the countries around its shores. Its coastal areas and wildlife are threatened by uncontrolled tourist development and pollution, such as from unprocessed sewage, oil and toxic discharges. Biodiversity is threatened by invasive species and the scraping of the sea beds. Wildlife is also endangered by uncontrolled fisheries in many countries.

An extraordinary summit of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in November will take stock of what has so far been achieved in the context of the Barcelona Process, and agree priorities for the future. The European Commission has proposed an ambitious new undertaking for the de-pollution of the Mediterranean Sea by the year 2020.

Under the European Neighbourhood Policy, the EU has recently bilaterally negotiated national action plans with many of its Mediterranean partner countries including cooperation in environmental governance, improving environmental legislation and its implementation, and promoting global and regional environmental cooperation. The plans state that sustainable development principles should be taken into account in developing cooperation with other sectors of the partner countries' economies. Implementing these bilateral plans will make an important contribution towards improving the environment in the Mediterranean.

Action is also required on a regional scale, and the Commission looks towards the MAP as an important partner in this. They are establishing a joint work programme, as recommended by the last conference of the parties to the Barcelona Convention, which places increased emphasis on actually implementing the Convention, in collaboration with the European Commission.

Under the joint work programme, the MAP will cooperate in implementing those aspects of the European Union's 6th Environmental Action Programme 2002-2010 that have special importance or relevance to the Mediterranean region. This includes the Commission's global thematic strategy for the marine environment, expanding technical cooperation in such areas as preventing emergencies at sea, and applying the EU habitats and birds directives in the marine environment.

The European Union is more committed than ever to promoting more sustainable development in the Mediterranean. In that respect, the Mediterranean Action Plan will continue to be the cornerstone of its partnership with the countries of the region ■

*Stavros Dimas is European Commissioner for the Environment.*