

The Indian Ocean Commission: regional solidarity in the face of globalisation

The Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) is a regional organisation regrouping four ACP states (Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles) plus one ultra-peripheral region of the EU (Reunion, an overseas department of France). Set up in 1984, the IOC is one of the first formal experiences of regional cooperation in this part of the vast region constituted by the Indian Ocean. The approach, essentially political in nature, was at the time part of the drive to reinforce cooperation within the Southern hemisphere. Now the organisation has reached the point where it must be redefined if it is to survive internal and external changes. Work has already begun.

Article supplied by the IOC

The objectives and missions established by the founders of the IOC were primarily to strengthen links between the peoples of its member states and improve their standard of living, promoting cooperation in a number of areas: diplomacy, economy, trade, agriculture, fishing, the conservation of resources and ecosystems, culture, science and education.

These islands in the south-west Indian Ocean have much in common: apart from their insularity, meaning that the problems they face are closely related, they share populations and a colonial history characterised by many similarities.

In terms of development, however, these islands are not all on an equal footing and are in fact at various levels which are often, unfortunately, very far apart. Reunion, an ultra-peripheral region of the European Union, is part of the developed world; Comoros and Madagascar are members of the group of Least Developed Countries; while Mauritius is classified as a Newly Industrialised Country and the Seychelles a Middle Income Country.

Some believe that regional cooperation and integration, which require more effective solidarity, not only in economic terms but also in many other areas, are the key to greater cohesion and could close this gap. Work in this direction should be combined with enhanced integration of the countries of the region in the ultra-regional (COMESA, etc.) and global (EPAs, WTO) economy and, as a priority, with protection of insular individualities, the group's strong point.

At a crossroads

Fast-increasing levels of globalisation, the emergence of new regional groups and changes in the situations of member countries have meant that regional cooperation has taken on a new dimension. In 1997, the IOC undertook a prospective study. As a result, a White Paper redefining the organisation's mission and strategy for the next 10 years was produced and approved by the Council of Ministers.

Organisation of the IOC

COUNCIL OF MINISTERS

- Supreme body
- Establishes the main courses of action
- Chairman changes yearly

COMMITTEE OF PERMANENT LIAISON OFFICERS (PLOs)

- Follows up the Council's decisions
- Review, approval of activities
- Made up of representatives appointed by each member state
- Chairman changes yearly

GENERAL SECRETARIAT

- Ensures a permanent presence and continuity of the institution
- Prepares the programmes and projects resulting from decisions by the authorities
- Monitors progress of the programmes and projects
- Administrative and financial management of the projects
- Headed by a General Secretary, with the assistance of project managers, a secretariat and an assistant accountant. The General Secretariat is supported by technical assistants provided by donors.
- The General Secretary is the Regional Official who has the power to authorise financing for projects financed by the European Community

PROJECTS/PROGRAMMES

- Implements projects/programmes

Ad hoc technical committees

Factors originating outside the region, identified in the White Paper, have been clarified and will continue to influence the countries on the road to economic integration, although in a wider regional context. Other elements have added to the complexity of this regional dynamic, but at the same time they increase the need for a local structure in the Indian Ocean.

Recent changes in the regional and international situation constitute an increasingly clear reflection of the trends forecast in the White Paper: the comparative advantages of large regional blocs (COMESA and SADC) in achieving regional economic integration, the new EU-ACP cooperation framework and the implementation of the Cotonou Agreement, and the recognition of insular individualities. At the same time, we are witnessing a trend towards decentralisation: in Comoros, in Madagascar (the establishment of Provinces), in Reunion (Loi d'Orientation Outremer or LOOM, a law providing for greater decentralisation towards French overseas departments) and in Mauritius. These factors make regional cooperation an even more complex issue, while, however, justifying the need for a local regional structure, as emphasised in the White Paper.

However, when it comes to implementing recommendations, the IOC's weaknesses are brought to light. Some of these are inherent in the countries and their level of development; others arise from the very process of implementing regional cooperation within the IOC and relate in particular to its structure.

Of the organisation's five strategic objectives, political

dialogue amounted to nothing or was inaudible, while the protection of the interests of the particularities linked with insularity and its vulnerability and environmental issues seemed to be the subject of agreement. However, the IOC has yet to demonstrate its ability to assert its role as a driving force in this area. The preparation of the region and its economic actors to face the challenge of globalisation yielded mixed results. Affirming and enhancing regional identity requires conceptual and practical adjustments. Some progress has been made with the involvement of non-government actors, although whether or not this can be made more widespread depends primarily on each country's abilities and initiatives.

There are various reasons why the level of achievement differed in each area. First, structural reasons: the inequalities between the member states in terms of development strategies and levels and technical and financial resources. Then there are methodological reasons, namely the difference in interpretation of objectives, the lack of an implementation plan, and contradiction between decisions and actions. Finally, political reasons, owing to the lack of strong political signals.

The IOC's organisational structure has a bearing on its capacity for implementation (insufficient resources to meet countries' expectations, executive and control bodies that are not always operational, etc.).

For a complete analysis, we cannot ignore the argument, put forward by some actors or observers, that the IOC should be purely and simply abolished, or converted into a light-weight structure for dialogue, a sub-group of COMESA.

The South-West Indian Ocean

Union Of The Comoros

Surface area (km²): 1862
 Population (in thousands): 600
 Independence: 6 July 1975
 Capital: Moroni
 Currency: Comoran franc
 Time zone: GMT +3 or +4
 Official languages: French, Arabic
 Spoken languages: Comoran, Swahili
 International dialling code: 00 269

France/Reunion

Surface area (km²): 2507
 Population (in thousands): 750
 Became a French department: 19 March 1946
 Capital: Saint Denis
 Currency: Euro
 Time zone: GMT +3 or +4
 Official language: French
 Spoken languages: French, Creole
 International dialling code: 00 262

Madagascar

Surface area (km²): 587 041
 Population (in thousands): 16 000
 Independence: 26 June 1960
 Capital: Antananarivo
 Currency: Ariary (1 ariary = 5 Malagasy francs)
 Time zone: GMT + 2 or +3
 Official languages: Malagasy
 Spoken languages: Malagasy, French
 International dialling code: 00 261

Mauritius

Surface area (km²): 2045
 Population (in thousands): 1200
 Independence: 12 March 1968
 Capital: Port Louis
 Currency: Mauritian rupee
 Time zone: GMT +3 or +4
 Official languages: English
 Spoken languages: Creole, French, English, Hindi, etc.
 International dialling code: 00 230

Seychelles

Surface area (km²): 455
 Population (in thousands): 81
 Independence: 29 June 1976
 Capital: Victoria
 Currency: Seychelles rupee
 Time zone: GMT +3 or +4
 Official and spoken languages: Creole, French, English
 International dialling code: 00 248

What does the 21st century hold for the IOC?

With the benefit of its experience and cooperation behind it, bolstered by the unwavering support of the European Union, but also learning lessons from the changes underway and the new order in international cooperation and its effects in regional terms, redefinition of the IOC now seems inevitable: without it, the organisation could slowly fade away. Such a redefinition must be based on a genuine, appropriate strategic and operational framework, taking on board the main points of the White Paper (but with clearer, more precise fields of cooperation), adapting its organisational structure and devising a financing strategy.

The above-mentioned strategic objectives must also be accompanied by a strengthening of the IOC's abilities and a diversification of its partners and its sources of funding.

These objectives are merely tools for the implementation of regional actions. They must be designed around cooperation focus points (or areas of activity, equivalent to a company project). Thus, it should be possible to define the IOC not only in terms of its role but also based on these cooperation focus points, targeted at three areas of excellence constituting as many cooperation focus points: economic integration, environment, and culture/education/research (the latter having a cross-sectional vocation, its activities being supplied by the other two).

This new form of regional cooperation must be based on an action plan and a restructuring of the General Secretariat, of the coordination structures and also of the role, function and position of each Permanent Liaison Officer (PLO) in the member

states. Through them, the place of each member state will be examined: their representation in the General Secretariat, arbitration between representativeness and competence, etc. This should be accompanied by actions in terms of communication (identified as one of the organisation's main weaknesses) and administrative and financial management.

Thus, the IOC would become a reference body in the field of economic development and natural resource management, tailored to the context of insularity and the regional dimension. ■

The IOC's activities are financed by a significant aid package from the European Union, which provides assistance under the Lomé Agreement and the Cotonou Agreement through the European Development Fund (EDF). Being a European region, Reunion does not meet EDF eligibility criteria. Its participation in IOC projects is therefore financed directly by France.

The Regional Indicative Programme (RIP) sets out the spheres of action and intervention in which this aid is used. Under the 8th EDF (1995-2000), a total of €25.5 million was allocated to the IOC.

European financing has been channelled mainly into the following areas:

- Economic development
- Higher education, research, training, communications and culture
- Environment
- Support for the General Secretariat.

The European Union and the IOC: going back a long way

Quite some time ago, the European Union and the IOC (now celebrating its 20th anniversary) established a close partnership founded on regional solidarity. Shortly after the creation of the IOC (following Lomé III, which marked the launch of regional policies), the EU financed a number of projects identified by its member states and, when required, provided the General Secretariat with the necessary technical assistance.

Our priorities are, as they have always been, centred on what makes this organisation special: its insularity, its environment, its marine resources and the complementarities between the countries of which it is composed.

Today, aided by these many years of shared experience, the IOC and the European Union are adapting to the new climate, characterised by globalisation as well as by the emergence of larger regional groups, determined by the ACP countries and in particular COMESA, EAC and IGAD and by its investment in the Economic Partnership Agreement negotiations. The IOC must make the most of this opportunity, not only by adapting to this new challenge but also, and above all, by affirming its identity. In this new, emerging situation, the European Union will again be the IOC's preferred partner, assisting it in the major spheres of intervention, which will henceforth constitute its main courses of action: natural coastal and marine resources, economic integration in the specific context of small island economies, cultural identity and training.

This is a new phase, one which requires adapting to meet new challenges, and, more than ever, the European Union is ready to face it and accompany the IOC in its development and institutional change.

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