



European Economic and Social Committee

REX/356
**Democracy and shared
prosperity in the
Euromed region**

Brussels, 12 September 2012

INFORMATION REPORT

of the

Section for External Relations

on

**The role of civil society in the implementation of the partnership for democracy and shared
prosperity in the Euromed region**

Rapporteur: **Carmelo Cedrone**

Administrator: Guy Harrison

On 18 January 2012, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 31 of its Rules of Procedure, decided to instruct its Section for External Relations to draw up an information report on:

The role of civil society in the implementation of the partnership for democracy and shared prosperity in the Euromed region.

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, drew up its opinion on 5 September 2012.

At its ...plenary session, held on ... (meeting of ...), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by ... votes to ..., with ... abstentions.

*

* *

1. **Conclusions and proposals**

The EESC

- In order to offer a clean break with the past, the EESC must take the position that it will prioritise relations with the representatives of countries which have made a confirmed start on working for democratic, social and economic reform. Relations with countries not reflecting the fundamental values of freedom, democracy and human (social and civil) rights must be on a non-formal footing and focus on backing democratic forces.
- The EESC must support local Economic and Social Councils (ESCs) in democratic countries, where they exist, and maintain contact with independent, democratic civil society.
- It is proposed to launch a practical support programme for democratic civil society in the Euromed area, as a neutral platform for dialogue and discussion and as a thematic focus for institutions, civil society and local authorities, in line with the approach already launched at the Euromed summit and involving new stakeholders, as well as through sharing experiences, supporting the activities of national ESCs, monitoring national action plans, and mediation efforts with European civil society organisations and networks.
- The EESC must continue to support the European Training Foundation in providing training programmes for new civil society leaders, including trade unions and employers.

Proposals for the European Union

- The European Union must step up its external and neighbourhood policies, especially in the Euromed area. It should give clear support to policies promoting democracy and reform in order to forestall any possible or probable return to repression and the restoration of former authoritarian regimes or dictatorships.
- The European Union should give strong backing to policies that reinforce and support civil society, seen as a real actor for democracy and social and economic renewal.
- The European Union should be a key element in coordinating the policies of the Member States in the Euro-Mediterranean area, including by relaunching the Union for the Mediterranean, recognising the EESC's proposals and implementing regional policies and policies to support subnational and local networks, including social economy networks.
- EU resources and funds to support and strengthen civil society organisations, especially the social partners and other organisations such as farming organisations, do not seem commensurate with the challenges presented by the dramatic and pressing situation in the southern Mediterranean countries.
- Simpler, effective access (by cutting red tape and providing training support) to funds should be provided to reinforce civil society and non-state actors.
- More support should be given to promoting economic and social rights.
- The establishment of bodies with the participation of the social partners and civil society should be facilitated for the follow-up and monitoring of bilateral (economic, trade and political) agreements, as well as the transparent use of EU funds.
- A proactive approach is needed to open up access to European funds by representatives of civil society from remote areas of countries.
- Greater support should be given to projects for young people and women.
- Backing for local governance projects is required, giving preference to the participation of civil society working with local and decentralised structures.
- Civil society organisations should not be regarded as mere beneficiaries but as real partners in the definition of the programmes created for them.

Proposals for the social partners and civil society as a whole

- They must strengthen the principles of democracy, dialogue and tolerance through their own actions.
- Civil society should itself provide evidence of democracy through its internal rules, so it can be seen as an authoritative actor in the ongoing reform process.
- Civil society must further step up its work and its role regarding the ongoing reforms in order to avoid any return to repression and restrictions.
- It must strive to shape a new form of participatory democracy, not least in local policies, and paying particular attention to the role of women and young people.

- It must further boost its south-south and south-north networking capacities, pointing in particular to the significant contribution of universities and secondary education institutions.
- The social partners should be involved in social dialogue by their governments and they should play an active part in the future development of civil society.

Proposals for new southern Mediterranean governments

- They should respect democratic principles, safeguard and recognise civil society associations and their freedom of demonstration and speech, and prevent (formal or informal) restrictions and repression, wherever present, when their actions respect others and fundamental human rights.
- They should respect and promote the inalienability and indivisibility of the rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and of the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights set out in the related protocols and the regional protocols.
- They should support efforts to empower young people and women, who are particularly vulnerable during this period of conflict and transition, in all areas where they are active (family, work, education, health, civil rights, etc.)
- They should act to reduce corruption at the national and local levels.
- They should recognise civil society in all its forms of expression as a crucial stakeholder in the democratic process and include civil society in the definition and implementation phases of social and development policies and agreements with the EU.
- They should recognise social dialogue and the negotiating autonomy of the social and economic partners.

2. Introduction

2.1 The EESC has on a number of occasions, both before and since the start of the so-called Arab Spring, addressed the role and contribution of civil society in the region, and has put forward a wide range of assessments and proposals, all aimed at enhancing the function of civil society in the countries of the area¹. In the past, the Committee has engaged in dialogue and worked with the respective "partners" and/or counterpart organisations in the Mediterranean countries, applying a politically realistic approach, in line with the mandate conferred by the European Commission², without making the democratic and representative credentials of many of these organisations a condition for effective cooperation. This approach proved not to have made a positive contribution to the development of civil society, even though it reflected a general policy of the EU at the time.

¹ *Freedom of association in the Euromed partner countries* (REX/234 (2008)); *Promoting representative civil societies in the Euromed region* (REX/341 (2011)); *The new foreign and security policy of the EU and the role of civil society* (REX/319 (2011)); *A new response to a changing Neighbourhood* (REX/340 (2011)).

² EESC mandate conferred under the Barcelona process.

- 2.2 This is an essential discussion and a matter of priority given the experiences of the population in countries where uprisings have already taken place, given what is happening in Syria, developments regarding the elections in Tunisia and Egypt and given what might happen in countries where there is still a climate of outward calm or which have embarked on a process of reform.
- 2.3 The present information report takes account of what the EESC has produced so far, but at the same time wishes to bring added value to what is a fast-moving situation in the Mediterranean. The aim is therefore to lay down markers for further work on the part of both the European institutions and the Mediterranean partners. Although the situation is still far from certain, a step change in Europe's policies vis-à-vis the Mediterranean is urgently needed, in order to better reflect the key role that civil society must play in this area, as a proper tool for partnership.
- 2.4 The EESC recognises that there are significant differences between the various countries in the area, which must be factored into the approach adopted for the development of north-south and south-south partnership policies. Even the European Commission's actions need to accommodate these differences and use existing good practices to promote democracy in the area. The EESC believes that the ongoing democratic process in these countries must be built on the internal foundations of each country's history and situation. This is why civil society has a crucial role to play.

3. **Civil society: brief comments on the state of play**

- 3.1 The authoritarian regimes in many countries have tended or still tend to control and/or repress civil society organisations (CSOs), including trade unions and employers' organisations, through various measures such as restricting freedom of association, refusing or making it difficult to obtain authorisation to set up a new CSO; funding CSOs that support the government, absorbing some associations into sham CSOs, sidelining those deemed "dangerous", etc. All of these factors, coupled with a lack of internal democracy and rifts based on ideology, religion and strategy, have produced a civil society that is weak and divided.
- 3.2 It should be acknowledged, however, that in the last decade, despite these conditions, a minority of civil society has not simply waited, but has fought to protect human rights and democracy: protest and political resistance movements have been born. The recent push for reform has been based on them. At the same time, the economic, political and social crisis has worsened, which has heightened people's exasperation and sense of frustration, in turn leading to more repressive government action. The events of 2011 were also the consequence of an unsustainable economic situation in a number of countries, where national assets were essentially requisitioned by a few individuals (e.g. the critical situation in rural areas) and a strong push for participatory democracy.

3.3 Hence the "Arab Spring", which has raised so many hopes and expectations among local communities and has garnered the support of people throughout Europe and across the world. What tools are needed to consolidate the reforms that have been achieved? How can we react realistically and diligently to the expectations raised among people in both the southern Mediterranean and European countries? The European Union's responses have so far been partial and incomplete, like the reforms undertaken in the Mediterranean area. There is an underlying danger of former regimes being restored to power, which would be disastrous. Democratic reforms look to be lengthy and difficult, and the process will have to be monitored and supported by civil society forces.

3.3.1 **Internal factors that shape civil society: democracy, rights, the economy**

3.3.1.1 **Culture, religion, citizenship**

One of key principles underpinning the role of civil society and its very *raison d'être* is the full and mutual recognition of independent and shared values, especially in the cultural sphere. This should hold true at all times and in all places, but is even more relevant in the Mediterranean, a region that is the cradle and a melting-pot of different cultures and religions. Mutual recognition of the capacity to create culture and cultures provides the basis and the source of a new civil society that is pluralistic in its forms and structures, and independent of state and political institutions. Particularly in countries today considered to be Muslim, where Islam is the predominant religion, the religious factor automatically plays a major role in social dynamics, law and politics. Recognising this specific historical (as well as cultural and even institutional) development is not an obstacle to founding democratic societies and institutions, provided that influential faiths and/or faith-based groups reject extremism and intolerance, which present a very real threat to democracy. If religion is in contrast viewed as part of the primary aim of social and human growth, in a secular approach, demonstrating respect for all other religious, philosophical and cultural beliefs, it could play a significant role in establishing democracy, and this is what we should strive to achieve. The Committee believes that there is no need to copy specific traditions and philosophical concepts which have their own specific and irreplaceable value to democracy in Europe or in other areas of the world. What is crucial, however, is to guarantee the universal, individual and collective rights of people³ and of organised civil society and the cultural, constitutional and institutional contexts of different countries. It would therefore be a good idea to encourage interfaith and intercultural initiatives that facilitate joint action to promote human rights, social and religious peace, and development across the Mediterranean through principles that originated on both its shores and have endured right up to the present day.

3 As set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and related protocols.

3.3.1.2 External factors

At a time of globalisation that goes beyond the economy and finance, it is hard to believe that the situations of great insecurity, abuses of power and massacres that are still occurring in this region can be resolved by themselves, at the national level. The EU should therefore play a stronger role, not only through its partnership policy, but also directly (e.g. through trade policy) and within international bodies.

3.3.1.3 The future of these countries will depend heavily on the role that civil society manages to play in developing democracy. Without an ever-present civil movement, more or less overt moves to restore authoritarian regimes will gain momentum. The gains made by civil society as a whole must be maintained: this includes the gains made by young people and other organised civil society groups, whose activities have to be protected and supported through specific Commission programmes. This applies in particular to Egypt and Libya as well as to Algeria and Morocco, where there have been, and still are various attempts to respond to the protests.

4. The Partnership for democracy and shared prosperity: areas of work and priorities

4.1 The European Commission defines democracy as "deep"⁴ when it is demonstrated by ongoing and global action in society that is not limited to the ballot box but involves citizens' groups and associations as active and permanent participants in the process. Civil society is an active component in democratic life today and should be given full responsibility as a stakeholder in democracy and shared prosperity. Democracy is becoming participatory and is opening up to action by civil society⁵.

4.2 Support for civil society and its democratic action should be looked at in the medium and long term. The current phase probably entails identifying, establishing and getting to know possible civil society partners⁶.

4.3 The EESC considers that the Euromed area is crucial to peace and stability in Europe. All future action should be based on the very values that we share in Europe. Action should be based on the universal values embodied in respecting human rights, the right to freedom and democracy, social rights, women's rights and the right of association.

4 COM(2011) 303 final.

5 See also the latest Commission documents on the neighbourhood policy - Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, *Delivering on a new European Neighbourhood Policy* (JOIN(2012) 14 final).

6 See the EESC opinions on *Increasing the impact of EU Development Policy: an Agenda for Change/The future approach to EU Budget Support to third countries* (OJ C 229, 31.7.2012, p. 133-139) and on *Civil society involvement in the EU's development policies* (OJ C 181, 21.6.2012, p. 28-34).

- 4.4 Since the publication of the two Commission communications⁷ and the new version of the Neighbourhood programme (May 2011), many aspects of the geopolitical context have changed, which was to be expected: Europe's focus on financial issues and the worsening internal crisis, instability in many areas and open conflict in Syria, together with unfinished reforms in the area as a whole.
- 4.5 In its neighbourhood policy, the Commission has adopted the "more for more" approach – an incentive-based approach. The more a country meets the criteria set by the Union, the more it is supported both politically and with financial instruments. Among its objectives, it is worth highlighting strong support for civil society and its inclusion in decision-making processes. The incentive policy should be reviewed in the event of serious human rights violations, devising a way not to abandon the country, but to give direct support to the civil society organisations present⁸.
- 4.6 To this end, links with a number of countries where a series of major reforms are already underway (such as Morocco) could be stepped up, promoting what they are doing and encouraging them to share their methodologies. Some of the recognised good practices in these countries could be put to use with a view to south-south cooperation⁹.
- 4.7 This confirms the need to expand, where possible, and with greater financial support, the European Commission's People to People programmes (Youth, Erasmus, Tempus), together with opportunities that are already in place (Civil Society Facility, Civil Society South, Youth IV and support for gender issues). One proposal is to create bridges and synergies between these and programmes geared towards territorial cooperation (CBC – cross-border cooperation in the Mediterranean).
- 4.8 European Commission tenders relating to the programmes should also be circulated at decentralised level in order to reach every part of countries, however remote. The difficult situation of associations in some countries, such as Egypt, also needs to be highlighted: sustained principally by European and American funds, they are the focus of negative official propaganda.
- 4.9 Civil society in the region must be involved in developing neighbourhood policies as soon as possible, to enable it to contribute to the planning of external cooperation for the 2014-2020 programming period.

⁷ COM(2011) 303 final and COM(2011) 200 final.

⁸ See the programme proposed most recently by the Commission, Modernisation of Belarus http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/fule/headlines/news/2012/03/20120329_en.htm.

⁹ Including association agreements with the EU.

- 4.10 Specific training should also be envisaged for the social partners to bring them up to speed on negotiating issues and international labour legislation. The various stages in adhering to the ILO conventions should be evaluated.
- 4.11 Greater opportunities for involving civil society (and for fostering prosperity in the Mediterranean) can also be envisaged under the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) which the EU is negotiating with Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Egypt. DCFTAs with many Eastern Partnership countries are already at an advanced stage of negotiation and are designed to achieve greater convergence on trade criteria and full application of the EU *acquis* in the field of trade. In line with EU trade policy, a joint monitoring body involving civil society representatives should be set up under the sustainable development chapter in each DCFTA. The EESC should be directly involved in such a body.
- 4.12 Capacity-building instruments for civil society and institutions must be modern, effective and innovative, moving beyond the embryonic stage and strengthening follow-up, technical assistance and training mechanisms.
- 4.13 Special attention should be given to civil society organisations that strengthen the role of young people in the decision-making process at local and regional level. Young people should be involved in particular in defining public policies on economic and employment matters. Similar attention should focus on the situation of women, in order to provide them with safety, participation and equal opportunities¹⁰.
- 4.14 No true democracy or development or shared and sustainable prosperity can be achieved without stronger democracy and greater participation at the local level. Local action and the development and support programmes of local authorities and civil society should therefore be backed, along with political and administrative devolution. Relations between local authorities/bodies and civil society, which need to be coordinated but provide for different roles, are one of the keys to stability and democracy. The EESC urges the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) to incorporate a civil society cooperation dimension among its activities. It also suggests that the civil society dimension of Union for the Mediterranean programmes be further reinforced¹¹ to strengthen the implementation of the proposal for a statute for an assembly of economic and social councils and/or similar institutions in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

¹⁰ See the support programme for women planned by the European Commission in April/May 2012.

¹¹ Final declaration of the Euromed Summit of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions, Rome, 10-12 November 2010.

- 4.15 Europe has acquired expertise in assisting countries in their transition to democracy (in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, for example). Support for civil society must be based on sharing good practice arising from experience in the countries of the east with the south, while avoiding past mistakes. It would therefore make sense to:
- Give solid support to civil society organisations that develop full democratic governance internally;
 - focus on the results to be achieved in the medium to long term rather than on the specific details of a given measure;
 - promote networks of associations and intercultural, interfaith, inter-institutional and interdisciplinary cooperation (local government/civil society, public/private, public/public, twinning, cross-border cooperation, etc.);
 - strengthen civil society networks that combine, both locally and globally, the process of democratisation and local prosperity, paying particular attention to the social partners;
 - public-public cooperation, also in the form of twinning arrangements between local authorities.
- 4.16 Final preparations are currently being made for the establishment of the Foundation for Democracy, which should provide more streamlined tools for civil society going through difficult times (fewer formalities, etc.). Support should be given to EU programmes designed primarily for civil society networks at the regional level which develop cross-border (in the Mediterranean area) and South-South cooperation and demonstrate local governance and a real membership base, that is monitored consistently and accurately, as is the case with trade unions and employers' organisations.
- 4.17 Territorial cooperation (supported by the European Commission) can count on substantial financial support and expertise. This should provide for close cooperation with civil society, which provides the added value of the proposal. Direct contacts between civil society on the two shores of the Mediterranean could subsequently be further strengthened along these lines (if they have the appropriate tools and synergies)¹², also through visa facilitation.
- 4.18 Within Euromed policies, despite the delicate situation and the economic and social difficulties, more support should be given to forms of participatory democracy – the definition given to democracy's current stage of development. This inclusive approach¹³ should also extend to economic development policies. One useful tool worth highlighting is the Council of Europe's Code of Good Practice for civil participation in the decision-making process (2009)¹⁴. Local ESCs in these countries can also play a significant role.

12 See the various *Cross Border Cooperation* programmes.

13 See the results of the Future of Democracy Forum (Council of Europe), <http://www.coe.int/portal/web/coe-portal/what-we-do/democracy/forum-future-of-democracy>.

14 http://www.coe.int/T/NGO/code_good_prac_en.asp.

- 4.19 Recognised leaders of civil society should be supported, through both formal and non-formal recognition mechanisms, thus filling a void left by previous systems.
- 4.20 Mobility and simplification of the visa application process should be promoted as key means of supporting civil society. The EESC welcomes the Commission's intention to include these features in European policies on migratory flows. This should make it easier to incorporate the Euromed countries into European policies, albeit to varying degrees.
- 4.21 In some cases, legislation in the Mediterranean countries provides sound opportunities for civil society to operate and develop. However, the lack of a readiness to listen and to implement existing standards creates a gap between democratic pronouncements and real democratic action. The practice of consulting and listening to civil society therefore needs to be strengthened and promoted not least during the negotiation of bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements.

Brussels, 5 September 2012.

The President
of the
Section for External Relations

Sandy Boyle
