

Southern Neighbourhood Civil Society Forum: *Brussels, 29 – 30 April, 2014*

Background information

Context

The EU has a longstanding history of support to civil society: over more than a decade, it has elaborated policies and established a number of instruments to help CSOs in building their capacities and implementing development projects. The Arab uprisings demanded a recalibration of EU relations with its Southern neighbours, a renewed balance of dialogue between Europe, the southern authorities and civil society actors. Policies were renewed, instruments reinforced, new ones created and programmes adjusted, with the objective of redirecting EU support to the emerging new governments and transition processes and to engage with and support civil society actors as key stakeholders.

More recently, a consultation process aimed at finding an appropriate format for tripartite regional dialogue – civil society, authorities, and the EU - has progressed via a number of meetings of varying sizes and composition for more than a year. Specific guiding principles for the consultation were derived in the early stages of discussion:

- objectives must be clear for each of the three dialogue tracks (CS-CS, CS-authorities, CS-EU);
- ownership is primarily with civil society;
- the EU supports and funds dialogue, but need not necessarily manage it;
- dialogue must be inclusive and also open to less formally structured actors;
- avoid duplication of existing channels and be clear on complementarity;
- any model must be adaptable, given the potential mutations in governance in the region;
- a North-South flow of dialogue can be useful as long as it respects an approach of equal partnership and avoids paternalistic overtones.

As the consultation has continued there has been consideration of core aspects such as what is civil society, what is the role of regional actions vis-à-vis national and local/thematic support, and how ownership of this process can be assigned to civil society when it is funded by the EU. While some of this debate will continue, it has proved possible to develop positions that are generally supported by the parties in the consultation and that provide a base for moving into a more detailed appraisal of what could and needs to be done. The Brussels Forum will confirm a commitment to pursuing this concept and permit input from key stakeholders on how it should proceed.

Consultation detail

The consultation to date has been structured to develop thinking along four key themes:

- How a communications platform might encourage exchange of information and views and help build cooperation on key issues.
- What kind of structure and governance would be best suited to the type of dialogue sought.
- Media activity as one of the key communities of civil society and as reporter on its actions.
- Whether professionally-managed practice and learning could help communications between government representatives and those from civil society.

Working groups, formed from a cross-section of potential stakeholders in the proposed dialogue, focused on these themes in a conference held in Malta (December 2013); outcomes from this event were then taken for consideration at a national level at a seminar in Jordan (March 2014) in preparation for the Brussels Forum.

Among the views expressed and generally supported in the discussions were:

- Support for the concept of multi-faceted civil society dialogue, underpinned by equal partnership
- The benefit of including civil society in the planning of any EU approach to establishing dialogue
- A major focus on the building of trust, which can only be done slowly through repeated actions
- The need for national dialogues as contributors to a regional approach, bottom-up

- The importance of communication mechanisms, supplementing face-to-face dialogue
- The need for new models of learning to enable civil society actors to work together/with others
- Preference for using existing structures and mechanisms, improving rather than reinventing
- Need for targeted information and communication strategies as an accompaniment
- The need for sustained support and action over the long term

The lessons from these meetings have been digested in the preparation for the Brussels Forum and influence both the participation and the shape of the event.

Moving forward

The aim of the Brussels Forum is to set the scene for continuation of this work, moving from discussions on approaches to plans for activities that will trial the concept of three-way dialogue. The process will be placed within the context of other EU actions in the region and the complementary benefits of regional action will set out for discussion. Participants will be able to put forward their views on key priorities for EU support – both generally and within the context of the proposed dialogue - and offer input to the planning of the next phase of activities.

Specific/immediate needs for the next phase, indicated in the discussions to date, included:

- Locating those parties ready to work on this issue, identifying those which are less so
- Discovering what orientation and/or training might be needed to ensure broadest possible buy-in
- Identifying what structures and approaches are acceptable in establishing positive dialogue
- Testing of the potential for buy-in at all levels by pilot exercise(s) that seek to kick-start dialogue
- Check out the thematic approaches that will allow the dialogue to start in a positive way but will also impact on those issues identified as priority in the region.

Those Brussels participants who have been involved in other events in this series will already be aware of how the consultation is framed. For those who are new, it is worth pointing out key aspects:

- All participants are invited as individuals, bringing their expertise and experience to the discussions. Participants are not intended to 'represent' any grouping, organisation or even their home country: while it is inevitable that opinions expressed are shaped by these factors, everyone should speak freely as individuals and not as the voice of others not present. It is the job of the Forum organisers to allow this to happen and to collate the views expressed to provide representative opinion for reference in continued planning.
- Part of the discussion will be in working groups, which will aim to provide focused consideration of specific points. These groups will be led by participants selected to chair, act as discussion opener, and as rapporteur: other than performing these function for the smooth running of the groups, those selected are part of the group as equal members - there is no hierarchy imposed.
- Discussions in the working groups will be under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution (the chair will explain this for those in doubt) to encourage open expression of thoughts. This cannot be the case in plenary sessions as access to these is much more open than to the working groups. Please note, however, that all sessions will be recorded to help the organisers extract the correct messages from the Forum: these recordings will not be made public in any form.

Your role

Participants to the Brussels Forum have been nominated by those involved in the consultation for the experience they can bring in specifying the next phase of activity. Please discuss with us openly and positively how we should move on from the current position in the consultation; we have reached this position through extensive discussion involving a wide variety of stakeholders and that achieving action requires us to go forward rather than revisit discussions already held. Be prepared to share not only your skills and knowledge, your views and expectations, but also your connections in the region, so that we can be sure we continue to involve all relevant parties. Our aim is to set in place a specification for action to establish regional dialogue: your contribution to dialogue in Brussels will help us devise that specification.

Glossary

The discussions to date have shown that people can have different perceptions of what is meant by key terms in common use. The following is produced to show how the discussions have approached these terms to avoid confusion about what is being said: it is not an attempt to rewrite the dictionary.

What it IS	What it IS NOT
Civil society	
Organisations in a society which are independent of the government. This includes independent trade unions, employers' organisations, religious, charitable and recreational groups together with advocacy groups and mass movements.	Organisations which are dependent on government support, are dominated by government supporters or dedicated to supporting or specifically opposing particular governments.
Dialogue	
Written or spoken conversational exchange between two or more people or organisations aimed at increased understanding and possible collaboration.	A means of reaching a single viewpoint. Dialogue is possible even if participants' views and objectives differ and continue to differ.
Governance	
A framework of arrangements which ensures that participants interact as intended , including definition of the responsibilities, rights and accountability of the key roles. (Wikipedia: "actions and processes by which stable practices and organizations arise and persist")	A means for particular decisions, alignments or constraints to be promoted or imposed (initially or during the process). Regulation and management are different from governance.
Learning (sometimes misleadingly referred to as 'training')	
Acquisition of transferred knowledge, including knowledge of techniques ('how to').	Making people change their opinions or viewpoints about politics, objectives, favoured activities or chosen approaches to these.
Media	
Newspapers, television, on-line services and blogs.	
Ownership	
This word is used metaphorically: to indicate a combination of trust and loyalty accompanied by a feeling of being entitled to help in determining what happens. Ownership of the dialogue process is achieved when users are loyal and feel participation is worthwhile, typically because they trust the process, and because they are confident it is and will be kept relevant and responsive to their wishes.	A contractual or other formal relationship whereby those who 'own' the dialogue are the only ones who have the ability to decide on what is said, who participates, or what resources are made available to support it.
Regional	
Relating to issues of joint importance to many geographically close countries – either because they cannot be effectively addressed at national level (e.g. cross-border issues) or because they might be addressed in similar ways in a range of such countries.	Issues that are of greatest concern to individual countries or arise from specific situations in, or relationships to particular countries (e.g. civil war, Middle-East Peace Process).
Representative In the context of a dialogue process the primary criterion of representativeness is that opinions of those who might contribute positively are not excluded, unheard or ignored.	

	<p>Ensuring that all relevant voices and viewpoints are <u>represented</u> so that they can be taken into account in the dialogue. This involves avoiding missing the opinions of those who might otherwise be not heard or drowned out. In current circumstances relevant civil society organisations may not yet have formed in many countries, and the ability of those that do exist to present their opinions varies widely (influenced by their resources, strength and ability to spend time on this, government intervention and access to support and grants). Ensuring that the dialogue is 'representative' probably requires techniques such as surveys and focus groups to in addition to meetings and online communications.</p>	<p>An entitlement for those whose work involves the largest number of people (whether as volunteers, members of a target group, or people attending a particular meeting) to decide on the conduct or the outcome of events or of the dialogue process as a whole.</p>
Southern Neighbourhood		
	<p>Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, occupied Palestinian territory, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Morocco.</p>	<p>Countries which are applicants to become members of the EU (e.g. Turkey) or beyond the immediate neighbourhood, e.g. Gulf States, Iran.</p>
Thematic		
	<p>Specific issues or opportunities dealt with through a focused approach, e.g. on water, energy, human rights, position of women, migration, youth unemployment, media freedom.</p>	<p>General issues such as relationship with the EU, issues treated in general terms or through comprehensive programmes of action.</p>