



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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SouthMed: Bringing civil society out of the periphery of EU-Mediterranean relations

Southern Mediterranean Civil Society Forum

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Mr Vice President of the European Economic and Social Committee, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends

Good morning everyone and welcome to the first, and I earnestly hope, not the last Civil Society Forum for the Southern Neighbourhood. Permit me straight away to extend my gratitude to President Malosse and the European Economic and Social Committee for the use of these magnificent conference premises for our forum and their substantial contribution to this initiative.

Even the longest and most difficult ventures have a starting point. The 7th Century Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said that 'the journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step'. Here, in Brussels today, I hope we can take that step together and start a journey of a new form of dialogue among the people of the euro-Mediterranean region.

In fact, today's event marks the end of a preparatory process that we started together more than one year ago at the Anna Lindh Forum in Marseille. There has been a very successful series of seminars and workshops in Marseilles, Brussels, Malta and Jordan among leading Euromed civil society organisations, academics, media, diplomats and government officials. These meetings helped clarify the engagement of the different actors and contribute towards the building of the necessary bonds of trust and confidence.

So allow me to thank most sincerely all of you who have been involved in these consultations over the last year, particularly the core advisory group from civil society organisations, international organisations and all those who have participated with their contributions. I would also like to welcome the 'newcomers' to this process and look forward to your contributions to the ongoing consultations.

There are three issues that I would like to address with you in my initial remarks, which I hope we can elaborate further during the panel debate. These issues are:

- The importance of civil society engagement for successful reforms;
- The relevance of engagement at regional level in complement – and not in competition - to engagement at the national level;
- And how we envisage building up this regional structured dialogue, listening to your voices over the next 12 months.

Dialogue and reform are the central themes of my address today, so let me first set out the context and conditions within which they are set, and why we consider that civil society has a crucial role to play in reforms.

Since 2011 political and social landscapes in the Southern Mediterranean region have undergone profound transformations, for good and for bad. We have witnessed the demise of despots and the dismantling of repressive regimes but we have also seen some societies divided by tensions between secular liberals and Islamists, between Sunni and Shia and sometimes between governments and civil society. We have seen the emergence of a determined and brave civil society demanding participation in dialogues and decisions that have an effect on their lives and livelihoods, and that they - people - are in a position to contribute to the necessary reforms in their societies. I am happy to see many of those who stood up for their rights here with us today.

If 2011 was a watershed year for our nearest neighbours it was also the year when Europe realised that another renaissance was necessary. It was time for Europe to move from cosy partnerships with authoritarian regimes and time to make our partnerships more inclusive.

For too long, you the civil society, the women, the young and the media were left on the periphery of our euro-Mediterranean relations. Now you are central to those relations and to the multi-faceted dialogues that underpin our joint efforts and ambitions. It is people who are pressing for human dignity, democratic freedoms and more accountable governments and social justice. And it is people who will be central to a successful transition to democracy, which is, I am sure, a priority for all of us.

Over the past three years we have witnessed together that the path from public protest to political participation is not a linear one, that there will be setbacks and disappointments. As polarisation in societies has deepened and intensified, the need for engagement in dialogue becomes more apparent. I strongly believe – also on the basis of the experience that I have witnessed in my own country - that an inclusive process of dialogue is the basis for political reform and economic and social justice.

The EU values an empowered civil society as a crucial component of any democratic system and as an asset in itself. The EU considers CSOs to include all non-State, not-for-profit structures, non-partisan and non-violent, through which people organise to pursue shared objectives and ideals, whether political, cultural, social or economic. Operating from the local to the national, regional and international levels, they comprise urban and rural, formal and informal organisations.

Let me also add that the EU proposes an enhanced and more strategic engagement with CSOs not only in the Southern Mediterranean but in all developing, enlargement and neighbourhood countries, with a particular focus on local civil society organisations.

Now let me turn to my second point – the need for a regional structured dialogue complementing the national dialogue.

It was in Marseilles early last year, at the Anna Lindh Forum, when I underlined the necessity and called for the creation of mechanisms for continuous, structured dialogue between civil society, the authorities and the European Union at a regional level. What we are trying to establish is the creation of the necessary space, conditions, freedoms, trust and the means to dialogue among all sides.

Dialogue is not a fig leaf for passivity and inaction. We are promoting it as a complement, not as an alternative, to active support for political and societal reform.

Let me also stress that dialogue cannot exist, or be effective, in a vacuum. It cannot be dialogue for the sake of dialogue or an end in itself but the means to ensure an inclusive participation of civil society in the decision making process. Dialogue should not be passive, but issue and action oriented.

Civil society participation in public policy processes and reforms should lead to inclusive and effective policies, if conjugated with adequate allocation of resources and sound management.

Why are we taking a regional approach? You have heard me say on previous occasions that common regional problems need common regional solutions. There are also some issues which by their nature are trans-national, that pass borders – refugees, migration, environment, etc. National dialogues exist with varying degrees of success. A regional approach allows building on, and complementing, the work done at national level. Adding a regional perspective will in no way diminish the national efforts. In some countries dialogue is a natural prerequisite for reform, while in other countries reforms are needed before dialogue can take place.

Let me now address my third point: how to build this initiative to make it truly inclusive and reflecting the needs of all stakeholders?

The key questions in moving forward on this initiative are obvious: How do we build stronger partnerships between civil society, governments and the EU or other donors? How do we ensure structured dialogues in which the voice of civil society in a broad sense is heard and respected when policy decisions are made and implemented? And how can the EU facilitate this?

To achieve sustainable democratic governance the EU and partner countries must embrace more inclusive policymaking, communicate more openly and improve engagement of the public and all stakeholders. That is quite simply the rationale and ambition that underlines this initiative.

But there are also, questions that civil society must ask itself. How best to leverage support for common goals? How best to organise itself in order to enter the structured dialogue and to use it in the best possible ways? How best to develop and share best practices? How best to ensure the representativeness of those participating in the dialogue?

We are all, therefore on a learning curve and our joint consultations over the past year have highlighted some critical signposts about the direction we should take and some key constituent parts to the overall shape of those dialogue mechanisms.

Most importantly, our/your civil society forum should be more than this single meeting, more than a series of annual meetings, but rather an umbrella for actions and activities between annual meetings. So I am asking you all here today – from those who have managed the consultations, those who have participated in them and those who are joining them today, and in the future, to consider the following: the Civil Society Forum will become a standing commitment to cooperation and engagement to work together towards the betterment of peoples' lives in the Southern Mediterranean.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

Let me highlight what we propose to do to achieve these objectives and the timeframe we envisage.

First, what are we going to do next?

The EU is ready to take its part in building up this continued process of engagement. We are going to do exactly as you have asked of during the on-going consultation process. As we continue to develop the initiative together the focus should centre, in our view, on the following main elements:

We intend to:

- Develop and build on existing networks and platforms; use the accumulated expertise from similar initiatives on a national level in the region, and on other regional initiatives.
- Build or strengthen existing support systems, both physical and virtual, to facilitate access to information and information exchange, coordination and dialogue on policies.
- Ensure appropriate learning and training to promote the relationship and dialogue between government and local officials and civil society.
- Define the role of media as an active member of civil society and how best it can promote the dialogues.
- Ensure the establishment of a governing 'umbrella' that can accommodate and manage the conflicting agendas of the different actors.

Practically, drawing from the above, this might entail:

- Establishing a comprehensive communications resource for the dialogue, building on existing platforms and making their separate capacities available via an umbrella facility.
- Getting civil society members and Government officials together as soon as possible in small regional exercises where they can start discussions on topics of common interest and find solutions that can fan the flames of trust.
- Constructing and operating thematic regional 'communities' that can deal with transnational issues such as youth unemployment, environment, migration, etc.
- Devising the necessary ownership and regulatory/management structures to allow the disparate strands to operate as a cohesive programme.
- Organising media and civil society workshops for mutual learning.

Second, when are we going to do this?

We are going to continue, with you, in a few stages. Firstly, there will be a follow-up regional seminar in Tunis in June where the ideas from today's seminar and working groups will be further developed and concrete actions decided.

A pilot phase of one year will start before the end of the year which the European Commission will fund with a maximum of 1 million euro for a series of activities such as I mentioned earlier, but, ultimately, which you – and no one else - will decide.

I would also like to see at least two initial activities as part of this pilot phase take place before the current Commission College stands down in October. These can be discussed today in the working groups and in the Tunis meeting. It is indeed important that these activities are launched rapidly to create an irreversible momentum.

However, this initiative is not driven by short term imperatives but with a long term engagement in prospect. Therefore, at the end of the pilot phase and taking into account its outcomes, we will commit the necessary funds for a longer term programme that will be hopefully launched at the next Civil Society Forum which should take place in June 2015.

Dear friends, it is time now to listen to your comments, observations and recommendations.

Before that, however, let me leave you with some parting words. I have been speaking about dialogue, partnerships, and relations. I opened my talk today with a quotation from a Chinese philosopher. Let me close with the words of writer Albert Camus, a genuine representative from the Euro-Mediterranean region:

"Don't walk behind me;

I may not lead.

Don't walk in front of me;

I may not follow.

Just walk beside me

And be my friend."

Thank you very much.