**European – Southern Mediterranean Relations: Discussing Policies and Partnership to Support Economic and Social Rights and the Role of Civil Society**

**A seminar organized by**

**The Euro-Med Civil Society Consortium and the Arab NGO Network for Development**

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**Introduction**

Uprisings and revolutions in the Arab region in response to the long years of oppression and massive violations of human rights by repressive regimes, as well as the failure of social and economic policies were the reason for the meeting of civil society organizations from several Arab and European countries in Beirut. The seminar aims at deepening the discussion about the change resulting from these revolutions and its potential implications on economic and social rights of citizens and considering the necessity of reviewing development models in the Arab region reflected in the policies of economic and social cooperation and partnership with the European Union. The regional seminar, entitled “European – Southern Mediterranean Relations: Discussing Policies and Partnership to Support Economic and Social Rights and the Role of Civil Society” and organized by the Euro-Med Civil Society Consortium and the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), was held in Beirut from the 11th to the 13th of June 2012 at the Golden Tulip Galleria Hotel.

In this context, the fact that transitions vary between countries and that decisions need to take into account this diversity and difference was the starting point of the discussions. However, the situation, although staggering in some cases, and the challenges it faces in other cases, predicts a better future for the people of the region. The relationship between citizens and their country is different now and persistent popular movements are one of the factors affecting decision-making. They are a form of political participation when effective frameworks and institutions capable of organizing dialogue are absent and opinions are diverse.

Transitions taking place in the region are a quantum leap and a historic phase and consequently the mechanisms to confront and deal with them should be up to the level of significance of these transitions.

1. **Conclusions on social and economic challenges in the Arab region**

* **Towards a new development paradigm and societal contract** especially in Arab countries where former political regimes collapsed under the impact of popular revolts leading to the disruption and depletion of the previous societal contract following the collapse of the political powers that were supporting and benefiting from it. In addition, it is necessary to activate the role of the democratic state in development, governance and protection of the rights of citizens in the economic system. The retreat of the state leads to a vulnerable society prone to conflict, division and exploitation. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on the democratization of economic and social decision and policy making process.
* **Emphasizing the importance of coherence in sustainable development** to integrate economic, social, political, and governance aspects, while addressing the problems relating to the crisis of concepts in depth and highlighting the importance of culture which is one of the pillars of the rights-based development process at the core of the development project as a goal and a tool. The state’s role and responsibility in shaping and implementing economic and social policies in partnership with civil society and national productive forces should also be emphasized. However, these policies should ensure re-mobilizing national productive sectors, promoting local development for capacity building and new opportunities, replacing centralized systems with decentralization and local democracy, promoting production for creating job opportunities, spreading the culture of decent work, values ​​of giving, effort and appreciation of manual and intellectual labor and linking rights to obligations. In this context, there has been:
  + **Emphasizing the need for a participatory development approach** that enables various social categories, including productive forces, to participate in the decision-making process and in developing economic and social policies. National trends, policies and options that will be adopted in the future must be built on a broad base of consensus and transformed into an expression of the interests of various social, economic, cultural, and political groups, trade unions and the private sector. This can only be achieved by expanding and activating frameworks for consultation and dialogue between these various groups and parties.
  + **Addressing all forms of gaps and inequalities (geographic, social, gender and those affecting minorities) by developing mechanisms for the redistribution of national wealth** and reviewing tax policies to ensure equality and basic services for citizens. This can also be done by developing a fair wage policy to include citizens in the country’s economic wheel, as well as looking for ways to benefit from development proceeds in a way that is more just and ensures real and sustainable stability.

* + **Implementing the right to work** by reviewing labor laws to be in line with international standards, enhancing vocational and technical education programs and seeking to develop them in line with labor market needs, developing inspection and monitoring tools, activating the role of management and accounting, developing policies for the right of recourse against arbitrary dismissal or for working without a contract (court with executive authority), as well as providing protection from exploitation and harassment, reducing employment based on political allegiance, and formalizing, reorganizing and restructuring the informal sector. There should also be an emphasis on the right to social security coverage and to determine social welfare institutions, including mechanisms for unemployment insurance. It is also necessary to focus on the importance of developing mechanisms to support vocational education for producing labor force according to market needs, promoting retirement funds and protecting labor force, as well as reviewing incentive policies in institutions and enterprises and linking them to productivity.
  + **In implementing social policies, social aspects should not be considered as a result of social progress, but rather require comprehensive and integrated approaches to social development, emphasizing** theimportance of women’s reproductive role and considering it as a productive factor. The State shall protect this role in social policies. There should be an emphasis on the importance of youth, focusing particularly on new entrants to the labor market, linking employment to curricula, and emphasizing the activation of economic and social councils.
* **Promoting cooperation and exchange between Arab countries** especially in this crucial stage witnessing major political shifts in particular. Economic and social challenges cannot be addressed only through local initiatives with limited impacts in the absence of regional government cooperation and among Arab civil societies, within a regional development project that goes beyond commercial exchange to establish a regional cooperation system dealing with production, movement of labor and joint ventures. Moreover, this cooperation should expand geographically to become a South-South cooperation at various levels.
* **Emphasizing the importance of linking foreign trade and investment policies to a clear development strategy** and consequently reconsidering the approach claiming that liberalization of the economy including that of various commercial sectors would lead to development. Such approach should be replaced by strengthening national production in the sectors of agriculture, industry and services. This is organically linked to addressing unemployment in the region and implementing economic and social rights of the various social segments.
* **Calling upon Arab countries to shift from being a recipient to becoming an initiator in developing frameworks of foreign trade policy and investment** on the basis of the right to development. There should be an emphasis on development as a basis for formulating agreements and rules of trade and investment, while giving priority to preserving a space for national policy-making and using necessary national tools to move to new development paradigms having at their core the re-mobilization of national productive sectors. In addition, developing mechanisms of consultation between negotiators on trade, investment and labor and civil and social forces and trade and professional unions in Arab countries.
* **Constitutionalizing economic and social rights**, as experience has shown in more than one country the importance of including economic and social rights in the Constitution as the supreme legal document that preserves the rights of citizens. On the other hand, policies relating to economic and social rights require a consensus with the participation of key sectors in society, and therefore they should not be prone to political bickering between majorities and minorities. It is also important that new constitutions include the right to work as a human right and acknowledge it as a component of dignity and as a constitutional right. This right entails a number of rights including the provision of adequate wages, opening employment prospects (capacity building), and the freedom to defend interests (freedom of association and collective bargaining).
* **Emphasizing the pivotal role of civil society** as a partner, observer and advocate of rights in general and of economic and social rights in particular. It is important to build strategic relationships between civic and non-governmental organizations and trade and labor unions based on unity of objectives and diversity of disciplines. There should also be an emphasis on the importance of synergies between civil society and trade unions in order to introduce amendments to legislations, particularly those relating to labor and respect of international standards and standards of decent labor.
* **Developing monitoring mechanisms to promote community accountability, fighting corruption** and to distribute wealth in a transparent and institutionalized manner. However, this mechanism should ensure accountability and impunity.
* **Distinguishing between the various components of political Islam** that imposed themselves at this stage, and distinguishing between organizations seeking to build an Islamic state whose beliefs conflict with democratic regimes and political parties that are committed to respect the civilian nature of the state and the peaceful transfer of power.

1. **Conclusions on European policies towards the Arab region and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership**

* **Supporting economic growth should be an integral part of supporting people’s choices and endeavor for reconsidering the dominant economic model** and shifting to a different model where productive capacities, mechanisms of redistribution, employment and wages are a priority. Supporting national ownership and national systems as stated in the Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action on aid effectiveness, in addition to integration and realization of human rights and decent labor standards in European Union programs for the region by enhancing coherence and cohesion in adopted public policies.
* **Concerning investment and trade policies between the EU and Arab countries:**
* Need to conduct studies to assess the impact of implementing free trade agreements on overall national economy and social development, in particular on the labor market and on the sustainability of natural resources and to build on the findings in order to change the traditional approach to trade and investment. Policies and agreements should be formulated to support a nationally accepted economic and development policy.
* Demanding full transparency in negotiations on comprehensive and deep free trade agreements. Any default in this regard by the concerned Arab countries or the European Union affects the path of democratization and weakens the demands of popular revolutions in the Arab region. In addition, there is a need to evaluate these proposals and their impact on the right to development as to the realization of economic, social, political, cultural and environmental rights for citizens in Arab countries before starting negotiations on the new bilateral agreement.
* Demanding a comprehensive assessment of existing trade agreements between Arab countries and the European Union, using a rights-based approach to show the impact on the right to development, on the various productive sectors of development in Arab countries, on the labor market and on the provision of decent work opportunities.
* **Concerning the role of European financial institutions:**

Assessing and reviewing the role of European financial institutions, including the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, to push them towards reviewing their options and adopting new approaches in supporting productive capacities, redistribution mechanisms, decent employment, comprehensive development objectives of the two countries and supporting small and medium enterprises.

Enhancing possibilities of civil society participation in monitoring, follow-up and discussion of policies and programs adopted by European financial institutions. This allows civil society organizations to lodge complaints and review financial affairs in case of violation of economic, social and cultural rights, and also if the program has adverse effects on the environment and the deterioration of natural resources. Emphasizing the importance of assessing the impact of projects and programs on human rights and international labor standards, and assessing the environmental impact of foreign investment and emphasizing the non-use of these investments for the transfer of environmentally harmful technology.

* **Concerning the participation of civil society:**

Full and genuine participation of civil society in developing these programs and setting priorities while clearly defining this partnership based on mutual accountability, taking into account the need to institutionalize the partnership with civil society in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. However, the partnership with civil society should not be limited to the implementation of programs and projects, but should include participation in developing public policy in the framework of the Euro-Arab relations.

* **Importance of reconsidering funding mechanisms** which are complex and prevent many organizations from obtaining the funding they need. Flexibility is a must when implementing programs within the context of a vision based on supporting a social, sustainable and democratic movement. If the EU considers civil society a strong and essential partner, this would require providing an appropriate environment not limited to the legal framework despite its importance. This requires providing an enabling environment that allows access to information, material and human resources and knowledge. The empowerment of civil society is also done by providing mechanisms for continuous and systematic consultations which affect large groups and are not limited to a specific category or to particular times and circumstances.
* Promoting technology transfer and settlement between European and Arab countries which contributes to strengthening productive sectors and creating job opportunities in the region.
* **Concerning immigration**
* Emphasizing that immigration is part of the solutions adopted in addressing unemployment and searching for a better opportunity to work and live for the youth of the South. It is also a humanitarian and social communication means essential in establishing a true and effective partnership.
* Refusing to address this issue unilaterally or through a security approach. It requires a review of laws restricting immigration or relating to granting visas to Europe, in line with the charters of human rights and the right to work and mobility.
* **Concerning debts**
* Calling for a review of debts inherited from autocratic and corrupt regimes by canceling, restructuring or postponing payment of debt. Arab revolutions have revealed the extent of corruption and smuggling of public funds by dictatorial regimes and ruling families, including the transfer of some of these debts provided by governments of some industrialized countries and international institutions to the private accounts of these families. These debts are also misused and used in non-productive projects or for boosting the image of these regimes.
* On this basis, it will be important to support people in refusing to pay these debts that are disgraceful and part of the corruption system. It is also important to consider the possibility of converting debts of countries of the South for the benefit of the European side into local funds managed with the participation of relevant civil society institutions. The aim of these funds would be to create jobs, promote social economy and strengthen vocational training institutions. Payment of such debts has become a serious impediment that would increase the burden for these people and hinder their efforts to achieve a sound and less expensive democratic transition.

1. **Conclusions on activating the role of civil society in advocating for a Euro-Arab Partnership for Development**

* **Emphasizing the importance of transparency in accessing information** by adopting a clear policy for disclosure of information, in addition to providing mechanisms that allow access to the necessary information to enable civil society to perform its role in monitoring, defense and service.
* Strengthening mechanisms for monitoring and analyzing EU policies towards Arab countries, including **European Neighbourhood policies**, EU initiatives to develop the Neighbourhood Policy in light of the Arab revolts, the “more for more” policy which links providing support to countries to political, economic and trade reform, in addition to **aid policies**, including assistance to state budgets, private sector investments or assistance to civil society.
* Developing and building capacities of civil society organizations, social movements and trade unions to strengthen monitoring of the impact of existing and future trade and investment agreements between the EU and Arab countries on the right to development, and strengthen assessment of the impact of these agreements on various sectors. Emphasizing the constitutionalization of human rights as a reference for any state obligations in the field of foreign trade and investment. Constitutionalizing citizen accountability and prosecution tools in this area, as well as considering the possibility of using national constitutional courts to challenge agreements and obligations affecting economic, social, cultural and environmental rights.
* Need to formulate a media strategy that contributes to the delivery of ideas and opinions to relevant officials in European and partner countries, as well as EU institutions. This strategy shall contribute to raising awareness and elaborating a public opinion on all issues that will be adopted.
* Developing relations between civil society organizations from the two sides of the Mediterranean, especially those who have representation in Brussels and in national platforms.

* Activating solidarity with the Palestinian people, particularly in developing its productive and economic capacities by activating the international boycott campaign (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions - BDS) in coordination with Palestinian partners especially the Palestinian NGO Network.