

Rome, 10th - 11th September 2015

Opening up a new phase of communication: The Advisory Council Meeting Report

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Overview and impact

The newly appointed Advisory Council of the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF) met for the first time in Rome from 10th to 11th September 2015. The Council, which is presided by the President of the Foundation, Élisabeth Guigou, is comprised of leading figures from Europe and the Mediterranean partner countries, and is responsible for building the strategic direction of the Foundation.

Hosted at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the 2015 Advisory Council Meeting was framed by the new Board-backed strategy of the Anna Lindh Foundation (“Working Together Towards 2025”) and addressed the role of the Foundation’s mandate for intercultural dialogue in the face of unprecedented regional challenges, from radicalisation to climate change and the impact of the refugee crisis on societies to the north and south of the Mediterranean. The Meeting also had a thematic focus on “opening up a new phase of communication” as the adopted strategic priority for the Foundation and a central pillar of “Working Together Towards 2025”.

The outcomes of the Advisory Council Meeting were presented by the ALF President to representatives of the 42 Member States of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the EU and League of Arab States, on the occasion of the 51st ALF Board of Governors Meeting under the Luxembourg Presidency of the European Council (Luxembourg, 28th October 2016). The Council conclusions directly resulted into the Board’s adoption of the new ALF communication policy and provided the basis for the first global communication plan approved by the European Commission. The recommendations of the Council were also central to shaping the agenda for the 2016 Mediterranean Forum of the Anna Lindh Foundation as a catalyst for redefining ALF’s strategic programming.

One of the most significant, strategic concepts to emerge through the Advisory Council meeting of 10th and 11th September was the way in which to connect the Foundation’s intercultural dialogue mandate with the pressing political and mediatic issues of the time. This conclusion was immediately applied to ALF programming and embedded in the new communication policy, notably through the preparation of the “Intercultural Dialogue for A Sustainable Mediterranean” initiative in the framework of the UN COP-21, and the ALF research and development project “Debate to Action” which opened up a pillar of work on the role of youth in creating counter-narratives to extremist discourses.

Reaffirming intercultural dialogue

The opening of the Advisory Council Meeting in Rome focused on the political context of the Anna Lindh Foundation’s mandate for intercultural dialogue, and included interventions on the theme of “reaffirming intercultural dialogue in times of crises”.

Dr. Mario Giro, Undersecretary of State at the Italian Ministry of Affairs, delivered welcome remarks, stating: “The work of the Anna Lindh Foundation is central to changing the narrative about our region today, bringing new inputs for the partnership between the EU and the Mediterranean, and bringing civil society into the heart of this partnership. Italy is backing the long-term work of the Foundation to build this counter-narrative to the headlines of extremism and radicalisation promoted by a loud minority.” H.E. Mrs. Stefania Giannini, Minister of Education, Higher Education and Research, underlined at the opening the importance of a culture-centric approach to a renewed EU Mediterranean policy and the importance of scaling-up exchange among peoples. “Europe has failed so far to find the effective solutions to the regional challenges we are facing today across the Mediterranean. It is for this reason that the work and inputs of the Anna Lindh Foundation are central to creating an ambitious regional programme which can represent the future framework of Euro-Med cooperation.”

The President of the Anna Lindh Foundation, Élisabeth Guigou, stated in her opening remarks: “We know from our experience in the field and our Report on Intercultural Trends that there is a convergence of values and an appetite for exchange across the Mediterranean. The extremists who promote an alternative vision, of division or a clash of values, are a minority but they are vocal, and we have a responsibility to empower the silent

majority with the tools and platforms to make their voices heard.”

From the following debate among Advisory Council members, there was a consensus view that the Anna Lindh Foundation should have a role in creating a counter-media narrative to extremist discourses in the region. The ALF “should not be silent” and should have a moderate message to fight extremism and radicalisation impacting on societies to the north and south of the Mediterranean. It was highlighted that the Foundation should become a reference point in particular for the mainstream media. This reference point role would also provide the basis for pro-actively responding to crisis by providing access to data, expertise and voices on cross-cultural issues.

Visibility as the defining factor

Following the institutional opening, the first working session was chaired by the ALF Executive Director, Ambassador Hatem Atallah, focused on putting in place a new communication policy for the Foundation as the strategic priority for the new operational phase as adopted by the Board of Governors on 11th June 2016.

In initiating the discussion, it was highlighted that the strategic relevance of visibility was not being stated for the first time: the founders of the Foundation (2003 ‘Groupe des Sages’, High-Level Advisory Group on Intercultural Dialogue convened by then President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi) underlined from the outset that “the final condition is visibility” and that “the Foundation must be clearly visible and understandable, wherever it may be. Failure to meet this condition, denying the public the chance to perceive the aims and results of the dialogue without any intermediary, through the clarity of the message alone (...) would reduce it to an abstraction and condemn it to rapid oblivion.” More recently, on the occasion of the 10th Anniversary Conference of the ALF, the importance of communication and visibility was equally highlighted by the main bodies of the Foundation (Board of Governors, Advisory Council, Network of Networks). In this regard, the ALF Executive Director underlined that the ALF was now moving on talking about the importance of communication to the stage of “doing communication”.

As a basis for the strategic discussion, Advisory Council members had received copies of the very first “Communication Audit” carried out with the support of external expertise during July and August 2015 (see Annex 1). The Audit highlighted the following key needs: (a) embedding communication plans and processes in ALF’s core work cycles, highlighted by the impact in the previous phase of programmes which had communication built in from the outset (e.g. Young Arab Voices); (b) reinforcing the ALF’s central capacity for communication (HR, tools) and to outsource as required services for large-scale digital and mainstream media impact; (c) investing in training and capacity-building across the organisation (HQ, Networks, project leaders, youth alumni) as the central process to create a culture of communication; (d) ensuring a minimum level of communication allocation within programmes (proposed at 15%); (e) reviewing the overall brand identity of the organisation, including the name of the institution and central messaging.

Following a presentation on the Communication Audit findings, the initial round of Advisory Council interventions focused on the challenge of visibility, with one member stating “visibility has been a long-term problem for the ALF, as with the UfM which has not had a significant level of visibility since the Heads of States Meeting in 2008” and another member highlighting “effective communication requires effective resourcing and there has been very limited money for visibility”. It was also highlighted that communication relates to the programme, and there is still the need for the ALF to concentrate its action and avoid a dispersion of activities across with one member stating “we still see a diverse range of activities but not an adequate focus on strategic action”.

One of the key points underlined by several members focused on the importance of the ALF defining a clear connection between its mandate for intercultural dialogue and the major issues impacting on the Mediterranean and the wider global community, namely radicalisation and extremist narratives, the impact of the refugee crisis and climate change on societies to the south and north of the Mediterranean, and unprecedented mass migratory flows of citizens. Specific ideas generated in this discussion, noted by the ALF Headquarters, ranged from maximising existing initiatives such as “Arabo Blog” to the development of ‘mobile apps’ for refugees to have information. It was also underlined that, in the current context, intercultural dialogue

can be “a very powerful concept if it is well-defined and articulated”.

Regarding the brand identity of the organisation, there was not a global consensus on the proposal for a “name change” as recommended by the Communication Audit. On the one hand, it was argued that the name had been established during ten years and a change at this stage may not have a significant impact on visibility; on the other, that “re-branding” was a usual process for young institutions and it would be important to engage external specialists who could “provide objective analysis and proposals outside the immediate political or sentimental considerations”.

Media and Opinion-Leadership

Moderated by the ALF Head of The Executive Office, Paul Walton, the afternoon working session focused on the engagement of media and the role of the Anna Lindh Foundation as an opinion-leader. The session drew on external expertise with inputs from ALF media partners, including representatives of the “Euro-Med Media Network” (EMMN) and the “Permanent Conference of the Mediterranean Audiovisual Operators” (COPEAM).

Randa Habib, Director of AFP Foundation and EMMN member, underlined that the ALF must leverage with mainstream media its position as a credible channel to civil society and the positive mandate it has in the face of unprecedented negative regional trends. She highlighted the importance of human-interest stories that can give a real insight to the problems faced to the north and south of the Mediterranean, and the potential of online training initiatives involving young journalists and senior mentors. Dr. Paul Gillespie, Irish Times columnist, media professor and member of the ALF scientific Report committee, presented an overview of the “Euro-Med Mapping of Media Dialogues” carried out by the EMMN with the support of the ALF and exposing concrete case-studies on how to build a long-term process of media engagement on issues of cross-cultural reporting. He highlighted the “ALF Trends Report” and “Young Arab Voices” as valuable assets for media engagement, and recommended ALF leverages its potential role as a permanent space of observatory and analysis on media reporting across the Mediterranean. Paola Parri, COPEAM Coordinator, stressed the potential of leveraging existing radio and television networks, and highlighted the centrality of translation in media work.

On the back of the inputs, there was a general consensus on the importance of building strong, long-term partnerships for mainstream media engagement. The “Media Mapping” initiative and the proposal to embed media in the Intercultural Trends Report were also identified as areas which could be built on to take the ALF’s media work to a next level, as well as consolidating a core media programme for ALF which builds on existing initiatives such as the Journalist Award alumni network. There was a specific proposal generated to create an “Anna Lindh Debates” programme series which could be adapted to different national settings and characterised by taking an intercultural dialogue approach to the most pressing issues of the day. One of the members referenced the recent opinion-piece published by the ALF Executive Director, and stated that such initiatives should be encouraged and supported as part of the new communication plan. It was also discussed how ALF’s flag-ship programme Young Arab Voices should be leveraged to bring youth alumni into the mainstream media to debate and generate counter-narratives to extremist discourses. The role of “humour” in communication and media work was highlighted by one member who also referenced the opportunity that alternative media programming such as soap operas offered beyond news media. Finally, a number of Council members underlined the importance of education as an instrument to build a next generation of reporters and the potential to engage with schools of journalism across the region. To compliment such an approach, it was highlighted, the ALF should also work with media owners and high-level executives to also embed good practice top-down.

Evaluation and Advisory Council role

A pre-meeting was held on 10th September to evaluate the preparation of the Advisory Council meeting and discuss among members the mandate of the Council for the new phase.

There was positive feedback on the documentation circulated during the preparation, in particular the Communication Audit, with members stating that the “documents are very deep and full of material that are essential food for thought” and that “it is the first time we have a document to analyse, not only to check”. One member expressed satisfaction on the follow-up to the previous Advisory Council meeting for the Foundation’s 10th Anniversary in Naples, stating: “It is great to see that the recommendations have been acted upon, notably securing for the first time the Board’s backing for a new visibility and communication policy.”

Regarding the role of the Advisory Council, it was underlined by several members that - in addition to what is set out the statutes - there should be further investment to see how to leverage the contribution of members. One member described the Council as the “intellectual think-tank” of the ALF and that the Council should focus on generating independent “ideas and thinking which can support the reach and impact of ALF’s programming”. It was also highlighted that the Advisory Council can play an important bridging role between the civil society Networks and the governments represented by the Board of Governors. More generally, a number of Council members underlined that it was for the ALF Secretariat to define well what it needed and to pro-actively ask the Council for support and guidance on defined, strategic issues.

Specific points were also raised during the meeting the regarding future opportunities for Advisory Council members to meet with the ALF Board and the possibility of organising a Council meeting in the Southern Mediterranean region. One of the members from the previous Advisory Council phase noted the positive way in which she had been involved in international forums on behalf of the ALF, and encouraged the idea that this good practice could be now embedded. Related to this, it was also recommended to carry out a further “skills audit” following the Rome meeting to map areas of experience among the Council members as a basis for leveraging further the diverse expertise within the group.

10 areas of recommended action

The following areas of action resulted from an analysis of the debate and recommendations of the Advisory Council on the occasion of the Rome meeting of 10th - 11th September 2015:

(1) Connect Intercultural Dialogue to the Global Agenda

At the heart of the new communication and visibility policy should be the aim to define the Foundation's mandate for intercultural dialogue in relation to the unprecedented challenges impacting on societies to the north and south of the Mediterranean. Issues from radicalisation and extremism to the impact of the refugee crisis dominate the political and media landscape, and the ALF should articulate with clarity its contribution to the global agenda.

(2) Reaffirm the role of Youth in creating alternative narratives

Investment in Youth has been adopted by the Board as a central pillar of the new strategy, and the ALF supports youth leaders in acting on the front-line of communication efforts for intercultural dialogue and challenging extremist narratives. More specifically, the ALF should invest in transforming its flag-ship programme “Young Arab Voices” at a Euro-Med level, and initiating media and advocacy capacity-building with youth alumni networks.

(3) Promote value-driven and evidence-based messaging

As part of the new communication plan, core messaging should be redeveloped on the back of a set of core values central to ALF’s intercultural dialogue mandate and international frameworks, also with a focus on making those values relevant to the current sociocultural and political context in the region. Evidence-based messaging and an effective use of data generated are also essential to contribute to ALF’s positing as the “reference point for intercultural dialogue”, and the Intercultural Trends Report is a central instrument in that regard.

(4) Invest in resourcing and embedding communication

In moving to “doing communication”, the ALF and partners will need to invest in resourcing effectively the communication plan, including dedicated HR, tools and processes for communication. The ALF should also be ready to outsource to secure areas of specialist support, and to invest in training and capacity-building as the principal process to embed a culture of communication across the organisation (including ALF headquarters, Networks, project leaders, and regional youth alumni).

(5) Maximise partnerships, existing networks and tools

ALF’s newly adopted strategic pillar on “partnerships” can be central to the communication plan, and there should be an investment in building effective partnerships which can act over the longer-term as channels for and multipliers of the ALF communication. Existing networks and tools should also be leveraged, from the Network of national civil society networks and the Euro-Med Media Network to available digital media tools and applications which can be used and adapted for ALF’s outreach agenda.

(6) Focus on priority projects and strategic action

As exposed by the Communication Audit, the ALF should concentrate its communication efforts on those flagship initiatives where there is evidence of potential large-scale impact, namely “Young Arab Voices”, the “Mediterranean Forum” and the ALF “Intercultural Trends Report”. The Council underlined the connection between communication and contents, and the importance of communication contributing to the definition of strategic programming and high-impact areas of action.

(7) Consolidate media programme and analysis role

The ALF has a solid basis for consolidating a central media programme, as underlined by the external communication experts, from the Journalist Award alumni to existing media partnerships and resources such as the mapping research. It is also recommended that the next edition of the ALF Intercultural Trends Report has a specific thematic focus on media and perceptions, as with the founding edition, which will be a tool to engage the media community in dialogue.

(8) Break the ceiling through opinion-leadership role

The strategic intent for the ALF to assume its role as “reference point” must be accompanied with a well-designed programme of public advocacy and engagement with opinion-leadership. The ALF will need to identify the appropriate partners with experience in this domain and be ready to invest in quality media products including opinion-piece development and public outreach events. Linking the editions of the ALF Trends Report will be an important operational step.

(9) Position the ALF as a resource for the media community

As underlined by Advisory Council members, the ALF can play a unique role as a bridge between civil society and institutions, and by offering media a credible platform of engagement with civil society and expert knowledge in-country. It is recommended to consolidate ALF’s network of intercultural experts and to develop the mechanism by which journalists and media practitioners can access this network. The ALF can also launch thematic media dossiers linked to major global events.

(10) Value credibility as the back-bone of visibility

One of the points underlined throughout the Advisory Council Meeting in Rome was the essential link between credibility and visibility. Members highlighted that it is essential that the ALF continues to invest in building its organisational capacity to develop and deliver quality, high-impact programmes. The ALF should also continue to reinforce the consortium of credible actors and institutional partnerships associated to its main activities, and invest in creating a ‘group of friends’ to act as champions for the Foundation’s mandate.