



European Economic and Social Committee

Second Regional Civil Society Seminar

Mechanisms for Regional Dialogue

Tunis, 18-19 June 2014

REPORT

The Regional Civil Society Seminar was arranged in consultation with civil society organisations and in cooperation between the EU Delegation in Tunisia, the Inter-Institutional Steering Group on Civil Society (EEAS, EC, EEAS and input from the Anna Lindh Foundation). This is not a formal EU report.

Regional Civil Society Seminar on Dialogue Mechanisms, Tunis, 18-19 June 2014

REPORT

This report contains a summary of the regional civil society seminar as well as, in the Annex, the reports of two working groups, drafted by civil society participants. The report does not intend to reflect all relevant aspects of EU policy and support to civil society, but to summarise discussions of the main issue at the seminar: Moving from an open and exploratory dialogue between civil society and EU institutions on how best to facilitate regional dialogue to beginning an operational phase of testing and adjusting various ideas put forward. Some slight editing – of form - of the Working Group reports was necessary.

The 2nd Regional Civil Society Seminar on 'Mechanisms for Structured Dialogue at Regional Level in the Southern Neighbourhood' marked the beginning of a new – operational – phase, following the year-long consultation process on the design and creation of ways and means to facilitate sustained dialogue at regional level among civil society organisations as well as between them and authorities and the EU. The objective of the seminar was two-fold: 1) To further expand the group of civil society organisations that participate in the consultation process; and 2) To begin planning of the pilot phase of the initiative, and its operational elements, which Commissioner Füle announced at the EU-Southern Neighbourhood Civil Society Forum in Brussels, on 29-30 April 2014.

The Seminar was attended by around 60 participants, comprising 25 civil society organisations from Tunisia and another 25 from the Euro-Med region (members of the Core Advisory Group), as well as staff of EU and Tunisian Government institutions. The format was similar to that used at the 1st Regional Seminar in Jordan, in March, i.e. a combination of a plenary discussion with broad civil society participation from the hosting country and more focused discussions in working groups with fewer participants.

The Head of the EU Delegation in Tunisia, Ambassador Laura Baeza, opened the Seminar and spoke about the EU's efforts in support of civil society at national level and perspectives for dialogue at regional level. This was followed by opening remarks from the Executive Director of the Arab NGO Network on Development who focused on economic developments in Tunisia. Tunisian Government officials were present but did not speak.

In the following plenary session participants received a briefing of the consultation process so far and the outcome of the Brussels Civil Society Forum, including Commissioner Füle's commitment to the further process. The Tunisian civil society organisations and other CSOs from the region exchanged views on dialogue at national level and expectations regarding dialogue at regional level. The main focus of that discussion was on how Tunisian civil society should organise itself at national level to strengthen its voice and impact on policy decisions. Related to that, participants discussed how to ensure representativeness of those who are interlocutors in dialogue processes at national level, but also at regional level. Remarks were also made on the governance of the regional dialogue mechanisms.

While views differed, there was a strong advocacy for an institutionalised structure and a Civil Society Council. The need to structure CSOs by categories (NGOs, Youth, Think Tanks, Media, etc.) was raised. Others stressed the need for CSOs to organise themselves in thematic clusters, while the importance of networking was highlighted along with a rejection of the need for more centralised and institutionalised hierarchic structures. The notion of thematic communities, also at regional level, gained significant

traction. There was a suggestion for a call for proposals on ideas and thematic priorities, and a conference on challenges in the region to establish priorities among themes and issues. However, the strong focus on national level issues revealed that the benefits of engaging in regional dialogue were not obvious to many participants.

The afternoon was dedicated to Core Advisory Group discussions that began working on a plan of action for the pilot phase. Two working groups divided the task on preparing the elements for the plan based on the 'Forum Five', i.e. the five areas of work that the Commissioner outlined in his speech at the Brussels Forum in April. These are:

- 1) A second dialogue session with Commissioner Füle before he leaves office;
- 2) Establishing thematic regional communities that deal with policy issues of regional scope;
- 3) Establishing a comprehensive on-line communication resource that facilitates access to information and dialogue, and builds on / connects with existing relevant Internet platforms;
- 4) Organising small regional learning and trust-building events on topics of common interest for CSOs and governments/local authorities;
- 5) Organising workshops on media and civil society for mutual learning.

At the end of the Seminar, the working groups presented a series of ideas on organising, steering and management of the dialogue mechanisms, as well as some concrete suggestions regarding thematic communities, a Forum-type meeting with Commissioner Füle in the autumn was proposed with an overriding principle to link the policy dialogue to the ongoing EU Neighbourhood policy agenda. The specific suggestions included:

1. Arrange a dialogue meeting with Commissioner Füle, focused on ENP (including Action Plans and Progress Reports), in the margins of the Anna Lindh Foundation 10th Anniversary celebrations in Naples, Italy, towards the end of October.
2. Establish thematic communities, in the first instance, around the following 3 policy clusters:
 - I. **Mobility**
 - a. Mobility partnerships
 - b. Question of migration, refugees
 - c. Freedom of movement
 - II. **Inequalities**
 - a. Poverty and exclusion
 - b. Economic and social issues
 - c. Job challenges and informal economy
 - d. Unlocking economic potential
 - III. **Shrinking space for civil society**
 - a. Rights and freedoms for CSOs
 - b. Civil dialogues on local and national levels
 - c. Access to economic, social and cultural rights

Further discussion on this question of thematic communities, policy clusters and priorities is envisaged.

3. Conduct an inventory of existing relevant Internet sites and design as soon as possible the on-line communications platform; decide on its structure and content, ensuring that it reflects the entire thematic and organisational substance of the regional dialogue and is capable of projecting the dialogue to a wider audience; establish the platform; provide the necessary staffing and management; assign a focal point/"communicator"; ensure input, i.e. information, communication and knowledge, part of which is knowledge produced by the envisaged learning and development sessions and think tanks.
4. Draft a road map on learning and development sessions and arrange a conference to discuss and elaborate this road map and start this activity component.
5. Organise a conference on media and civil society to address the key themes in the relationship, i.e. CS-media, CS-EU and CS-government relations. Follow up with smaller workshops on media and civil society as discussed at the EU-Southern Neighbourhood Civil Society Forum in April.

Consistent with the entire consultation process on regional dialogue mechanisms to date, much of the discussions during the working segment on the plan of action focused on principles and criteria related to the overall objective, as well as steering and management of the process, not just during the pilot phase, but also beyond. Some of the proposals are not considered compatible with a quick start to implementation of the pilot phase, but should be considered with a view to a steering and management set-up for the longer term. These include setting up an Organising Committee, comprised of civil society and EU institutions, to decide on day-to-day management issues; Terms of Reference for the various bodies engaged in the overall steering, such as the Core Advisory Group, the Organising Committee and the Inter-Institutional Steering Group. More immediately relevant for the pilot phase are principles of openness, transparency and inclusiveness, to engage new CSOs and emerging civil society actors, and proposals to establish criteria and ground rules for participation in the dialogue.

Another feature of the seminar discussions (both in plenary and workshops) highlighted expectations that the initiative on regional dialogue mechanisms might address a wide range of issues which are beyond the scope of this initiative. These included: mapping of civil society, capacity building, media mapping and monitoring, and the establishment of a permanent network of media professionals and journalists. Participants were made aware of the other components of the Civil Society Facility's Regional South Programme and received a briefing on the Programme.

Follow-up: A paper outlining process and substance of the pilot phase will be presented to the Commissioner, taking into account his request that some activities be completed before the current college stands down at the end of October.

ANNEX

Working Group 1 - Thematic communities, thematic meetings and dialogue formats

Objective: Create an open and inclusive space and freedom to hold the dialogue, not establish a structure, hence we have to aim to setup a **PROCESS** (in time) that will lead to strengthening the dialogue.

*The discussion focused more on designing a process that will lead to developing mechanisms for (structured) dialogue – **LEARNING WHILE DOING** – i.e. physical and informal exchanges.*

Main outcomes:

Civil society, engaged in the Core Advisory Group, welcomes the initiative to form the ENP South Civil Society Forum and expresses its enduring support. At the meeting in Tunis, the following recommendations were formed for the future:

- The process to establish the forum, as well as the dialogue space itself, could be organized in a more transparent and open manner, ensuring the inclusion of more actors and building the forum in partnership. Efforts could be made to engage new actors from local national and regional levels i.e. local authorities and social partners.
- Civil society recommend not to start from “scratch” but rather build on the strengths of existing networks, and bring networks that are not yet engaged into the process; better efforts to be made to engage actors such as social movements, grass roots organizations, women movements, etc.
- Adhere the process and the open forum to ongoing policy work, sharing the relations between countries in the region and the EU, such as the ENP neighborhood policy progress monitoring process and the implementation of the mobility partnerships.
- Take into consideration some of the ENP civil society facility outcomes, in particular the multi-stakeholders consultations and mapping.
- Practically, civil society recommends to set up an organizing committee composed of members of the advisory group of civil society organizations (existing networks) together with the European External Action Service, European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee and furnishing it with a mandate to take decisions. A strategy to enlarge the core advisory group by integrating new actors should be outlined.

General thematic elements / “**POLICY**” **FRAMEWORK**: (needs further elaboration in the steering group and the recommended organizing committee)

1. Mobility

- a. Mobility partnerships
- b. Question of migration, refugees
- c. Freedom of movement

2. Inequalities

- a. Poverty and exclusion
- b. Economic and social issues
- c. Jobs challenges and informal economy
- d. Unlocking economic potential

3. Shrinking space for civil society

- a. Rights and freedoms for CSOs
- b. Civil dialogues on local and national levels
- c. Access to economic, social and cultural rights

Proposed **MAIN GOAL** of the ENP South Civil Society Forum: Providing a transparent and inclusive space for CSO from the region to exchange, to network, coordinate, build capacity and engage in meaningful dialogue with EU institutions and Euro-Med Fora and national & local governments.

A larger discussion on **METHODOLOGY** (how to work together) is needed, something that the potential organising committee should take on. An experienced civil society dialogue builder / facilitator can accommodate the process.

- How to bring in new actors
- How to shape the physical dialogue
- How to ensure outcomes
- How to build on the outcomes to strengthen the dialogue
- How to ensure synergies and spillover affects with other initiatives

Working Group 2 - On-line communications platform, learning, skills development and trust building, and media

We understand this overall initiative is intended to be more flexible than existing programmes, capable of responding to changing events and in that sense be closer to policy-making rather than development aid. But it also needs to complement, and not duplicate, the substantial array of existing EU programmes

The overall objective is to create a *regional structured dialogue* “to help bring civil society out of the periphery of EU-Mediterranean relations”. It is *regional*, not national and so complementary; *structured*, (presumably) meaning organised, timetabled, budgeted and staffed; and a *dialogue*, which should engage each side of the Civil Society-EU-Governments triangle. According to Commissioner Fule, speaking in Brussels on 30 April to the Forum, the initiative is intrinsically related to empowering civil society to facilitate the reforms necessary for a “successful transition to democracy”. He pointed out it is not a linear process and said: “What we are trying to establish is the creation of the necessary space, conditions, freedom, trust and the means to dialogue among all sides”.

Civil society organisations play a pivotal role in counterbalancing state power. They effect action against authoritarianism and battle against vested state-controlling interests. On the other hand media – both mainstream and social - must be watchdogs which expose corruption and can help the promotion of good governance and accountability by providing accurate, balanced and timely information, diversity of views and in depth analysis of facts – all of which are of interest and relevance to civil society and the public good. Unfortunately the relationship between media and CSOs is often charged with suspicion and animosity. CSOs view some mainstream media as making propaganda for controlling actors; journalists regard (some) CSOs as organisations of diluted values, funded by murky sources. In the pilot phase of this initiative we hope to find ways to build more trust in the relationship between media and CSOs. This is an absolutely necessary effort in order to develop innovative policy frameworks to address points of concern for both sides and cultivate rapprochement based on empirical evidence.

Action Points Arising from Tunis Discussion

- 1. Set up a Communications Platform for Information and Dialogue within the civil society dialogue as a priority over the next year.** It would be concerned with the entire thematic and organisational substance of the dialogue as determined by the core group/steering committee in consultation with the EEAS, EC, EESC and other potential EU partners. It would include generic values like democratic change, human rights, free flow of information, inclusivity as well as selected themes like economic crisis, migration, youth employment, mobility. It would integrate the three main elements of information, communication and knowledge identified in the Tunis discussions, which bring together the media and academic/think tank strands of the Brussels Forum. Learning and development rather than training are the key norms. This pooling of skills will strengthen and add value to the dialogue by bringing media, social media, specialist expertise and communications personnel together.

2. **Organise the platform in a timely and effective way in line with these thematic priorities.** The technical side requires website and communications skills which were persuasively outlined in Tunis. This needs budgeting and staffing, which should be prepared in an action plan to be completed by October and presented at a meeting that month, with a view to having the platform up and running by the beginning of next year. The more significant editing functions need to be similarly specified and prepared for that meeting. A platform needs to be edited and managed along these lines, paying due account to access and openness for designated participants. This amounts to a major initiative for an umbrella platform capable of projecting the civil society dialogue to a wider audience. The organisational chart, roadmap and timetable proposed by Working Group 1 is fully compatible with this recommendation.
3. **Organise a conference on media and civil society to address key themes in the relationship.** Timing to be determined by further study and discussions at core/steering group. It should deal with CS-media relations and CS-EU relations and discuss how best to address CS-Government relations, given that many governments oppose CS freedoms. Social media are also an urgent concern. Protection and enhancement of CS and media freedoms and the space for dialogue are priorities. So are how to enhance reciprocal action among the three elements of the triangle in a future structured regional dialogue, including on media literacy. There is a scope for at least one more conference, and possibly several smaller workshops, on these subjects over the next year. There is a case for considering a quadrilateral dialogue in which media, CSOs, the EU and Governments would be involved, in recognition of media being simultaneously an essential part of civil society yet needing to be autonomous from it to do its proper job.
4. **Organise a media research, monitoring and mapping initiative to complement and highlight existing facilities.** This should become a running activity, including research on the legal frameworks, ethical guidelines and state of the media in the southern neighbourhood. It should have a budget to commission and conduct research.
5. **Establish a permanent network of media professionals and journalists who are advocates of the free flow of information and professional values of journalistic reporting.** This should be a component part of the core/steering group.
6. **Establish a Learning & Development process that:**
 - A. will empower the relevant stakeholders through networking and the consequential formation of a knowledge base, with active participation of regional Media
 - B. will serve the purpose of creating a new mind-set both in the South and the North with regards to Civil Society
 - C. will facilitate capacity building and mutual confidence on a regional basis among CSOs
 - D. will be a knowledge production/knowledge exchange mechanism that will consist of:
 - Online Toolkits/Manuals
 - Webinars
 - Podcasts
 - Academic papers
 - Physical L&D Sessions
 - Knowledge exchange (virtual and physical) meeting