

**Civil Society Co-operation
in the EMP:
from Declarations
to Practice**

– Ulrike Julia Reinhardt –

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Title

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from Declarations to Practice*

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Berlin*

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Contents

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 4 |
| 1. Some remarks on definitions | 6 |
| 2. What is wrong with the current EMP civil society co-operation? | 7 |
| Regional Civil Society Programmes | 7 |
| The Euromed Civil Forum | 11 |
| 3. What are civil society and governments facing? | 14 |
| Conditions for civil society co-operation in the Med-12 | 14 |
| Attitudes towards external support to civil society | 15 |
| Particularity of political trajectories | 17 |
| 4. Concluding remarks | 19 |
| 5. Recommendations | 20 |
| References | 22 |

Introduction

Civil society is accorded a far more important role in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) than in other international agreements. The Barcelona Declaration of November 1995, in combination with the bilateral Euro-Mediterranean association agreements, form the first multilateral framework between states in which civil society is recognised as an “essential contribution” to the development of relations and “as an essential factor for greater understanding and closeness between peoples”.¹ This can be seen as a major qualitative step in the history of relations between the European Union and its southern neighbours. Its relevance has been stressed and discussed at numerous ministerial conferences, not least at the Euro-Mediterranean Senior Officials’ meeting in June 2001.

The emphasis on civil society is essential to the Barcelona Process because that distinguishes the Partnership from traditional foreign policy approaches. Drawing on the experience of European integration, the initiators understood that any rapprochement between countries – be it mainly political, or economic, or both – could not function without the support of the respective societies involved. It is revealing, in this regard, to consider the effect of people-to-people activities on foreign policy – for example, the exchange programmes that French and German politicians have repeatedly proposed since the Franco-German Treaty of 1963. Moreover, as an explicitly regional approach, the Barcelona Process cannot reach its aim of creating a “common area of peace and stability, shared prosperity and mutual understanding”,² if intergovernmental co-operation is not based on a foundation of civil society networks. Regional co-operation depends on the awareness of actors beyond just those linked to government that the respective countries belong to a common region and that there exist – notwithstanding obvious divergences and differences – common interests and backgrounds. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) is designed to help create a region that embraces intergovernmental as well as intersocietal ties around the Mediterranean basin. Without the contribution from societal actors, such a comprehensive policy lacks both legitimacy and effectiveness.

If we look, however, at the implementation of what is proposed in the Barcelona Declaration, we see a different picture. Programmes are criticised for their limitations and incoherence, and the associations involved face many obstacles to the implementation of their activities. Co-operation in this field also plays a minor role in political discussions, and is generally seen as being borne out of the policy-makers’ desire to make the Barcelona Declaration appear to be an attractive option and to underline the friendly character of the Partnership. It seems to be a taboo among politicians to go beyond the rhetoric of emphasising the need for co-operative ventures. All-in-all, in reality, the interest of participating bodies in this part of the EMP seems to be based on very divergent assumptions and expectations.

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¹ Barcelona Declaration, 28 November 1995.

² Ibid.

This report addresses underlying reasons for and the effects of this malaise. What is the specific problem with this dimension of the Barcelona Process, both in terms of policymakers and civil society actors? Does the problem lie within the concept of civil society co-operation in the Euro-Mediterranean region or in its current implementation, or perhaps in both? Is the cause a mere inadequacy of means – with the priority being placed on other chapters of the EMP – or is there a more fundamental unease with the entire approach?

In the first part of this report, we will look at the civil society concept itself and provide an operational definition in order to facilitate the discussion of concrete approaches (I). The second part deals with the background of two prominent fields of activities in the civil society sector of the Barcelona Process – the regional Euromed programmes and the Euro-Mediterranean Civil Forum – providing an analysis of the problems and disappointments linked to them (II). We will then turn to the overall approach, asking what problems civil society and governments are facing with it (III). In the concluding remarks (IV) it will be shown that civil society programmes are not the way to achieve what some of the initiators of them anticipate, but that their significance lies in a slightly different field: They allow the creation of networks as a testing ground for co-operation on multiple levels of society and are thus confidence-building measures in themselves. Hence their importance as an instrument of the Barcelona Process that deserves further attention from policymakers. The recommendations at the end of this paper (V) point to ways to take greater advantage of such an instrument.

1. Some remarks on definitions

The primary concern of those dealing with this topic arises from the vagueness of the term “civil society”. Too frequently, discussions about civil society issues dwell on the search for a proper definition of the term itself. Since it emerged in a specifically European socio-economic context, many scholars doubt that the term is applicable in other regions of the world where society evolved in an entirely different way.³ Particularly in dealing with authoritarian states like those that dominate the southern shore of the Mediterranean, observers tend to question whether a “real” civil society exists in these countries at all.

Yet, although civil society in countries where governments are first and foremost suspicious of independent associations necessarily takes different forms than the one commonly found in Europe, this does not mean that it is absent. Restricting our understanding of the term to a normative view through, for example, reference to pluralism, freedom of opinion, tolerance or other elements of a specific reformist political agenda – more or less accurately reflected in the way civil society developed in Europe – would only hinder any pragmatic discussion of concrete approaches in a Euro-Mediterranean context. For the purposes of this paper, it therefore appears appropriate to introduce an operational definition of civil society with a focus on function rather than a theoretical discussion. Then we must ask what functions civil society fulfils within the space it occupies between the family and the state.

These functions are:

- Economic - businessmen associations and chambers of commerce,
- Occupational - employers’ federations and trade unions,
- Social - family planning agencies, religious associations, charity groups, immigrant organisations, sports and leisure clubs,
- Promoting awareness and/or public policy reform in matters of general interest, such as consumer protection, environment, human rights, democracy, peace, gender issues, or
- To promote awareness and/or public policy reform in matters of particular interest, for example, amongst ethnic minorities or handicapped persons.

Within this perspective, the observer gains a sense of the wide range of associational activities found in all concerned countries, both in Europe and in the Mediterranean. The ideological stance of these groups – if any – is not necessarily “civic” in a normative sense. Some components of civil society are in opposition to their governments. Others benefit from government support and see no need for change. Many are not interested in politics at all, and yet others seek political change only in the long run. Some seek change, or seek to create awareness, in specific fields of public policy exclusively.

³ On this discussion see Schwedler, 1995, pp. 7ff.

2. What is wrong with the current EMP civil society co-operation?

In the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership framework, civil society is involved in different levels. Through its civil society programmes, the European Commission sponsors projects on specific topics, both on a bilateral and on a regional track. The Euro-Mediterranean Civil Forum provides an annual meeting point for all sorts of civil society actors. In addition, several civil society institutions have set up other means of co-operation among themselves and their counterparts. Institutes from all 27 EMP countries doing research in the field of foreign policy and security and in the field of economics work together in the Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission (EuroMeSCo) and the Forum Euro-Méditerranéen des Instituts Economiques (FEMISE). Under the auspices of the European Economic and Social Committee, the national economic and social committees as well as similar institutions, meet regularly every six months, in European and southern Mediterranean cities alternately. The European Federation of Trade Unions organises meetings and workshops of national trade union representatives from European and partner countries, concentrating their willingness to co-operate on specific topics of interest, such as migration, labour legislation or unemployment. Bodies which do not belong to civil society but are located in an intermediary position between national governments and civil society have embarked on similar joint endeavours, such as a forum of towns of the northern and southern rims of the Mediterranean, or the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Co-operation, which brings together speakers and selected members of national parliaments.

In the following discussion, two of these co-operation activities will be analysed, in order to determine their actual and potential contribution to the forging of Euro-Mediterranean civil society co-operation. The first activity involves the regional civil society programmes. These constitute the Commission's most prominent field of activity for civil society support, which, unlike the bilateral programmes, also strengthen regional or subregional co-operation. The second activity is the Euro-Mediterranean Civil Forum, which is organised by civil society actors themselves, with financial support mainly from the Commission and the respective host country. This activity constitutes the principal platform for debate and exchange of opinion among civil society organisations active in the EMP.

Regional Civil Society Programmes

The current regional civil society programmes are based on a different approach from those existing prior to the launch of the Barcelona initiative. At the origin of all Euro-Mediterranean civil society programmes has been the concept of decentralised co-operation. Considered as an innovative instrument of development policy since the 1980s, it aims at integrating a whole spectrum of public and private actors without direct links to governments or EU institutions as participants in development projects. The concept not only supports the participation, but also the transfer of initiatives and responsibilities to local authorities and organised sectors of civil society, hence being complementary to government initiatives. It also seeks to react more rapidly to the concrete needs of the population in matters like environment, urban planning, youth, or local business. Besides these developmental goals, typical activities should – and this is central in our

context – improve the knowledge of the other, promote contacts, transfer know-how and create beneficial interaction in order to prevent conflict.

On the basis of this concept, the European Commission outlined the first regional Euro-Mediterranean Civil Society Programmes as early as 1990 and launched them in 1992 within the framework of the "Renewed Mediterranean Policy."⁴ These programmes covered four sectors: local authorities (MED-Urbs), small and medium enterprises (MED-Invest), university education (MED-Campus) and the media (MED-Media). Between 1992 and 1995, the MED-programmes allowed for the creation of more than 470 networks, bringing together around 2,000 civil society partners and disbursing ECU 67 million in support grants, a rather modest sum compared to the disbursements made in the EMP framework after 1995. The number of projects increased from 81 projects per year (1992-93), to 160 (1993-94), with about 300 planned for 1996, when the programmes were stopped.⁵ Their suspension in October 1995 was provoked by the European Court of Auditors reporting that irregularities had been revealed in the administrative and financial management, which had been delegated, as is the case with many Commission programmes, to a non-profit association (the "Agence des réseaux trans-méditerranéens", ARTM) and several offices for technical assistance.⁶ Commission officials had lost control of their programmes, and the Court, echoed by the European Parliament, blamed them for negligence and naivety in the delegation of management responsibilities and failure to provide evidence of all their spending. As a result, the Commission decided to suspend activities in this sector as its own personnel resources apparently made it impossible to manage such small-size ventures. Since then, Commission officials have been over-sensitive about anything referring to decentralised co-operation, micro-projects, or even the denomination "MED-programme".

Nevertheless, only a month after the suspension of the initial MED-programmes, the Barcelona Declaration again mentioned the need for decentralised civil society programmes in the third EMP basket. However, this issue was thereafter virtually neglected for several years. It was only in 1998 that regional activities involving research centres and private firms were launched in context of the EMP second basket, creating networks in the field of information and communication technology (EUMEDIS) and statistics. The first regional programme to be initiated in the third basket was Euromed Heritage, also in 1998. One year later followed Euromed Audiovisual, a modified version of MED-Media. The youngest programme is Euromed Youth, set up at the end of 1999, after successful lobbying from youth groups and the European Youth Forum.

The MEDA Democracy programme is a special case, for it was established in 1996 on the initiative of the European Parliament to fund regional as well as country-specific projects of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on democratisation, conflict resolution, gender issues, and the defence of human rights and fundamental liberties. The political and security basket of the Barcelona Declaration and the new association agreements with their human rights clause and the provisions for political dialogue serve as the programme's "legitimising ground."⁷ Unlike the Euromed programmes, however, it is financed within the framework of the "European Initiative for Democracy and the Protection of Human Rights" (budget line B7-7050) rather than in the MEDA budget (B7-4100). Projects are therefore selected unilaterally by the European Commission without consultation with the Euro-Mediterranean Committee for the Barcelona Process ("Euromed

⁴ For a discussion of these programmes see Schmid, 1996, and Rahmani/Bekkouche, 1995.

⁵ European Commission: Background Note, Les programmes "MED", 28 September 1998.

⁶ Journal Officiel des Communautés Européennes, 96/C 240/01, 19 August 1996. See also European Commission/TMO, 1997.

Committee⁸). The programme is not, therefore, strictly part of the EMP but has been created by the EU in accordance with the principles of the Barcelona Declaration on topics such as human rights and democracy, insofar as the Barcelona follow-up activities do not yet include a discussion on these issues at a multilateral level with all partner countries.⁹ Its beneficiaries are NGOs, most of them from the partner countries, and the funding is focussed on relatively short-term activities.

The purpose and the approach of the Euromed programmes thus differ from MEDA Democracy in a number of ways. As an EU programme directly aimed at strengthening groups in partner countries who put democracy, minority rights, conflict resolution, and human rights education on their agenda, MEDA Democracy is also much more controversial in the partner countries, whereas projects for the Euromed programmes are selected by the Euromed Committee, i.e. by both EU and partner governments. These programmes fund joint undertakings in less politicised sectors such as cultural heritage, audiovisual media and youth work.

The intended impact of the Euromed programmes is not so much a straight-forward political one, but concerns the achievement of very specific goals such as the realisation of computerised cartography for the archaeological heritage many countries of the region share, or the production of a children's TV series on Mediterranean history and legends.¹⁰ In this way, the Euromed programmes are also politically significant because they operate as a kind of confidence-building measure at the level of professionals and experts. The creation of such a network in itself has "pedagogic" effects, because the network participants have to agree upon an approach, which requires defining common objectives. Discussions, negotiations, mutual comprehension and empathy are central to realising common arrangements for concrete projects. The creation and sustained functioning of a network is, therefore, in itself a proof of the success of co-operation across national and cultural borders. Project content is indeed then less significant than the fact that there has been any kind of continuous interaction at all.

On many occasions, the Euromed programmes have been applauded by policy-makers for their contribution to the Barcelona Process.¹¹ In MEDA II, the budgetary framework for 2000-2006, the programme budgets have been augmented.¹² Two new regional programmes are soon to be launched in the sectors of Humanities and Women. The concept of decentralised co-operation, however, once upheld by the Commission, is not implemented in all of these programmes.

⁷ Karkutli/Bützler, 1999.

⁸ The Committee, which meets on a quarterly basis at senior official level, is chaired by the EU Presidency and consists of the EU Troika, Mediterranean Partners, and European Commission representatives (Member States not in the EU Troika also participate).

⁹ Tunisia, for example, has made it clear, ever since the beginning of the Barcelona Process, that it is not willing to discuss these issues with the EU in this framework. As the association agreements are negotiated individually with each of the partners, they differ from one country to the other. Cyprus, Malta and Turkey are linked to the Union by means of association agreements that consider their special status as candidates for EU membership. Of the other partner countries, only seven have concluded the new Euro-Mediterranean association agreements so far. Only the agreements with Tunisia, the Palestinian Territories (interim accord), Israel and Morocco are ratified – and thus in force. For the others (Jordan, Egypt, Algeria and Lebanon) and the only country with which negotiations have not been concluded yet (Syria), the relationship with the EU is still based on the 1970s co-operation agreements.

¹⁰ Examples are taken from Euromed Heritage I (project "Ipamed") and Euromed Audiovisual (project "Euromediatoon").

¹¹ See e.g. Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Brussels, 5-6 Nov. 2001, Presidency Conclusions, point 27.

¹² See "From MEDA I to MEDA II: What's New?", *Euromed Special Feature*, no. 21, 3 May 2001.

A close look at the current programmes shows that project size and the choice of target group do not really focus on civil society. The programmes are often limited to the participation of experts in specific ministries or in government-funded institutes. The project budgets are significant – amounting to between €100,000 and €4 million – making tenders from smaller groups impossible, both because they are unable to advance or co-finance such amounts, and because these groups are often created spontaneously and cannot wait for payments disbursed more than a year in arrears, as EU funds commonly are. The only exception within the third basket of the EMP is Euromed Youth, which operates on a smaller scale, with short-term NGO projects rather than large co-operation networks. These micro-projects – with a budget of around €25,000 each – are much more effective at reaching the grass-root level. Euromed Youth's success seems to have been noted, judging from the recent enlargement of its budget and scope for a new operational phase until 2004.¹³ Given that, in some partner countries, youth under 25 years constitute 60% or more of the population, the chosen target of this programme and its achievements are rather promising.

Nonetheless, the general tendency of increasing budgets for single projects carried out by large governmental or state-owned institutions while massively decreasing the number of projects in total is in line with the Commission Report, entitled "Reinvigorating the Barcelona Process" in May 2000. It states that co-operation should in the future concentrate "on a small number of strategic programmes whereas small programmes would no longer be funded."¹⁴ However, this contradicts the goal of a more flexible process that ensures maximum participation of civil society, as well as visibility and effectiveness at the grass-root level. If the aim is to reach a greater number of people, not only the usual beneficiaries who already have contact with European policies and the operation of the EU, then micro-projects are particularly important. They may well indeed be more labour-intensive to launch and evaluate, a factor that had contributed to the failure of the initial MED-programmes, but there is a critical need for these kinds of more diversified programmes in all sectors of civil society co-operation. Nor should this consideration be dismissed simply because of internal administrative difficulties within the Commission.

It is also necessary to ease the way in which civil society groups can become beneficiaries of these programmes. In order for EMP initiatives to have a real impact at the societal level, civil society organisations have to be able to obtain information about programmes easily and to apply for them without being excluded by overly bureaucratic procedures. Far too frequently interesting projects cannot be carried through for the simple reason that an application would take too much time to be approved before funding could be assured and NGOs do not always dispose of the human resources to generate all the paperwork required. Only in some cases do umbrella organisations, such as the German political foundations, take over the task of corresponding with the Commission and co-ordinating several micro-projects with Euro-Mediterranean funding at the same time. The current decentralisation of external relations administration is a move in the right direction because it leaves more flexibility in budgetary planning to the delegations of the European Commission in the partner countries, so that more micro-projects can eventually be selected on a decentralised level.

¹³ Commission Decision no. 2001/2347 of 22 November, 2001. Euromed Youth II is provided with a budget of €14 million for 2002-2004 (budget increase of 40% over Euromed Youth I), of which €10 million are taken from the MEDA budget and €4 million from the Youth budget line.

¹⁴ "Reinvigorating the Barcelona Process: Working document of the European Commission services for the 'think tank' meeting of Euro-Mediterranean Foreign Ministers, Lisbon, 25-26 May 2000", finalised as COM(2000) 497, 6 Sept. 2000 (European Commission, 2000).

Nonetheless, the delegations of the European Commission cannot always meet the requirements necessary to act as interlocutors for civil society organisations in the partner countries. Indeed, delegations should provide consultants especially prepared to respond to civil society concerns, in a similar fashion to business counselling, supplied on a local level through units funded by the Commission, in order to further enable interested groups to learn more about opportunities and concerns linked to the EMP. In this context, it should also be possible to allow applications for EMP programmes to be prepared in the official languages of the partner countries.

The Euromed Civil Forum

The Euromed Civil Forum is the best-known entity as the voice of civil society in the EMP. It was organised for the first time during the Barcelona Conference in November 1995 on the initiative of southern European NGO activists and intellectuals. Since then, civil forums have taken place during or prior to almost every conference of foreign ministers of the Barcelona Process. What began as a gap-filling activity has quickly become a well-established event and a prominent meeting point for civil society representatives from EMP countries. Thanks to their informal character, the forums facilitate the exchange of opinions among civil society actors even at times when governments interrupt the official dialogue. Civil society groups from Syria and Lebanon took part in the Civil Forum at Marseille despite their governments' boycott of the "Barcelona V" Ministerial Conference after the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada. Nevertheless, the Euromed Civil Forum today suffers from two main problems, one being its composition and format, and the other its lack of agreement on the question of which role the forum – as an example of organised civil society representation at a Euro-Mediterranean level – is supposed to exert within EMP structures.

The forums differ strongly in size and format at each annual meeting, although they generally feature a mixture of exhibitions, fairs, workshops, and conferences. As the different forums are organised and conceptualised by individual institutions from the host country, their success depends to a considerable extent on the organisers' ability to channel the many divergent opinions and strands of civil society attitudes into a precise and concrete political recommendation. In addition, because the different organisers of each gathering are also responsible for the selection and invitation of participants, their own specific background and interests have a strong impact on the Forum's composition. This often results in meetings involving an exclusive circle of intellectuals and activists already well acquainted with the EMP, and with each other. It is difficult, if not impossible, to bring together a roughly "representative" sample of civil society. Yet the credibility of this platform as a genuine voice for the diversity of Euro-Mediterranean societies is dependent upon bringing together associations from very distinct fields of concern and forms of action – from environmental matters to human rights – who share an interest in taking an active role in the Barcelona Process. No matter how well organised a civil forum might be, the contradiction between the political ambition to present civil society as a strong and solid force on the one hand, and the reality of the heterogeneous character of civil society on the other, will remain.¹⁵

As far as the function of the Civil Forum today is concerned, it is important to bear in mind that in 1995, during the first Euro-Mediterranean Conference, two civil society forums took place, one similar to the current format, funded by the Commission and the host country and serving as a debating platform for civil society actors to promote and improve the EMP, and another an

¹⁵ See Jünemann, 2000.

“alternative” one, entirely independent from government support, that openly criticised the EMP’s concept and its potential risks, particularly for the southern partners. One could therefore characterise the divergent functions of these two forums as one acting as “mediator” in contrast to the other as “watchdog”.¹⁶ Obviously, as an unorthodox counter-event to the ministerial conference, the alternative forum was doomed to be ignored rather than listened to by policy-makers. At the same time, the other forum, partly integrated into the EMP as it was through its links to the host government and the Commission, provided a platform for mediation between officials and civil society and was therefore in a much better position to discuss hopes and discontents with the EMP and, importantly enough, provide a meeting point for activists from different countries. Probably because of the more constructive (and less provocative) format of the “mediator” forum, the concept of having completely independent alternative civil society summits was eventually dropped, whilst the concept of a civil forum largely in line with the EMP has become the model for similar events in the following years.

This has, however, created the current dilemma for the Euromed Civil Forum. Because it is co-financed by the European Commission and organised in agreement with the government of the country hosting the ministerial Euro-Mediterranean Conference, the Forum is too close to the EMP to fulfil a critical watchdog function. Yet, because of the lack of structures connecting it with the official level of the EMP, it is also too remote to really influence it from within.¹⁷ Even now, the Euromed Civil Forum is really no more than a series of individual events linked only by the political recommendations that subsequently emerge. Official interest in it varies considerably from one EU presidency to another. For France, the Marseille Civil Forum in November 2000 served as a means to promote the EMP – and the French role in it – in public during a time when the Barcelona Process itself was being called in question. In such circumstances, the concerns expressed by forum participants receive considerable attention and even find their expression in the ministerial debates during the Foreign Ministers Conference itself. In many other cases, the host country’s political agenda does not direct the same level of attention to civil society. This is particularly the case when the Forum takes place several weeks prior to the ministerial conference, so that direct communication between forum representatives and policy-makers is virtually impossible.

A certain disappointment on the part of participants and organisers is hence gaining ground, caused by the impression that they cannot help but repeat their demands, without influencing the outcome of their declarations. The decision by policy-makers to incorporate the Civil Forum into the follow-up of the third basket has so far not been put into practice. Being neither independent, nor incorporated into the structures of the EMP, it is almost impossible for civil society to take an active part within the Barcelona Process. This is particularly the case if its political demands go beyond the accepted limits of cultural or technical co-operation and touch on politically sensitive issues.

This paradox is the second reason why the Forum today suffers from a certain paralysis and has lost much of its initial appeal. Although the Commission is the Forum’s main source of funding, the distance between the officials responsible for it and the civil society activists actually involved has grown ever larger, to the point where the Commission decided, at the Civil Forum in Brussels (19-20 October 2001), not to send any representative to the proposed panel discussion. The Council’s General Secretariat, whose Mediterranean desk is responsible for the briefing of EU presidencies in matters concerning the EMP, did not even express an interest in the Forum’s agenda. This is

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

noteworthy as it shows official ambiguity towards the issue. On the one hand, the Commission missed an opportunity to discuss and develop ideas on the Barcelona Process with Forum participants, whilst, on the other, it continued to include civil society actors in the EMP rhetorically. For the European Commission, this is surprising, as it has – in internal EU political terms – always encouraged the participation of interest groups in policymaking through its “comitology” system.

According to many activists, one way of ensuring that more attention is directed towards the concerns of civil society would be to provide for a more continuous integration of the Euromed Civil Forum into EMP structures. A permanent body or round-table to represent civil society in the EMP would then be responsible for organising the annual forums but would also serve as an interlocutor for policymakers and a lobby bureau in matters concerning civil society in the Barcelona Process. Yet, many questions would remain. How could a sufficiently representative body of civil society be gathered together? Is the Civil Forum well positioned to give birth to this body? And finally, would the existence of such a panel change the widespread ambivalence of governments toward civil society?

The vibrant level of activity within civil society around the Mediterranean has undoubtedly led to important inputs into many aspects of the EMP. Above all, multiple possibilities have been created for people to meet and work together across national borders. But there is no clear message from policy-makers on what is actually intended, who is supposed to participate, what to focus on and how to handle views emanating from civil society that are at odds with government positions. Any opposition to or deviation from the official approach is seemingly unwelcome. The fact that the Presidency conclusions of the recent Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Foreign Ministers in Brussels stated that “The Ministers stressed the input of civil society into all aspects of the Partnership” but “...urged the protagonists of civil society to organise themselves to respond better to the terms of reference of the regional programmes”¹⁸ only underlines the incongruency between approaches from the intergovernmental and civil society level.

As long as policy-makers show little readiness to adapt their strategies to the needs of civil society and to draw on its specific strengths, this dimension of the EMP will continue to be inadequately implemented. However, rather than questioning single programmes and making cosmetic adjustments here and there, it might be useful first to look at why governments have such contradictory attitudes towards the issue.

¹⁸ Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Brussels, 5-6 Nov. 2001, Presidency Conclusions, point 29.

3. What problems are civil society and governments facing?

Profound problems arise from a general divergence in what is understood by civil society co-operation on either side of the Mediterranean. Europeans are used to thinking of civil society groups co-operating across national borders as positive, bringing international issues closer to the people and making policies more efficient.¹⁹ Inside the EU, many Community policies have been based on this approach, aiming at transforming traditional intergovernmental co-operation among states into a multi-level approach that involves sub-state actors at the regional, municipal and societal level as well. A look at the European Community's regional and structural policy shows how the European Commission, through the creation and support of networks between civil society associations, tries to bolster its policies and to by-pass the state level by communicating directly with citizens. The method chosen in the Barcelona Process is thus an adaption of a formula used in European integration but applied within an external relations context.²⁰

Conditions for civil society co-operation in the Med-12

In countries to the south and east of the Mediterranean, however, the political conditions in which civil society activities take place are different. It is difficult to make general statements about the twelve Mediterranean partners, just as the fifteen EU member-states can hardly be dealt with as a homogeneous group, particularly in the field of foreign relations. The so-called "Med-12" group comprises entities – eleven states plus the Palestinian Territories – that share some common characteristics in their political and societal systems, but that differ considerably in the degree of pluralism allowed in their societies, the way regional conflicts have an impact on their political and socio-economic structures and their resource endowment. Nonetheless, in their majority, they show a similar attitude toward civil society involvement. While the inclusion of other actors in foreign relations and the fragmentation of state authority have been interpreted in Europe as an inevitable step towards a globalisation that will eventually overcome outdated models of sovereignty, in most of the southern Mediterranean countries this very sovereignty has only been achieved through struggles for decolonisation that took place only a few decades ago. Post-independence states have had to strive to impose themselves and to become fully legitimate. The model adopted by many was that of a state acting primarily on society through direct and authoritarian intervention. Hence, the initial reaction of public authorities is generally hostile to local, sectoral and other forms of spontaneous self-expression within society. In recent years, with an increasing liberalisation of the economy and the need for structural adjustment, the state has begun to withdraw from some areas of social life, leaving space for numerous associations, especially in social matters. But in fields that are more political than social or economic in nature, regimes continue to see civil society as a natural rival to their authority and instinctively fight any alternative forms of organisation outside their control.²¹

¹⁹ This is not always the case, though. The example of the French government opposing co-operation between anti-nuclear energy NGOs from France and Germany shows that European governments can be very reluctant to admit cross-border co-operation that is at odds with their policies.

²⁰ Reinhardt, 2001, pp. 304f.

²¹ Schmid, 2001.

Many states in the region have developed a range of instruments to assure control over civil society activities. They either forbid independent associations and place all activities in this field under strict control of government, or they systematically co-opt existing organisations, even creating artificial organisations that exist in parallel to the real ones, in order to supervise the latter more closely. In Jordan, for example, the state has allowed for the development of a relatively abundant civil society, but has spotted it with “phantom organisations” that help the regime control political opposition.²² When asked why his government did not follow a less repressive approach towards civil society, the Syrian vice-president evoked the Algerian experience of the late 1980s and early 1990s, warning that a more liberal system with increased possibilities for divergent stances within society would tear the country apart.²³

Attitudes towards external support to civil society

Despite the challenges posed to governments by certain parts of civil society, it is clear that Mediterranean societies are replete with associations, unions and groupings of all kinds. Instead of claiming to “create” a civil society in the partner countries from scratch, the EMP approach should, in contrast, proceed on the assumption that civil societies that already exist in all the countries concerned could be strengthened by closer co-operation between them. They could then be encouraged and supported by transnational networks across Europe and the Mediterranean region.

However, any external support necessarily provokes domestic resistance and most partner states are extremely suspicious of any kind of decentralised co-operation involving civil society abroad that might escape their control. The perceived infringement of state sovereignty, an interference in internal affairs and a waning of state authority through the encouragement of political dissent are issues that most regimes and societies in the South resent very strongly. In particular, NGOs funded from abroad that are designed to promote awareness for political matters are often considered a foreign implant and not representative of domestic society.

Examples of external involvement, from European civil society in southern Mediterranean countries, which were heavily criticised or even actively resisted by the governments concerned are plentiful. The “Rome Platform” in 1995, in which most opposition parties of Algeria successfully agreed upon the prerequisites for ending of the conflict, was developed with support from the catholic community of Sant’Egidio near Rome. In consequence, the Algerian regime bluntly rejected the initiative as an unwelcome encroachment from foreign civil society into internal Algerian affairs.

An even more sensitive topic has been material support from external sources to specific elements of domestic civil society. In Egypt, sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim and other staff members of the renowned Ibn Khaldoun Centre for Development Studies were arrested in Autumn 2000 and sentenced to up to seven years in prison because they were alleged to have, among other charges, received unauthorised funds from foreign donors – including the EU – for their programmes supporting women voters. (As the result of a ruling of Egypt’s Court of Cassation, Ibrahim was released from prison in February 2002.) In a similar manner, politicians from the government coalition in Israel dismissed the financial assistance the EU provides to “Peace Now” and other

²² Ibid.

²³ Vice-President Abd al-Halim Khaddam, quoted in *al-Hayat*, 10 July 2001.

associations in favour of a resumption of the peace process as a "biased intervention of foreign nations in the democratic processes of Israel."²⁴

The EMP is often described as emanating from a purely European design that is implicitly led by hegemonic attitudes and perceptions of the Mediterranean region as a threat to European security, rather than by a true spirit of partnership. There is hardly any sense of a common ownership of the Process among the Mediterranean partners, be it governments or societies.²⁵ Similarly, the issue of civil society support is dismissed as a typically "neo-colonialist" search for influence through "purely Western values"²⁶. Public reaction to keywords such as "democracy", or "human rights", and to what it perceives as the European attitude of being the sole repository of truth is almost allergic. Double standards within European governments' policies toward states that violate these principles and the failure to implement conditionality clauses consistently do not help their credibility in this respect. As a result, any programme propagating these values – such as MEDA Democracy – is doomed to raise eyebrows on the part of governments. Cases in which funds of this kind were misused to finance associations and institutions in Europe only add to their reputation of offering little other than undesired consequences.

In the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks, it appears that politicians in Europe show increasing interest in the importance of the grass-roots level to foreign relations, as well as in a reassessment of the EMP's social and cultural basket. At the same time, issues in the civil society sector have become more intractable. The political focus has shifted to an approach primarily concerned with hard security issues, amongst which an intense fight against terrorism figures most prominently. To many Mediterranean partners, this is nothing new. If combating terrorism is accompanied by a firm stance against regime critics, the current situation, for many governments, justifies their longstanding campaigns against dissidents in their own countries. Human rights defenders from all over the region have drawn attention to the fact that the worldwide action against terrorism risks serving as a pretext for the abuse of power and the restriction of civil liberties.²⁷ Many southern Mediterranean governments have seized on the occasion to accuse the West of harbouring alleged terrorists who, according to them, describe themselves as opposition forces or freedom fighters only to attract sympathy for their cause. In their eyes, up to now Europe has paid too little attention to this issue and given too much freedom to political associations from the South to establish themselves on its soil. In Turkey, politicians of the ANAP party, a junior coalition partner, have pointed to Germany's passiveness, particularly towards Kurdish associations, and blamed it for sustaining terrorism by allowing such groups to act freely.²⁸ "We are the only ones who understand the Americans' pain", both Turkish and Tunisian rulers claim.²⁹ Instead of giving the Southern partner-states lectures on democracy and human rights and recommending that they develop a dialogue with their Islamist oppositions, European governments should no longer ignore the difficulties these states face because of potential criminals being sheltered abroad. They should instead co-operate on combating and handing over groups critical of those in power.³⁰ From now on, it can be assumed, Arab governments as well as Israel and

²⁴ Shaul Yahalom, chairman of the National Religious Party, quoted in "EU defends its support of Israeli Left", *Jerusalem Post*, 27 June 2001.

²⁵ Joffé, 2001.

²⁶ See e.g. "Omran yantaqud du'aat al-mujtama al-madani: juz'un min isti'mar jadid", *Al-Hayat*, 30 Jan. 2001, and "Tasiyyis haquq al-ansan yuhauilha illa mahzala kobra", *Al-Hayat*, 14 Aug. 2001.

²⁷ "Au Proche-Orient, la lutte contre le terrorisme sert d'alibi pour réprimer les oppositions", *Le Monde*, 23 Oct. 2001.

²⁸ "Deutschland für Terror verantwortlich", *Welt am Sonntag*, 23 Sept. 2001.

²⁹ "How Tunisia won the war against terrorism", *IC Publications*, Nov. 2001.

³⁰ "N Africa seeks US aid for militant crackdown", *Financial Times*, 19 Sept. 2001.

Turkey, will reject attempts from Europeans and Americans to bring topics such as the rule-of-law, good governance and democracy to the agenda with much greater confidence.³¹

Particularity of political trajectories

This does not mean, however, that ideas of participatory government, more inclusive political systems, good governance, and administrative reform are thus completely rejected. Governments in the Middle East and North Africa are aware that long-term stability in the region will depend upon the creation and maintenance of genuine ties between themselves and their citizens. Reforms towards more participatory structures, something to which many societies in the Mediterranean region aspire, require a minimum of co-operation between the state and civil society. In fact, an active engagement to create sufficient space for civil society activities enables governments to regulate and monitor all groups in society and “tends to moderate the rhetoric and objectives of the groups that opt for participation.”³² There is no doubt that an active civil society involving NGOs is fundamental to the construction of a strong, just, and effective state, and their work should be “encouraged rather than shunned with suspicion.”³³ After all, domestic NGOs and other civil society associations can act as a means of improving conditions in the country, as they are active on the spot and know the prevailing conditions and existing grievances best. Their consequential “early-warning function” is essential for effective government to work.

Such aspirations towards an increased potential for civil society action do not necessarily go along with a transition to democracy that would correspond exactly to Western expectations. The trans-Mediterranean dialogue is particularly delicate on this issue and seems to be trapped in negative perceptions and stereotypes that hinder pragmatic discussion.³⁴ Because of the weight of passion and ambiguity that characterises relations between Europe and its southern neighbours, the concept of democracy often seems to be too closely associated with the West to find unanimous support, particularly in Arab societies.³⁵ Even if the concept is not rejected from the outset, there is still a broad consensus that the trajectory political systems will take in the partner countries will necessarily be distinct and differ in many ways from European assumptions.

The common aim of developing democracy that was agreed by all partners in the Barcelona Declaration is thus to be pursued by a long-term encouragement for democratisation through spill over effects between distinct elements of the Partnership, rather than by straightforward political reform encouraged from abroad. Whatever form political transition in the Arab world may take, democracy will be fostered, not against, but only with support of the state.³⁶ Europeans do not seem to see that overtly blunt attitudes towards this sensitive issue provokes counter-productive reactions from the partners.

But reservations are not limited to one rim of the Mediterranean alone. Arguments against greater tolerance for civil society co-operation have emerged on the European side as well. There is no doubt that policy-makers, like the public at large, have become more sceptical of Arab and Muslim societies. Laws concerning the creation of associations, the free expression of opinion, and

³¹ Perthes, 2002, p. 23.

³² Schwedler, 1995, p. 14.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Chartouni-Dubarry, 1998.

³⁵ Salamé, 1994, p. 29.

³⁶ Chartouni-Dubarry, 1998.

independent jurisdiction have been restricted in most European countries since the September 11th attacks.³⁷ In the EMP framework, this increased wariness could result in less support for civil society projects. What is more, the debate about the issue of the movement of persons in the Euro-Mediterranean region has become even more pressing. As has been pointed out frequently, there can be no real partnership between the two sides of the Mediterranean unless the movement of persons between them is properly organised and the legitimate interests of all sides are guaranteed.³⁸ The conclusions of the Civil Forum at Marseille expressed it clearly: "What good is the building of a bridge if it cannot be used!"³⁹ However, in the current situation even short-term entries by citizens from partner countries into Europe have been further limited, making it still more difficult to organise common events for civil society actors.

Nonetheless, the civil society dimension of the EMP is most likely to provide a way out of this trap. Civil society co-operation allows for a mutual exchange of opinions at a societal level, which will have an influence, at least in the long run, on governmental actors. Experience has shown that, on a non-governmental level where relations are more individualised, expressions of North-South and South-South antagonisms are less frequent. Members of civil society from Arab countries do serve as ambassadors of their countries to the West and their dialogue with the West could help correct the negative images of Muslim societies.⁴⁰ Furthermore, NGOs in particular are often more effective than governments in acquainting populations with the EMP, something which, both in the partner countries and in Europe, is generally seen as one of the biggest problems of the Barcelona Process in its six years of existence.⁴¹

In addition, exchanges at the civil society level have an important function in spreading mutual knowledge about other countries, societies and cultures. This is a vital resource for political and economic relations and would render EMP activities in the context of the first and second baskets more sustainable. The acceptance of these cross-border activities adds to perceived government accountability and creates, by ensuring a more reliable political background, an essential precondition for attracting foreign investment.

Last but not least, common civil society projects bring together different southern experiences and allow for an exchange of know-how that is not only limited to a north-south flow. Co-operation between the partner countries is still very weak and relations between them are characterised by seclusion or competition rather than by co-operation. The civil society sector could serve as a motor as well as one of the biggest beneficiaries of an increased dialogue within the South.

³⁷ "Der Terrorist als Gesetzgeber: Wie westliche Regierungen den Rechtsstaat demontieren", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 8-9 Dec. 2001.

³⁸ See Economic and Social Committee, CES 1332/2001, point 4.13.

³⁹ Forum Civil Euro-Méditerranéen, Marseille, Conclusions, Nov. 2000 (author's translation).

⁴⁰ This has been underlined by Saudi Prince Talal recently, see "Al-amir Talal yatlub bi-irsal wafd 'arabi illa-lgharb", *Al-Hayat*, 20 Nov. 2001.

⁴¹ Joffé, 2001.

4. Concluding remarks

There is not yet a common consensus or adequate support for the role of civil society in the EMP. A true integration of civil society activities into the EMP is seen as a vague desire or a simple expression of good will, but is neglected or resisted by policy-makers, particularly because of its perceived ambiguity. At the same time, the EMP activities already implemented as well as their evaluations show that the strengthening of civil society dialogue, despite the well-known difficulties involved, is considered by a majority of scholars and participants as the most appropriate measure for drawing both shores of the Mediterranean closer together.

The Barcelona Process is based upon the principle of trial-and-error and is therefore open to suggestions for improvement from any of the participants in it. This provides a leeway for change, first because openness to comment allows for innovative approaches and new incentives that might have not been anticipated in the initial EMP project and, second, activities can be extended to sectors that are not in the media and government focus and are thus less politicised.

We have seen that there is a problem of communication between signatory states, the European Commission and civil society actors concerning the purpose and form of civil society co-operation within the EMP framework. Again, it should be clear that the realistic aim of these programmes cannot be the straightforward democratisation of the partner countries. Democratisation is difficult if not impossible to force upon political systems from the outside. Furthermore, at this point, it is not high on the agenda of any partner country.

Nevertheless, the need for civil society co-operation has to be seen at a different but not less important level, which emphasises the creation of networks between societies. With an increase of contacts between experts, civil servants, students, activists and artists, a true dialogue amongst citizens can take place, something much more effective and much more enriching than an abstract "dialogue between civilisations." The establishment of co-operation and communication routines with colleagues in partner-countries and the creation of stable networks among civil society actors in the region will serve as confidence-building measures in themselves and could lay the foundation for enhanced relations based on mutual knowledge and accountability.

In the light of globalisation and regionalisation, such a policy approach will gain in relevance. Because of the growing importance of non-classical criteria in international relations and new forms of conflict, the need for units with economic and social – rather than military – power is growing. These units are more capable of accepting and supporting interdependence and of adjusting their actions to this new context. In this sense, the EMP mechanisms are particularly useful because they will have a long-term influence on the structures of international relations. Whilst political dialogue and economic relations may fluctuate, mutual self-awareness will be able to increase in a regular fashion. The support for interaction amongst civil society actors at an international level is a crucial element in this process. However, if the Barcelona signatory governments and the European Commission continue to neglect civil society, they will be sacrificing an essential instrument in attaining the stated aims of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

5. Recommendations

What, then, could the concrete steps towards enhancing the role of civil society in the Barcelona Process be? In view of the generally problematic conditions for civil society co-operation in the region mentioned above, it is clear that the malaise with the status quo has deep roots. If a reform of current activities is intended – and there should be no doubt about the need for this – the underlying paradoxes and failures of communications will have to be tackled first. It would then be possible to improve civil society programmes within the EMP and make them more effective.

Above all, it seems essential that the Barcelona signatory governments agree upon a common approach concerning the role civil society is supposed to play in the EMP. Several points seem to be of importance here:

- It has been shown above that there is a need for improved work conditions for NGOs in many countries in the region. Governments should allow for greater independence of domestic NGOs and for the establishment of branches of international NGOs. They should also permit freer cross-border operations of civil society actors in all twenty-seven countries involved in the Barcelona Process.⁴²
- As far as the lack of a sense of common ownership for the Partnership is concerned,⁴³ it is not sufficient to constantly complain that the Barcelona Process is a European design, even if this is true. There is little reason to expect that the process will become more equitable unless there are more inputs from the partner countries. Up to now, Mediterranean civil society actors, rather than their national governments, have been ready to propose initiatives of their own, and these need to be exploited.
- It would be useful to introduce an option for enhanced political dialogue with some partners on issues that others are not yet interested in. The association agreements allow for this and a provision for it could be formulated in the future Euro-Mediterranean Charter for Peace and Stability. Such an option would make it possible to realise more regional civil society projects even if one or several states are not willing to participate. On a non-governmental level, not all EU or partner states need to be involved in every project. Co-operation could then be encouraged without offending national sensitivities.
- Finally, it is crucial to find a solution to the problem of unequal mobility in the region. The Barcelona Work Programme has already mentioned the need for facilitating those human exchanges resulting from the EMP. The introduction of a special “Barcelona visa”, an idea

⁴² The European Economic and Social Committee has put forward this point in its recent opinion on the Barcelona Process, CES 1332/2001, point 5.6.1.

⁴³ Joffé, 2001.

developed by EuroMeSCo and the European Parliament, would ensure that fewer civil society activities failed because of travel restrictions.

Once these basic issues have been tackled, policy-makers should envisage improvements on the current activities:

- Encouraged by the performance of the existing programmes, the areas of civil society co-operation and support should be enlarged, as has been done in the past through ministerial conference initiatives, with Euromed Heritage, and through NGO lobbying, as with Euromed Youth. Sectors eligible for new programmes have been pointed out in many evaluations; among the most cited are fine arts, local municipalities, media training, music, literature and translation.
- An even more essential point concerns increasing the number of small-sized projects. The European Commission should reconsider its tendency to only fund “strategic” projects and instead reassess the importance of micro-projects in affecting the grass-root level reactions.
- Large-scale bureaucratic procedures for civil society programmes often frighten off potential project managers. In addition to the current decentralisation of the European Commission’s external aid operations, efforts should be made to further facilitate application and funding procedures, with Commission delegations providing special counselling for civil society organisations.
- The current decision-making process in the EMP is exclusively intergovernmental, but affects many sectors in which civil society actors have special expertise. Their active contribution to the development of the EMP could be intensified by integrating representatives into EMP meetings and by consulting them more regularly on issues involving their own special concerns.

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