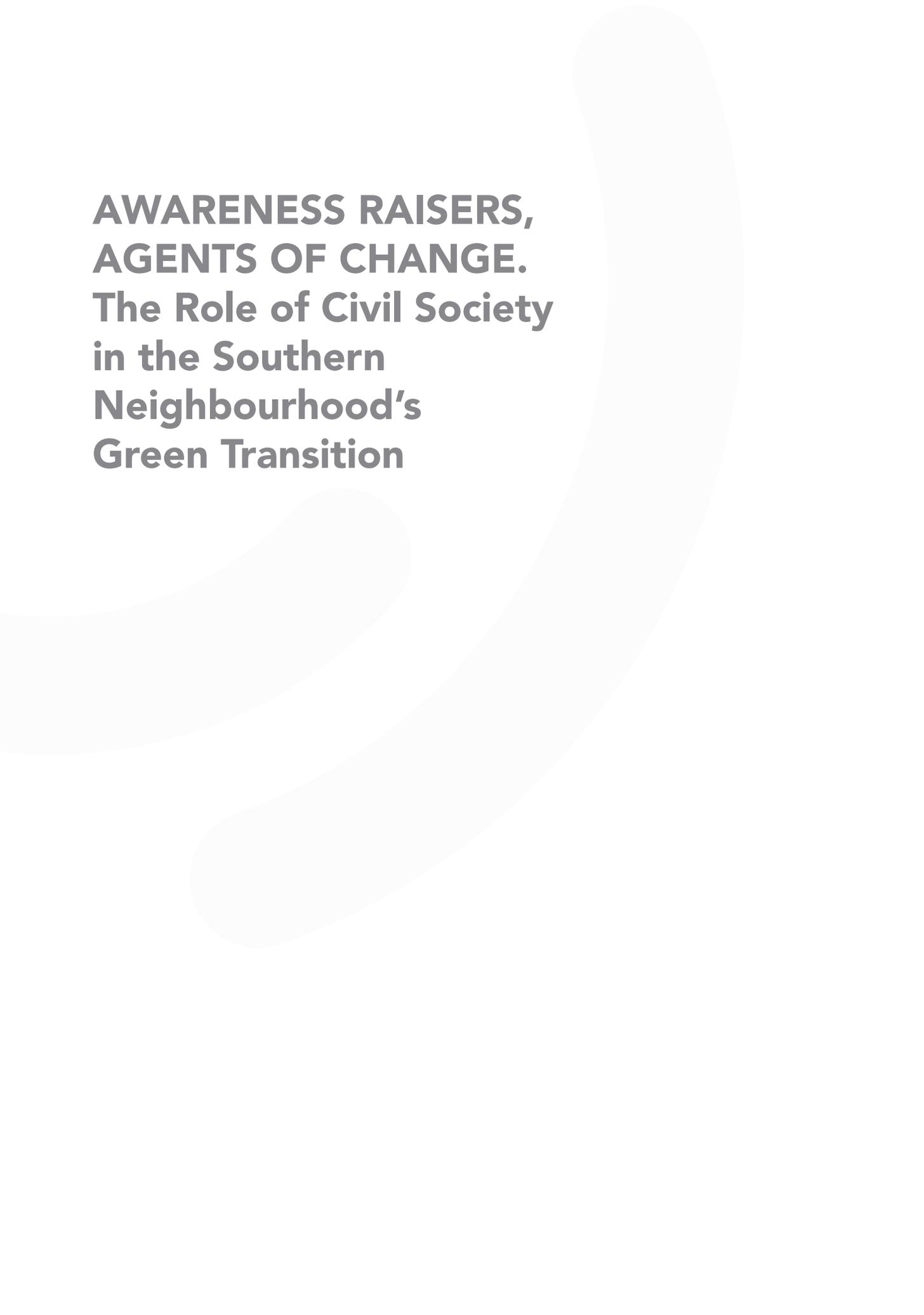


AWARENESS RAISERS, AGENTS OF CHANGE.

The Role of Civil Society in the Southern Neighbourhood's Green Transition

8 April 2021

Report



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*The EuroMeSCo Civil Society Stakeholders Platform gathered 30 participants, including civil society representatives, EU officials and think tankers, from both shores of the Mediterranean. With their presentations, **Patrizia Heidegger**, Director of Global Policies and Sustainability at the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), and **Emad Adly**, General Coordinator of the Arab Network for Environment and Development (RAED), laid the foundations of a productive debate, which **Zied Boussem**, Senior Fellow of the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), and **Hajar Khamlich**, President and Co-Founder of the Mediterranean Youth Climate, kicked off with their insights.*

Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria (Director of the Euro-Mediterranean policies department and EuroMeSCo team leader, European Institute of the Mediterranean-IEMed) explained the rationale of the Civil Society Stakeholders Platform, which brings together think tankers, EU officials and civil society representatives, in line with the overall objective of the EuroMeSCo project to contribute to inclusive and evidence-based policymaking across the Euro-Mediterranean region. The theme of this session was chosen to respond to the need, acknowledged by the EU Joint Communication on the renewed partnership with the Southern neighbourhood, to engage civil society in policy dialogue and to build its capacities in raising awareness on the green transition. The webinar was also designed by considering the results of the EuroMeSCo's last Euromed Survey, which showed a perception gap on the importance of the green transition between European and Southern Mediterranean respondents. Moreover, according to the survey results, a significant number of respondents considered the engagement of civil society and NGOs as an effective way to support the green transition in Southern neighbourhood. Taking into consideration the survey's results together with the priorities set by the Joint Communication, Mr. Cohen-Hadria concluded that awareness raising in relation to the green transition in the Southern Neighbourhood should be a priority and that civil society can significantly contribute to this objective.

Sylvie Fontaine (Programme Manager, Regional Programmes Neighbourhood South in the Field of Environment, Water, Agriculture, DG NEAR, European Commission) presented the relevant aspects of the European Commission's Joint Communication "Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood - A New Agenda for the Mediterranean". She started by highlighting the initiatives of the European Union and of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in terms of green transition and environment protection. Based on these efforts, the EU presented a New Agenda for the Mediterranean in the Joint Communication on a renewed partnership with the Southern neighbourhood, based on common interests and challenges. It focuses on five policy areas: human development and governance, resilience and prosperity, peace and security, migration and mobility and green transition – the latter further developed in climate resilience, sustainable energy, and environmental protection. The renewed partnership with the Southern neighbourhood will support countries to meet their climate change commitments, drive a transition to a clean energy and promote resource

efficiency, protect biodiversity, and achieve a transition to sustainable food systems. Ms. Fontaine highlighted that these goals could not be achieved without the involvement of the civil society, which plays a pivotal role in the dissemination of information, in education and in awareness raising on the green transition. Through the Joint Communication, indeed, the EU announced its intention to increase the engagement of civil society and EU's support to it by providing capacity-building activities concerning the green transition.

The discussion started with a reflection on the role that civil society has played in the green transition in the European context, based on lessons learned from Europe's largest network of environmental NGOs. On the one side, civil society in the EU has been recognised as the representative of the concerns of citizens and of public interest, as well as having a role in mobilising and involving citizens, in early warning, in channelling feedback, criticism and protest. According to the Lisbon Treaty, EU institutions are mandated to maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society organisations. As such, civil society organisations in Europe are able to participate in consultations and Parliamentary hearings, to discuss with MEPs and experts in the European Commission and can present their own policy recommendations. On the other side, however, civil society involvement in political processes is not formalised and, therefore, it needs to be claimed constantly in order not to be forgotten by institutions. Civil society organisations are often not involved in political processes since the beginning, as the experience of the EU implementation of the Green Agenda in the Balkans showed, where a rather limited involvement of civil society meant a very little awareness on the issue in the region. Moreover, the space for civil society in the EU is becoming narrower, if not obstructed, in several countries, especially with regards to organisations working on human rights or opposing business interests, such as environmental organisations. Therefore, civil society space needs to be defended constantly.

The discussion then turned to the strategies that civil society organisations can implement to defend and boost their action. As the EU promotes civil society participation globally, civil society organisations should insist on participation where EU actors are involved, as they are bound to ensure meaningful involvement. In countries governed by institutions who are not interested or not willing to include civil society organisations into political processes, an effective strategy to defend civil society role is to involve European actors or EU-based NGOs to ensure participation through them or claim that space. Also building civil society coalitions and networks can have several benefits: strengthening capacity through peer learning and exchange, pooling resources and knowledge, better policy recommendations and projects, increasing political weight, access and visibility, and protection.

Concerning the New Agenda for the Mediterranean and its focus on the green transition as one of the priorities to be addressed, it was recognised that civil society environmental organisations should take advantage of this momentum created by the EU for environmental matters in the region. However, civil society also has to stay vigilant and ensure its involvement in the roll out of the agenda as well as its role as a critical watchdog for truly sustainable investments.

The focus then shifted from the European context to the Southern neighbourhood through the perspective of a network including more than 300 environmental civil society organisations from Arab countries and aiming at enhancing their role as key partners in environmental policy. One of the key challenges encountered by civil society organisations in the Southern neighbourhood, indeed, is the fact that governments do not consider them as active and real partners in policy making. The space in which civil society organisations are allowed to play their role in Southern neighbourhood countries is very limited, not merely in terms of quantity but especially in terms of quality. This means that civil society organisations do exist in relatively high numbers in Arab countries, but are not enough involved by governments, for which establishing partnerships with these organisations is merely symbolic.

Besides the lack of governments' vision on how to partner with civil society, the effective engagement of organisations in the Southern neighbourhood is also limited by legislation, which has been often designed to control rather than boost the action of civil society. Other challenges encountered by civil society organisations in the Southern neighbourhood are the lack of financial resources, the lack of access to information coming along with the lack of involvement in political processes, and a weak institutional capacity and infrastructure.

From a Southern neighbourhood perspective, the New Agenda for the Mediterranean appears to offer some opportunities to establish new partnerships on strategic priorities such as the green and digital transition, as it is based on the conviction that sustainable prosperity and resilience can be achieved through a strong partnership across the Mediterranean.

The discussion was concluded with the proposal of a list of areas of opportunities for potential interventions for EU's support, among which education, conservation and sustainable management of natural resources and ecosystems, green, blue and circular economies, sustainable production and consumption, digital transformation, resource efficiency, sustainable food systems and agriculture, energy transition, as well as support to good governance and accountability.

A speaker provided insights into environmental activism in Tunisia. Even though the number of Tunisian civil society organisations has significantly increased since 2011, very few are focused on environmental issues, which seem to mobilise mainly social movements and groups of citizens. Civil initiatives related with environmental policies in Tunisia face a number of challenges, ranging from political instability, which explains the difficulty to rely on central government institutions and on a consistent environmental policy, to corruption and shrinking space for civil society organisations, especially those dealing with environmental issues as their work threatens economic interests.

Then, the debate turned to the increasing role of civil society in filling the void left by welfare states and in providing expertise on environmental sustainability as well as knowledge about local contexts, which is crucial to address the needs of the territories towards the green transition. The importance of engaging the

youth in the green transition was also mentioned and the lack of financial resources was recognised as one of the main limiting factors for civil society organisations in the Southern neighbourhood.

Another intervention elaborated on the main challenges that civil society organisations have to face in the Southern neighbourhood, such as shrinking space, lack of vision of governments and lack of allocated funding. In addition, it suggested that, in order to make the impact of civil society organisations more effective and sustainable, there is the need to establish clusters working on socio-economic policies and roadmaps to integrate the work of the different organisations towards the Sustainable Development Goals in addition to North-South networks. It also highlighted that the EU should improve the mechanisms of funding available to civil society organisations in the Southern neighbourhood: as they entail very long periods of negotiation for each proposal, they make the process very costly in terms of time and resources involved for the applicant organisations.

Afterwards, the discussion moved to the ways in which civil society organisations can raise awareness on environmental issues by providing examples such as workshops and roundtables including authorities, universities, research centres and civil society organisations, and international campaigns aiming at engaging volunteers in practical activities.

Another intervention focused on the need to tailor awareness raising techniques to local communities' specific needs and perceptions of environmental issues. Based on a research project on climate change awareness in Tunisia, Mauritania and Egypt, it was argued that there must be a revolution in awareness raising strategies by stopping using the same language to address people with different needs. In Arab countries, local communities perceive climate change differently from European countries as they are more concerned with other pressing issues, such as unemployment, education, health and safety. Rather than raising awareness through a vocabulary adopted from the European context, environmental issues in the Southern neighbourhood should be communicated in the local language and through interventions aimed at solving the issues that local communities perceive as priorities.

Lastly, the crucial role of civil society in acting as a watchdog regarding the proper implementation of the European Green deal was underlined: civil society has the important task to raise support and help passing the correct message that transitioning to a green economy is not just moving towards a green growth, but to a green a fair economy.

