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IS CLIMATE DIPLOMACY THE SOLUTION FOR MORE RESILIENT COOPERATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION?

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Introduction

The dialogue and cooperation within the Mediterranean region are still a political, economic and social challenge. In recent years, the political revolutions in countries in northern Africa, added to other threats such as the energy shortage and the migration crises, have exacerbated both the gap between countries in the region and their differences (Quagliarotti, 2022). Several opportunities were lost during these years, especially for the less developed countries or those facing more struggles in their complex context. Moreover, as stated by Adriázola et al. (2014, p. 10), evidence of how climate change is perceived as a multiplier and trigger for threats to international peace and security is growing among scientists and policy-makers around the world.

The attempts to improve the connection and dialogue across the region have had diffuse impacts in the past. Despite the success of initiatives such as the Trade Policy Review (European Commission, 2021) or the creation of common institutions such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), there are still serious problems that need a strong and coordinated response. Given the urgency with which climate change must be addressed globally, the region has a unique opportunity to find cooperative solutions to its major problems.

For this reason, this policy brief proposes to explore how climate diplomacy can contribute to deeper cooperation between countries of the Mediterranean and propel a stronger relationship between its citizens. Climate diplomacy has proved to be a very optimistic solution for improving poor cooperation between countries (Escribano & Lázaro, 2020), as it gives not only the chance to establish new connections and dialogue channels but the capacity to respond to common threats and combine efforts, in addition to focusing on the possibilities that a resolution could bring for the countries concerned. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report (IPCC, 2022), the region is one of those more likely to experience the effects of climate change, so it is not only an opportunity but also a necessity for countries to reactivate dialogue in areas that can put political differences aside and focus on economic and social benefits. This policy brief fervently supports this course of action and will outline potential avenues for climate diplomacy in the Mediterranean.

Climate change in the Mediterranean region

According to the IPCC report (2022), the Mediterranean region hosts exceptional biological diversity and socio-cultural richness originating from three continents. In addition to the major contributions from other environmental change forces, the report also argues that climate change is now being progressively connected to the impacts observed across the entire world, highlighting that the Mediterranean region is a hotspot for interconnected climate risks. Yet a concern raised in this report is that the progress made in achieving the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) varies within the sub-regions, with the northwestern countries showing greater resilience than the southern and eastern nations. In consequence, the report strongly recommends sharing and co-producing knowledge that can support climate adaptation practices and enhance sustainability in the Mediterranean region. And this is where the commitment to climate diplomacy comes into play.

An independent network of Mediterranean Experts on Climatic and Environmental Change (MedECC) published the first Mediterranean Assessment Report (MAR1) in November 2020 (MedECC, 2020). The report was written by 190 scientists from more than 25 countries and had partners such as the United Nations Environment Programme/Mediterranean Action Plan (UNEP/MAP) – Barcelona Convention Secretariat, through its Plan Bleu Regional Activity Centre, and the Secretariat of the UfM. This investigation summarises the current situation as follows:

“Virtually all sub-regions of the Mediterranean Basin, on land and in the sea, are impacted by recent anthropogenic changes in the environment. The main drivers of change include climate (temperature, precipitation, atmospheric circulation, extreme events, sea-level rise, sea water temperature, salinity and acidification), population increase, pollution, unsustainable land and sea use practices and non-indigenous species. In most areas, both natural ecosystems and human livelihoods are affected. Due to global and regional trends in the drivers, impacts will be exacerbated in the coming decades, especially if global warming exceeds 1.5 to 2°C above the pre-industrial level. Significantly enhanced efforts are needed in order to adapt to inevitable changes, mitigate change drivers and increase resilience”
(MedECC, 2020, p. 6).

Mediterranean cooperation has been enhanced since the beginning of time when commerce and conflict were the most common interaction for countries over the region. Ever since the start of the Ancient Era, Mediterranean countries have exchanged knowledge, traded goods and created alliances. However, Mediterranean cooperation as we understand it nowadays finds its starting point 30 years ago, with the Barcelona Declaration and the creation of the UfM as an intergovernmental Euro-Mediterranean organisation that brings together all

countries of the European Union (EU) and 15 countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. Despite its many ambitions and ongoing projects to enhance better relations between countries, 30 years have passed and these relations are still facing structural problems that have shown little progress in recent years. How can we update the spirit of 1995 and react to threats, such as climate change, from a common strategic logic?

Climate change is a growing sector that is believed to be able to multiply the opportunities in the region to respond to the common threats it faces (Torney & Cross, 2018). However, we also have to acknowledge that it cannot resolve all the challenges of the region. The aspiration that climate change is going to solve any possible problem should not be embraced, as it can only lead to an unrealistic perception of the struggles and difficulties that our contemporary societies are facing.

Diplomacy is the traditional soft-power format in which countries interact and resolve their differences (Berridge, 2021). Yet new forms of diplomacy have emerged in recent decades that differ from conventional and institutional forms of diplomacy, expanding the notion of such activity and posing such potential in domains like science, culture, or, most recently, climate. These innovative concepts acknowledged the need to adapt traditional diplomacy to the current complexity of our global agenda in addition to broadening its definition (Barston, 2019).

Examining the regional challenges for climate diplomacy cooperation

For a variety of reasons, cooperation in the Mediterranean region in recent years has not been successful. The key to directing Euro-Mediterranean society toward a more cohesive and united one lies in understanding the factors that sustain social and environmental imbalances. First of all, there is a need to acknowledge the existing gap between the south and the north coasts. Because of the pervasive prejudice in terms of race, culture and religion, countries of the area find it difficult to get along and establish long-lasting relations. The past tensions in the regions and unequal relations derived from colonialism dependencies are still a threat to resilient cooperation in the region. In order to forge deeper and more lasting links within the region, it is necessary to increase business and intercultural possibilities across nations. Climate diplomacy would be seen as a catalyst for such measures.

Second, the attitude of superiority of European countries toward other sides of the Mediterranean region is one of the main criticisms that efforts to enhance cooperation and multilateral partnerships in the Mediterranean region face. European leadership concerns countries that lack the capacity to develop climate strategies *in the European way* and discourages them from engaging in collective climate strategies (Biedenkopf & Petri, 2019). Finding consensus on issues related to climate cooperation is made more difficult by neighbouring conflicts like the Russian takeover of Ukraine or the rise of populist movements in nations like Hungary, Sweden or Italy. Moreover, statements like those made by Josep Borrell referring to the neighbourhood of Europe as “a jungle” do not improve the situation, nor the reluctance to cooperate in southern-led initiatives (Ramesh, 2022). For this, there is a need to promote acceptance of the diversity and different velocities of the energy transition in Mediterranean nations with realism, but also with the vision to provide revolutionary alternatives. European states can provide their knowledge and experience in developing renewable energies, while non-European powers can show their capacity to diversify their economies and focus on the creation of new renewable energy networks and common projects that show the transformative capacity of one of the regions that will suffer the more the effects of climate change (Moner, 2020).

Third, the holding of COP27 in Egypt was seen as an opportunity to acknowledge the differences in how the continent is facing the climate change threat. Africa is the continent that receives fewest funds to research and adapt to climate change: since 1990, only 3.8% of global investment has been focused on the African agenda (Gbadamosi, 2022). While European powers criticised Egypt's lack of human rights, particularly regarding freedom of speech and imprisonment (according to Reporters without Borders, the country is one of the major prisons in the world for journalists), African powers did not hesitate to denounce the exploitation of energy resources from countries in the Global North (Soler, 2022). Due to this, even though the decision to create a Loss and Damage Fund achieved at the most recent COP27 is a big step towards a global justice approach in the region, there is still a long way to go to construct a better strategy for African countries in their battle against climate change.

In this direction, young generations can be a driver for solutions in this context, and educational and intercultural encounters on common threats such as climate change can be a beneficial tool for building awareness on common agendas, such as environmental regulations, reducing pollution, energy dependencies or social resilience. According to a BBC survey, nearly 60% of young people approached said they felt very worried or extremely worried, and more than 45% of those questioned said feelings about the climate affected their daily lives. In order to unite and put together the solutions for the threats posed by climate change that may arise in the region in the coming years, new research and participative initiatives must be established.

Recommendations for strengthening action in the Mediterranean region

The following recommendations have been developed in light of the region's situation and the fact that organisations like the IPCC consider forecasts for Mediterranean countries.

- **A shared agenda and strategy for the Mediterranean region.** The uneven relationships between states that have existed up until now must be broken and transformed into one that is more equal and cooperative in order to encourage the region's transition to a greener economy through channels that are not necessarily political. The accumulation of crises in the region has deteriorated diplomatic relations between countries, but there is an opportunity in the search for solutions that favour environmental and social justice. The only way to improve how Mediterranean cooperation should look is to involve all parties in a dialogue based on equal consideration.
- **The role of youths as drivers of change.** As heirs of the current situation, youths are usually seen as the hope for the strengthening of the relations between countries. Their interest in global challenges such as climate change and their commitment to social issues provides hope to think that if we give them the necessary support from multilateral institutions and organisations they can be a driver of the change necessary for the region to pursue the climate path as its main shared interest.
- **Involve not only policy-makers but also enterprises, academia and civil society.** A transition cannot be just if we only involve some of the stakeholders at the decision table. A more just transition can only be activated if we involve all the actors in the conversation; that is, policy-makers but also institutional and multilateral representatives, business leaders, civil society and activist groups. A just transition is more than investing in green economy projects and eco-innovation, but also a strengthening of social sustainability and empowering the most vulnerable groups in our society. The opportunities that climate-

oriented projects can pose for marginalised groups if supported by governments and international institutions can be highly beneficial (Della Ragione, 2022). However, expectations must be reasonable and based on the capabilities of the current status quo rather than the will of participants, as reaching a consensus can be challenging and fraught with hurdles.

- **Acknowledge the differences.** A new climate diplomacy strategy in the region has to acknowledge the differences between the compromises and capacities that different states have in terms of climate action, not only regarding economic factors but also political agendas and priorities of each country, as well as the potentially most dangerous effects of climate change in their territories. Only by recognising the difference, we can start to look for common ground.
- **Encourage shared investments in megaprojects.** Initiatives such as the green hydrogen new strategy in Egypt (Kamel, 2022), the cooperation between Jordan and Israel on the desalination of water or the potential for investment in renewable solar or wind energies in the region need to be not only deployed but also strongly encouraged. The current crises of fertilisers and the threats that neighbouring conflicts can pose to the stability of the Mediterranean countries can also open a door for cooperation beyond the energy sector and focus on problems, such as food sovereignty or recycling (Della Ragione, 2022, pp. 30-42).
- **Establish a list of priorities for the region.** Although climate change can take multiple forms, and shapes and affects agendas in various aspects, there are priorities in agenda setting. For this reason, there should be an annual multilateral and multi-sectoral meeting to revise the priorities set in the climate agenda for the region and be held accountable for the progress made by all the parties. This event would also contribute to shaping how cooperation in the region should look, as well as the climate path of the Mediterranean region. Initiatives like the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) and its leadership in representing regional and local authorities, sustaining political communication and fostering interregional cooperation, for instance, could be very helpful in achieving this goal.
- **Unify ongoing efforts.** There are multiple initiatives and stakeholders that are currently putting efforts into climate action in the Mediterranean region, sometimes even overlapping efforts and attempts. The creation of a platform to exchange best practices and share success stories can be very beneficial for the region's resilience, in addition to encouraging new climate-led projects and involvement at the governmental level as well as the sociological, economic and technical levels. It might be helpful to draw inspiration from programmes like the Red Iberoamericana del Cambio Climático, a regional association for developing climate change projects in the Iberoamerican region.

Conclusion

A policy based on climate diplomacy might not be the answer to all the enduring and structural conflicts in the Mediterranean region. That is a path worth exploring, though, as it may offer answers to some of the major problems and regional dangers. The economy and political agendas of the region may converge and strengthen a deeper, stronger and more resilient collaboration to combat shared present risks and future difficulties in the region if we centre international discussions on green projects and sustainability initiatives. Additionally, the region's commitment to a common green agenda and recent advancements in initiatives like the energy mix of neighbouring nations may also indicate a potential for climate leadership in the region, strengthening its influence in the global arena.

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