



North-South Centre of the Council of Europe

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Lisbon Forum 2013

Conclusions

“Valuing civil society as actor of governance: Perspectives for the South Mediterranean”

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Ismaili Centre, Lisbon

In partnership with:

AKDN
AGA KHAN DEVELOPMENT NETWORK



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Strengthening democratic reform in the southern Neighbourhood

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The 2013 Lisbon Forum of the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe, chaired by **Bernardino León**, EU Special Representative for Southern Mediterranean, was held in Lisbon on 6 and 7 November 2013, on the topic **“Valuing civil society as actor of governance: Perspectives for the South Mediterranean”**.

Organised in co-operation with the Anna Lindh Foundation, IDEA and the Aga Khan Development Network, the Forum was organised in the framework of the Joint EU/CoE Programme “Strengthening democratic reform in the southern Neighbourhood”.

More than 250 representatives of parliaments, governments, local and regional authorities and civil society in the countries of the Southern Mediterranean, member states of the Council of Europe and the European Union and representatives of several international organisations attended it.

The Forum reached the following conclusions:

The transitions taking place in the Southern Mediterranean, based on the same values as those shared by the Council of Europe and the European Union, have radically changed the dynamics of the functioning of institutions in the region.

Democratic governance is now recognised, including in the Southern Mediterranean, as a dynamic democratic process resulting from the interrelationship between its four main actors – parliaments, governments, local and regional authorities and civil society – involved in structured and inclusive consultation and decision-making processes which help chart the “democratic course” of a society. What we term the “quadrilogue” is therefore a tool for any approach to establishing the foundations of good governance.

Today, the establishment of a “new and multiple” relationship between the four governance actors – a relationship which is essential for making tangible progress in the consolidation of inclusive democratic transitions – is foremost among the challenges to be addressed to ensure the success of the transitions initiated in certain countries of the Southern Mediterranean. In this connection, it is of particular importance to ensure the inclusion and participation of civil society- notably women and young people- in capitalising what has already been achieved in those countries.

In order to work together more closely and achieve good governance, the four partners must be fully aware of the ongoing diversification of democratic processes and the need to take further action to assess and address the risks of populism, polarisation and mismanaged conflicts and to be more resolutely committed to dialogue, debate and being a driving force for proposals. Here, it is important to bear in mind that the new realities, such as the socio-economic crisis, inequalities and intolerance, are factors that weaken democracy and are obstacles to good governance.

Based on the idea of a quadrilogue whose actors interact with different, but complementary capacities, it is essential for civil society to be given the wherewithal to take part in the political, socio-economic and cultural debate provided that its action can be firmly rooted in the reality and challenges of the society in which it is active.

At the end of its discussions, the 2013 Lisbon Forum identified avenues to explore in order to address the challenges faced by the actors in governance. For each level of interaction with civil society, the Forum made a number of key conclusions and operational proposals listed below, addressed to each player and to the international organisations, in order to achieve the objectives laid down.

The 2013 Lisbon Forum,

With regard to parliaments

concludes that :

- the co-operation between organised civil society and parliamentarians cannot but reinforce the legislative function;
- the promotion of participatory democracy in a democratic institutional framework must prevail;
- it is necessary to bring civil society closer to their elected representatives and restore trust between citizens and their parliamentary representatives.

proposes that :

- mechanisms for reinforcing parliamentary bodies through the strengthening of regional networks and a parliamentary code of conduct are put in place;
- training tools in view of a better political preparation of civil society in the field of citizenship, through the strengthening of the capacities of civil society organisations- notably youth and women organisations- are set up.

With regard to governments

concludes that:

- the executive plays a key role to unlock the potential of civil society to bring about good governance;
- there are two visions of civil society's role and nature. Civil society can be seen as an independent group of individuals and organisations whose role is to monitor and control governmental performance. The second vision considers the civil society as part of the political system, having two one additional function that is to enhance the legitimacy of the entire political system through improving its capacity to deliver;
- a major challenge for societies in transition to democracy is to move from informal political activism to formal institutionalised processes of political participation;
- governments may facilitate such transformation through establishing legal provisions for the registration of civil society organisations that are clear, uniform and unrestrictive;
- It is not enough for legislature to pass laws aimed at improving the environment for civil society actors; those laws have also to be enforced and respected.

proposes that:

- practical measures should be taken to overcome suspicions that hinder dialogue among governments and civil society actors and prevent the formation of coalitions and consensus-building on core issues;

- coordinating bodies, such as governmental NGO councils, should be set up in order to assist associations, notably youth organisations and organisations for the protection of human rights, in participating to the definition and implementation of public policies, and in strengthening their human capital, internal organisation and leadership skills;
- governments should establish procedures for taking into account reports received from associations, and for making them easily available to the public;
- measures should be taken to encourage the exchange of best practices and experiences with international organisations and partners, but also *among* stakeholders from within the Southern Mediterranean region.

With regard to local and regional authorities

concludes that:

- local democracy and citizen participation should be part of a dynamic process which requires a framework that enables genuine interaction, respects the prerogatives of each stakeholder, ensures good governance at local level and contributes in a tangible way to governance at national level;
- the absence of common references, lack of understanding of the respective activities of each player and the failure to organise dialogue can constitute serious obstacles to its implementation and lead to confrontational situations;
- the process of the relationship between local and regional authorities and civil society must be built on a relationship of trust and common and shared benchmarks; the institutional framework in which this process takes place must be set up by means of a legislative, normative or regulatory initiative to which the highest levels of the state and civil society must fully subscribe.

and proposes that:

- in co-operation with partners having experience in this field (Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, EU Committee of the Regions, Council of European Municipalities and Regions, Association of Local Democracy Agencies) a benchmark framework be drawn up for citizen participation at local level and dialogue between civil society and elected representatives, taking account of the “Code of good practice for civil participation in the decision-making process” drawn up by the Council of Europe’s Conference of INGOs, and approved by the Committee of Ministers;
- an exchange of best practices be promoted between the countries of the North and South and that civil society should be encouraged to gather in a national Conference, to be set up with the support of the CoE Conference of INGOs;
- the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe pursue the co-operation it has initiated with the countries of the southern Mediterranean, providing the institutional framework to formalise multilateral exchanges between elected representatives and civil society.

With regard to international organisations

concludes that international organisations should:

- continue supporting an enabling environment allowing civil society to be an effective actor of governance within the *quadrilogue*;
- adopt strategies, policies and approaches conducive to promote the inclusive participation of civil society and to diversify collaboration with civil society partners, whilst strengthening mutual accountability;
- pursue efforts to achieve a real partnership with civil society based on mutual trust;
- ensure a long-term and sustainable approach to partnering with civil society.

proposes that international organisations should:

- continue supporting the setting-up and the effective implementation of an appropriate legal framework respectful of fundamental freedoms and rights, working in particular with Governments and Parliaments;
- reach a wider spectrum of civil society organisations, both geographically and thematically and with a special focus on youth and women organisations, by simplifying access to funding and support, whilst responding to accountability requirements;
- systematically follow a horizontal, impartial, non-prescriptive approach in their relations with civil society;
- continue contributing to the empowerment and capacity building of civil society by also focussing on fostering good governance within civil society organisations

The Forum thanks the European Union, the Council of Europe and the partners who made an active contribution to the organisation of the 2013 Lisbon Forum – the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF), the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) – and the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Forum takes also note with satisfaction of the invitation done by the Moroccan Authorities to hold a session of the Lisbon Forum in Morocco and thus placing it at the heart of the Region.