

Towards the reinforcement of civil society

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Through a series of rich and diversified activities, this regional programme supports the development of civil society on national and regional levels. Yet, this objective does not seem to be within easy reach.

Antoine Ajoury - Alicante, Eurojar

Alicante, Spain, was not chosen by chance to host Euromed's 4th civil forum. Home for the impressive Santa Barbara castle, built by the Moore in the 10th century, the Spanish city gathers traces from all the communities who went past the city. It is a historic and touristic symbol that attracted the 250 participants of the non-governmental Platform Euromed. They came from around 20 European and Mediterranean countries, to attend the forum that took place between the 14th and the 16th of May 2010.

During the forum, principal instrument of participation of the civil society in the Euro-Mediterranean world, representatives from the Mediterranean civil society prepared a document calling for increased equality in the Mediterranean. This document will be submitted to head of States of the European Union and the Mediterranean during the summit planned for in Barcelona.

However, the main issue that concerned the participants and those intervening in the forum is the place and the role of civil society in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, especially at a time when the Barcelona process is being officially replaced by the Union for the Mediterranean. With this institutional and geographic upheaval, Michel Tubiana, Secretary General of the civil platform Euromed, asks whether their claims for autonomous and independent civil societies will be taken into consideration, in the framework of the reformed partnership. In this context, Tubiana is worried about the new place granted to civil society. Abdelmaksoud Rachdi, president of the platform, shares the same worries about civil society and asks whether it is accepted as a real partner in political decision-making, and whether public institutions take into consideration their propositions.

In this complex atmosphere that prevailed during the forum, was launched the regional programme "Euromed Civil Society 2010-2013", supported by the European Commission and implemented in collaboration with the platform and its partners. The overall budget reaches 1

million

Euros.

In fact, a consortium of six organizations, members of the platform, and the Platform itself, won the call for proposals submitted by the European Union, according to Andrea Amato, president of IMED-Rome, heading the consortium.

The three-year programme was launched in the beginning of last February. It is based on the efforts deployed by the consortium from one hand, and on the concrete and daily work of a small team, based in Brussels, that works on coordinating the activities of the programme and providing technical assistance to the European Commission, from another hand.

Two goals and eight actions

Team leader, Rachid Kheddeim, explains that the programme has two objectives: first, reinforcing the institutional capacity of the south Mediterranean civil society, in an effort to promote dialogue and coordination mechanisms among civil society organizations, and between these organizations and public institutions. The second objective is to promote debates as well as national and regional activities related to policies, institutions and mechanisms of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership among members of the civil society.

In order to fulfill these two objectives, eight actions will be implemented. The first action consists of creating national organisms to coordinate the activities of the civil society in nine countries concerned by the programme. "We have set 4 criteria to select these organizations," notes Kheddeim while explaining the rules of participation.

The second action consists of preparing and organizing four seminars and following up their outcome in the following fields: environment, social issues, migration and right of asylum, and last but not least the freedom of association. These seminars will be most probably held in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Egypt.

The third activity consists of preparing and following up the results of a regional seminar in which will participate State representatives as well as members from the civil society and from organizations interested in mediation and consulting. In this regard, "it is worth endeavoring to avoid problems with national authorities, which means obtain the support, or at least the neutrality, of these regimes to reach our objectives without having to abandon our principles," explains Kheddeim.

The fourth activity consists of establishing a summary note about the benefits of dialogue and discussions between civil society, the government and other institutions.

The drafting and implementation of an action plan to promote the participation of representatives from the civil society in the decision-making process of the Euromed partnership is the fifth activity foreseen in the framework of the programme. "On the national and regional levels, all efforts will be exerted to facilitate the task for the civil society to access information, and then constitute pressure groups," underlines the team leader. He adds: "It is important as well to promote relations between the civil society of South Mediterranean countries and that of North Mediterranean countries."

Other activities are implemented in the framework of the Euromed programme "Civil Society", namely the creation of a strategy and orientation group that will work on enhancing the credibility and visibility of the programme, in addition to the monitoring part, and the creation of a network of beneficiaries and publication of the results of the programme.

Rachid Kheddeim stresses on the conditions that led to the elaboration of the programme: "It was launched in a context of decline of many forms of freedom, such as the freedom of association, Union's freedom, the freedom of joining associations and defending their interest and points of views."

Andrea Amato concludes by reiterating the importance of the regional programme, however, a question remains unresolved for him: what would happen after 2013? Would the Union for

the Mediterranean take into consideration the achievements of this programme and consider them as a foundation for future plans?