

New Goals for the Euromed Civil Forum: from Intentions to the Real Impact

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The Euromed Civil Forum, and therefore what it represents as an instrument of participation of civil society in the construction of the Barcelona Process, has turned out to be, since its first convention in 1995, meetings that help to sound out the societies in the Mediterranean region. Conceived as an annual meeting linked to the Euro-Mediterranean ministerial conferences, which has the objective of the development of the Partnership, the eight conventions of the Forum have had different formats since the first one was held in Barcelona.¹ However, sometimes controversially and often attracting criticism, the Forum has contributed the participation of civil society and helped to reveal the weaknesses of the Barcelona Process, and has assisted in the achievements of the Process and the road ahead for an influential development on the opposite shores of the Mediterranean. In the last year, different endogenous factors alien to its future have propitiated the development of new initiatives, which with a view to renewing the Forum or

completing its activities, can contribute to an improvement of the Partnership's results.

Despite its lack of functional definition within the framework of the Partnership,² through its eight meetings the Forum has set itself up as a qualified voice of civil society, on one hand because of its condition as the principal party involved and beneficiary of the whole of the Euro-Mediterranean process, and on the other, because it has become the main driving force for the dynamism of the process. However, such an importance meets its boundaries in the lack of development of the role that it is expected to play, and in the numerous related problems with which it is confronted.

At the meeting of the Valencia Euro-med Civil Forum, held in April 2002,³ the recommendations of the European Commission⁴ revealed the need to analyse the most effective and participatory involvement of Euro-Mediterranean civil society in the Partnership. There is no doubt that discussions have revealed what could be called endogenous factors of inertia that are characteristic of the functioning system of the Barcelona Process, a construction of great scope when the wills are combined toward a sole objective, but which yields slow results when there are no real and efficient action mechanisms in the southern Mediterranean

societies. The lack of optimism from the southern societies with respect to the whole of the Barcelona Process can be extrapolated to the development of the Euromed Civil Forum, which receives tough criticism from the institutions, and from the civil society itself, owing to the lack of continuity between meetings, its poor visibility, its weak political influence, and the limited effects in the development of cultural dialogue between the two shores.

However, the recommendations prior to the holding of the Valencia Forum are also related to the global context of international relations after the attacks of 11th September 2001, and to the will of the EU to recover, through new formulae, the Partnership's so-called third basket, the cultural and social dialogue in the Mediterranean, which should have contributed to a mutual understanding between the societies of the two shores, and in the medium term, to the creation of a trust that would be capable of preventing conflicts in the area. The debate on the definition of civil society in countries whose structures differ from the western definition of the term, as well as the introduction of the concept of the Mediterranean as a political project beyond the previous objective of signing up to post-decolonisation cultural projects unavoidably leads to the question concerning the kind of dialogue

¹ The European Institute of the Mediterranean is the successor to the Catalan Institute of the Mediterranean, which was responsible for organising the first Euromed Civil Forum. Since then the IEMed has monitored subsequent forums with the objectives of encouraging and maintaining the participation of civil society in the Barcelona Process.

² The Barcelona Declaration specifies the objectives of the contribution from the civil society, but does not develop them or mention how its task will be combined with the institutional development of the Partnership.

³ *Euromed Civil Forum. Valencia 2002*. Fundació de la Solidaritat i el Voluntariat de la Comunitat Valenciana, ed., May 2003.

⁴ SEC (2002) 159 final. «Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament to prepare the meeting of Euro-Mediterranean Foreign Ministers.» Brussels, February 2002.

that can be developed in the Mediterranean. In this sense, the Chania Euro-med Civil Forum, held in May 2003 after the Crete Ministerial Conference, was integrally devoted to the situation of intercultural dialogue in the Mediterranean, and its conclusions brought together several important ideas to promote dialogue, which although repeated from previous meetings had the virtue of being set up from something similar to the principles of dialogue: among others, the need for circulation of ideas and people, the concentration of cooperation only in determined fields of action, the reaffirmation of the value and credibility of the actors and networks already working in the Euro-Mediterranean area, and the strengthening of the EU economic aid that was planned for the dialogue.⁵

Valencia, and later Crete, constitute the starting point of a critical reflection on the utility of the Euromed Civil Forum, understood both from the perspective of the responsibility of the actors involved and the results in the Partnership as a whole. During the year 2002, a basis for the renewal of the forums has been prepared through the constitution of the non-governmental platform for the Euromed Civil Forum,⁶ and with the open participation of all those actors

and networks with skills and works carried out in the Mediterranean. Among the main objectives of this platform are those of revising the issues and priorities of the forums, ensuring the continuity between forums and guaranteeing a participatory process for the ultimate aim, and in the longer term, of capacity building so that the Partnership efficiently responds to the needs of the area. In the short term, the Naples Euromed Civil Forum, a meeting of the civil society under the Italian EU Presidency in the second half of 2003, constitutes the first test of the adaptation work carried out, above all with reference to its contents, with a view to the greater effectiveness of the Forum. However, in close collaboration with the process and in the field of the *desiderandum*, we should not forget that there are another three primordial spheres that can ensure greater involvement of civil society in the Partnership and its improvement. The first is linked to the visibility of the process. In this context, it is appropriate to point out the necessary combination of this framework with other initiatives from the EU whose aim is to publicise the Barcelona Process with the consequent involvement of societies such as the Euromed Dialogue programme an-

nounced in the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference of Crete,⁷ and other initiatives related to sectors that are vital to visibility and mutual understanding, such as education and the media. The second element has to do with the necessary transversality of the performance of civil society in the whole of the Partnership, which can arise from a greater involvement in the other two baskets of the Partnership (political and economic dialogue), as well as from common work linking the three baskets. Finally, there is the question, closely linked with the two previous elements, of how to unite mechanisms that generate greater collaboration between the actors in the field – that is, civil society – and the political level of action or the involvement of states, as well as exploring in depth how this forum can help to improve the development of the process itself. For example, the synchronisation between the future Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue of Cultures and Civilisations and the work already carried out by civil society's networks and actors in this field appears as an indispensable element in the advance of real participation of civil society in the Partnership's projects that will benefit the two shores of the Mediterranean.

⁵ <http://www.euromedcivilforum.gr/>

⁶ *Réorganiser le Forum civil euro-méditerranéen. Renforcer la coopération de la société civile euro-méditerranéenne dans le processus de Barcelone*. Plateforme non-gouvernementale pour le Forum Civil Euromed. February 2003 (<http://www.euomedrights.net/francais/fransk.html>).

⁷ The Euro-Mediterranean Mid-Term Meeting of Foreign Ministers, held in Crete on 26th and 27th May, 2003. http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/euromed/conf/cret/concl.htm