

Civil Society Dialogue Network Meeting

European Union – League of Arab States cooperation and the EU response to changes in the Arab region: Views from civil society

1-2 June, Valletta, Malta

Meeting Report

This report summarizes the discussions that took place during the Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) meeting *European Union – League of Arab States cooperation and the EU response to changes in the Arab region: views from civil society*. The report covers the points raised by meeting participants and does not represent the positions of the meeting organizers, EPLO, the European Union (EU) and the League of Arab States (LAS). The meeting was held under the Chatham House rule.

Introduction

The European Union (EU) and the League of Arab States (LAS) have recently stepped up their cooperation on a range of issues. Recent joint declarations and the Joint Work Programme have underlined the importance of civil society, particularly in the context of current transformations in the Arab region.¹ Within this context, the purpose of the CSDN meeting was:

- To gather analysis from civil society experts from the MENA region and Europe on the key challenges of peaceful transformation in the Arab world, the EU's response to these regional transformations and EU-LAS cooperation in developing regional and joint responses;
- To discuss the relationship between regional organizations and civil society in addressing these regional issues within a comparative perspective.

It brought together officials from both the LAS and the EU and civil society participants from NGOs, think-tanks, and research institutions, primarily from across the Middle East North Africa region, with a small number from Europe who are working on regional integration and/or with the LAS.

Session 1 - The EU response to changes in the Arab World: pitfalls and potential

The EU has expressed its commitment to support deep democracy in the Arab region, and it has altered its policy in response to the transformations but it is unclear whether this response has been adequate. The aim of the session was to discuss the main challenges faced by Arab societies in ensuring peaceful transformations, the role the EU can play as a neighbouring partner, and the priorities, policy and tools that should be implemented to maximise the positive impact of EU response.

EU officials presented the EU's response to changes in the Arab region covering:

- **Neighbourhood** – The Treaty on European Union sets as objective for the EU to develop a special relationship with its neighbourhood, with the aim to develop an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on EU values and characterised by closed and peaceful relations based on cooperation (Article 8). In the context of the transformations in the Arab region, the EU amended its policy for the region in spring

¹ Second European Union-League of Arab States Foreign Affairs Ministerial meeting, Cairo, 13 November 2012: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/133465.pdf. The Joint Work Programme is not publicly available.



2011.² More than two years after the start of the transformations it is important for the Union to reflect on its approach and refine it, taking into account that the highly complex context limits the EU's ability to influence the situation.

- **Civil society** – Civil society organizations (CSOs) are close to the people and often have more information than can be gathered through diplomatic channels. Therefore, it is very important for EU officials to receive feedback from civil society on its response. The role of civil society is also key to ensure accountability of governments. EU support includes the following:
 - The EU has increased its funds for civil society by setting up a special Civil Society Facility. It aims at reinforcing the capacity of civil society in policy advocacy, monitoring government accountability and responding to the real needs of society.
 - During their visits to the region, High Representative/Vice-President Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Štefan Füle meet civil society representatives. They aim at developing a regular dialogue with civil society on regional cooperation.
 - The EU consults civil society when organising Task Forces for mobilising investment and development assistance for partner countries (Egypt, Tunisia and Jordan) and when developing trade initiatives
- **EU priorities** – Since 2011, the EU has tried to respond on three levels: supporting democratic transformation, developing a partnership with the people and civil society and supporting sustainable and inclusive growth. The complexity of the transition, including the polarisation of political debates in particular over the role of religion and the State, the economic difficulties and international conflicts, in particular the increasing Sunni – Shia divide, has hampered the effectiveness of the EU response.
- **Fora for cooperation** – Aware that many challenges require regional responses, the EU has given a new impetus to regional cooperation. Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) is an ancient process that is now further developed through the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) for which the EU now assumes the co-presidency. Cooperation with the LAS has been stepped up following the successful EU-LAS Ministerial meeting of 2012 and through the work of the EU-LAS Liaison Office in Malta. Other fora for cooperation include mechanisms with the 5+5 dialogue, Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), and increased cooperation with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). However, regional cooperation remains slow and hindered by conflicts and rivalries.

Comments and Responses from Participants

Timing: A criticism is that the EU reacted too late. While some participants were of the opinion that everyone reacted late, others said that the uprisings could have been predicted based on, for example, the strikes that took place in Egypt before the large-scale protests broke out and the early warning by Tunisian human rights organizations.

People vs States: Some participants argued that the EU did not have an influence over the uprisings and that the current and past cooperation instruments did not meet expectations. According to some, the EU may even have hampered change by supporting the authoritarian regimes – the EU still congratulates authoritarian leaders when they come to power. Other participants stressed that the EU has been instrumental in supporting civil society. Participants encouraged the EU to choose between the regimes and the people.

Consistency vs specificity: A challenge for the EU is to define the geographic and political issues of the Arab region in such a way that the response is consistent across the region but also takes into account the specific circumstances of individual countries and their societies.

² Joint Communication by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission: [A new response to a changing Neighbourhood](#), 25 May 2011.



Some participants underlined that the EU has divided LAS Member States into geographic sub-divisions, whereas developing a common response to the region is essential. The EU should modify its neighbourhood approach and not distinguish between Southern Mediterranean countries and other Arab countries. On the other hand, other participants noted a diversity of approach among Arab countries on some issues, demonstrating that different types of support are needed: for example, in Palestine experienced civil society organizations trained the Palestinian Authority, while the very existence of civil society is prohibited in Saudi Arabia.

Instruments: the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is not considered a true partnership instrument as it was designed for EU's Eastern neighbours and then applied to the Southern neighbourhood in a non-strategic manner. The UfM is considered by some to be a lost opportunity as it has not led to the development of common political space between the EU and the Southern neighbourhood. Some of the partnerships, e.g. with the AMU, could have been further developed. Many view the 'More for More' policy as patronising; it should be reformed in close cooperation with Arab neighbours in order to ensure a balanced and respectful approach, based on mutual interests. It should not just be a partnership between states but a true partnership of the people in order to accelerate transformation processes.

Civil society: The EU could also be more consistent when meeting civil society. While it is true that EU officials meet civil society representatives when they travel to the region, many participants regret that the follow-up actions or the policy implications of these meetings are not often known. Therefore, EU-civil society communication should not end after these meetings. The solution seems to lie on both sides: the EU has to do more effective outreach and also be clearer on the criteria that measure progress, while civil society representatives should feed information to the EU more actively.

Evaluation of the relationship: A clear need to evaluate the current state of affairs was recognised. However, it was also noted that all these cooperation proposals, including the initial Barcelona Process, came from the EU. Southern neighbours should be more pro-active and contribute in order for the partnership to be a genuine one. At the moment, the EU is viewed as a donor by many in the region, while for the EU the Arab region is seen as an oil and gas market – and a threat when it comes to extremism and migration. This is not a constructive basis for a partnership.

Recommendations

Concerning EU support to civil society:

- As the EU is often regarded as a donor, rather than a real partner, it could change this by creating non-financial, creative ways to support civil society;
- The EU has been criticised for only supporting organizations that "look like itself" and embrace the values of the Union. There is a lot of potential in, for example, rural areas;
- In the meantime, for some participants, the EU should be cautious with the types of CSOs it supports. The civil society organizations that the EU supports should be encouraged to become more inclusive and widen to include new constituencies. Especially during the transition period, it is essential to allocate the support carefully. However, civil society organizations with more experience should not be forgotten, as they are facing serious funding constraints after the uprisings;
- More financial support to civil society is needed, as well as technical support to help CSOs organize themselves, improve their expertise on transparency and promote/transpose international human rights law and standards in their countries. Support to gender, youth and culture projects are particularly important. Cultural projects could be used to stimulate exchanges, freedom of expression and inter-



cultural dialogue, especially with youth groups;

- The EU should ease the application processes for its funding instruments. Administrative procedures should be simplified in order for especially grassroots and unregistered organizations to be able to benefit from them. The use of sub-granting and other flexible funding mechanisms should be further developed.

Generally:

- While the EU should find a way to encourage democratic reforms, it should try to avoid assumptions of cultural superiority in promoting good governance;
- The EU should avoid double standards, which are particularly noticeable in the cases of Syria and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To remedy this, some participants suggested the EU should more actively promote the responsibility to protect (R2P) principle;
- The EU continues to suffer from a lack of credibility in the Arab region because many believe that it supported the wrong people in the interests of economic stability. It was recommended the EU reforms its approach and becomes truly value-driven and human security-oriented. This should also be reflected in the ENP Action Plans, which are generally seen as too focused on economic issues;
- The EU should also deliver in other political areas, such as visa liberalisation. This would facilitate civil society cooperation between the two shores. Currently, it takes around 4-6 weeks to organize a visa for civil society representatives, which poses challenges to cooperation projects.

Session 2 - The role of EU-LAS Cooperation and European and Arab Civil Society in Addressing the Regional Challenges of Peaceful Transformation

This session covered common challenges identified in the Arab region and how they can be tackled through LAS-EU-civil society cooperation. It covered the following topics: 1) challenges and cross-regional responses; 2) recommendations for EU-LAS cooperation; 3) cooperation between regional organizations and civil society: successes and failures; and 4) how to involve civil society in EU-LAS cooperation?

Common Challenges in the Arab Region

Internal challenges:

- The relationship between religion and the state – the question was settled in most of Europe centuries ago. But it took wars to settle it;
- Societal reconciliation – this includes protection of minorities, dealing with the past through transitional justice;
- Bridging gaps in societies – these include the gaps between the old and the young, between the genders, between rich and poor and between centre and periphery.
- Management of diversity – the main reason for the eruption of conflicts is the alienation of various groups;
- Extremism – which poses challenges to the region;
- Modernisation – including institution-building;
- Reforming the role of the military.

External challenges:

- New divisions and fault lines – including Shia versus Sunni divisions and shifts in the balance of power in the region;
- The implications of the Syrian conflict – with spill-over effects on Iran, Iraq, Jordan,



and Lebanon. It is complicating an already tense situation;

- Inter-relatedness of conflicts – for example, Jihadis are now crossing borders from conflict to conflict; neighbouring countries play roles in conflicts over their borders.

In terms of response, there are two schools of thought: act now or wait for crises to settle. A key question is whether there is a plan or a vision – practical, implementable and based on sound analysis. There is a lack of a strategic vision for Euro-Arab relations, which affects both sides. Key questions that need to be addressed include: Did the EU have any influence on the Arab awakening? Does the current level of engagement help the situation? Are the current instruments adequate?

In the Arab world, the predominant belief is that the EU was not instrumental in the Arab awakenings; that the cooperation instruments over-promised and under-delivered and that the ENP was designed for new neighbours in the East, with a subsequent decision to apply it in the Southern neighbourhood. The division of the Arab region in EU policy is problematic. That said, major proposals concerning relations between the EU and the Arab world have all come from the EU side. The Arab world also needs to present a new coherent vision for the partnership. A set of lessons from the Arab awakening are emerging including:

- Fundamental questions (as outlined above) were not addressed and now the region is paying the price;
- The LAS is changing – for the first time in its history, it imposed sanctions;
- We need to understand why all initiatives failed in Syria;
- We need to be better prepared to deal with fragility;
- Moderation should be supported across the region.

Participants' Views on Challenges Facing the Region

The following issues were highlighted by participants:

- ***Modernisation*** – There are still many differences between the different countries and between different societal groups. Socio-economic challenges include, e.g., social safety nets, reforming education systems, and general institution-building.
- ***Extremism*** – It was suggested that all actors should engage with more extreme voices as they are also part of the societal fabric.
- ***Supporting the revolutions*** – some participants stressed that the revolutions/uprisings should not be “stolen” from the forces that started them.
- ***Fragility*** – fragility can be prevented by reforming the judiciary, improving transparency, improving civil society inclusion, and enabling the freedom of speech and assembly - i.e. overall Rule of Law reform.
- ***Democratic control over the military*** – Participants saw this as the most serious challenge in various parts of the Arab region, both for the LAS and the EU, as conflicts have a tendency to spill over. Beyond equipment provision, it is important to reform the role of the military by means of security sector reform (SSR) and cover issues such as democratic civilian control over armed forces.
- ***Role of civil society*** – in addition to SSR, civil society should also be supported in the field of transitional justice and in particular dealing with past violence. Civil society could also assist in election monitoring.
- ***Shrinking spaces*** – one of the main challenges for civil society is limited space for its operation (the “shrinking spaces” problem). There are many obstacles to the emergence and the proper operation of CSOs in many Arab countries. CSOs face explicit or hidden authorisation systems, including criminalising non-registered organizations, restricted access to funding (including foreign funding), measures geared at hampering organizations' ability to perform, administrative restrictions, as well as government organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) dominating



space. Civil society also faces direct harassment, intimidation, defamation, personal attacks and assassinations. Moreover, the uprisings in the region created new actors, and civil society has been tainted by the actions of armed groups.

- **Discrediting civil society** – Civil society representatives face attacks for example when CSOs support UN conventions, they may be considered traitors. For participants, the EU could be particularly helpful in the provision of support to LAS Member States in the reform of their legal frameworks, with regard to association laws, freedom of expression, and so on. The EU could also assist in strengthening the capacity of civil society to act in a democratic context. It is very important to "train democrats" who know how to promote democratic standards and how to use the political system for this purpose. Creating genuine citizenship is essential, and it is key that this citizenship is truly diverse and inclusive. Societies in the Arab region are marked by cleavages, including neo-patrimonial, neo-tribal and sectarian divisions. In this context women's, youth and minority rights play a particularly important role in the generation of a citizenship that is equal for all.
- **Euro-Arab relations** – Most participants agreed that there is a lack of vision in Euro-Arab relations and especially when it comes to a long-term strategic plan. This lack of vision should be addressed by both sides and should culminate in the creation of better instruments and mechanisms of cooperation. The two regional partners can also learn from many on-going processes, including the UN Post-2015 framework and UNDP's poverty reduction strategies. Overall, it is important that civil society is supported and engaged in all these contexts. At the same time, civil society should also make an effort to communicate its needs to the EU and the LAS. Overall, there should be an effective consultation channel between the LAS, the EU and civil society.

Session 3: The LAS' Approach to Civil Society Engagement

During this session, the following topics were discussed: the LAS' new approach to cooperation with civil society, the potential of the Civil Society Secretariat to act as a focal point in the Arab region; the EU experience in terms of integrating civil society into EU mechanisms and how the LAS could benefit from it; EU-LAS potential cooperation in capacity-building for the Arab civil society organizations; and possible future activities and programmes which engage civil society organizations with EU and LAS.

The LAS has attempted to improve its institutional framework for civil society inclusion. This is a new approach, including the setting up of a Civil Society Secretariat at the beginning of 2013, the appointment of the LAS Secretary General's Envoy for Civil Society Affairs (Dr Haifa Abu Ghazaleh), deepened cooperation with the LAS' international and regional partners and the start of the Joint Work Programme covering civil society inclusion.

A series of meetings on the role of civil society in the transitions have taken place. The LAS recognised the important role of civil society in statements of LAS Secretary General Nabil El Araby. He has also stressed the importance of LAS cooperation on the matter with international actors, in particular with the EU.

Concrete activities may include:

- **The launch of a LAS Decade for Civil Society 2014-2024** with specific action plans in the short term. The Secretariat plans to organize a conference to launch this idea and will announce a platform and action plan on civil society engagement. The aim of the decade is to raise awareness about the role of civil society and it will include regional and national campaigns to encourage governments to develop action platforms for civil society.



European Union
EXTERNAL ACTION



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- **Development of the LAS website into an information hub for civil society.** It could provide manuals and special materials to civil society and it would allow for the internal circulation of knowledge among the LAS-civil society network.
- **Use of model laws** to provide examples to the LAS Member States on, for example, association/civil society laws.³

The overall aims of the new approach are to support the role of CSOs, to facilitate dialogue and partnership through training and technical support, and to establish a regular cooperation forum to enable direct dialogue and strategic consultation on different policy areas. The LAS aims to combine a high-level political approach, for example marked by the Cairo Declaration⁴, with more specific approaches and action plans. The LAS has cooperated with civil society for some time now, but it also needs to work on its public diplomacy, and to acknowledge when civil society input was used for a policy or a document.

The plan is to develop mechanisms for CSOs in different fields to be able to present reports to the relevant ministerial councils. The idea is also to organize workshops on specific policy areas where first LAS civil servants attend as observers, but which are later gradually elevated to a higher level of cooperation. Also the various bodies and special committees of the LAS could engage in deeper cooperation with civil society so as to really make civil society the "third arm" of the LAS. This may be further enhanced by the possible establishment of a trust fund for civil society.

The LAS also aims to support think-tanks and knowledge centres in order for them to be able to present papers and organize discussions on LAS-civil society cooperation. It is particularly important to be able to have an instrument to assess the progress of the new approach. Other issues that were mentioned were a possible workshop between the LAS, the EU and the African Union (AU), establishing an ombudsman or watchdog for human rights violations and organizing civil society fora on the margins of LAS meetings.

Developing LAS Engagement with Civil Society – Participants' Discussion Points

Formalization of relations with civil society: According to the participants, the role of civil society in the Arab region should be formalised and it should be given more weight in policy processes. This includes knowing what happens to input provided. For example, civil society could be allowed to submit shadow reports in line with its critical watchdog role.

Consultative status: Civil society expressed the need to have true consultative status in LAS bodies, such as the LAS Human Rights Charter Committee and the Arab League Economic and Social Council. Currently, civil society does not have influence over the meetings or their agenda and cannot submit recommendations. Civil society is more a passive recipient of information (and this information is not always provided in a timely matter).

The challenge with observer statuses is that definitions of civil society representatives tend to be very rigid, which often closes the door for many actors and it is undesirable that the LAS only cooperate with organizations afforded a certain status. Therefore, it is also necessary to develop a definition or understanding⁵ of civil society that goes beyond organizations and encompasses a broader range of actors. Overall, the LAS should be more inclusive in its dealings with civil society, which may also require restructuring.

³ The Palestinian civil society law was mentioned as an example of a successful law.

⁴ Second European Union-League of Arab States Foreign Affairs Ministerial meeting, Cairo, 13 November 2012: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/133465.pdf

⁵ Definitions are more based on actors while understanding is rather behaviour-focused, which makes it more inclusive as an approach.

The role of the EU: The European Commission's recent Communication provides a broad definition of civil society and could serve as an inspiration for the LAS.⁶ The EU could also provide advice on guidelines on how to interact with civil society. Exchange visits and other technical support such as providing experience on mechanisms of self-evaluation can be useful cooperation tools. The EU's main contribution to the LAS and its engagement with civil society was considered the sharing of experiences and lessons learned from transitions and drafting roadmaps to democracy in its own Member States and in its Eastern neighbourhood. The EU could focus on this in its funding priorities.

Member States: It was also recognised that the challenges usually do not lie with the Secretariat but rather with the Member States. The participants recognised that most of the work in terms of civil society inclusion and human rights needs to be done at the state-level. The LAS Member States should also improve their abilities to deal with opposition and create space for opposition movements. At the same time, the gap between the Secretariat and the Member States should be bridged and a true League of Arab Citizens should be the result of the process. The LAS could progressively raise awareness among its member states about the importance of civil society, through national and regional campaigns (for instance the possible Decade for Civil Society), and through leading by example in its cooperation with CSOs from the region.

One way to reduce tensions with governments is to go ahead with a step-by-step approach so that more sensitive issues can be approached gradually. All activities require careful preparatory actions and the recommendations on these issues should be very practical. Pilot projects for civil society to gain transferable skills and for governments to better trust civil society may also be useful mechanisms. Sometimes framing projects under "youth cooperation", for example, could reduce the sensitivity and allow issues such as young women's empowerment to be addressed.

The LAS faces a shortage of people that are committed to and have the capacity to engage civil society. It is very important that civil society engagement is mainstreamed beyond the Civil Society Secretariat and that all LAS bodies communicate with civil society. To this end, the LAS should also give suggestions to civil society on how it can be helped to set up these desirable structures.

Policy areas: Sector activities could lead to regional consortia of civil society, which would enhance cooperation region-wide, but also cross-regionally and would render civil society efforts and communication more effective. Some of these efforts have already taken place, and meetings are increasing in size. Also, EU and Arab civil society should step up their cooperation. Knowledge production on civil society and democracy and human rights should also be increased and supported. This knowledge production from Arab civil society should be policy-oriented, context-driven and should include impact analyses. There seems to be a lack of information on the LAS which may hamper the advocacy efforts of civil society actors. Knowledge production on civil society and the LAS could culminate in the foundation of civil society information centres. Arab CSOs should organize themselves in thematic networks or clusters to channel their expertise to the LAS more effectively (and the EU could support this process).

Human rights: During the meeting, the LAS was criticised for not having a genuine human rights policy and not criticizing human rights abuses. Often the human rights situation seems

⁶ European Commission, The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with Civil Society in external relations, 12 September 2012: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2012:0492:FIN:EN:PDF>

to be the elephant in the room in LAS discussions. Here, there is a need to develop practical tools such as special rapporteurs, guidelines, and an Arab Court for Human Rights or other mechanisms to which victims of violations have access. The standard of the Arab Charter on Human Rights is not high enough thus a starting point could be its revision based on the universality of rights. Overall, whenever new bodies are created in the LAS, civil society should be fully associated. There was also an interest in a truly representative and directly elected Arab Parliament.

Expertise: These newly emerged organizations – and those traditionally marginalized – could be supported in their capacity to engage with international and regional entities, including coaching professional staff and volunteers in administrative issues (e.g. contracting), social media education, use of lobbying and advocacy tools, etc. "Training" civil society is a sensitive issue: civil society already has a lot of know-how. It should be recognised that experience does not only lie in Europe – there is also a wealth of experience in the Arab world.

Expectations: Civil society also needs to realise that changing the operations of regional organizations and their Member States is not an easy process; they thus should demonstrate realism and strategic patience in their activities.

Other Regional Organizations – Cooperation with Civil Society

One of the working groups discussed the lessons learned from the United Nations, the African Union, and Latin American regional organizations. The following conclusions were presented:

- **Choose representatives to communicate civil society positions:** this has been the approach in the AU and in the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). The main risk is that the process for choosing representatives is not always clear or may not represent all interests equally.
- **A regular forum to deal with civil society issues:** The Organization of American States developed this approach. Here, civil society interests and concerns are discussed at the highest level. The challenge is that cooperation may take an excessively bureaucratic form and it may not lead to civil society's views being included in policy-making. Moreover, this approach usually favours well-organized civil society.
- **Observer statuses in UN bodies:** The experience from UN bodies such as the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), where civil society can participate in meetings is considered a positive experience and truly involves civil society.
- **Thematic mechanisms in regional organizations:** Regional organizations have cooperated with civil society in various thematic fields. One example is the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) early warning mechanism in which civil society participates in information-sharing. It is unclear, however, how early warning can be transformed into early action. Another example is the LAS consultations on small arms and the Middle East nuclear weapon-free zone, as well as consultations on issues such as Yemen, Libya or Syria. The LAS also cooperated with civil society to issue ID cards to less advantaged women.

Overall, it seems that civil society does not have enough access to regional organizations; many civil society organizations are not aware of the role of regional organizations. In some cases, there is no formalized cooperation method; the LAS is not alone in facing this challenge. The key is to improve trust at all levels. Here, careful use of definitions, specific formulations and terminology may help. Studying the positive and negative experiences from all regional contexts could help identify the best mechanisms for cooperation.

The EU Approach to Civil Society Engagement

Possibly the most effective way to engage civil society in the EU context is the existence of a legal obligation to involve civil society in policy processes. The Treaty of the European Union (Article 10 onwards) includes the legal obligation to engage with civil society in the context of the democratic principles of the functioning of the EU. These articles provide a clear legal basis for an open, transparent and regular dialogue. The EU also has special mechanisms to implement these obligations:

- ***Institutionalizing the input of civil society***: This is done through the EESC, which is a permanent body of the Union and which is consulted on all Commission initiatives. It has 108 civil society members from all EU Member States, and they sit together with employers and employees representing the whole spectrum of various kinds of NGOs in the EU. The challenge with this approach is that it can be very limiting to only work with the organizations that have the status to participate. Certain interests may be over-represented.⁷
- ***The open door policy***: According to the open door policy anyone can come and express their views to any of the EU institutions. The open door policy comes at the price of transparency, however. As around 50-70% of national legislation originates at the EU level, thousands of organizations try to influence legislation, the European Parliament and the Commission being the most targeted institutions. Therefore, they have established a register together in which all the details of the organizations that want to engage are registered, including the legislation and activities that they are most interested in. By registering, the organizations agree on a code of conduct. EU staff members are themselves subject to strict rules on ethics, corruption and conflict of interests.⁸
- ***Independence of civil society***: It is extremely important that civil society organizations are left to organize themselves and to decide who represents them. CSOs need to keep their independent role even though they receive money from governments/regional organizations. Regional organizations should also give feedback to civil society. The independence principle should be linked to the so-called "duality paradigm" in which governments should allow criticism from civil society despite the fact that they provide funding to them. This requires a level of trust between the two sides.
- ***Consultation in foreign policy***: The EU also applies the principle of civil society engagement in its foreign policy. In the area of human rights particularly, it attempts to have systematic policy consultations with civil society and tries to be informed by civil society in its political dialogues with third countries. It invites civil society in the concerned countries to the EU delegations to feed into processes before the official human rights dialogues and for debriefs after the dialogues. In addition, the EU holds 12 to 15 civil society seminars mixing European and partner country's NGO to feed into the official dialogues. With the AU, for example, the EU discusses human rights in a formal dialogue at least once a year, which is fed by a dedicated civil society seminar. This is a best practice mechanism that could also be applied in dialogue with the LAS.
- ***Formal vs informal dialogue***: It is important not to frame civil society only as a source of expertise that can feed useful data to decision-makers. Rather, it should be perceived as a true partner. In Brussels, civil society has organized itself in four main thematic networks in the foreign policy sphere: humanitarian affairs, development, peace-building, human rights and democracy. They are regular (but not exclusive) interlocutors for the EU institutions. The CSDN, which is a vehicle for dialogue between civil society and EU policy-makers on peace-building, is a very recent structure (since 2010). Its strength is that it is a mutual mechanism, and that meetings are agreed to by the EU institutions and EPLO which manages the CSDN. The EU experience has shown that informal bodies are

⁷ Some participants were critical of the amount of funding provided to the EESC and its lack of representativeness.

⁸ Participants of the CSDN meeting also called for an open door policy at the LAS.

very important, as they give a lot of room for manoeuvre, enable real dialogues, and provide expertise before and after the decisions are made. Another important element is the ability to work with local civil society.

- ***Instruments:*** The EU has also created a number of instruments that address the specific needs of civil society. These instruments include the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and its funding envelopes for third countries as well as the new Civil Society Facility (CSF), which has been set up specifically in the context of the Arab transformations. The EU has also introduced various mechanisms for financial flexibility, such as sub-granting which aids organizations that do not have bank accounts or guarantees. Another mechanism is the DG DEVCO mechanism on human rights defenders, which can provide help in urgent situations without specific legal procedures.

Conclusions

The CSDN meeting aimed to gather analysis from civil society, the EU and the LAS on key challenges linked to peaceful transformation in the Arab region, as well as addressing these through cooperation with civil society. Many of the challenges in the region are common and demand coordinated responses. The role of civil society in providing information on the ground and strategic input are valuable for all actors. The relationship between the EU and the LAS could be improved through provision of strategies by both sides; cooperation with civil society could be part of the relationship. The EU response to transformations in the Arab region has been revised since 2011, but it still needs adaptation and re-evaluation, especially in terms of the real needs in the region and mutual interests. The LAS is taking a new approach to civil society which can be further developed with input from civil society but also from the EU and other regional organizations.

Participants felt that it would be useful to continue discussions and cooperation on the issues discussed during the meeting; ideas for follow-up activities will be gathered and presented for discussion.

Civil Society Dialogue Network

The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a three-year project co-financed by the European Union (Instrument for Stability) and aimed at facilitating dialogue on peacebuilding issues between civil society and EU policy-makers. It is managed by EPLO, in co-operation with the European Commission and the European External Action Service. For more information please visit the [EPLO website](#)

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