

Civil Society in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership

Ridha Kéfi

Editorial Board

Afkar/Idées, Tunis

Meeting at the last Euromed Civil Forum in Marseille (30 October-2 November 2008) to discuss the 'mobility of actors' and 'living together in the Euromed region', 250 representatives of civil society organisations from both the northern and southern shores of the *Mare Nostrum* strongly reasserted their 'commitment to the Euromed Partnership (EMP)'. They did not fail, however, to indicate their "questions", "perplexity" and "concerns" with regard to the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the latest embodiment of this process, at the Paris Summit on 13 July 2008. These "questions", "perplexity" and "concerns" had to do with the objectives and forms of governance of this new framework for the partnership, as well as the risks it could generate. According to them, the main risk would be the fact that "the participation of civil society representatives in the institutions of the Partnership is now questioned," especially in South Mediterranean Countries (SMCs), where autonomous, independent civil society is "subject to an unacceptable mistrust" and their members to "an intolerable suppression."

Apart from the growing marginalisation of civil society in the governing bodies of the Partnership, the participants in the Marseille Forum also emphasised a large number of other difficulties that hamper the development of the Barcelona Process and the attainment of its initial objective, that of creating "a zone of peace and shared prosperity." They particularly underlined the following concerns:

- The persistence in the area of "inequality between women and men" and "discrimination based on

origin, religion, absence of religion, or sexual orientation".

- The difficulties encountered by civil society actors in the South and by the South Mediterranean population in general to obtain short-term visas and enter Europe; which difficulties impede family ties and human exchanges, and endanger artistic, scientific and educational exchanges between the northern and southern shores.
- The attitude of certain governments in the South that prevent independent civil society actors from participating in meetings organised within the framework of the Euromed Process.
- And, last but not least, the multiplication, in particular on the part of political decision-makers in both the North and the South, of discourse and speeches that are "expressly xenophobic and even racist, in the name of an identity devoid of any external enrichment."

In the eyes of civil society actors, the EMP is far from having kept its promises. Considering all of their grievances, it could even be considered as departing dangerously from such commitments, at least in certain aspects relating to governance, human rights and human mobility.

The assessment to be made of this Partnership 14 years after its launch deserves, however, to be more detailed. For one should not underestimate the acquis of civil society in terms of appropriation of the Euromed Process and active contribution to a certain number of its programmes. Moreover, for this assessment to be fair and balanced, it would be best to go over the genesis and evolution of the Barcelona Process, identify the progress made, indicate as well the difficulties, shortcomings and dysfunctions and finally, examine means of relaunching it to allow greater involvement of the civil society within a global, well-balanced partnership.

From Barcelona to Paris: Hope and Disillusionment

It was thus in Barcelona on 28 November 1995 that 27 countries of the EU and the Mediterranean Region launched the EMP with a formal declaration. It was an original initiative for regional cooperation and integration. Based on recognition of special ties between Europe and the Mediterranean, “links forged by neighbourhood and history”, this Partnership had the general objective of “turning the Mediterranean Basin into an area of dialogue, exchange and co-operation.” To make this ambitious goal a reality, the 27 signatories of the Barcelona Declaration drew up a joint programme filled with promises.

In the Declaration’s political and security basket, designed to promote the creation of a “common area of peace and stability,” the signatory countries committed to act in accordance with the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Consequently, Mediterranean Non-member Countries (MNCs) would have to develop political systems in keeping with established international norms on human rights and democracy, introduce the necessary reforms and take specific measures for the effective application of fundamental liberties and for respecting diversity and pluralism.

The economic basket of the Partnership prescribed the substitution of the bilateral trade agreements extant in the region until then by a new, global and multilateral approach. The aim was to establish a free trade area between the EU and South and East Mediterranean countries by 2010, one that would foster economic and social development and aid these countries to become integrated into the world economy. The Partnership’s third basket lent it the mission of promoting greater “understanding between cultures” and improving mutual knowledge by bringing the populations in both northern and southern Mediterranean countries closer. Apart from matters relating to education, the media, cultural exchanges, dialogue and the mobility of individuals – a problem that the signatories undertook to resolve in particular “by improving administrative procedures” and was to become, over the course of the years, a real bone of contention – the 27 had emphasised the role of civil society, whose contribution, it was thus affirmed for the first time, was an essential element for rapprochement among the peoples of the Mediterranean.

Emerging in a favourable context at the end of the Cold War, marked by agreement on the major prin-

ciples of democracy, peace and dialogue among cultures, and above all, with a perspective for peace between the Israelis and Arabs opened by the Oslo Accords, the EMP nourished many hopes in both the northern and southern Mediterranean Basin. Yet its implementation soon proved difficult and fraught with pitfalls. Among the numerous obstacles encountered, we could generally mention:

- The stalemate in the Middle East peace process after the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and its consequences: the pursuance of Israeli colonisation of Palestinian Territories and the Israeli wars, first against Lebanon (2006), and then against Gaza (2008).
- Political opposition to change in the SMCs, where democratic transitions are delayed by the persistence of authoritarian systems and the chronic weakness of opposition parties and civil society organisations, which are controlled or simply prohibited.
- The rise of Islamic fundamentalist movements, threatening the rare progress made in issues of democracy and respect for human liberties and rights, in particular those of women.
- The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and their consequences: the onset of the war against terrorism, the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, the exacerbation of ethnic or nationalist sentiment.
- The turbulence caused by the acceleration of globalisation: economic and social crises, increasing pauperisation of populations in the South, the widening of the gap between the northern and southern Mediterranean countries.
- And finally, the arrival in the region of other powers wishing to extend their influence as well (USA and China).

In addition to these objective difficulties born of unfavourable international and regional situations and that have often justified restrictions to civil liberties, there are also subjective difficulties associated with the scepticism that has gradually gained ground in countries in the North, increasingly preoccupied with EU enlargement or the Balkans crises; and the disillusionment of the countries in the South, which, while indefinitely deferring the implementation of the structural reforms they had committed to undertake, demanded more financing and less administrative procedures and captious controls from the EU.

The mutual frustration was aggravated, for that matter, when the EU, enlarged to include 27 countries, seemed to be more concerned with its eastern neighbours than its southern ones.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), launched in 2004 to revitalise the Euromed Process, did not seem to have reassured the MNCs. On the contrary: by enlarging the Partnership to the ensemble of EU 'neighbours,' namely the candidate countries for EU accession and the 16 'neighbours,' among them the nine MNCs, it did away with the geographical specificity of the Partnership and blurred the vision of its identity and cohesion (allocation of budget and resources, Turkey's position, external political orientations and so forth). The implementation of this new policy based on action plans negotiated and adapted to the needs (and priorities) of each country did not fail to heighten concerns among SMCs regarding the displacement of the EU's interest towards its 'neighbours' in the East and North of the European continent and a reduction, to the benefit of the latter, of the financial means allocated by the EU through the Partnership.

Some voices are being heard today, both in the North and the South, that censure what they consider an attempt at giving a regional process in crisis a facelift

The UfM, launched at the Paris Summit of 13 July 2008, sought to infuse Euro-Mediterranean relations with renewed political dynamism, in particular "by upgrading their relations, incorporating more co-ownership in their multilateral cooperation framework and delivering concrete benefits for the citizens of the region." Yet, focussing too much on structuring and federative projects in particular domains, such as water, 'Motorways of the Sea,' the environment, solar energy, transport and education and training, this new Partnership approach does not seem to have dissipated the concerns and suspicions of the South Mediterranean population. Quite on the contrary: some voices are being heard today, both in the North and the South, that censure what they consider an attempt at giving a regional process in crisis a facelift. In this regard, we can cite Hassan Abouyoub, Amb-

assador-at-Large to Morocco, appointed by King Mohammed VI, who qualified the measures initiated by the UfM as "inadequate." At a recent conference at the Law, Economic and Social Sciences Faculty of Casablanca, the Moroccan diplomat stated that, "When they speak of union, who are they trying to fool? There is no common institution with a common budget. It is not the financial crisis that is behind the UfM's failure, but the numerous inequalities among the countries along the northern and southern shores, as well as the status of Arab countries. The fact that no country in the South has put forth a UfM project is proof of this." He then went on to condemn "the absence of political will within EU Member States that would allow sanctions against countries in the South that do not respect democracy, the Rule of Law or elementary human rights" (www.yabiladi.com, 20 April 2009).

Hédi Djilani, President of UTICA (Tunisian employer's organisation), also displayed a good deal of skepticism when he declared before the French Prime Minister, François Fillon, at the Tunisian-French Economic Forum on 24 April 2009 that he believed much more in bilateral cooperation and the 5+5 Dialogue (the Arab Maghreb Union plus France, Spain, Italy, Portugal and Malta) than in the UfM. At least "until the UfM finds a place in the sun."

Government Suspicion towards Civil Society

Returning to the third basket of the Partnership, that of intercultural dialogue –which concentrates the essential actions carried out by civil society actors in both the North and South–, there is no denying that, though there was some progress, the overall results remain quite limited.

This basket is supposed to improve mutual knowledge by bringing the populations in both northern and southern Mediterranean countries closer and fostering ties and the establishment of a civil society network. Numerous programmes have been launched in this sphere, as we will see below, particularly dedicated to cultural heritage, audiovisuals, youth, media or the situation of women, but their impact remains quite limited, in particular because of the dearth of means for their implementation and, in many SMCs, the authorities' sentiment of suspicion towards civil society, which is supposed to participate in implementing these programmes and thus serve as a bridge for democratic ideas.

It should be noted, however, that despite these shortcomings that lead to disillusionment and frustration on both southern and northern shores of the Mediterranean, the number of associations and NGOs have grown significantly over the past fourteen years in the majority of the MNCs: nearly 30,000 associations in Morocco, 16,000 in Egypt, 9,000 in Tunisia and 4,000 in Jordan.

Associations, civil society organisations and other local groups have in fact managed to enter all fields of activity, carry out projects, launch dialogues, organise symposia and build networks, with or without the recognition or intervention of States or the reception of funds allotted to the Partnership

Thanks to this dynamic, in which the Euromed Process has certainly played some role, a certain degree of progress has also been made. Associations, civil society organisations and other local groups have in fact managed to enter all fields of activity, carry out projects, launch dialogues, organise symposia and build networks, with or without the recognition or intervention of States or the reception of funds allotted to the Partnership.

Among the success stories are, for instance, the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF). Inaugurated in April of 2005 in Alexandria, this intergovernmental organisation is financed by the EMP Member States and the European Commission (EC). Guided by the values of the Barcelona Process, it was established in particular for the "rapprochement between peoples through a social, cultural and human partnership." Serving as a network of national networks, it currently connects over 1,500 member organisations from all civil society domains, all of them dedicated to fostering mutual knowledge and respect in the region.

Another important vector for energising civil society in the Mediterranean Basin is the Barcelona-based European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), which is a think tank specialising in Euro-Mediterranean relations. Through research and study activities, organisation of colloquia and seminars, publication of books

and periodicals, and planning of exhibits and cultural festivals, the IEMed functions as both a centre for reflection and debate on Mediterranean societies and a Mediterranean lobby before institutions and public opinion in the region.

The EuroMeSCo (Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission) is a network of non-governmental research institutions, universities and experts. Created in 1996 with the financial support of the EC, its mission consists of fostering political and security dialogue among civil society stakeholders. Bringing together foreign policy institutes from 39 EMP Member States, this network currently has 58 member institutes, 30 observer institutes and two international associate members. Another network to be mentioned is the Forum of Euro-Mediterranean Economic Institutes (FEMISE). In charge of the economic analysis of the Barcelona Process and the study of topics considered priorities for the future of the Euro-Mediterranean Region, it currently has over 70 member institutes representing the 27 Partner Countries of the Barcelona Process. Numerous programmes have also been launched within the framework of the Partnership's third basket that have allowed intercommunication and shared analyses, such as MEDSTAT, whose mission is to make statistical information that could be useful for monitoring the progress of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation available. After MEDSTAT I, implemented from 1996 and 2003, with a budget of 20 million euros, MEDSTAT II was launched in 2006 and slated to last three years, with a budget of 30 million euros. Launched in 1999, the EUMEDIS project was endowed with a budget of 65 million euros for a duration of eight years (1999-2007). Dedicated to developing the information society in the MNCs by means of fostering information and communication technology, EUMEDIS has allowed the implementation of 20 regional pilot projects applying information technology in diverse sectors ranging from education to healthcare, including research, industry, tourism and cultural heritage. A new programme, EUMEDIS II, with a budget of 5 million euros, is to be launched during the course of 2009.

The Euromed Audiovisual Programme, with a budget of 18 million euros, has the mission of strengthening the audiovisual and cinema sectors within the MNCs, as these sectors are considered excellent vehicles for cooperation and mutual comprehension among Mediterranean countries. This programme began in 2000 with an initial series of six projects that concluded in 2005, among them the co-production

of 26 animation films and documentaries on legendary figures having contributed to the history of the Mediterranean ("Viva Carthago," whose EU funding amounted to 3.98 million euros). Euromed Audiovisual II, launched in 2005 with a budget of 15 million euros, came to a close in December 2008. It financed 12 additional projects involving the widest range of professionals in the audiovisual industry and covering all the processes of development, distribution, promotion and exhibition of the films.

To contribute to mutual understanding and dialogue among the cultures of the Mediterranean through the promotion of cultural heritage, the Euromed Heritage Programme has allocated a budget of 57 million euros to funding partnerships among heritage institutions in the Mediterranean Region as well as experts in heritage conservation. Nearly 400 partners in the EU Member States and the MNCs have benefited from the programme over its three preceding phases, between 1998 and 2004, 2002 and 2007 and 2004-2008, respectively. Euromed Heritage IV, which covers the 2008-2012 period, offers the region's inhabitants renewed opportunities to increase their knowledge and develop a sentiment of appropriation of their cultural heritage.

Other initiatives, programmes and action can also be enumerated, both in the North and the South Mediterranean, under diverse forms and with the different actors of the two shores in various domains such as human rights, the struggle for liberties and the struggle against torture (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, EMHRN), the promotion of women's status and rights (Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on Strengthening the Role of Women in Society, Istanbul, November 2006) or the protection of children, as well as initiatives to achieve the reform of judicial institutions (EuroMed Justice Programme), to name but a few examples.

There is the same diversity and abundance of initiatives associated with the economic sphere, whether they be, for instance: business clubs bridging the northern and southern Mediterranean shores (such as the French-Egyptian business club, Club d'Affaires Franco-Égyptien, CAFE); enterprise unions (such as the Union of Mediterranean Confederations of Enterprises, UMCE); or businesswomen associations (such as the Association of Organisations of Mediterranean Businesswomen, AFAEMME).

Ties are likewise being forged among trade union organisations within the framework of the Euromed Trade Union Forum (ETUF); handicraft organisations

and SMEs are networking to undertake joint initiatives, training, seminars and annual conferences; permanent dialogue has been established among economic operators through the Association of Mediterranean Chambers of Commerce and Industry (ASCAME), as well as among official professional associations, chambers of agriculture or other professional organisations, bar associations, orders or associations of jurists or liberal professionals, not to mention the social economy and the Euro-Mediterranean Social Economy Network (ESMed Network).

Local and regional authorities demonstrate the same vitality in the Partnership, either encouraging local associations or undertaking projects themselves. Twinning of cities and regions on both sides of the Mediterranean, the implementation of MEDA programmes (EUROCITIES, a pilot programme for cooperation among municipalities launched by the European Commission in 2003, Euromed regional authority forums, etc) and other initiatives emerge one after another, all of them different. They sometimes give rise to healthy competition among Euro-Mediterranean regions or cities: Marseille, Barcelona and Alexandria, for instance, each striving to become the Euro-Mediterranean capital.

Civil society has been particularly active in the youth sector. Classical programmes oriented towards education and professional training have mobilised significant credit (over 700 million euros). They have been complemented by NGO initiatives, against illiteracy, for instance, or fostering schooling and professional training for girls. Those initiatives working with universities and students of the MNCs, the European Tempus and Erasmus Programmes, as well as those that have contributed to exchanges among youth on both sides of the Mediterranean (Euromed Youth, Salto Euromed, or the launching of the Euromed Youth Platform in 2003) are often only the visible part of efforts on both shores attempting to make the Mediterranean a real community built on its children and youth.

To complete this panorama, we should also mention the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA), whose creation in 2004 constituted a turning point in the consolidation and development of the EMP. Consisting of 280 parliamentarians, of which 140 are members of MNC parliaments, this institution has consultative power. The Presidency is held by either an MNC or an EU parliamentarian on a rotational basis. The Assembly expresses its views on all issues relating to the Partnership, including the implementation of association agreements, and adopts resolutions or

recommendations, which are not legally binding, addressed to the Euro-Mediterranean Conference. With three permanent committees dealing with the Partnership's three baskets, it constitutes an excellent framework for promoting dialogue and represents an opportunity to contribute towards a peaceful, fair and lasting solution in the Middle East. Considered to foster the Partnership's credibility and therefore help meet the people's needs for democratic legitimacy, the EMPA manages more or less to transmit the Partnership's concerns on the parliamentary level, but it cannot be said to express the points of view of the region's inhabitants with sufficient force. The reason? Its southern members are not very representative because they are often appointed and/or poorly chosen.

The Economic and Social Councils (ESCs) should also be mentioned. They have also taken on the habit of meeting at Euro-Mediterranean summits since 1995. At these summits, organised by initiative of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and financed by MEDA funds to the amount of 50,000 euros per year, socio-economic actors discuss different topics that they have jointly worked on and issue recommendations. The last summit was held in Rabat (Morocco) on 14-16 October 2008. Since the year 2000, the Mediterranean ESCs have been the beneficiaries of a specific programme called TRESMED, likewise financed by MEDA funds and designed to lend trade unions, employers' organisations and other economic and social actors of the Euro-Mediterranean Region a framework for institutional dialogue aiming to improve governance and foster the democratisation of the region. TRESMED III, launched in 2008, has a budget of 907,000 euros. In contrast to these last two examples, the Euromed Civil Forum is a non-institutional initiative for coordination and debate among Mediterranean civil society organisations. It has given rise to the Euromed Non-Governmental Platform, comprised of thematic, regional and subregional networks, NGOs, and local and national platforms working in the spheres of human rights, democracy, gender equality, conflict prevention, environmental protection and cultural dialogue. Organised annually during (or before) the Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, this Forum allows the region's civil society to meet, enter into dialogue –despite differences and the conflicts ravaging the region– and issue recommendations to governments. It therefore constitutes an ideal opportunity for sharing information and ideas, and debating proposals for action in all sectors of

interest to the EMP. Consisting of plenary sessions, thematic workshops, self-conducted workshops, agorae and cultural activities, the forum is considered to illustrate “civil society's capacity for self-organisation and vitality.”

In any case, whether it is the Euromed Non-Governmental Platform, the Euromed Civil Forum or the Mediterranean Social Forum and the Maghreb Social Forum, born of the former two platforms with the aim of regrouping organisations and movements involved in the struggle against neoliberalism, these spaces for dialogue, each in their own fashion, attempt to bring together civil society actors in order to make their voices heard and organise their contributions to the different States and to the EU. Platforms for protest as well as proposals, they attempt to come up with collective responses to the challenges and threats hanging over the future of the region. Their founders, however, are frustrated to see that their voices are not truly taken into consideration by political decision makers. The reason for this, in some cases, is the consideration and place assigned to these voices that is at issue. In other cases, it is the very definition of civil society that is either too vague or too restrictive; for it is often limited to social movements, NGOs or trade unions.

Difficulties to Overcome on the Road to an Egalitarian Partnership

In terms of assessment, there is a first observation to be made: the EMP implied the equal development of the three baskets –political, economic and socio-cultural–, if not at the same pace. However, the primacy of the second basket over the first and much more so over the third has emerged over the years as the structuring principle of the Partnership. Though the social, cultural and human basket is considered important, it is quite clear that in the eyes of the Euro-Mediterranean Partners, both northern and southern, economic development remains a priority.

The economic dimension having been given priority, it has thus naturally been employers' organisations, industrial federations, chambers of commerce and the like that have often been privileged when drawing up or implementing EMP programmes. Civil society, for its part, has greater difficulty benefiting from programmes whose access has been rendered difficult by highly complex procedures, if not by lack of governmental will, in particular in the South.

Another difficulty identified: the diversity that characterises civil society does nothing to facilitate the perception of it by funding agencies that are already inclined by the very nature of the Partnership to first address themselves to clearly identified socio-economic sectors and the representative structures constituted by parliaments, ESCs and similar institutions. In this regard, it suffices to study the distribution of funds allocated by MEDA, the main financial framework for EU cooperation with MNCs, then those of its successor, the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), as well as the loans granted by the European Investment Bank (EIB), to realize the marked concentration of these allocations under the economic basket and, to a lesser degree, the political one. Initiatives carried out to foster "support to civil society" (including NGOs) still represent a very weak percentage. One of the reasons is that the smallest organisations in civil society are often excluded from Partnership funding because they are not very organised amongst themselves and generally have neither the means of filing applications nor the time to wait for results. Which explains the obvious frustration often expressed by their members at Mediterranean Civil Forums.

These meetings, which are sometimes lacking in organisation, have never had the recognition or the weight necessary to project their proposals. Also, they never cease to place particular emphasis on the need to have civil society participate, not only in preliminary consultations and debates organised within the framework of the Partnership, but also in the decision-making process, which remains essentially inter-governmental.

Moreover, the Partnership involves democratic European States clearly engaged in a decentralisation process, while their South Mediterranean partners remain, for the most part, anxious to validate their legitimacy and thus adopt rather cautious attitudes towards any initiatives for decentralised cooperation that might be proposed, particularly those involving independent NGOs. Hence the difficulties experienced by the latter in playing a more central role in society and its evolution in the Mediterranean Region.

How can greater importance be given to civil society actors from all the MNCs and thus allow the Partnership to take on its full meaning for all countries concerned, lending it the visibility it has lost over the years?

The answer lies in the solutions that could be brought to bear against the series of problems, often pointed out by civil society agents, that concern:

- The monopolisation of the EMP by the States, making it progressively lose credibility and readability to those for whom the process was launched: the individuals living on both sides of the Mediterranean.
- The major discrepancy between the States' commitments and the effective implementation of reforms in society, between discourse and reality, above all with regard to political governance.
- The assertion of cultural relativism via 'respect for specificities' often claimed by SMCs opens the way for discourse stating the impossibility of transposing certain values based on respect for liberties and rights that should be non-negotiable everywhere.
- The lack of official recognition in the South Mediterranean of certain trade unions, associations and NGOs does not favour the development of a dynamic associative fabric able to effectively contribute to bilateral and multilateral Partnership action among civil society on both sides of the Mediterranean.
- The questioning by certain MNCs of the very principle of the participation of civil society representatives in the Partnership institutions.
- The fact that, in these same countries, legal associations are prohibited from receiving foreign funding, whether or not it is granted through the Euro-med Partnership.
- The weakness of financial aid dedicated to measures in favour of the development and revitalisation of civil society, considering the needs in this sphere.
- The lack of awareness that South Mediterranean civil society organisations, often of limited size, have of these aids, when available.
- The technical and financial constraints of the programmes and the importance of the budgets allocated to them often limits them to specialist milieus, with no tangible or visible results on societies.
- Access to these programmes is often an ordeal due to excessively complex and restrictive administrative procedures (forms, deadlines, legal status of applicants, and so on).
- The quasi-monopolisation of Euromed programme organisation by operators from the North; their MNC partners, who are rarely granted the status of co-organisers, must often settle for the role of 'associate partners' if not of that of the foil necessary for the execution of the programmes.
- The conception of the programmes within a European logic and not from a Partnership per-

THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN NON-GOVERNMENTAL PLATFORM

During the Euromed Civil Forum in Valencia (2002) in the context of considering the participation of civil society in the Barcelona Process, networks and actors of the Euro-Mediterranean civil society decided to launch the Euro-Mediterranean Non-Governmental Platform in 2003. It was established with the main task of reforming the Civil Forum, an annual meeting of the Euro-Mediterranean civil society designed to influence the Barcelona Process through the contributions of civil society. Indeed, since the first Euromed Civil Forum was held in 1995, the idea of actively involving civil society in the Barcelona Process and fostering the recognition of members of civil society as key interlocutors in the different countries of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) has been the order of the day. The Platform lends Mediterranean civil society a more permanent interface with the authorities and guarantees the continuity, efficiency and legitimacy of the Civil Forum.

It is comprised of 120 independent civil society organisations working on the international, Euro-Mediterranean, national and local levels. Based in Paris, it has an operative team directed by a General Coordinator that carries out the Platform work. Its members include regional, sub-regional and local networks working in the fields of human rights advocacy, democracy, peace and migrant conflict prevention, environmental protection, gender equality, sustainable development, economic and social rights advocacy, cultural dialogue and the like.

Wishing to build on an internal democratic dynamic, the Platform decided to establish itself as an association according to French law (Law of 1901). Hence, the General Assembly makes the fundamental decisions, such as those relating to strategy, articles of association and financial matters, as well as the election of the Board, whose current Chair was elected at the second General Assembly held on 10-11 November 2007 in Madrid. At the latter, all the decisions were taken relative to the Platform's tasks and operation between general assemblies. The Board is comprised of 16 organisations (local, regional and thematic networks): International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN), Euromed Trade Union Forum (ETUF), the Euro-Mediterranean Forum of Cultures (FEMEC), Arab NGO Network

for Development, Association des Femmes de l'Europe Méridionale (AFEM), the Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO) and so forth.

The Platform's Executive Committee has been chaired by Abdelmaksoud Rachdi since his appointment on 13 January 2008 in Casablanca. With a charter of values and principles adopted in Limassol/Lemesos (Cyprus) on 25-26 June 2004, the members of the Platform work towards the same objectives (the democratisation of societies and States, the struggle against political, financial and administrative corruption, the promotion of social dialogue as an essential factor in development and social justice, etc.) Their joint action consists in working towards balancing and renewing exchanges among societies of the Euro-Mediterranean Region, strengthening civil society and its active involvement in the Barcelona Process, renovated within the framework of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy, all the while respecting the principles of human rights and democracy. Any association wishing to join must first sign the Charter.

The Civil Platform's ultimate function is to organise Civil Forums. It prepares them via local consultation (in 2008, the Civil Forum's theme was *Move and Live Together in the Euromed Space*). From the start, the Platform has had the intention of organising a Civil Forum in a country of the South. The opportunity arose in Morocco, thanks to the proposal of the the Euromed Platform's Moroccan Committee. In order to begin preparing this Civil Forum, the Platform's Board met in June of 2006 in Rabat. It designated a Steering Committee and drew up a plan for the forum, and approved the idea of organising a Civil Forum in Morocco, in close cooperation with the Euromed Platform's Moroccan Committee.

The Platform thus contributes to ensuring the smooth operation and organisation of debates and to choosing themes and participants, but above all, it is a powerhouse for strengthening the role of civil society actors as key interlocutors in their respective countries and in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

For further information:

www.euromedplatform.org/spip/spip.php?rubrique=45

www.euromedplatform.org/spip/spip.php?article13

spective, relegating South Mediterranean Countries to a subordinate position rather than being on an equal level.

- The domination of trade flow between the two shores by products from the North in all domains, including that of research or creation.
- The difficult situations and discrimination experienced by migrant populations, as well as the strict policies regulating migratory flows, often understood by the MNCs as proof of a lack of European countries' will to make the Partnership function in all its facets, including the one relative to the circulation of people.
- The maintenance of visa regimes, particularly required of all citizens from SMCs upon entry into Europe, which is in flagrant contradiction to the spirit of the Barcelona Declaration and which

very often prevents SMC actors from crossing borders, even when travel has to do with Euro-Mediterranean cooperation projects.

In general, it would be necessary to clearly indicate, and more strongly than has been done to date, the link between the shared values as they were affirmed in the Barcelona Declaration and the economic and social development programmes drawn up with each MNC, in particular with regard to democracy and human rights, good governance and the consolidation of the Rule of Law. By thus establishing a strong link between democratic aspects, good governance, economic and social progress and market liberalisation, greater perspectives for civil society participation in the Euromed Process are created.