



EuroMed Rights Seminar on the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), Brussels, 22 April 2016

## *What space for civil society in the implementation of the ENP-South?*

### Seminar report

#### Preamble

Five months after the publication of the Communication on the revised European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) by the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS), EuroMed Rights organised a one-day seminar in Brussels on 22 April 2016, to reflect on this new policy framework and explore spaces where civil society organisations (CSOs) can make their voices heard.

Since the beginning of the consultation process in March 2015, EuroMed Rights has contributed to the review of the ENP through various inputs, raising the need for the EU to consider CSOs as real partners and implement a ‘human rights friendly’ perspective as a pre-condition for any meaningful relations with Southern Mediterranean countries. This seminar was an important milestone to raise awareness around the revised ENP among field activists from the South Mediterranean and Brussels-based NGOs active in the field of human rights protection and democracy promotion, as well as engaging in an open dialogue with EU officials.

The present report primarily aims at identifying some of the spaces CSOs can occupy to influence EU policies during the implementation phase of the revised ENP.



#### 1. ENP's key objective is 'stabilisation'

The EU decided to rethink its partnership with Southern Neighbourhood countries due to the geopolitical developments on both shores of the Mediterranean since 2011<sup>1</sup>. The year 2015 was an opportunity to address shortcomings of the ENP raised by EU Member States, partner governments and CSOs, and the fact that the EU chose to revise the ENP through a large consultation process was welcomed as an unprecedented move in the ENP history. However, it was noted during the meeting that the final result, i.e. the Joint Communication on the ENP review of 18 November 2015, did not differ much from the content of the consultation paper published in March.

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed description of the revised ENP, see background document in appendix 2.

Contrary to the 2011 ENP, which focused on conditionality with the principles of '*deep democracy*' and '*more for more*', flexibility, ownership and differentiation are now presented as central to the revised ENP, with an overarching objective of promoting stabilisation. Two other issues have a specific focus: youth and employment as key drivers for change. During the seminar, DG NEAR said that 'differentiation' meant "working more effectively and pragmatically with each partner according to their individual aspirations and European interests as well (...) but at the same time, keeping our commitments to European and universal values."

*"We know we can only achieve objectives if we can do so in partnership, and the partnership has to include an honest discourse (...). We will ensure that there is a dialogue alongside with the civil society organisations."*

Nicholas Westcott,  
Managing Director MENA, EEAS

EU officials defined 'stabilisation' in a broad way, i.e. longer-term socio-political changes, inclusive economic development and sustainable human security in the region. The EU is willing to design and tailor its partnerships by adopting joint 'priorities' with partner countries. However, it has also claimed, while doing so, that it commits to keep universal values such as human rights, good governance, democracy and the rule of law at the heart of its relations with national governments.

Flexibility is also the cornerstone for any future assessment methodology. Tailor-made partnerships will be assessed by tailor-made reporting. Country-specific reports will be published at different moments and under different formats, with the EU's intention to keep them public. Another key moment will be the mid-term review of the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) in 2017 (see below under 2.2).

Although the EU stressed on the necessity to combine security concerns and full compliance by partner governments with human rights, democracy and rule of law principles, participants underlined that EU's credibility is far from being ensured on this issue, for example in the light of massive arms sales from EU Member States to Southern Neighbourhood countries, and internal rising authoritarianism in some Member States. They added that reinforcing civil society support could be a solution to remedy that, and it was emphasised that the EU needs to stay strongly behind CSOs, politically and financially.

## **2. Where can civil society raise its voice?**

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If the EU committed itself in the revised ENP to include CSO support as an important element, uncertainty remains as to how these will be able to play their crucial role in the implementation phase. The seminar was an opportunity to discuss ways forward, and explore means to enable their full participation.

In EU officials' own words, the EU sees civil society as "an integral part of the partnership" and thus a key player in pushing forth with reforms. The EU commits itself to strengthen CSOs' capacities, and reach out to local civil society going beyond capital cities as well as encompassing "religious organisations, business partners, universities etc."

Several spaces of influence for the next weeks/months were identified and discussed:

### **2.1. Influencing the ENP Partnership Priorities**

The new framework for setting Partnership Priorities (PP) with partner countries should enable CSOs to make their inputs during consultations held both in Brussels and in the field. The EU has started such dialogues with Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and may start soon with Algeria and Morocco, and intends to

generalise it to the whole neighbourhood. To this end, EU Delegations are requested to develop a constant, fruitful dialogue with civil society organisations to ensure their proper involvement in line with EU commitments in that regard.

The issue of lack of inclusiveness and transparency were raised both by speakers and participants. Indeed, many CSOs are not aware of the consultations led by the EU, and when they are invited, they are not always informed about the status and subject of the meeting beforehand, thus leading to a weak involvement of civil society in shaping EU policies. Participants demanded that EU officials pay specific attention to this issue at a time when formal negotiations on the ENP partnership priorities have started.

The example of Tunisia was presented as a good practice to be learned from. The tripartite dialogue between the EU, Tunisian authorities and civil society organisations should inspire ways to involve civil society in EU-Southern Neighbourhood political dialogues, most specifically in the design, implementation and evaluation of the PP. This would require making the various reports on the implementation of the ENP and PP available to the public and CSOs so that they can play their watchdog role. Transparency is another principle that should be enforced by the EU, according to participating CSOs.

## 2.2. The European Neighbourhood Instrument, soon under review

The mid-term review of the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) in 2017 is an opportunity to discuss direct support to Southern Mediterranean governments, and the ENI Civil Society Facility. CSOs should be consulted in that regard in a meaningful way, avoiding a 'box-ticking' exercise. However, EU officials stressed that political dialogue within the framework of the ENP must be differentiated from financial instruments.

*"The real legal debate will be the mid-term review of the ENI in 2017. Then we will see how a financial tool with legal basis can influence the policy."*

*Erwan Lannan, Professor, Ghent University*

The EU foresees to continue providing long-term funding to CSOs. The various EU financial instruments addressing CSOs' needs in the region and globally, e.g. the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), are complemented by independent initiatives such as the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). Flexible and

complementary initiatives from non-EU bodies are necessary but their effectiveness can only be guaranteed if there is strong political and institutional support provided by the EU and its Member States, in particular to address the rising, worrying trend of shrinking space for civil society in the Southern Neighbourhood.

## 2.3. Towards a structured regional dialogue

Although dialogue with CSOs at multilateral level is underway in the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean (almost limited to a Ministerial conference on Women's Rights though), the need for a more structured dialogue<sup>2</sup> between the EU and CSOs has led to organising annual fora where EU policies are discussed. What's currently under discussion is to move this dialogue up a gear with an institutionalised forum mirroring the one existing for the Eastern Partnership – although with a different set-up due to a different context in the Southern Neighbourhood.

*"Problems that we all face respectively in our countries are in some respect due to lack of political leadership by the EU."*

A civil society participant (Egypt)

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<sup>2</sup> See "Background document - Towards a structured regional dialogue with CSOs" in appendix 5.

## **2.4. Focus on security and economic/social rights**

Two overarching ENP priorities were addressed during the seminar, i.e. security<sup>3</sup> and economic/social rights<sup>4</sup>, with a view to helping CSOs understand and influence the cooperation established between the EU and partner countries in these fields, e.g. arms sales, support to Security Sector Reform, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) and Mobility Partnerships.

### Security policies

The EU has developed a substantial security agenda in recent years in response to the deteriorating situation in the Southern Neighbourhood. The fight against terrorism is a central piece of that agenda, as well as a strategy to support Security Sector Reform that is set to be approved in June 2016 by the Council of the EU. This increased focus on security interests is also likely to be present in the Global Strategy on foreign policy that is expected to be adopted before summer. This trend has raised concerns



about the absorption of the ENP, which is an EU instrument aimed at serving common interests, by the Common Foreign Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy (CFSP/CSDP), which remain intergovernmental - in other words mainly in the hands of the Member States. Moreover, there is important work to be done in the field of defining widely-used concepts such as terrorism, extremism and radicalisation. Civil society plays an important role to define these.

### Economic and social rights

Economic and social rights are at the heart of peoples' aspirations and preoccupations on both shores of the Mediterranean. Indeed, the triggering factor of the Arab uprisings was the claim for social justice and better economic future. Nevertheless, economic and social rights have been under high pressure since, and enormous progress is still needed to achieve objectives in that respect. The ENP-South partner countries witness an almost complete absence of social protection and a lack of long-term investment to achieve socio-economic welfare of their citizens. The majority of public policies have been focusing on short-term objectives to fight against poverty without engaging long-term structural reforms.

What can the EU do to address this situation in its bilateral relations with the ENP-South countries? The revised ENP puts the emphasis on the need for deepening economic relations between both shores of the Mediterranean, as a way to trigger growth and address the economic root causes of instability in the region. This implies structural reforms, which are also necessary to ensure that economic growth is inclusive and provides basic rights to people. To this end, the revised ENP foresees an intensification of trade relations with partner countries to make the Mediterranean a free trade area by concluding Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs). It also claims a commitment to complement it by easing the free movement of people through Mobility Partnerships.

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<sup>3</sup> See "Background document – Security vs. Human Rights?" in appendix 3.

<sup>4</sup> See "Background document – Economic and social rights in the ENP" in appendix 4.

Civil society will have a crucial role to play to ensure that the EU promotes sustainable development, decent working conditions and lives, and effective social protection for all. The EU-partner country economic relations can thus be used as a platform for CSOs and trade unions to raise their concerns on economic and social rights, with a view to:

- ensuring that the EU negotiates DCFTAs in fair terms - fully taking into account the level of competitiveness of its partners' economies;
- pushing EU partner countries to launch and implement ambitious, inclusive economic and social policy reforms under the ENP talks;
- calling on the European Investment Bank (EIB) to better define and target its activities in the region.

### **3. Food for thought on how to move forward**

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The main lesson that all participants conveyed was the need for civil society organisations to adopt a proactive approach in the implementation of the ENP. Indeed, the uncertainty around the new framework for co-operation with partner countries, the reporting tools and financial instruments creates confusion but is also a good opportunity to make recommendations to feed into the current ENP implementation process and EU-partner country co-operation in various fields, including at financial programming level.

Listed below are suggestions and ideas for moving forward, which were raised during the seminar:

- A **rights-based approach** should be mainstreamed during the implementation phase of the ENP, with references to other key EU policies in the area, e.g. the action points relating to support to civil society in the EU's Human Rights Action Plan 2015-2019.
- A genuine dialogue with civil society on the ENP at regional level must **avoid 'tokenism' and 'box-ticking' approaches**, i.e. only giving the appearance that civil society representatives are being treated fairly and their views are really heard. At this stage, Southern Mediterranean governments should not be invited to the structured dialogue at regional level, and the issue of shrinking space for independent civil society organisations should be high on the agenda.
- It takes time to build trust between CSOs and the EU. The objectives of the dialogue at regional level should be to **open spaces for civil society, and promote democracy and human rights** in the region, adopting a bottom-up approach and building on past experiences such as the Policy Forum on Development, which has adopted a [Chart](#) that can be inspirational. A dialogue is not meant for 'talking for the sake of talking' at an annual event, but rather for promoting inclusiveness and diversity of civil society.
- A **two-way channel** needs to remain open to ensure that CSO recommendations are heard, and make the EU accountable. It is the only way to build trust between the EU and those CSOs that are increasingly at risk in the region. Feedback on how information and recommendations from CSOs have been utilised is crucial for a meaningful dialogue, in particular in the context of negotiating ENP partnership priorities.



- The EU should pay more attention to protecting Human Rights Defenders. Within an increasingly shrinking space and hostile environment for civil society actors, international/institutional support - notably from the EU - might constitute the unique protection for HRDs to pursue their actions in the field.
  - It is of utmost importance that CSOs are able to **continue playing their watchdog role** especially when it comes to ensure transparent and independent justice mechanisms in the field of security and the fight against terrorism. Be it transitional or not, the justice system must respect standards that should be closely monitored by CSOs, e.g. fair trial conditions, independence of judges, fair and strictly proportionate sentences and effective right of appeal, as stipulated in international law and ratified by all parties.
  - A strong emphasis should be given to **support CSO efforts** to reach out to all segments of population in order **to develop specific awareness-raising activities especially towards the youth to prevent radicalisation, counter hate speeches and promote values of tolerance**.
  - The EU and CSOs themselves should further **invest in empowering civil society actors**. Indeed, topics discussed under the ENP are complicated and require early and urgent responses. All these features require sound expertise and responsiveness from civil society, especially on key topics such as economic and social rights and security-related measures, allowing them to actively participate in the implementation phase of the ENP.
  - **Increased core funding to CSOs, regular trainings and enhanced platforms** for cooperation and information-sharing among CSOs are good practices that should be further developed.
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## Appendices

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### Appendix 1 - Programme

#### First session: The revised ENP-South at length

- 9.15        *The political and historical background of the ENP-South* by **Erwan Lannon**, Professor, Faculty of Law of the Ghent University
- 9.30        *The revised ENP-South: What has changed?* by **Martin Hetherington**, Strategy Unit – ENP Review, DG NEAR, European Commission
- 9.45        *Tools for actions in the field: practical support provided to CSOs* by **Marie Camberlin**, Programme Officer Southern Neighbourhood, European Endowment for Democracy (EED)
- 10.00-10.45    Q & A, debate with the audience

#### Second session: What space for CSOs in the implementation of the ENP

- 11.15        *CSOs' role in the implementation of the ENP and upcoming structured dialogue*, by **Nicholas Westcott**, Managing Director for Middle East and North Africa, European External Action Service (EEAS)
- 11.30        *The way forward to enhance civil society in the Neighbourhood*, by **Andrzej Adamczyk**, rapporteur of EESC Opinion on the ENP, European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)
- 11.45        *Ensuring transparency and inclusiveness in the implementation of the ENP*, by **Vincent Forest**, Advocacy Director, EuroMed Rights
- 12.00        Q & A, debate with the audience

#### Third session: Discussing the ENP overarching priorities

- 13.30        Short presentations of thematic priorities:
- *Stability/security vs. human rights?* by **Nabila Habbida**, EPLO
  - *Economic and social rights in the Southern Neighbourhood*, by **Maurice Claassens**, Solidar
  - *Towards a structured regional dialogue with CSOs in a context of shrinking space*, by **Marc Schade-Poulsen**, EuroMed Rights
- 13.45 – 15.30    Small working groups on:
1. Human rights impact assessment in security and counter terrorism measures, what role for civil society? (facilitator: Nabila Habbida) – Room Topaz (French/English)
  2. Shrinking space for CSOs in the South and economic and social rights: what dialogue with the EU? (facilitator: Bérénice Michard) – Room Jade (English only)

#### Closing plenary session

- 16.00        Reports of small group discussions
- 16.30        Discussion on proposed recommendations on the ENP implementation and the structured dialogue

## **Appendix 2 – Background document ‘The European Neighbourhood Policy in a nutshell’**

Since its inception in 2004, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has been largely inspired by EU’s enlargement policy with a view to extending European norms, regulations and values beyond its borders including values such as democracy, rule of law and respect of human rights. Adopted the same year as the largest enlargement of EU’s history, the ENP aimed at avoiding the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its neighbours, by “strengthening prosperity, stability and security for all.” However, without the prospects of EU accession for the South and small financial means compared to accession instruments, the ENP has become an “ambiguous” policy instrument for Southern Mediterranean countries, and a question has been whether it provides real incentives for implementing “common shared interests.”

In 2011 the EU reviewed the ENP to respond to the Arab uprisings, addressing its shortcomings in terms of human rights and democracy promotion and making a *mea culpa*. However, the new ENP published in November 2015 puts again the emphasis on stability/security, economic development and migration management, downscaling the human rights-based approach instilled in 2011. Despite the commitment to launch a structured, inclusive dialogue with civil society and a clear emphasis on women’s empowerment, there seems to be lesser space left for the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in the implementation of the revised ENP-South.

### **The Barcelona Process**

In parallel to the ENP, the EU is supporting a multilateral mechanism now called the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). In 1995, the then fifteen EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs and twelve Mediterranean partner countries met at a summit in Barcelona and established the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (the EMP), described in the Barcelona Declaration as a way to enhance EU-Mediterranean multilateral relations as complementary to national foreign policies. In 2008, the EMP became the UfM which is in charge of organising multilateral Ministerial Meetings such as a conference on the role of women in society in the second half of 2016. It also promotes regional economic and infrastructure projects with the UfM label.

### **Genesis and evolution of the ENP-South**

The ENP, launched in 2004, is built on Association Agreements signed with most South Mediterranean countries after the initiation of the EMP. It has now become the main foreign policy instrument that guides EU’s external action towards its neighbouring countries. The ENP has been developed around two regional areas, namely Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods, each area covering countries that present numerous economic and political disparities. The Southern Neighbourhood is made up of ten countries: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.

The ENP was launched by the EU to strengthen political co-operation and develop economic integration with its neighbours, with the objective of “*establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterized by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation*”.

To this end, non-binding Action Plans for economic and political transition reforms, with references to the principles of democracy, human rights, rule of law and good governance, were agreed with most partner countries on top of the Association Agreements, with the exception of Algeria, Libya and Syria. Some of them later saw their status as EU partner upgraded. The implementation of the Action Plans

has been assessed by the EU under the form of annual Progress Reports, which gradually came to integrate a more human rights language, in particular after 2011 when the EU strengthened its ‘more for more’ policy based on the so-called ‘deep democracy’ principle. The idea was to fine-tune the ENP to make it a more adequate instrument to respond to peoples’ democratic aspirations, increasing support for countries that made the most progress in this sense.

The whole policy is linked to the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), aimed at financing the implementation of projects and providing assistance.

### **The revised 2015 ENP: back to the stability agenda**

Four years later, with the analysis that the principles set out in the 2011 review, e.g. ‘more for more’, did not bear fruit due to the lack of political appetite shown by partner governments and that the uprisings in the region largely failed to produce democratic transitions, the EU decided to engage in a review of the ENP, strongly influenced by ongoing crises, e.g. migration, conflicts in the region, and the priorities of the EU and its Member States relating to security and counter-terrorism.

The EU stresses the need for “*a new approach, a re-prioritisation and an introduction of new ways of working*” to soften - in EU’s own words - its ‘patronising’ image. This became the basic principles of the revised ENP Communication published in November 2015, and led the EU to emphasise again the need for stability, broadly understood as the necessity of preserving human and regional security, ensuring national cohesion by promoting the principles of human rights and the rule of law, as well boosting economic prosperity.

To this end, the revised ENP advocates greater differentiation between partner countries and better mutual ownership, with a view to better reflecting the interests of each country when it comes to define the nature and focus of the partnership.

The EU has also proceeded to major changes of its assessment tools. There are still uncertainties about the future of country-specific reports. Comprehensive public Progress Reports will no longer be the single, annual reporting tool as it used to be. Instead, the EU will develop “*a new style of assessment, focusing specifically on meeting goals agreed with partners.*” This means that reporting will also be tailor-made according to mutually agreed priorities. In addition, where human rights assessment will be ‘placed’ has not been clarified yet, although it seems it will be inserted in a regional report.

The EU has committed to engage a dialogue on human rights and democracy with all partners as an agenda item in political dialogues. Public administration reform, gender equality, security sector reform, protection of human rights, pluralism are some of the topics for discussion. But, here again, according to the Communication, dialogues will be held in “mutually agreed formats” with national governments. This sounds like a step back compared to the commitments made after the Arab uprisings, with a focus on pre-2011 priorities, such as the stability agenda and EU economic interests.

### **Appendix 3 - Background document ‘Security vs. Human Rights?’**

Security and conflict prevention are now a strong priority of the European Neighbourhood Policy. As the European Security Strategy (ESS) - the most relevant public document on EU’s vision on internal, regional and international security - states in 2003, the EU firmly believes that its security goes hand in hand with a secured neighbourhood. In recent years, the Southern Mediterranean countries have been witnessing increasing conflicts, rising violent extremist acts as well as political crises, with high potential of destabilising the whole Euromed region. For the EU, all these developments have made the dialogue on security a vital element of EU-Southern Mediterranean relations, and the EU has sought to put security challenges at the heart of the ENP-South to formulate adequate responses to violent conflicts and humanitarian crises.

#### **The predominant security agenda of the revised ENP**

The ENP sets an extended cooperation framework for addressing stability/security challenges with Southern Neighbourhood partner countries. This drives CSOs to discuss their role in implementing a security agenda, i.e. tackling the root causes of insecurity and violence.

At the top of EU’s security agenda, one can find the following:

- Support partner countries to achieve their Security Sector Reform at civilian and military levels;
- Combat violent extremist acts and prevent radicalisation, and step up criminal justice responses to terrorist acts. In this regard, the EU foresees to involve civil society;
- Disrupt cross-border organised crime and corruption in the framework of security cooperation;
- Meet cross-cutting security challenges related, according to the EU, to migration, e.g. human trafficking, border management;
- Due to the instability of the region, empower partner countries as far as crisis management and responses are concerned.

#### **Much-needed human rights approach to security challenges**

Although the right to security is a fundamental right for people on both shores of the Mediterranean, security-related measures must strictly respect international human rights law (IHRL) and international humanitarian law (IHL). In a context of cross-border and cross-cutting security challenges, human rights impact assessment has been an extremely difficult task to realise. In this vein, it is of utmost importance that the EU and partner countries adopt a human rights-based approach to security measures, and make sure their security cooperation comply with IHRL and IHL. *Sine qua non* conditions are crucial to achieve that goal: respect of non-derogable human rights such as freedom of expression and thought, full compliance with the principle of proportionality, the independence of the judiciary, ensuring accountability, independent review and assessment of counter-terrorism laws, etc.

#### **Appendix 4 - Background document ‘Economic and social rights in the ENP’**

Since 2004, the EU has put economic prosperity as a central condition for stability, with a focus on addressing the root economic causes of instability in the region: “*poverty, inequality, a perceived sense of injustice, corruption, weak economic and social development and lack of opportunity especially for young people.*” Thus, the revised ENP prioritises economic partnership with the aim to stimulate economic development and modernisation in the Southern Neighbourhood.

#### **The economic agenda of the revised ENP**

Improving competitiveness, inclusive growth and social justice while creating better conditions for jobs and employability are some of the key objectives of the ENP-South. To this end, the EU has the ambition to deploy a wide range of means such as increasing macro-financial assistance operations, promoting capacity building for training a new generation of public managers, as well as stepping up cooperation with international financial institutions to finance growth projects.

For the EU, trade constitutes another cornerstone for promoting prosperity in the region. Diverse types of trade agreements are proposed to partner countries so that they can access EU’s economic market. The ultimate objective is to conclude **Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs)** with the most advanced countries by removing tariffs, increasing investments, intensifying trade through setting common rules and standards and creating an enabling policy environment. Other agreements will be tailor-made for those who do not wish to engage in such an economic integration.

#### **Why civil society needs to be implicated?**

In a context of a recasting of relations between the EU and ENP-South countries, the intensification of economic and trade relations might be a good opportunity to widen and strengthen dialogue between the EU and civil society on the respect of economic and social rights. On the other hand, enhancing economic relations following an inappropriate model, especially in the framework of DCFTAs or other trade agreements, might also aggravate the current state of those rights in the region. Indeed, a fair framework of cooperation between the EU and its partners must be built taking account of the unequal competitiveness of each economy.

An enabling environment for civil society organisations and trade unions is of utmost importance to fulfil the conditions for inclusive economic development for all and a shared prosperity in the region. Economic and social rights underpin both individual and collective rights. Therefore, freedom of association and peaceful assembly, and right to access to information, need to be fully recognised to enable trade unions, human rights defenders and other rights-based organisations to monitor, add inputs or even propose new ways of getting out of the current economic and social crises in the region, and enhance EU-Southern Neighbourhood partnership.

## **Appendix 5 - Background document 'Towards a structured regional dialogue with CSOs'**

Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a key role in fostering democratic reforms in the Southern Mediterranean countries. The EU has a broad definition of CSOs that comprises "*all non-State, not-for-profit structures, non-partisan and non-violent, through which people organise to pursue shared objectives and ideals, whether political, cultural, social or economic.*" In September 2012, the European Commission published a Communication in which it committed to boost its relations with CSOs at global level by outlining three priorities:

- Enabling regulatory environment for CSOs in partner countries;
- Promoting a meaningful and structured participation of CSOs to partner countries' policies and in the EU programming cycle as well;
- Improving CSOs' technical and financial capacities to carry out their roles more effectively.

Hence, in parallel with its institutionalised dialogue with national authorities, the EU is formally committed to further strengthening its dialogue with CSOs from the Southern Neighbourhood. In addition to the dialogue at national level, the idea of a regional structured dialogue in the Southern Neighbourhood of the EU was launched by Commissioner Füle in 2013 to enable CSOs to express their views about EU policies and priorities.

### **Enabling environment for civil society: a top priority to realise**

In the meantime, the situation of human rights and democracy in the region has been deteriorating with increasingly repressive laws leading to restrictions of freedoms of association, assembly and expression, in an overall context of stigmatisation and crackdown on human rights defenders and NGOs. To help enlarge the space for civil society, a real, effective dialogue between the EU and CSOs is much needed, reaching out to field organisations and empowering these both politically and financially. This is in the own interest of the EU, who recognises the limits of its action within the framework of bilateral relations with national governments who seem unwilling to engage further. However, the EU remains ambiguous in its approach to civil society dialogue. On the one hand Commissioner Hahn has stated that the revised ENP privileges a "*bottom-up approach*" with "*less megaphone diplomacy and more support for civil society.*" On the other hand, the EU's focus on civil society looks downgraded in the November 2015 Communication.

### **A regional structured dialogue: the way forward**

Since 2012, EU civil society roadmaps have been developed as a common strategic framework for the engagement of EU Delegations and Member States with civil society at country level, with the objective of improving the impact, predictability and visibility of EU actions. However, there are still some ways to go for a direct, constant dialogue with civil society that goes beyond information-sharing, thus making CSOs a real political reform partner. At the regional level, a structured dialogue with civil society in the South is under discussion. It is still to be seen whether it will be able to help tackle common regional issues, build solidarity networks, provide an enabling environment for CSOs, influence EU policies, and set the scene for EU practical protection for human rights defenders.