



THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN RAISING AWARENESS OF THE GREEN TRANSITION IN THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD. OBSTACLES, PRACTICES AND POTENTIAL FOR THE EU'S SUPPORT

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Civil society organizations and the green transition in the Southern Neighbourhood

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Southern Mediterranean Countries (SMCs) often lack the adaptive management capacity that is essential to become effective agents for coordinated and long-term development processes. This leads to haphazard, uncoordinated interventions and a lack of shared goals. By working in silos, CSOs risk duplicating efforts, missing out on opportunities to capitalise on the work of other CSOs, and potentially undermining initiatives. CSOs in the region also struggle to apply innovative practices and methods given their limited financial resources and lack of synergies with other institutions and organisations. Additionally, existing legal frameworks in some countries in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region limit innovative practices and hamper CSOs' agency to address environmental challenges.

Recently, civil society has been considered to be under serious attack in 153 out of 195 countries, and civic actions in societies around the world are impacted by the "shrinking space" effects (CIVICUS, 2020), which also apply to SMCs. CSOs in the region working on

environmental issues are particularly vulnerable to this shrinkage because of the lack of vision on environmental issues, which are not considered a priority in most countries. Furthermore, governments do not consider CSOs as key partners in the field of environment and sustainable development. Other obstacles stem from the limited resources available for CSOs working on the environment in comparison to those working on charity issues and health, which poses additional challenges for CSOs in this field.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, societies around the globe were put under lockdown for different periods. The work of many CSOs was stunted, as crucial activities were put on hold and communities that were usually served were left unattended. CSOs have faced serious challenges, such as delays in operations, funding shortages, difficulties in cooperation and coordination with partners, downsizing for failing to pay staff salaries and rent, and lack of technological platforms to operate efficiently respecting social distancing measures.

CSOs faced the challenge of mobilising social solidarity while practising physical distancing. They worked to refocus their energies on emergency response, striving to serve communities facing illness, hunger and unemployment, among others. Digital transformation demanded new skills and resources and challenged the usual ways of management and exposure due to the online imbalances between dominant voices and excluded groups; socioeconomic challenges have risen dramatically, uncovering inequalities and putting a strain on overall stability. In spite of this, many CSOs were able to adapt their work to the new circumstances, while protecting the safety of their beneficiaries and staff. Within their capacities, they strived to fill the gaps where governments were unable to provide services. Current challenges have highlighted the growing demand for capacity-building programmes and resources.

The new Agenda for the Mediterranean and the green transition

Based on the conviction that “sustainable prosperity and resilience can only be built in strong partnership across the Mediterranean,” the new Agenda for the Mediterranean highlights opportunities for new partnerships on strategic priorities of green and digital transition (EC, 2021). The new Agenda aims for a green, digital, resilient and just recovery, guided by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development 5, the Paris Agreement and the European Union (EU) Green Deal.

Although COVID-19 has had devastating effects on the world economy, it also offers opportunities for the green transition in the recovery process. While the 2008 recession led to a “grey” transition scenario, the post-COVID-19 context can be the occasion to boost the transition to a sustainable and green economic model by investing in clean-energy jobs, healthcare for all, ensuring safety and civil rights, and positioning climate justice high on the priority list. The EU Green Deal announced in December 2019 provides a roadmap to achieve this transition (EC, 2019). However, it will also depend on the efforts of its partners, “including its most immediate neighbourhood such as the Mediterranean, a major hotspot of climate change. This is why the EU will have to cooperate with its southern neighbours to accompany their recovery and transition towards a more sustainable economic path” (Cercle d’Economia, 2020).

CSOs have an important role to play in advancing the post-2015 sustainable development agenda by ensuring the localisation of these goals, particularly CSOs working in the field of sustainability.

Main challenges facing SMCs

SMCs have been facing many environmental and socioeconomic challenges, which need the efforts of all stakeholders and a participatory approach that ensures no one is

left behind. Challenges include an unsustainable use of natural resources; climate change effects due to the increase of greenhouse gas emissions, which affect access to water, food and energy; poor access to safe drinking water and sanitation, which affects people's health; and increased risks of disasters (desertification, droughts, heat waves) due to climate change, which has led to irregular migration and displacement. Environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity also poses a serious threat to the region as well as the pollution of land, water and air, which is directly related to unsustainable waste management systems and marine litter (MIO-ECSDE, 2012). Other socioeconomic challenges related to human activities and behaviour that have a significant impact on the region's environment are unsustainable consumption and production patterns; lack of awareness regarding environmental challenges at regional and global level; gender inequalities, which affect access to natural resources; and an increase in population that puts pressure on limited resources. Other obstacles include weak governance and institutional capacities, unemployment, and weak communication and coordination channels, which force environmental organisations to work in silos.

In most areas of the Mediterranean, both natural ecosystems and human livelihoods are affected. In turn, there has been a noticeable increase in governments' interest and will to address such common challenges. There are several significant regional strategies and initiatives aiming to tackle those challenges such as the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development, the Mediterranean Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development, the UfM Ministerial Declaration on Climate Change and Environment, the Horizon 2020 Initiative and, recently, the 2030 Greener Med, the Arab Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the Arab Strategy for Water Security, among others.

Although there has been a significant increase in people's awareness towards environmental challenges in the last two decades, additional efforts are needed to ensure people's participation in and commitment to their surrounding environment.

Role of CSOs

Over the years, CSOs have proven to play an important and unique role among other stakeholders as they advocate for change and raise public awareness on existing challenges; provide services to meet social needs; act as experts given that they bring unique knowledge and experience to shape policy and strategy as well as identifying and suggesting solutions; contribute to capacity-building of various segments of society; and represent and give power to the voice of marginalised or under-represented communities.

Contributions of CSOs to addressing existing challenges

In order to fulfil their roles and address existing challenges, CSOs contribute to policy analysis, policy-making and strategy formulation at international, regional, national and local levels; assist in the implementation and localisation of policies in collaboration with national and local governments; develop innovative approaches, good practices, participatory methodologies and multi-stakeholder partnerships; enhance the resilience and meaningful participation of vulnerable and marginalised communities; facilitate knowledge exchange and sharing of good practices and lessons learned; and support monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Challenges facing CSOs in the Mediterranean region

Most CSOs working in the field of environment and sustainable development in the Mediterranean region face significant challenges, such as the lack of financial resources

and access to information, which is essential to ensure accountability in the face of weak involvement in regional, national and local processes, weak institutional capacities and infrastructure resulting from limited resources, lack of government support, and limited engagement due to specific legislation.

Active regional CSO networks and practices

There are several regional CSO networks active in the field of environment and sustainable development, as well as successful practices that can benefit from potential EU support in different areas to achieve sustainable development, make concrete progress towards the green transition, and overcome existing challenges at national and regional levels.

The RAED was established in 1990 and includes more than 300 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) from 17 Arab countries in the MENA region. The mandate of the RAED is to develop CSOs' capacities to help them become actively engaged in environmental protection among other relevant stakeholders at national and regional level, in addition to facilitating the exchange of knowledge, experience and lessons learned. In 1995, the Arab League recognised the RAED as the representative of civil society in the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment (CAMRE), as well as in the Arab Ministerial Water Council (AMWC). The RAED enhances, mobilises, initiates dialogue and develops capacities of and advocates for the Arab CSOs to have a more prominent role among relevant stakeholders to achieve sustainable development. In Egypt, the RAED established in 2012 the Egyptian Sustainable Development Forum (ESDF), a think tank that has succeeded in initiating dialogue among concerned parties to discuss integrating sustainability in various sectors such as the water sector, agriculture, climate change, biodiversity and education, among others. The ESDF has followed a participatory approach involving all concerned stakeholders in order to leave no one behind. Building on the success of the ESDF, similar initiatives have been launched in five other countries – Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen – and the League of Arab States has set up the Arab Network for National Sustainable Development Fora, which aims at facilitating exchange of experiences, lessons learned and best practices.

The Secretariat of the UfM supports the active engagement of CSOs. The Roadmap approved in January 2017 stresses that “the multi stakeholder approach and the partnerships developed by the Secretariat are an essential tool to expand UfM activities and to give leverage to regional cooperation and develop effective interactions between cooperation actors.” In particular, it underlines that “in close coordination with the governments concerned, civil society, in particular universities and NGOs, bring an interesting bottom-up perspective and share their regional analysis, knowledge, experience and proposals to tackle the current challenges” (UfM, 2017).

The UfM framework can serve to better highlight the Euro-Mediterranean region's contributions to the global agenda and link actions in the region to the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As expressed in its Roadmap for action, “the transversality of global issues related to sustainable development, including poverty alleviation, economic growth and environmental objectives, will continue to be addressed by the UfM, based on a cross sectoral inclusive approach” (UfM, 2017).

Accordingly, in mid-2017, the UfM supported the establishment of the BlueGreen Med-CS, which started as a UfM labelled project and then continued as an initiative among NGO networks in the region, namely the MIO-ECSDE, the RAED, the World Wildlife

Fund Mediterranean Programme (WWF-Med), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature-Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation (IUCN-Med), the Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative (MEDWET) and the Institut Méditerranéen de l'Eau (IME), in coordination with the CSO networks that belong to the Global Environment Facility (GEF)'s Small Grants Programme (SGP), implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).¹

The main goal of the BlueGreen Med-CS is to allow relevant national and regional CSOs to benefit from regional Mediterranean projects and programmes, and link ongoing regional processes to national processes. The BlueGreen Med-CS served as a process that helped towards a more structured and organised approach to networking and coordination of civil society involvement and participation in regional processes. The BlueGreen Med-CS facilitated the involvement of CSOs within the UfM environment and water processes, and in particular through EU-funded projects, such as the Sustainable Water Integrated Management in the Mediterranean (SWIM), Horizon2020 Support Mechanism and the Water and Environment Support (WES) projects, building on the BlueGreen Med-CS partners' link with qualified and knowledgeable CSO stakeholders in the partner countries. The BlueGreen Med-CS succeeded and involved more than 80 CSOs in the national and regional capacity-building activities of the EU-SWIM Horizon 2020 Project until 2019, and later engaged them in the EU Water and Environment Support (WES) Project, which will run until 2023.

The MIO-ECSD is a non-profit federation of 133 Mediterranean NGOs working in the field of environment and development in 28 countries of the Euro-Mediterranean area. The three main founders were two European organisations in addition to the RAED from the South. For more than 20 years now, the MIO-ECDS has been joining forces and building bridges in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Opportunities of EU support for environmental CSOs in SMCs

According to EU officials, the EU sees civil society as "an integral part of the partnership" and thus a key player in pushing forth reforms. The EU has reaffirmed its commitment to strengthening capacities of CSOs "going beyond capital cities as well as encompassing religious organisations, business partners, universities, etc." The new framework for setting Partnership Priorities (PP) will give CSOs the opportunity to contribute to the discussions both in Brussels and in the field. "To this end, EU Delegations are requested to develop a constant, fruitful dialogue with CSOs to ensure their proper involvement in line with EU commitments in that regard" (EuroMed Rights, 2016). Dialogues have already been initiated with Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt and are expected to include Algeria and Morocco soon.

To enhance cooperation between European and Southern Mediterranean organisations, new partnerships should be created and existing ones strengthened. International and regional organisations could play a very important role by creating and expanding opportunities to ensure the engagement of both European and Southern Mediterranean organisations. There is a need to provide more funding

¹ A Brief Note on cooperation possibilities has been prepared between the BlueGreen Med-CS project of the UfM, and the GEF's SGP implemented by the UNDP. The key purpose of cooperation between them was to take advantage of the presence of both programmes within the Mediterranean region to help connect local, national and regional processes and actions supporting the environment, and facilitating participation of CSOs.

opportunities to both implement joint projects and ensure an exchange of views and knowledge in addition to technology transfer.

Areas of potential interventions for the EU's support

The EU could contribute to improved environmental protection and sustainable development in the region through the direct support of the conservation and sustainable management and use of natural resources, more precisely through: (1) the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystems. Efforts to conserve biodiversity must take into consideration not only the physical environment but also the socioeconomic conditions and local community needs that are directly connected to biodiversity and ecosystem services; (2) forest restoration, as restoration and responsible management of forests will address health and economic crises that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. It will contribute to economic recovery through green jobs while increasing food security and improving human well-being; (3) coastal zone management through projects aiming to balance environmental, economic, human activities and human health; (4) de-polluting river basins and other ecosystems through activities to face pollution resulting from agriculture, mining, urban development and industrial pollution; (5) increased support to green, circular and blue economies, which will significantly result in economic growth, improved livelihoods, human well-being, gender equality, reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities while creating new job opportunities; (6) sustainable production and consumption, where support is essentially needed to help countries build and set recovery plans after the pandemic that take into consideration reversing current trends and changing consumption and production patterns towards a more sustainable future; (7) intervention in energy transition and energy security could also be beneficial, as well as in resource efficiency, including water and waste management; and (8) support for better environmental governance to ensure the engagement of relevant stakeholders (government, private sector, academia and CSOs) could also yield positive effects in the region (DG DEVCO, 2018).

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