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Seminar on Empowerment of Youth Organisations and Youth-led Civil Society Initiatives in the South-Mediterranean Framework

Malta, 22 - 24 march 2012

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report has been prepared for the EU-CoE youth partnership by an external consultant and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the European Commission and the Council of Europe.

Background and context of the seminar

The process of changes brought about by the 'Arab spring' in various countries provided the context and drives the need for re-visiting this cooperation. The *seminar on empowerment of youth organisations and youth led civil society in the South-Mediterranean framework* was the first step in this direction, providing youth non-governmental organisations and institutional partners with the opportunity to reflect upon recent developments and their implications for the future youth policy cooperation so as to safeguard ownership of the process among stakeholders and to ensure a sustainable long-term perspective.

Indeed, the events in a number of countries in the Arab region since the beginning of 2011 have imposed a new perception of young people's capacities and aspirations. As crucial actors in the processes of political changes, young people have stood up for more freedom, equality and justice. They also stand up for better future perspectives in education and work, economic and social development and participation in the decision making process. Thus and linked to the above, the role and organisation of youth policy needs to be reviewed and international youth policy cooperation has an important role to play. Despite the obvious differences between the Arab and European regions, it is clear that both are affected by consequences of globalisation processes.

The institutional framework

The South-Mediterranean youth policy cooperation of the partnership between the European Union and the Council of Europe in the field of youth, the League of Arab States and other actors started in 2005, with the aim to develop a common understanding and exchange of issues of specific concern for youth policy in Europe and South Med region. The cooperation aims at developing a common understanding and exchange of issues of specific concern for youth policy in Europe and South Med region. Since 2006, other national and international stakeholders of youth policy in European and South Med countries have become involved and extended the framework of this informal cooperation.

The activities carried out brought together youth researchers, governmental institutions responsible for youth policy and nongovernmental youth organisations in European and South Med countries. Those initiatives led to - amongst other results, new possibilities for direct exchanges between South Med and European youth leaders, as well as opportunities for capacity-building of civil society youth organisations through training courses on human rights education, intercultural dialogue and youth participation.

In reaction to the political changes in their Southern neighbouring countries, both, the European Union and the Council of Europe are strengthening their efforts to support these developments towards democracy. Young people in Egypt, Tunisia and other parts of the South-Mediterranean hold the key to the sustainable and peaceful development of their societies based on human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Understanding and taking into account their expectations and needs is crucial for all the institutional stakeholders, such as the League of Arab States, national youth policy authorities and youth organisations. The experience of young people from the Diasporas in Europe and their role in and perception of recent developments can also positively contribute to this process.

Purpose of the seminar

The seminar gathered about 40 participants from 19 countries. It focused on the role and status of youth organisations/youth movements and the young people they work with as crucial actors in the development and consolidation of inclusive, participatory and pluralistic democracies based on human rights and the rule of law. Alongside a joint analysis on the impact of youth (organisations) on the Arab revolutions (and vice versa) as well as their role within the resulting transition process have also been part of the agenda. In order to come up with well-grounded recommendations, young people supported by experts have been given the opportunity to exchange experiences and needs through three main working groups. Proposals for concrete projects to be realised by/in cooperation with youth (organisations) also formed part of the above-mentioned recommendations. The results of the seminar will be used for the preparation of the forthcoming Tunis symposium on youth participation and contribute to a meaningful dialogue between policy, practice and research at that event.

Before, during and after the Arab spring: participants' realities

The seminar shed the light on 'before and after' the Arab spring. Through interventions and exchanges, participants and speakers have been able to highlight some of the key factors which led to the revolutions as well as the remaining challenges, more than one year after the burst of the Jasmin revolution.

Interchangeably called the 'Arab Uprising', 'Arab Spring', 'Arab Spring and Winter', Arab Revolutions' or 'Arab protest', the **roots of the events** early 2011 which brought wind of changes in the Arab region are now well known, thanks to the media, the social networks and the number of activities and initiatives developed since. Though numerous specific factors could be listed for each country, the commonalities that resulted from the exchanges during the seminar could be summarised as follow: a general rejection and a strong will to subvert the power (dictatorship) in place; the concentration of wealth in the hands of autocrats and an ever growing intolerance of cases of corruption; constant violation of human rights; an increase of poverty and unemployment; lack of transparency and democratic participation and a strong feeling of injustice, to name a few. Parallel to that, Europe has witnessed the birth of movements such as the 'Indignados' as results of somewhat similar factors, such as; lack of job opportunities; the economic decline; an increased instability and lack of participatory democracy and space for active citizenship; and corruption.

The seminar allowed a **better understanding of the role social media and social networks played in the revolutions**. Although it would be totally untrue to credit the latter for the outcomes of the events, they undoubtedly played a key role in easing the dissemination of information in real time, allowing massive reactions and coordinated actions. The 'cyber revolution' mostly started at home, transforming the private space into a public forum, a space for expression where no one was told what was right or wrong, a space for citizenship and a way to achieve transformations as never before. In countries perceived as rather hostile to the use of Internet, the social networks became a powerful tool to counter the power in place and overcome bans beyond imagination. However, the different interventions during the seminar also highlighted the other side of the medal. Indeed and even though social media and social networks are mostly user-generated contents and do develop as people use and shape them, it appeared important to recall who is behind the social media. Moreover, the regulations that social networks such as facebook imposed did not always ease disseminating the information though ensuring a minimum 'safety', as for instance when it came to the use of real names (using false names had as consequence a ban on the facebook page).

The **Arab spring brought down autocrats and dictators** (in Tunisia and Egypt), led to the definition of new constitutions (e.g in Morocco) and to transition periods as to support the

overall process of changes towards democratic elections, for instance. It witnessed a process where **[young] people fought power** while being in a system of power-relation. It highlighted the duality between individualism and communitarianism and situations where the two met as to achieve common objectives: justice, freedom and democracy. However and although most of the media kept on 'painting the situations in pink' so to say, young people from the Arab region started to **feel something closed to disappointment**, aware of their own weaknesses as well as of the enormous obstacles still in place. Indeed, the revolutions and protests did not bring –yet, the expected changes. There are still high levels of resistance to change amongst not only the new institutions or the transitional structures but also amongst the population.

Youth organisation, youth movements and civil society organisations realised that to move on and prove that they deserve the place they claimed and fought for, **they need a much higher level of coordination, organisation and strategy**. Before the remaining challenges such as the extremely weak financial resources, the lack of education and training opportunities, the lack of trust, and the unemployment situation, young people are left with the immense task to better organise themselves, to radically break with old models of governance and innovate, to reach the unreached and develop a more inclusive approach to their work, and be ready to be challenged though empowered and equipped with the necessary skills and competences to act as citizens and along equality principles.

The implications of the Arab spring on NGOs and civil society organisations

As explained in the previous point, the implications of the Arab spring resulted in a number of awareness-raising processes. In spite of the still lack of trust, transparency and willingness to 'radically-change', all participants agreed that **it is time to rethink youth-led movements**. Indeed, the revolutions shed light on the general weakness of youth/youth-led movements and civil society organisations. Not weakness in terms of motivation but rather in structural and organisation terms.

Parallel though different than those they condemn, youth-led organisations acknowledged that they **lack the resources and possibilities to envision their work and their future** from a different perspective. They realise the need for change, for different forms of governance, for considering 'youth participation', democratic processes and citizenship differently, but do feel somehow steered down in a common post-revolution form of apathy. The task is huge, and will require to **first be able to get out of power-relations** (who had prerogatives over whom) **as to exercise their roles in a different way** and develop strategies based on the needs of the people they work with.

To be able to influence the new power in place and become **full actors of the transition while shaping the future**, youth-led and civil society organisations will need to become accountable and credible. Concretely, this also means to go through training on organisational management, capacity building, advocacy and leadership, among others. It will require a very cohesive and inclusive approach to youth work as to avoid letting anyone behind.

Such processes will also imply **enhancing dialogue and cooperation with other and new networks**. Though everyone is now calling for visibility and for its place in the process of change, cooperation remain a key word as to work in an organised and systemic manner, still guaranteeing organisational specificities and identity.

The Arab spring also **put into light external obstacles to youth participation** which still exist at the moment of the seminar: security harassment and control of civil society movements; the lack of access to rights (e.g. to participate, to education); the need to reform and transform

education and training; the need to recognise the value and contribution of youth work; and to improve the visibility and recognition of non formal education.

Today: the role and participation of and in youth organisations / youth-led organisations?

As stated by Karima Rhanem during her intervention, ‘today youth voice their opinions to influence policy making. They want their voices to be heard and considered; they want to be part of the decision making process; they want to be actors of change’.

The **questions** raised during the seminar and partially tackled in the proposals and recommendations were as varied as the number of challenges youth-led organisations face.

- Why to participate? For social change, for transformation, for citizenship, for the access to rights, for equity, for well-being... But what does it mean for youth-led organisations today?
- There is a need for youth-led and civil society organisations to be ready to be challenged and to have a critical look to their work. Many are not ready yet and need support in this process;
- Youth-led and civil society organisations may rethink their very basic structure. Do they still have to be membership-based, for instance? Do they still need to function as they used to or according to the ‘European standards of youth organisations’? Perhaps this is the time and the chance to be innovative in the way of working, cooperating and networking.
- Youth-led and civil society organisations need to avoid falling into the trap of the exclusive priority on employment. Youth participation goes far beyond it;
- The question of identity will remain important: dialogue, values, and attitudes will have to be comprehensively considered when developing future initiatives and strategies. Hence, intercultural dialogue will have a transversal and major role to play in the forthcoming cooperation not only within the region but also with European youth organisation and amongst institutions;
- The youth field in general won’t be able to ignore the political emerging forces (e.g. political Islamic coalitions). What impact may that have on the work of civil society and youth-led organisations?
- Youth-led and civil society organisations should aim at getting fully involved in the development and managements of legislations, regulations and structures that affect them. Accountability and credibility are necessary and need to be accompanied by training mechanisms as well as safe and secured spaces for participation.

Next steps: recommendations and proposals

One of the outcomes of the seminar consisted in a list of proposals and recommendations from the participants, which could serve as a basis to prepare not only the forthcoming event in Tunis (August 2012) but also for institutions and partners to stimulate their reflections on future priorities and related cooperation strategies.

Participants were divided into three working groups focusing on education and training, youth participation and citizenship, and access to rights. Although each group had its own specific topics and theme-related proposals, several issues and commonalities can be drawn.

These are proposals/recommendations made by the participants of the Malta seminar:

- The **concept of 'youth' and young people'** varies a lot from region to region. Future partnerships may require to agree on a common definition of youth, which may also lead to – at a later stage though, the elaboration of an international declaration on youth and youth rights.
- The need to create a **common [Euro-Arab] youth platform** as to favour sharing good practices and experiences, have online consultations with specialists and experts, and increase the possibility to gather information about partners and funding opportunities.
- **Knowledge, research and documentation** should ensure the [online] publication of youth oriented material and research should enhance the knowledge about youth [policy] issues. This area of work ought to include **mapping/baselines for measuring the situation of young people** in the different countries as well as ensure tackling the issue of **youth rights**. The creation of a **think-tank** with young people from both Europe and the Arab region as to carry research-related work could also be considered. Communication should of course consider the **use of new technologies and in particular of social media and social networks** and – in the case of education and training, the development of more **e-learning** platforms.
- **Capacity building through specific training** should form part of institutional and youth organisations strategies as they guarantee empowering young people to take an active role in matters that concern them. Specific attention should be dedicated to **human rights education and to targeted and thematic campaigns and advocacy**. Amongst other issues mentioned are training in organisational management and democratic leadership.
- **Cooperation between formal and non formal education** needs to be reinforced as to maximise the learning outcomes and the competence development of young people. **Youth work ought to be recognised** and seen as an added value to other education mechanisms. Schools should also consider creating spaces for participation within the very structure such as, for instance, [school] youth councils.
- **Legislations** should aim at enhancing affirmative actions or introduce quotas of young people representatives in governmental bodies and structures. Thus, **'co-management'** of structures dealing with youth, sport and education issues (for instance) should be considered based on the models already applied within the Council of Europe or following the path of the EU's structural dialogue. Evaluation and monitoring systems involving young people should also be created.
- There is an urgent need to **review existing funding mechanisms for youth organisations** and to make sure that representatives of the latter are involved in developing/elaborating the former (e.g. through co-management and/or consultation mechanisms). Funding should also guarantee **inclusion of all young people**.

Complementary to the above, the group on access to rights has developed a full proposal aiming at the creation and running of a **Euro-Arab rights network or platform for human rights**.

General Rapporteur: Gisele Evrard