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Civil society and national dialogue

The Middle East and North Africa Regional Organization of the International Council on Social Welfare convened its third Forum in Rabat, Morocco on 17 and 18 June 2013. It was devoted to civil dialogue in the Arab world, and the comparison of experiences and practices, bringing together representatives of Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Mauritania, Jordan, the Palestine Autonomy, Tunisia and Yemen. The choice of the priority theme for discussions reflected a growing recognition of the importance of the civil dialogue in the Arab societies in the aftermath of the “Arab spring” and uncertainties about existing political choices and trade-offs, as well as a role the civil society can play in promoting democratic development and popular participation.

The “Arab spring” has attracted much attention around the world. The root causes of the political manifestations and profound changes in the various countries involved were, of course, different – because the histories and problems of those countries are also country-specific. But there was, in my view, a common denominator – a clear desire on the part of people who went out into the streets *to have their voices heard*. So the “Arab spring” was not exclusively an issue of youth unemployment as it was sometimes depicted. One of the lessons learned is that people want to find ways to participate in and have a greater voice in all matters that affect their lives; people want to be active citizens and be able to shape their present and their future. They also demonstrated against what they perceived as unfair, namely, being forced to remain invisible and voiceless, to be deprived of universally recognized rights, to be witnesses to and without recourse in the face of what they perceived as injustice resulting from unfair rules of the game.

Civil society is made up of voluntary associations formed by citizens for the purposes of common interests or collective action. Situations in the Arab countries regarding such possibilities differ significantly and it is a gross simplification to speak about only one “Arab world”. Countries in the region are learning that civil society is not only a fundamental element of political democracy, but it is also intertwined with democratic forms of governance. The openness of the political debate, which by itself is one of the

pre-requisites of democracy, is an important element in offering participants equal opportunities to influence public opinion. These organizations may advocate for certain course of action, and they may be more or less successful. But politicians and policies are rated by majority decision in a democracy as expressed by citizens through the ballot box.

In democratic countries civil society organizations offer channels for the expression of various interests; they also help to articulate public concerns. In this way they promote the participation of citizens in the affairs of their country at the community and national levels. It is beneficial for society as a whole to have various points of view presented and discussed in a constructive manner. First, it creates a sense of belonging and helps to overcome alienation stemming from “imposed” solutions. Second, if the solutions to difficult issues of public policy are based on wide-ranging discussions in society before the final decision is taken, the chances are that they will be better, compared to situations when they are arbitrary and result from a top-down process. In addition, people often find it easier and more effective to participate in community life through civil society organizations.

Civil dialogue is a process that involves people coming together to discuss issues deemed important to society. But definitions may differ from one country to another. The partners may start with different expectations and different understandings of the existing choices and trade-offs, and it is not at all guaranteed that they will be able to resolve their differences and find the satisfactory solutions easily. But it may happen with time. That is why it is important to approach civil dialogue, not as an ad hoc phenomenon that is useful in resolving certain extraordinary crisis situations (crisis management is certainly very important and adds value to the dialogue in the eyes of the citizenry), but rather as a *permanent feature of modern democracy*. When stakeholders are talking to each other continuously, listening to the arguments and defending their positions with arguments – even though they may disagree – that process strengthens trust in society and brings it to a new level. If mutual understanding is achieved through continuous dialogue, that is a definite plus for a society; then even some extreme forms of mistrust, hostility and violence might give way to reconciliation. In many situations national dialogue has been an important precursor to a wider political processes and broad-based negotiations.

In the Arab countries the government traditionally played an important role in articulating public interests, and in principle government efforts can also bring people together to build a better society. One of the lessons learned is that when the state *engages its citizens, listens* to their concerns and *acts in cooperation with civil society organizations*, the outcomes may

be much better. But it is not easy to learn how to get along, and all stakeholders need to invest much effort in developing plans and programs that address the needs of society as a whole. *Positive agendas are important*, not just criticism. At the same time, one can argue that civil society organizations, which emerge with visions of their own and sometimes critical visions, might provide a clear indication of the nature and level of people's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with some traditional systems for intermediating interests, as well as their rising or declining trust in established political parties or politicians.

It is clear that independence of civil society is an important pre-requisite of democratic development. But *civil society is not homogeneous*, and the Arab countries are no exception to that rule. Some organizations demonstrate commitment to the improvement of living conditions of people, the protection of the environment, or supporting various peace activities, while others may promote completely different goals and views, which are at odds with democracy or human rights. We are talking here about the first group of civil society organizations, which work for the people and promoting positive values, such as altruism, civic responsibility and participation. These benign organizations quite often fill various gaps in the provision of services and help those who are marginalized, promoting interconnectedness and a sense of community.

National elites can also play a very important and constructive role in advancing a dialogue with civil society, if these elites are capable of learning and are truly concerned with national well-being and cohesion and not just with their role and privileges in the status quo. They must, therefore, be supportive of institutions promoting dialogue and be able to accommodate constructive dissent with regard to some key national priorities, learning to listen to those who disagree with them. The role of national parliaments as the place for open discussion on all issues of importance, as well as the place where the ways and means for resolving national problems are thoroughly explored, is paramount. Furthermore, a free press provides a window for articulating alternatives views and its role is essential.

Often among the barriers to inclusive societies we find the resistance of the privileged to change in the face of an evolving environment. This type of barrier is probably one of the most deeply-rooted and widespread. And *poverty* – endemic in some countries – itself represents a huge barrier to the participation of people in society. The need for inclusiveness in democratic societies is universally recognized and reflected in many key documents of the United Nations. The role of civil society is also well reflected there, and standards are highlighted. Let me refer to the World Social Summit held in Copenhagen almost twenty years ago, which articulated the need to

promote a “society for all” or, in other words, an inclusive society, as one of the goals of social development.¹ How to achieve such political, social, economic inclusion is a different matter, there are no shortcuts here and practical strategies should be charted by countries themselves. But the Program of Action of the World Social Summit contains a lot of normative indicators helpful for national policy-making. The UN Secretariat has also produced a number of important documents on how to promote social inclusion, popular participation and empowerment.² That might be helpful when national legislation is drafted or reviewed.

The *culture of civil dialogue* is very important. But I would also stress the need for a *culture of democracy* in which national dialogue can flourish. The capacity to resolve conflicts peacefully needs to be improved, or even built from scratch, when there is a history of violence. I think that when there are established channels that enable citizens to engage in the national dialogue or when it is possible to establish such channels, it becomes easier to learn the skills necessary for conducting the dialogue.

But we should also not lose sight of the main issues – quite often confrontations on the streets are the result of inequality, wide-spread corruption and the marginalization of some groups in society. So, dedicated efforts at the national level are required to address the socio-economic roots of the crisis, before it starts breeding confrontation and violence.

Establishing an agenda for a national dialogue that reflects the concerns of all stakeholders is vital. Putting forward such an agenda creates incentives for all stakeholders to engage in the dialogue with a clear desire to achieve a positive outcome. Having a vision of possible solutions is important for all sides. It is helpful if the process is well thought out, its format agreed in advance, and, where agreed, some professional facilitation is considered. Much depends on the negotiation teams – the participants should make a major effort and come to the round table with an open heart, without preconceived reservations – however difficult psychologically it might be for them. To listen and to hear are two different things. I am hesitant to talk about pre-conditions before the start of a dialogue, because pre-conditions might be counterproductive for fruitful discussions and even derail them outright. I would mention only one precondition – mutual respect and willingness to consider some novel approaches along with time-tested solutions.

Non-governmental organizations are actively involved in the provision of social services in many countries of the world, including Arab countries. Regarding some specific forms of engagement by civil society in this part of the world, let me provide a practical example related to our activities. For the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) as a global NGO, the issues of social justice, social welfare and social protection are the most important

policy issues. We actively support the Social Protection Floor (SPF) initiative as outlined in the Recommendation 202 of the International Labour Organization. We believe that civil society can play an important role in the design of social protection floor schemes and in monitoring their implementation at the national level. Many Arab countries are well known for using a variety of tools to protect their vulnerable and less-privileged groups, apart from family support, which has traditionally been very important. The engagement of civil society organizations can have a huge social value, as they can work to improve national systems of social protection, enhancing at the same time the credibility of government efforts in this area. The SPF is a universal scheme that seeks to provide basic guarantees regarding income security for children, for older persons and for people in active age temporarily out of work. It also envisions access to essential health services. ICSW advocates a bottom up approach to monitoring the implementation of the Social Protection Floor initiative, and we believe that a combination of qualitative and quantitative tools used by civil society and the state is helpful in getting a better picture of the effectiveness of the proposed scheme.

The emergence of new technologies and the growing sophistication of the Internet and social media have made our lives different – this fact is well recognized. The new electronic means provide a wealth of new opportunities to all, including instant communications. These new technologies cannot but facilitate the development of the civil society organizations, making information widely available and political mobilization easier. But these new communication technologies become even more important when other elements relevant to the development of civil society are also present, namely, the accountability of government, the transparency of the political process and the openness of discussions.

I have already mentioned that the freedom of the media, including the press, is indispensable for democratic development and for a flourishing civil society. Unimpeded access to information is essential for improving the quality of education, health and other basic services, and the development of science – in this sense the interests of civil society coincide with the principle of a freedom of information. Free and responsible media highlight the life of society in all its complexity. It is essential for the dialogue and for promoting a culture of understanding and tolerance. I would also stress its importance in promoting global human solidarity, the co-existence of cultures and civilizations and their cross-fertilization .

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Notes

1. Report of the World Summit for Social Development, A/Cof.166/6 <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/conf166/aconf166-9.htm>
2. Participatory dialogue: Towards a stable, safe and just society for all, UN DESA, New York, 2007 [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/publications/prtcprtry_dlg\(full_version\).pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/publications/prtcprtry_dlg(full_version).pdf)