Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'COVID-19: The role of civil society in the reconstruction and resilience of the Euro-Mediterranean region'

(own-initiative opinion)

(2023/C 140/03)

Rapporteur: **Angelo PAGLIARA**

Plenary Assembly decision	25.3.2021
Legal basis	Rule 52(2) of the Rules of Procedure
	Own-initiative opinion
Section responsible	External Relations…
Adopted in section	20.12.2022
Adopted at plenary	24.1.2023
Plenary session No	575
Outcome of vote	
(for/against/abstentions)	183/0/5

1. **Introduction**

1.1. The pandemic crisis has hit the Euro-Mediterranean region hard, exacerbating existing problems and creating new challenges to add to previous ones. The socioeconomic consequences of this are likely to increase inequalities, especially in countries with weak economic and productive systems.

1.2. The EESC's Euromed Follow-up Committee has decided to focus on the role of civil society in reconstruction and resilience in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

1.3. Civil society organisations from the Euro-Mediterranean region and the economic and social councils of various countries have been involved in drafting the report. A particular and close collaboration has been pursued with Morocco's Economic, Social and Environmental Council, which co-hosted the 2021 Euromed Summit.

1.4. This information report therefore has an important added value thanks to the involvement of civil society on both sides of the Mediterranean.

1.5. This report complements previous information reports on Education and vocational training in the Euro-Mediterranean region, Digitalisation and SMEs in the Mediterranean region and Sustainable Development in the Mediterranean region ([1]).

2. **Conclusions**

2.1. Civil society worldwide responded immediately to the pandemic, working on the front line and providing assistance and help to the population. In the Euro-Mediterranean area, too, the role of civil society has been crucial in mitigating the adverse effects of COVID-19.

2.2. Civil society organisations in the Euro-Mediterranean region have backed up government action by providing essential services and healthcare; they have distributed personal protective equipment and helped to disseminate vital information, especially in remote areas. Their work has also been of paramount importance in cushioning the impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable sections of society, such as women, young people, immigrants and those with disabilities.

([1]) This information report also complements recent EESC opinions on this subject, in particular: Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a Recovery and Resilience Facility' (COM(2020) 408 final — 2020/0104 (COD)) — 'Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a Technical Support Instrument' (COM(2020) 409 final — 2020/0103 (COD)) (OJ C 364, 28.10.2020, p. 132); ECO/515 Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Regulation (not yet published in the Official Journal; Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'A post-COVID-19 emergency: the design of a New Multilateral Matrix' (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C 364, 28.10.2020, p. 53).

2.3. Civil society's active involvement has buttressed solidarity in the Euro-Mediterranean region; many civil society organisations in the Southern Neighbourhood have played a part in setting up civic solidarity groups, experimenting with innovative methodologies and stepping up their online information and coordination work.

2.4. The EESC firmly believes that a fair and equitable economic and social recovery is only possible through the involvement of the social partners and civil society organisations, the private sector and, in particular, SMEs. The recovery of the Mediterranean area and the development of sustainable and resilient socioeconomic models must be guided by principles such as respect for the rule of law, the protection of democratic values and social and human rights, the implementation of ILO core conventions, and a shared commitment to attaining the sustainable development and climate neutrality goals.

2.5. The EESC welcomes the adoption of the new Agenda for the Mediterranean and underscores the need for all measures in support of the recovery to serve the dual aims of development and improving the quality of life of the region's people.

2.6. A number of social, political, environmental, geopolitical and immigration challenges are currently concentrated in the Mediterranean that are key challenges not just for Europe but for the world as a whole. The EESC believes that the area's growing multidimensional challenges can only be grappled with through renewed and effective multilateralism supported by the European Union.

2.7. The impact of climate change is also affecting the Mediterranean area in the form of desertification, water scarcity and rising temperatures. The current crisis has cast into relief the need to strengthen common resilience and open up new cooperation initiatives on the environment and digitalisation. The EESC considers it useful, not least given the increasing civil society awareness and through greater stakeholder participation, to extend and reinforce initiatives such as WestMED so that they help achieve the climate and environment goals through blue economy models targeting job creation and the protection of the ecosystem and diversity.

2.8. 10 years on from the Arab Spring, the European Union has renewed its cooperation strategy with its Mediterranean neighbourhood. In this connection, the EESC sees the new Agenda for the Mediterranean as a key instrument for the social and economic recovery of the region following the COVID-19 crisis. The renewed partnership commitment must be tightly bound not only to economic and social challenges, but also to environmental, demographic and immigration ones, while fully respecting the Union's progress and founding values. The situation of health systems has proven fragile in many parts of the region, and the pandemic crisis is an important test that could also impinge on political stability.

2.9. The Mediterranean area's recovery and reconstruction programmes should put particular weight on the swift recovery of the tourism sector and especially of small- and medium-sized enterprises that employ more than half of the employees in the EU. A lingering impact of the crisis, including structural unemployment — especially of the young and women — would have serious social consequences.

2.10. The development of the human capital of the workforce is particularly important for the sustainable development of the EU's Mediterranean partners. Especially in the tourism sector, staff training should be promoted. Moreover, the EESC notes that the problem of the 'brain drain' from the southern partner countries to the highly developed industrialised countries is a major obstacle, particularly to the digital transformation of their economies. The Member States of the European Union should therefore facilitate short- and medium-term work permits in the EU for both self-employed workers and employees, especially in the IT sector. Furthermore, the Commission should support the implementation of digital projects in partner countries so that IT technicians in particular find good employment opportunities in their home countries.

2.11. The EU will make use of existing cooperation instruments and programmes to strengthen its dialogue with the Southern Neighbourhood. The European Economic and Social Committee recommends the broadest possible involvement of civil society organisations, through inclusive social and civil dialogue at all levels that takes into account the specific characteristics and roles of the various players involved and that emphasises their contribution to the design and implementation of the policies and measures needed to manage the impact of the current changes and crises, starting with the effects of climate change.

2.12. It is estimated that many countries in the Southern Neighbourhood will experience a fall in GDP per capita and have major challenges in confronting the growing social, economic and poverty risks. Economic and financial reconstruction plans are therefore needed, with measures in them that can also address the problems accounting for growing social insecurity.

2.13. The economic recovery of many countries in the Mediterranean neighbourhood very much hinges on the effectiveness of a proper vaccination campaign, and the EESC accordingly recommends the strengthening of COVAX, and the maximum logistical and supply support from the European institutions, also through bilateral agreements. The EESC stresses that it is particularly important to support partner countries south of the Mediterranean in establishing self-determined production facilities for vaccines and medical products in their countries. In this context, it reiterates its call for the release of patents on vaccines and medical products to combat pandemics to be seriously discussed.

2.14. The EESC believes that the active involvement of civil society in the post-COVID-19 recovery will be instrumental in reaching goals such as improving people's quality of life and developing a new model of sustainable development. It therefore calls on the European institutions, using the partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood, to further strengthen all instruments for involving civil society organisations.

2.15. Civil society organisations have been at the vanguard of supporting the health and social response to the pandemic and their hands-on involvement has helped palliate the social and health fallout on the population. However, as the EESC has already pointed out, their ability to respond to society's needs is shaped by the reality that resources are often limited and can fluctuate. The EESC is convinced of the need to strengthen support mechanisms for civil society organisations, partly so as to better protect the most vulnerable groups afflicted particularly badly by the pandemic, such as young people, women, migrants and people with disabilities.

2.16. The EESC calls for further action by the European institutions in support of peace, democracies and respect for human rights in conflict areas in the Mediterranean neighbourhood. The conditions experienced by the populations in conflict areas have further deteriorated because of the pandemic and vigorous efforts are required to ensure a complete peace plan.

2.17. In view of the certainly difficult recovery from the pandemic crisis, the ongoing trade negotiations between the EU and Morocco and Tunisia, as well as the upcoming negotiations with Jordan, are becoming more important. The EU should take greater account of existing asymmetries and adequately accommodate its southern trading partners. The EESC calls for better involvement of civil society organisations and social partners in the negotiation processes and for a formal anchoring in the Treaties to enable them to make positive contributions to the trade relations between the partner countries, in particular, to ensure the implementation of the mandatory sustainability chapters of the upcoming trade agreements.

2.18. In addition, the EESC suggests that the CSOs and social partners be given responsibility not only for the sustainability chapters but also for the entire scope of trade and investment agreements as part of their formally structured involvement.

2.19. The EESC reiterates its view that the EU should target part of its Aid for Trade funds to support CSO participation and capacity building in sustainable trade and investment efforts.

2.20. The EESC has already called in the past for digital skills to be bolstered on both sides of the Mediterranean. Following the adoption of the new strategy for the Mediterranean and with a view to post-pandemic reconstruction, the EESC points to the need to boost investment in digital infrastructure and support the digital transformation of SMEs as drivers of employment and social development, including through the involvement of the social partners, acknowledging the potential of collective bargaining and social dialogue at the various levels.

3. **General comments**

3.1. The pandemic crisis has made the Mediterranean neighbourhood's difficulties worse: 25 years after the Barcelona Declaration and 10 years after the Arab Spring, the Mediterranean's challenges remain colossal. The European Union and its partners in the Mediterranean region have recently decided to relaunch and strengthen cooperation through the ambitious new Agenda for the Mediterranean.

3.2. This is grounded in the conviction that only by working together and in a spirit of partnership can the strategic challenges of the future be successfully addressed in the interests of both sides. The Agenda includes a bespoke economic investment plan to support the Mediterranean Neighbourhood's socioeconomic recovery in the period 2021-2027. The shared goal, as announced by High Representative Josep Borrell, is to build a peaceful, secure, more democratic, environmentally friendly, prosperous and inclusive Southern Neighbourhood.

3.3. *Bridging the Sea* ([2]), a recent study published by the Med Dialogue for Rights and Equality, found that almost 63 % of civil society organisations operating in the Southern Neighbourhood dealt with issues such as the consolidation of democracy and rights, while more than 53 % dealt with, among other things, grappling with socioeconomic inequalities. Their awareness of and attention to ecological and environmental issues is increasingly important. These figures confirm that a solid foundation exists and that support to civil society needs to be ramped up to better address the challenges of the future.

3.4. Civil society in the Southern Neighbourhood has increased its presence over the last two decades. Its active approach has enabled mitigation of the social and health consequences for the population, but at the same time brought to prominence the need for action to reinforce the capacity and skills of civil society to function better.

3.5. The Mediterranean area, like the rest of the world, has undergone a severe economic and social shock as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The social and health consequences have been aggravated by the lack of adequate public health infrastructure, especially in the most fragile countries. The pandemic crisis has compounded the crises that already existed in a number of countries, the result of a series of factors such as already precarious economic and social trajectories, high unemployment and the consequences of conflicts in certain areas, such as Libya and Syria.

3.6. Governments in the Mediterranean region reacted immediately, albeit in very different ways, to contain the spread of the pandemic by putting support measures in place for workers and businesses, including in collaboration with the social partners and civil society organisations, although they were often insufficiently involved and in some cases not at all. To contain the effects of the pandemic, almost all countries in the Mediterranean area imposed lockdowns, like in Morocco, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, curfews and travel restrictions.

3.7. In the wake of the pandemic crisis, many governments in the area have put in place expansionary policies to address the economic crisis and support particular sectors by stimulating production and introducing tax and economic benefits and measures to attract investment.

3.8. The pandemic has engendered adverse economic consequences across the Mediterranean region, not just because of factors such as reduced internal and external demand and falling consumption, but also because of the worsening financial and public debt situation. Since the outbreak of the pandemic crisis, the region's governments have allocated additional resources to the health and economic systems to support certain sectors. The public deficits of almost all the countries in the Mediterranean region will increase considerably as a result.

3.9. The transport sector has been hard hit by the restrictive measures that have prevented or reduced international travel, making tourism one of the sectors worst affected by the pandemic. The OECD has estimated a contraction in the sector of between 45 and 70 %, and a drop in international tourism of between 60 and 80 % ([3]). Tourism is one of the prime economic sectors for the Mediterranean countries and, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (Unctad), Egypt and Morocco will be among the countries most impacted worldwide ([4]).

3.10. Micro and small- and medium-sized enterprises and the self-employed are one of the important components of the economy of the countries on the southern shore. They have seen a significant reduction in their turnover and most of them have been forced to reduce the number of employees. In this regard, structural measures will be needed to help SMEs emerge from the crisis and to grow and innovate by addressing the dual challenge of digitalisation and decarbonisation.

([2]) https://meddialogue.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Publication-Bridging-the-sea.pdf.

([3]) https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=124_124984-7uf8nm95se&title=Covid-19_Tourism_Policy_Responses&_-ga=2.143901749.1647750476.1622806508-1692148678.1622806341.

([4]) https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditcinf2020d3_en.pdf.

3.11. Although the pandemic crisis in the Mediterranean region has affected all social groups, the worst hit have particularly been: young people, due to the worsening of the labour market and the lockdown measures for schools and universities; women employed, in some areas such as the Southern Neighbourhood, primarily in the informal economy, agriculture and in a tourism sector severely affected by lockdown measures; vulnerable groups such as informal workers and refugees, who are often not beneficiaries of social protection measures, and people with disabilities, due to the often poor services.

3.12. In some parts of the Southern Neighbourhood, factors such as water scarcity and poor access to sanitation have exacerbated the impact of the pandemic, especially in the most socially isolated strata, conflict areas and refugee camps.

4. **Challenges and opportunities**

4.1. As highlighted by the secretary general of the Union for the Mediterranean ([5]), the current health crisis is jeopardising the area's socioeconomic progress of recent years. Nevertheless, the crisis is an opportunity to strengthen integration and make economies more resilient.

4.2. The role of civil society in the Euro-Mediterranean region is of paramount importance in building a fairer and more inclusive society after the pandemic; similarly, as highlighted at the Porto Social ([6]) Summit, the active involvement of the social partners and civil society organisations is crucial in making sure no-one is left behind and for the effective implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

4.3. COVID-19 and related measures put civil society sustainability at risk. Governments and many donors have suspended grants and have frozen funding, redirecting funds to COVID-19 relief efforts. The result is threatening CSO's already fragile sustainability, the possibility to continue serving communities, and the jobs of many civil society workers, although there are big expectations of CSOs. The EESC stresses that organisational sustainability grants and core support funding is crucial for CSOs to adapt to rapidly changing situations and to continue operations during crises.

4.4. The EESC has highlighted the fact that the Mediterranean is one of the parts of the world most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. COVID-19 has adversely affected the social situation and development, making the adoption of sustainable development and green economy strategies a matter of urgency.

4.5. The adoption of recovery plans in the Mediterranean area constitutes a potential opportunity to ensure the region's economic, social and environmental development. It is essential to link development opportunities with adherence to principles such as solidarity, combating inequalities and safeguarding and respecting the rule of law. Active civil society involvement is essential if all the goals are to be attained.

4.6. Future post-COVID-19 reconstruction plans, alongside economic growth, should occupy an important place in the Southern Neighbourhood in measures to contain environmental problems associated with climate change, water scarcity, desertification and pollution. Environmental conservation and protection measures could have a positive impact in the Mediterranean region by diversifying the economy and creating quality jobs. In this context, the EESC draws attention to the very high potential for renewable energies (especially solar and wind energy) in the southern partner countries and calls on the EU and its member countries to push for more sustainable common investments in this field.

4.7. The EESC has already highlighted the need to promote a just transition in the Mediterranean area, partly to bring benefits in terms of health, education and gender. In order to ensure a recovery effectively geared to the principles of the transition and digitalisation, it will be crucial to promote awareness-raising and the development of particular entrepreneurial mindsets and digital skills. The EESC supports the call of its southern partner countries for a stronger commitment of the EU and its Member States in the field of research and development cooperation in the Mediterranean.

([5]) UfM Foreign Affairs Ministers set priority areas for stronger cooperation and integration in the Euro-Mediterranean region — Union for the Mediterranean — UfM (ufmsecretariat.org).

([6]) https://www.2021portugal.eu/en/porto-social-summit/porto-social-commitment/.

4.8. The recovery of the Southern Neighbourhood, in a situation characterised by a large share of employment in the informal economy, is also closely linked to the development of an effective model of vocational training and education. The EESC reiterates the need to strengthen professional skills, especially those of young people and women, so that they can be used in national and transnational settings, as part of a circular brain approach. CSOs also have an important role in strengthening skills through non-formal education, organising workshops and training and through promoting the social economy. The Committee also stresses the need, as already highlighted by the UfM Regional dialogue with social partners, inter alia, to involve the social partners, with a view to tackling the mismatch between supply and demand on the labour market.

Brussels, 24 January 2023.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
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