

EU and South Mediterranean Countries

Ideas for a renewed partnership



Dr. Nader Al Sayed, as Program Manager of NSCE, could you please indicate to us some relevant best practices you were involved in beyond the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, in particular among subjects from the Southern shore of Mediterranean Sea ? Which kind of collaboration (in terms of governance, transferability, main outputs & results, etc), has been developed? What have the limits been?

North South Consultants Exchange (NSCE) has been involved for over twenty years now as a local developmental consultancy firm in the Middle East and North Africa. NSCE has al-

Interview with Nader Al Sayed , Program Manager of the North South Consultants Exchange (NSCE)

ready implemented various developmental endeavors in some South Mediterranean countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania and Lebanon. Our thematic focus lies in the fields of microfinance (and Islamic microfinance), water and wastewater management, governance and capacity building to local ministries and authorities, eco-tourism and socio-economic research.

The most prominent best practice NSCE has contributed to achieve and transfer is the design of Islamic microfinance products and services in Senegal. Funded by the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), the still ongoing project has succeeded in identifying new segments of microfinance beneficiaries interested in alternative and non-traditional types of microcredit.

Between the burden of the past and the ideas for the future

How do you think that the burden of the past, in particular the colonial condition, has influenced the relations between Europe and Mediterranean?

While the colonial burden influenced the relationship between colonial European powers (most notably France and Great Britain) and freshly independent South Mediterranean nations in the 1960s and 1970s right into the 1980s, the relationship between South Mediterranean countries and the EU is relatively stable now (of course a generalization is not perfectly correct here, there are differences between these countries in their relationship to the EU and individual European countries). However, "neocolonial resentments" emerge from time to time as a reaction to certain European policies, e.g. when it comes to restricting immigration to Europe or with regard to subsidizing European agricultural products, thus limiting the access for agricultural products from the South to be exported to Europe. Such practices contribute to drawing a picture that colonialism is returning through the back door.

The aforementioned negative images of Europe can be gradually removed only with more transparency and by following a political path that acknowledges South Mediterranean countries as equal partners, and not merely as beneficiaries of development aid that –in many cases- fosters autocratic structures.

Nowadays, when dealing with geopolitical relations, the reciprocal impression between partners is important. How do the Southern Mediterranean countries see their European neighbors and EU, and how does the latter view the former?



Despite the "neocolonial resentments" that might arise from time to time on the South Mediterranean side vis-à-vis European politics, an overall positive impression dominates the perception of Europe in the South Mediterranean countries. Europe is generally admired for its democratic political systems, for its fair elections and for sticking to a relatively high standard of human and citizen rights. Although the economies of almost all European countries (especially countries like Greece, Spain, Italy or Ireland) have severely suffered from the negative consequences of the most recent financial crisis, the EU is still perceived by the populations in Southern Mediterranean countries as a heaven for employment and a good quality of life. Furthermore, the EU is valued for its technological advance in the various fields of science.

On the other side, South Mediterranean countries are viewed by the EU as a natural extension of an integration process that started more than forty years ago with a handful of European countries and that has reached 27 countries so far (with Bulgaria and Romania being the newest members in the European club). Although an expansion of the EU to the South and South-East cannot be expected in the coming few years, it does play a role in the strategic considerations of European politicians (the debate on Turkey's access to the EU stands as a good example). Of course economic aspects play a vital role in this respect: a tax-free zone including the EU and its South Mediterranean neighbors would have benefits for both sides. The EU would have greater access to export their native products to large emerging markets in Egypt, Morocco, Turkey etc. and South Mediterranean countries would also benefit from greater access to promote and export their own products.

Common values for a renewed partnership

Considering the importance of cultural dialogue, from which common values could a partnership between North and South countries be built on?

Although involved in many brutal conflicts that lasted for many years, the East and the West share a common and rich history of cultural and humanistic achievements. The "West" has profited from characters like Averroes, Avicenna or Ibn Kaldun while ancient and modern European philosophy and science has for sure influenced the Middle East up until now. It is exactly this joint humanistic heritage that should be the fundament for cultural exchange based on shared human values: freedom, equality, fairness and the belief that both Europe and its non-European Southern neighbors have much more similarities than differences. The belief in a common vision and future where both regions are treated as equal partners will do the rest in bridging separating differences.

The role of migration

In the framework traced by the latter two questions, could migration have a role? And, how could the EU policy of "selective immigration" and the problem of "brain drain" that Southern countries have to face with be compatible ?

I do believe that it is legitimate for the European countries to select the "types" of immigrants they need in their local markets. Most recent trend analysis have shown that there is an increasing demand in Europe for highly skilled and educated workers and technicians: physicians, engineers, graduates from natural science faculties and others. At the same time, no one can deny that the influx of highly educated and experienced immigrants to Europe corresponds with a decline of qualified and well-established personnel in Southern Mediterranean countries. Some kind of "scientific compensation" has to be negotiated between the EU and its Southern neighbors, e.g. in form of more intensive scientific exchange between the EU and other Mediterranean countries, through the provision of capacity building programs to local universities and research centers or by increasing the amount of scholarships provided to extraordinary students and researchers from non-EU Mediterranean countries.

What does the Mediterranean Area represent for the external borders of Southern Countries (for example African countries, the others Arab countries, and so on)?

The Mediterranean Area is, maybe, the most important trade region for almost all South Mediterranean countries ranging from Morocco in the West to Croatia in the South-East of Europe. Furthermore and referring to some Arab countries like Lebanon or Iraq, the Mediterranean Area stands for peace, stability and normality.



Although many EU countries do not have ethnically and socially uniform societies, they succeeded in establishing strong political systems that integrate all ethnic groups and social strata under the umbrella of democracy. This experience is still missing to a large extent in countries like Iraq and Lebanon. For them, the EU represents the hope for a better political (and thus better social and economic) reality.

The Barcelona process

It's a shared opinion that the results of the Barcelona process haven't been satisfactory. Do you agree? If not, could you tell me why? On the contrary, if so, could you tell me please what the limits have been?

According to the Barcelona Declaration, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership should achieve the following objectives:

- The definition of a common area of peace and stability through the reinforcement of political and security dialogue.
- The construction of a zone of shared prosperity through an economic and financial partnership and gradual establishment of a free trade area by 2010.
- The rapprochement between people through a social, cultural and human partnership aimed at encouraging understanding between cultures and exchanges between civil societies.

In all aspects there is still room for improvement in terms of political, economic and socio-cultural integration. In terms of economic integration, the free trade agreement has to get its final shape, subsidies have to be removed on both sides gradually, and local agricultural producers from the South have to be trained and supported to export their products to the EU. On a cultural level, it would be great to see much more initiatives like the Anna Lindh Foundation bringing together young people from both sides to exchange their experiences and hopes.

The path to a successful integration of the Mediterranean area

Considering the three pillars of Euro-Mediterranean partnership: political, economic and socio-cultural; if you had to decide where to start, what would you concentrate on first? Why?

The reconciliation of Europe, a continent that witnessed an extensive number of brutalities and rivalries, especially between Germany and France, started as a European Economic Community in 1957 after the Treaties of Rome were signed (before that the European Steel and Coal Community was established). The process of economic integration went hand in hand with the socio-cultural interpenetration. The European Political Cooperation was introduced in 1970 after the economic and socio-cultural integration had started, and until now, political integration has not been completely finalized. In the supranational system of the European Union, there are still many policy fields that are regulated by national governments themselves and not by the EU Commission or Parliament, such as Foreign and Security Policy. Thus, the integration of the Mediterranean Area should follow the same successful and gradual path: economic integration in parallel with socio-cultural integration, followed by political integration.

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In addition to a focus on sustainable development, NSCE International has an excellent network of associated experts in the fields of conflict analysis, peace building and rehabilitation in post-conflict zones, particularly in the Horn of Africa, and it is working towards an expanded cooperation with a wider range of European based donor agencies, development groups, academic institutions and consulting companies.