

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Economic, social and cultural rights in the Euro-Mediterranean region'**

**(own-initiative opinion)**

(2018/C 081/06)

Rapporteur: **Helena DE FELIPE LEHTONEN**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Plenary Assembly decision                    | 30.3.2017  |
| Legal basis                                  | Rule 29(2) of the Rules of Procedure<br>Own-initiative opinion |
| Section responsible                          | External Relations   |
| Adopted in section                           | 28.9.2017  |
| Adopted at plenary                           | 18.10.2017   |
| Plenary session No                           | 529  |
| Outcome of vote<br>(for/against/abstentions) | 123/0/1  |

## 1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. As early as the Barcelona Declaration of 1995 <sup>(1)</sup>, economic and social organisations and civil society as a whole were highlighted as playing a key role in fostering the gradual construction in the Mediterranean of an area of peace and stability, shared prosperity, and dialogue between the cultures and civilisations of the various Mediterranean countries, societies and cultures. At present, civil society organisations in the Mediterranean are forums for inclusion, participation and dialogue with public authorities, including local authorities, with the aim of promoting economic, social and cultural rights in the Mediterranean region. The EESC considers it necessary to **strengthen the role of ESCs** where they exist and to **encourage countries without ESCs to set them up** by intensifying synergies between the various actors involved. In order to promote these rights, the ESCs and economic and social organisations need to develop partnerships so as to make them more realistic and effective.

1.2. Women are victims of gender stereotypes which reproduce political, economic and educational barriers with serious consequences for society's development. The EESC calls for steps to be taken to narrow the enormous gaps between legislation and reality. To this end, the Committee believes there is a pressing need to provide resources to train and educate those responsible for ensuring that this legislation is implemented effectively. In order to strengthen rights, the EESC recommends involving local authorities in the various activities carried out by organisations, economic and social actors, civil society and their gender equality networks working in the relevant societies. This work should be backed up with contributions from universities and specialist research centres.

1.3. The threat of violent extremism must be countered by addressing its multiple causes that go beyond security. Economic and social organisations must play a leading role in this endeavour in collaboration with institutions and networks dedicated to intercultural and interfaith dialogue with a view to achieving a greater impact and including **cultural heritage, artistic expression and creative industries** in their activities. The EESC urges the European Commission and the Member States of the Union for the Mediterranean to promote these intercultural dialogue activities among social partners as well, thus strengthening specialised bodies that have worked in the Mediterranean for many years, such as the Anna Lindh Foundation <sup>(2)</sup>. In terms of heritage, the EESC calls for increased cooperation in the protection of cultural heritage that is under threat because of armed conflict and violent organisations.

<sup>(1)</sup> <http://ufmsecretariat.org/barcelona-declaration-adopted-at-the-euro-mediterranean-conference-2728-november-1995/>

<sup>(2)</sup> <http://www.annalindhfoundation.org/>

1.4. **Economic, labour and social rights** are essential for economic development and a democratic society. These rights include free enterprise, freedom of association and of industrial action, collective bargaining, and social protection in areas such as health, education and old age. As already pointed out by the ILO when it was set up and in the Declaration of Philadelphia in the sense that it was necessary to subordinate economic organisation to social justice. And that this should be the central aim of national and international policies. The Declaration of Philadelphia stresses that economics and finance are resources that serve people.

1.5. The media play a crucial role in shaping mutual perceptions and views and are a key driver for improving intercultural dialogue and fostering respect, tolerance and mutual understanding. The EESC therefore welcomes the launch of projects that seek to ensure respect for diversity and promote information that is free of bias, stereotypes and distorted perceptions. At the same time, it encourages greater use of tools for monitoring, training and awareness-raising in order to tackle racism and Islamophobia in the media, and urges the promotion of cooperation mechanisms and joint platforms for professional development relating both to professional ethics and defending freedom of expression.

1.6. Education is the main vehicle for socioeconomic mobility and as a result for potential improvements in quality of life. By contrast, unequal educational opportunities put the region's stability and security at risk. The EESC therefore calls for joint efforts to improve the quality of primary and secondary education, higher education and vocational training through the exchange of experience on curriculum development and innovative methodology. Furthermore, the EESC considers it essential to close the knowledge gap between the two shores of the Mediterranean and, to this end, proposes the promotion of joint knowledge and research networks to facilitate the transfer and circulation of knowledge and the mobility of teachers, students, academics and researchers as well as support for the translation of their work, especially from and into Arabic.

1.7. Non-formal education is a vital additional element given the valuable role it plays in shaping more inclusive and pluralistic societies. The EESC believes that the synergies between formal and non-formal education should be stepped up and that this type of education should be promoted as a tool for developing a culture of peace and lifelong learning. The EESC therefore calls for more resources to be earmarked for non-formal education and for the transfer of experience and know-how between Europe and the Southern Mediterranean to be promoted.

1.8. With a view to developing an inclusive and competitive economy, support is needed for the digital and technological integration of people. To this end, the EESC underlines the need to promote local and regional projects that empower citizens with regards to the use of new technologies, entrepreneurship and digitalisation, together with the need to strengthen initiatives aimed at citizen participation, promotion of digital training and the creation of decent jobs, such as urban initiatives on social and digital innovation (Labs).

## 2. Background

2.1. In 2011, political systems were shaken by a hope for change among young Arabs. Unexpectedly, these systems were fundamentally called into question. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen deposed their political leaders but the concrete political circumstances would end up taking them in very different directions: from the steadfast transition in Tunisia, sustained by its dynamic civil society, to the change of regime in Egypt, through the open conflicts in Libya and Yemen. Syria has remained embroiled in a bloody war, which has now taken on a regional and international dimension. For example, there have been tragic population displacements and unprecedented migratory movements that have destabilised the entire Euro-Mediterranean area.

2.2. Beyond a change of regime, the aim was to create a fairer and more inclusive system, offering political freedoms, social justice, opportunities and dignity. Expectations were frustrated because they were not translated into the social sphere. Specific political circumstances, both inside and outside these countries, helped to frustrate them. Six years on, legitimate calls for economic, social and cultural rights remain valid but unheeded, and continue to be a potential source of instability for the region.

2.3. The EESC therefore considers achieving peace and democracy throughout the region, as well as respect for the fundamental and human rights of all its citizens, to be an absolute priority.

#### 2.4. Fundamental rights: unwaivable and inalienable

2.4.1. The EESC encourages all countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean to sign up to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights<sup>(3)</sup> and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union<sup>(4)</sup>. At the same time, it stresses the importance of the principles and values of secularism, as well as the protection of the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities<sup>(5)</sup>.

2.4.2. The EESC underlines the crucial importance of advocating a decent quality of life for all. The EESC stresses the need to ensure that people have access to sufficient food and drinking water at affordable prices and sufficient access to energy in order to prevent the energy exclusion of individuals and communities. It also underlines the need to promote a decent environment and to develop healthcare provision.

2.4.3. Given the special circumstances in the region, the right to adequate housing should be ensured at both national and international level or, in the absence thereof, to decent refuge/shelter for individuals and families. At the same time, the EESC believes that the right to the inclusive and proper reconstruction of devastated areas should be guaranteed, regardless of whether this is the result of natural disasters or armed conflict.

#### 2.5. The right to decent work: a way of ensuring social stability and progress

2.5.1. The EESC believes that societies in neighbouring countries need to pool efforts to promote greater inclusiveness and cohesion. Likewise, their economies should undergo reform and innovate in order to create decent jobs — a key element of sustainable development.

2.5.2. At the same time, the EESC stresses the need to guarantee the rights which must underpin these principles. In this respect, the right to decent work in these countries must be safeguarded, regardless of social background, religion and nationality.

2.5.3. The EESC believes that steps must be taken to promote decent work as a way of ensuring social stability, as advocated by the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its follow-up<sup>(6)</sup> and in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights<sup>(7)</sup> as a means of avoiding poverty and encourages the signing of these documents. It is therefore essential to safeguard fundamental labour rights such as the right of association, the right to set up a trade union or to join a trade union of one's choosing, the right to strike, effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, as well as the right to certain health and safety conditions at work and to receive an income.

2.5.4. Likewise, as proposed by the ILO, the right to housing should be developed in order to protect the whole population, and especially the most vulnerable segments of the population. It is also essential to combat violations of basic rights such as child exploitation or forced labour, as well as to promote access to work for women and people with disabilities.

#### 2.6. Entrepreneurship: a key driver of economic development

2.6.1. The European Union believes that the five key factors for ensuring peace, stability, security and prosperity in the Euro-Mediterranean area are: economic development through modernisation and diversification of economies; strengthening the business eco-system and innovative entrepreneurship; creation of jobs through skilled training especially for young people; development of the private sector, especially SMEs; and energy and environmental sustainability<sup>(8)</sup>. Attention is drawn to the creation of quality jobs as a basis for economic prosperity and the enhancement of female entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial synergies on both shores of the Mediterranean.

In turn, the EESC considers that such factors are inseparable from social development, as stability, security and prosperity are always based on integration and social cohesion.

<sup>(3)</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>

<sup>(4)</sup> <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT&from=EN>

<sup>(5)</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/Minorities.aspx>

<sup>(6)</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/declaration/thedeclaration/textdeclaration/lang-en/index.htm>

<sup>(7)</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>

<sup>(8)</sup> [http://ceas.europa.eu/archives/docs/enp/documents/2015/151118\\_joint-communication\\_review-of-the-enp\\_en.pdf](http://ceas.europa.eu/archives/docs/enp/documents/2015/151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf)

2.6.2. As a key element in the development of these economies, the joint communication advocates the need to allow for private entrepreneurship and ensure that it can operate under fair conditions. A legal framework must therefore be safeguarded that provides guarantees for the right to private property and its inviolability, subject to the legal framework.

2.6.3. The Committee also attaches importance to efforts by the public authorities to protect free and fair economic competition, which ensures that entrepreneurs can work under equal conditions. It is therefore essential to ensure equal treatment in access to finance and the availability of microfinance services as well as a public administration that is free from corruption and has a public-service remit.

2.7. The right to create and innovate: the guarantee of a diversified economy with added value

2.7.1. The ministerial declaration of the Union for the Mediterranean on the digital economy<sup>(9)</sup> suggests promoting the inclusive and cross-cutting effects of new technologies in the fields of culture, society, the economy, government and security.

2.7.2. The EESC also supports the approach of the joint communication on the need to diversify and develop the economies of the Mediterranean region in a sustainable and inclusive manner.

2.7.3. When it comes to designing new programmes, the EESC stresses the need for the EU to set up programmes for the Euro-Mediterranean area in order to encourage innovation that enables the region to make progress economically, while also preserving the individual and collective right to create and innovate. This implies the recognition of the right to intellectual property, the right to share and disseminate innovation and the right to have access to new technologies.

2.7.4. The EESC recognises digital inclusion and free internet access as both an individual and collective right, which is inherent in innovation.

2.8. The right to high-quality education: a pillar of human development

2.8.1. Education is the main vehicle for socioeconomic mobility and for potential improvements in quality of life. The United Nations Programme for Development (UNDP)<sup>(10)</sup> has highlighted that, although primary education has reached universal standards and significant progress has also been made in secondary education in many countries in the region, the quality of such education is poor. The World Bank has implemented programmes for this region in cooperation with other agencies, and the European Commission should also carry out work in this area. At the same time, it is pointed out that the significant inequality of opportunity in education is harming the social contract in Arab countries.

2.8.2. The roadmap of the Union for the Mediterranean<sup>(11)</sup> stresses the need to strengthen education as a key tool for creating sustainable and skilled jobs, especially for young people who are out of work and are at risk of developing bad work habits; research and innovation as a basis for modern economies; and sustainability as a cross-cutting approach to ensure inclusive social and economic development.

2.8.3. Strengthening social capital is crucial for the stability and security of the region. There is therefore a need to promote primary and secondary education, higher education, access to science and to scientific knowledge, employability, health, youth empowerment and mobility, gender equality, discussion forums and social inclusion.

2.8.4. Notwithstanding some problems in accessing education and making it universally available, and despite the need to improve the quality of primary and secondary education, the overriding issue is bridging the gap between training and employment. In this regard, it is vital to promote structures that link up the labour market and the education system, with a view to ensuring that young people are fully integrated into society. To this end, the EESC believes that the exchange of experience on curriculum development and innovative methodology must be encouraged, promoting the transfer of experience and practices in order to develop competences and skills suited to working environments. It is also essential to promote and attach greater value to vocational education and training given the challenge of creating 60 million jobs in Arab countries over the next decade.

---

<sup>(9)</sup> <http://ufmsecretariat.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/UfMMinistersDeclarationEN.pdf>

<sup>(10)</sup> [http://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/library/huma\\_development/arab-human-development-report-2016-youth-and-the-prospects-for/](http://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/library/huma_development/arab-human-development-report-2016-youth-and-the-prospects-for/)

<sup>(11)</sup> <http://ufmsecretariat.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/UfM-Roadmap-23-JAN-2017.pdf>

2.8.5. The social partners and other specialist organisations have highlighted the central role of non-formal education (NFE) as a key tool and long-term solution for combating radicalisation and extremism, and for its contribution to the integration of at-risk groups, particularly young people and women.

2.8.6. The EESC welcomes the recognition that non-formal education (NFE) is an important way of complementing formal education, and believes that synergies between them should be stepped up. For example, it believes that there should be greater political commitment to NFE and that it should be provided with a bigger budget, given that it promotes mature and socially integrated young people, teaching them about active participation and the development of democratic values, and is an effective instrument for strengthening a culture of peace.

## 2.9. Academic and educational mobility: bridging the knowledge gap

2.9.1. The mobility of young people is a key element of meeting the challenges facing the Mediterranean. As a matter of fact, migration in Arab countries is an indication of the social exclusion of young people with high-level qualifications. There is therefore a need to promote migration that is beneficial for both countries of origin and destination. This will require greater recognition of diplomas and qualifications and steps to facilitate academic mobility and improve the legal framework for conditions of entry and residence in the EU applicable to nationals of neighbouring countries, for the purposes of research, study, pupil exchanges, training and voluntary service.

2.9.2. At the same time, one of the biggest gaps that currently exists between the two sides of the Mediterranean is the knowledge gap. The EESC therefore believes that measures should be taken to promote the production and circulation of scientific and academic knowledge, and proposes the creation and promotion of joint Euro-Mediterranean knowledge and research networks. It is also essential to promote the translation of any relevant academic and scientific work, especially from and into Arabic.

2.9.3. At the same time, the EESC is keen to encourage mobility of students, teachers, researchers, academics and scientists through placements, exchanges and practical experience, as a crucial way of promoting academic quality, employability of young people, and strengthening the effective implementation and the achievement of results by the Erasmus Plus Programme in the countries of the Euro-Mediterranean region, as well as the circulation of knowledge and intercultural dialogue.

## 2.10. The media and intercultural dialogue: the key to tolerance

2.10.1. The pluralism, independence and professionalism of the local media ensure social progress and help the media act as a catalyst for change in the neighbourhood countries.

2.10.2. The EESC underlines the need to promote dialogue and cooperation amongst the media in the Euro-Mediterranean area, with a view to improving and strengthening professional standards and their legislative frameworks. It is also crucial to help guarantee and protect freedom of the press and freedom of expression.

2.10.3. The role of the media in improving intercultural dialogue and encouraging respect, tolerance and mutual understanding must be recognised. Given the increasing prevalence of anti-Western speech in the South and populist xenophobic speech in Europe, it is more vital than ever to take steps to combat this type of narrative in a way that can counter the views that pit peoples, cultures and religions against one another on the basis of a binary, black and white approach that is non-inclusive.

2.10.4. In this connection, the EESC welcomes the launch of projects that seek to ensure respect for the diversity that exists in Europe and advocate tolerance and information free of bias, stereotypes and distorted perceptions, such as the Islamophobia media observatory in Spain<sup>(12)</sup>, which promotes information free of racism. It in turn encourages the launch of cross-cutting projects to this end.

2.10.5. Beyond the security sphere, lack of opportunity, particularly for young people, may be one of the underlying reasons for instability and can be added to the causes of radicalisation. There is clearly a need to prevent and combat extremism and racism by promoting intercultural dialogue. For example, synergies between the institutions and networks dedicated to intercultural and interfaith dialogue should be stepped up and complementarities found in order to achieve a greater impact.

---

(12) <http://www.observatorioislamofobia.org/>

2.10.6. Mediterranean ESCs, economic and social actors and civil society must all be involved in preventing radicalisation and violent extremism. Mechanisms are therefore needed to support exchange and cooperation with an allocated budget, as well as to tackle issues relating to justice, gender inequality, hate speech, youth unemployment and illiteracy, as part of a wider de-radicalisation effort that also includes the promotion of intercultural dialogue. In this connection, the work of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)<sup>(13)</sup> and its Centre of Excellence should be underlined.

2.10.7. The EESC believes that exchanges between intellectuals, artists and cultural operators in the region must be encouraged, since they are key agents of social change, promoting shared projects that help develop dialogue and shared knowledge. At the same time, the Committee calls for increased coordination and cooperation to protect cultural heritage and to highlight and promote awareness of the different cultural and artistic disciplines and sensitivities that coexist in the Euro-Mediterranean area, as a valuable part of cohesion and mutual understanding.

## 2.11. Civil society and synergies between social stakeholders: forums for inclusion and debate

2.11.1. The economic crisis and xenophobia in the northern Mediterranean, but also the demand for freedom of expression and the fight for human rights in countries on its southern shores, impact decisively on efforts to secure economic, social and cultural rights in the societies of Euro-Mediterranean countries.

2.11.2. In this regard, the European Parliament's human rights report of November 2015<sup>(14)</sup> states that greater support for civil society is needed. However, civil society organisations in the countries of the South still have low visibility, in spite of their efforts and the risks they occasionally take as well as the role they play in promoting social change. The Mediterranean ESCs can play a role in this regard by providing a space to meet, discuss and disseminate information.

2.11.3. The EESC notes that the voluntary sector is a sphere that contributes to inclusion. At the same time, the EESC believes that the European Commission should increase support for projects carried out by organised civil society through its economic and social organisations, its associations, and the networks that these comprise, and that partnerships and synergies between the different stakeholders involved should be stepped up.

2.11.4. The EESC believes that the Euro-Mediterranean ministers should cooperate with the Euromed Summit of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions on specific projects, without prejudice to the provision of support for civic and cultural associations.

## 2.12. **Women:** at the centre of economic, social and cultural rights

2.12.1. During the three Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conferences on Strengthening the Role of Women in Society held in Istanbul<sup>(15)</sup> (2006), Marrakesh<sup>(16)</sup> (2009) and Paris<sup>(17)</sup> (2013), governments promised to implement the commitments adopted: equal rights for men and women when taking part in political, economic, civil and social life; tackling all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls; and working on changing attitudes and behaviour to achieve gender equality so that women are empowered, not only in terms of rights, but also in reality.

2.12.2. Despite the legislative changes adopted in southern Mediterranean countries, the UNDP believes that we are still far from achieving women's equality with regard to economic, social and cultural rights.

2.12.3. The EESC notes the significant disparity between official declarations, proposals from institutions and even current legislation, and the everyday reality as experienced by women in their communities, and underlines the need to bring national laws into line with constitutions and to close legal loopholes that still allow discriminatory practices against women.

<sup>(13)</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network)

<sup>(14)</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+REPORT+A8-2015-0344+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

<sup>(15)</sup> <https://www.euromedwomen.foundation/pg/en/documents/view/4224/ministerial-conclusions-on-strengthening-role-of-women-in-society>

<sup>(16)</sup> <https://www.euromedwomen.foundation/pg/en/documents/view/4756/second-ministerial-conclusions-on-strengthening-role-of-women-in-society>

<sup>(17)</sup> <https://www.euromedwomen.foundation/pg/en/documents/view/4226/third-ministerial-conclusions-on-strengthening-role-of-women-in-society>

2.12.4. In this connection, the EESC emphasises the need to provide resources to train and educate those responsible for overseeing the effective application of legislation: judiciary, security forces, businesses, educators, media, institutions such as the ESC, etc.

2.12.5. In order to strengthen rights and obtain better results, the EESC recommends bringing together local authorities and civil society organisations working in the field of gender equality, given that they have at their disposal better data on the problems and needs of the population. This joint work by different stakeholders could be supported with contributions from academia (universities and specialist research centres). One example is the Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation<sup>(18)</sup> (FFEM), which, together with the Federation of Leagues of Women's Rights, the regional authority of Marrakesh, Cadi Ayyad University, the regional committee on human rights and other local bodies, has carried out an awareness-raising campaign against child marriages.

2.12.6. The EESC therefore calls on ministers of the Union for the Mediterranean's Member States to ensure that these areas are taken into account at the next ministerial conference and that sufficient funds are provided for these initiatives and campaigns.

2.12.7. The EESC maintains that failing to take the above points into account will have a major impact. Child marriages, early interruption of education and hence the devaluation of women in the labour market and in politics, are some of the factors that have a negative impact on efforts to secure rights, especially those of women and girls.

Brussels, 18 October 2017.

*The President*  
*of the European Economic and Social Committee*  
Georges DASSIS

---

---

<sup>(18)</sup> <https://www.euromedwomen.foundation/>