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Towards a More Reflexive EU in the Mediterranean

Final Policy Recommendations of MEDRESET

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Towards a More Reflexive EU in the Mediterranean. Final Policy Recommendations of MEDRESET

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Abstract

In MEDRESET's final policy recommendations, aimed at the new European Parliament, Commission and High Representative, we propose that the EU should become a more reflexive actor in the Mediterranean. Three related steps are key to take into this direction: (1) Substance: Begin to have periodic screening reports of EU policies and the possible harmful effects they have, and set up a study commission to reflect on a new development model for the whole Mediterranean, Europe included. (2) Actors: Work with local non-co-opted civil society and include it in all stages of policy-making towards third countries. (3) Instruments: Come forward with a reconciliation, "do no harm" and dialogue policy.

Introduction

MEDRESET has started from the observation that EU policies in the Mediterranean, as well as parts of the literature on them, have been characterized by a Eurocentric approach which has featured: (1) a narrow geopolitical conceptualization of the Mediterranean space driven by European economic and security interests; (2) the application of European concepts and values to the Mediterranean, manifested also in a sectoral (instead of integrated) approach to deeply linked policy issues; and (3) the marginalization of local perspectives and human security concerns/the needs of people in the region. In an increasingly multipolar world, overcoming this Eurocentric approach is key for Europe to play a more meaningful role in the region (Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013).

Thus, MEDRESET aimed to reset our understanding of the Mediterranean and develop alternative visions for a future role for the EU in the region. To do this, it developed a non-Eurocentric research design which has been *anchored in three analytical dimensions (substance, actors, instruments) and in three phases*. In a first phase, we de-constructed the EU's construction of the Mediterranean through critical discourse analysis (WP1). In a second phase, we contrasted the EU construction by mapping the Mediterranean on the geopolitical level (WP2), as well as through an elite survey (WP3) and through recursive multi-stakeholder consultation (RMSC) in four work packages on political ideas (WP4), agriculture and water (WP5), energy and industry (WP6) and migration and mobility (WP7). As described elsewhere in more detail (Huber et al. 2018), these consultations were set up in a way which allowed us to reverse the ordinary approach by which perceptions and priorities of Southern shore partners are included in the picture only marginally and/or a posteriori. Instead, stakeholders

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in the EU (institutional and civil society) had to react and position themselves *with reference to structured inputs coming from Mediterranean partners*. All in all we pursued 697 interviews in the elite survey and the RMSCs which are visualized by gender, work package and country in Figure 1. With the enormous amount of qualitative data MEDRESET has produced through these interviews, we add a new dimension to the existing mainly quantitative data, see for example the results of ArabTransformation surveys (Abbott et al. 2018) or EuroMeSCo surveys (IEMed 2018). To our knowledge no other research project has ever so thoroughly scrutinized perceptions on all sides of the Mediterranean through qualitative analysis.

In the third phase, we are seeking to reconstruct a new role for the EU in the region. In this respect, the policy reports and briefs of Work Packages 3–7 have already given country- and issue-tailored recommendations (MEDRESET 2018b, Chaaban et al. 2018, MEDRESET 2018a, 2018c, 2018d, 2019c), which are summed up in our infographics and key policy recommendation sheets (MEDRESET 2019a). What clearly comes across in them is that the EU's 'one fits all' model should be reviewed in order for the EU to develop a more nuanced appreciation of the socio-economic diversity and unevenness of the Mediterranean. Furthermore, gender-specific recommendations have been provided as well (Ghosheh 2019), while the report on the effectiveness and potential of EU policies in the Mediterranean by Münevver Cebeci represents an analysis of all empirical research pursued in MEDRESET from an effectiveness perspective, assessing the latter "in terms of a relationship among equals, finding bottom-up solutions to problems common to the region and desecuritizing relations between the two sides of the Mediterranean" (Cebeci 2019: 2–3).

Based on all these policy reports, *it is the task of this final report to re-construct a new role for the EU in the Mediterranean in terms of its policies' substance, involved actors and instruments*. While we do want to give concrete policy recommendations which put local perceptions, concerns and needs upfront, this report does not intend to give a shopping list which would risk simply reducing the status quo or could even serve to strengthen the "EU as empire" (Zielonka 2006, Del Sarto 2016). Rather what we are aiming at is *an EU which becomes a more reflexive actor in the Mediterranean*. This report gives concrete recommendations for the new European Parliament, Commission and High Representative in this direction.

Figure 1 | Interviewed stakeholders by type, gender, work package and country
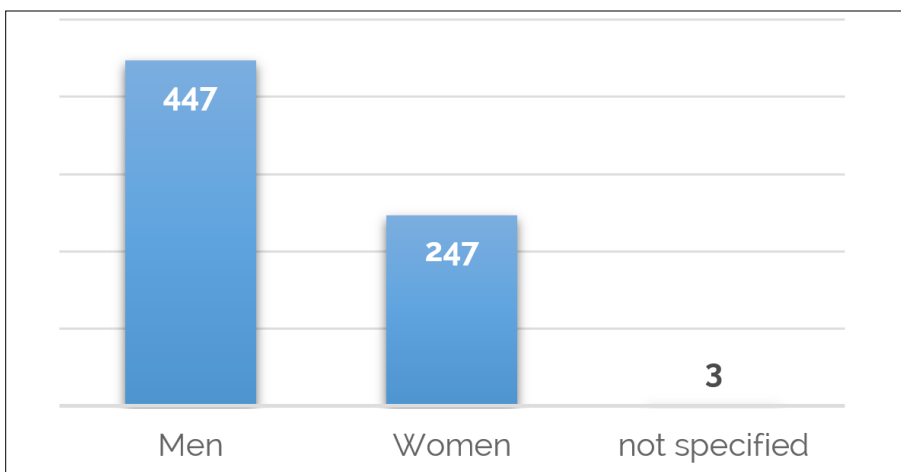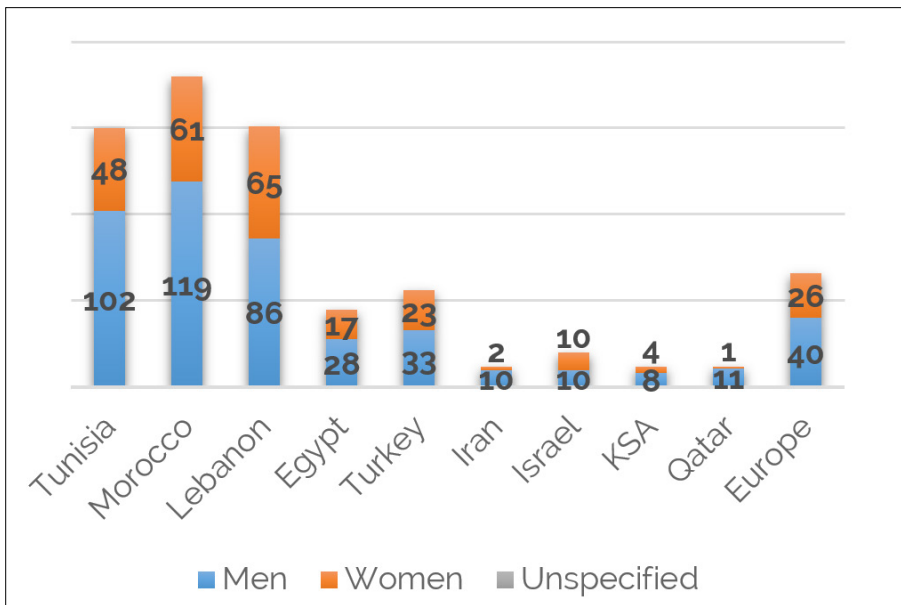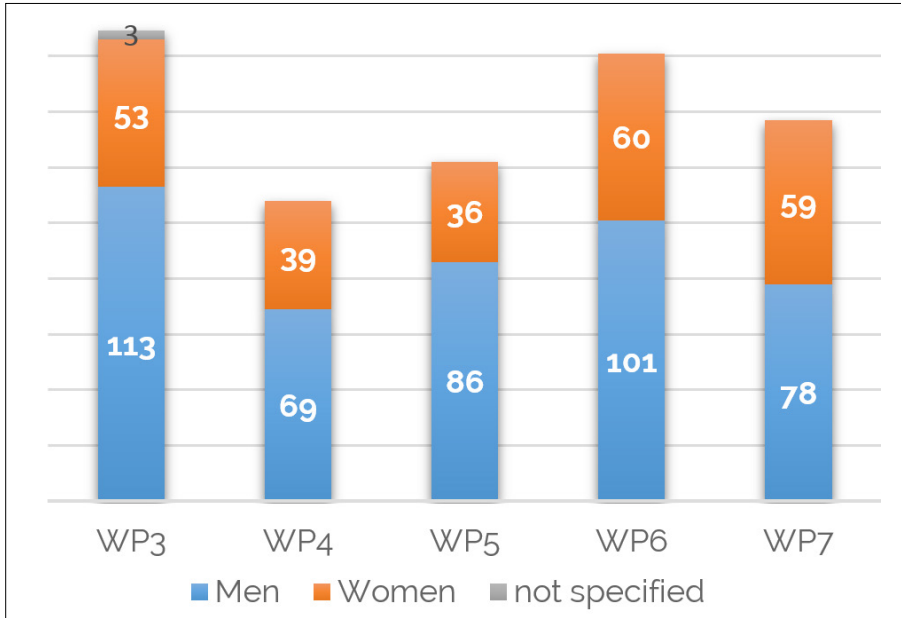
Interviewed stakeholders

Youth organizations, human, socio-economic, women/minority/identity rights organizations, rural development organizations, new social movements, student movements, Islamic organizations, unemployment organizations, trade unions, syndicates, activists, journalists, artists, academics, doctors, agriculture organizations, farmers' cooperatives, small and medium enterprises, private sector, federations, energy companies, officials in public institutions, international organizations, migration and asylum organizations.

1. Substance: Becoming More Responsive to Local Needs

In her report, Cebeci points out that "the EU pursues asymmetric/unequal, top-down, Eurocentric, interest-driven, technocratic, depoliticizing policies in the Mediterranean prioritizing security and stability over democracy, human rights and the rule of law" (Cebeci 2019: 2). This approach limits the EU's scope for action and relevance for people in the region.

Migration is an eminent example of this. In contrast to energy or the industrial sector which are largely absent from or only peripherally part of EU policies (Guesmi and Moisseron 2018), migration is seen as looming large in EU policies, approached in a highly securitized way as became clear in MEDRESET's elite survey (Dark 2018: 10). Some European funding instruments, such as the Trust Fund for Africa for example, which are meant to support socio-economic development are instead used to finance border control, migration management and securitizing policies (Roman 2018: 9). Also, the EU's response to migration legitimizes "the idea that not fully respecting international legal standards could be justified for the sake of achieving control-oriented policy objectives" (Roman 2018: 12).

Furthermore, the EU mainly seeks to enhance trade, rather than developing the industrial sector. However, the establishment of free trade areas can be accompanied by high social costs (Zorob 2017). South Mediterranean countries are indeed reluctant to implement free trade areas for fear of high social costs resulting from competition between their local market actors and the European providers. A Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) may worsen the situation in terms of unemployment, labour precariousness and job losses, specifically for women (Moisseron et al. 2017: 20). In Morocco, the existing Free Trade Area (FTA) with the EU is criticized for having deteriorated the country's trade deficit (Moisseron et al. 2018: 22). In the case of Lebanon, stakeholders argue that the Association Agreement, along with steps taken to ensure Lebanon's accession to the WTO, have hurt Lebanese exports and worsened the trade deficit (Chaaban et al. 2018: 9). Moreover, export-oriented sectors tied to the EU are mainly concentrated on low-value-added sectors providing poor quality working conditions, particularly for women. The way in which Southern countries have been integrated to the European Market (i.e., low technological subcontracting) therefore leads to a development model that is not compatible with the qualified youth entering the job market (Aboushady et al. 2019). Furthermore, the types of FDI coming from the EU do not create jobs and generate spillovers. One European stakeholder pointed out that these flows were allocated towards the acquisition of privatized companies in less labour-intensive sectors, such as banking, oil and real estate. These investments also neither generate spillovers and innovation, nor provide a larger access to EU markets for SMCs (Bianchi et al. 2018: 14).

As for *energy policies*, they are seen as mainly "market oriented" (Moisseron and Guesmi 2018: 2); their scope remains timid and below the needs of the South Mediterranean countries. Furthermore, local civil society actors give increasing priority to the environmental effects of some energy policies, effects which are rarely taken into account by EU policies and national governments. In Egypt, they are mobilizing against coal that pollutes the environment, harms people's health and destroys marine life. In Tunisia they protest against hydraulic shale gas extraction, asking for a fair distribution of mineral resources such as oil. Civil society actors are also aware about the political implications of renewable energy projects. Regarding the export

of renewable energy across the Mediterranean they express serious concern regarding the extent to which locals will benefit; domestic elites and foreigners are likely to benefit the most since the people are denied control over land (Aboushady et al. 2019: 13).

As for *agriculture*, the numerous partnerships with the EU are often seen as having disproportionately served EU commercial interests and were claimed to be a covert means for the EU to flood Mediterranean markets with high-priced products from the EU, while pursuing protectionism against agricultural exports of South-Mediterranean countries (Hamade et al. 2018: 5). Similarly, European stakeholders in the field of agriculture are equally reluctant to engage as they fear these exports, and suspect wage and environmental dumping on the part of SEM countries (Woertz and Martínez 2018: 23). What is seen as necessary instead is sustaining local production as an important contribution to their countries' food security: the current focus, promoted by EU policies and national governments, on the production of export-oriented products has diverted attention away from production of grains and other staple crops that make an important contribution to these countries' food security. Regarding the access to EU markets, small farmers suffer from a lack of competitiveness locally and internationally due to outdated equipment, inefficient modes of production and low margins. Furthermore, the mostly informal agricultural work is another issue as wageworkers in the agricultural sector, particularly in export-oriented crops, are not protected and do not fall under the scope of the Labour Law. The work of women in agriculture often remains unpaid, not accounted for by national statistics and highly exploited in agribusiness. Also neglected by EU policies are structural issues such as gender inequalities in access to land.

In conclusion, policies and practices in all these policy areas have contributed little to good quality job creation, inclusive growth or the sorts of structural change that are much needed to redress the profound inequalities within a given country and between the two shores of the Mediterranean. The EU should be concerned with issues of decent jobs and better working conditions particularly in those export-oriented sectors tied to the EU, including female-dominated sectors in industry and agriculture, as well as environmental justice.

As proposed by several stakeholders, *there is need for a more thorough and up-dated socio-economic and ecological assessment of what, for example, trade and energy policies can lead (or are leading) to, including within Europe itself. Also, a human rights perspective should start informing trade agreements by paying attention to social rights and environmental effects. Thus, the EU should set up periodic screening reports in that respect.* Social assessment of trade, energy, agricultural and migration policies and programmes should be carried out by giving the task to grassroots civil society actors that are in the field and can provide information that considers the views of civil society, local communities and workers.

Furthermore, what is needed is a reflection on the broader development model within which EU policies are developed and seated. The EU hegemonic model is no longer seen as a model for the region which *needs a more sustainable and equitable model that can ensure social and ecological justice.* The need for an alternative model has been a major claim raised by civil society stakeholders, not only in the South, but in the EU as well. European civil society stakeholders argued that "the EU itself is adopting an economic model […] which does not take care of social issues, and is worsening the situation of European populations" (Huber and Paciello 2018: 9). Thus, there is a decisive convergence between Mediterranean stakeholders on this issue, and the EU should become aware that its economic and political model is fraught

with many problems and is in crisis both internally and externally. Indeed, one European interviewee argued that the "EU could turn to the South of the Mediterranean saying that it is rethinking a new model [... and] to try to understand together which model we could adopt, always tailored to the local context" (Huber and Paciello 2018: 9).

Profound reflection is necessary in order to move ahead with a real systemic transformation and to start listening to the needs of people from both the South and the North. However, the dependent trade relations with Europe, the specialization of the South Mediterranean countries as well as the pressure applied by the EU to further enlarge trade agreements are strong obstacles to rethinking their own social and economic policies in ways that favour social justice and fair redistribution (Huber et al. 2018, Aboushady et al. 2019). Thus, the EU should set up an independent study commission to start rethinking its development model. This study commission should consist of independent academics, as well as journalists and civil society organizations from both the North and the South of the Mediterranean to start this reflection, bringing together different perspectives on how to build an alternative model, reflecting local specificities, and prepare concrete proposals to present to the EU institutions.

2. Actors: Towards Inclusion

EU policies are also questioned because of their top-down approaches. In the fields of migration, agriculture, energy and industry, *the main partners of the EU continue to be governments and public authorities*. In all Work Packages, *the need to include local civil society actors in deciding the issue priorities of aid, for example, appeared as key*, rather than having Western experts seconded to these countries setting this agenda. For example, professional agricultural organizations in Morocco and Lebanon criticized the EU's top-down approach, for excluding certain actors such as local civil society organizations, while heavily including traditional public institutions such as the Ministry of Finance. Rather than including the knowledge and perceptions of stakeholders, the latter have little say in the matter and are subjected to top-down decisions of a centralized government. The same finding came across in the elite survey (Dark 2018: 13).

When the EU does work with local civil society actors, *it frequently does so with those that are part of international NGO networks, excluding genuinely local grassroots*. As Emanuela Roman has pointed out for the area of migration,

> the majority of local civil society organizations complained about the lack of a truly participatory decision-making process and express their wish to actively participate in migration policy-making. Those local CSOs involved in the implementation of EU-funded projects and in the dialogue with the EU are part of international NGO networks, have strong links with Europe, professional staff, and the administrative skills and know how to access and manage EU funding, whereas smaller genuinely local grassroots CSOs whose international network is limited and whose activity is largely based on voluntary work, struggle to be involved in policy-making and consultations. (MEDRESET 2018d: 5)

Similarly, Asma Nouira and Hamadi Redissi have suggested that EU contributions are perceived to be biased to pro-Western elites and civil society (Nouira and Redissi 2018: 14). The genuinely local grassroots organizations are often unable to access EU funding because they are less organized and have a limited international profile. These organizations are locally embedded and may have deeper knowledge of the local context; therefore, their active involvement in both policy-making and implementation represents a key factor contributing to policies in line with people's needs.

The EU also needs to *stop perceiving civil society as a service provider to the EU*; civil society works in the service of specific aims it considers important for its own society. In response to EU funding for specific issues it considers important, *civil society has professionalized; it is not only organizing its activities in line with EU needs, but is even structurally dependent on donors*. Some interviewees argued that the EU is supporting a range of inefficient, corrupt and co-opted organizations (Huber et al. 2018: 13).

Furthermore, *EU projects and policies do not reach marginalized categories* such as poor and working women, small farmers, landless peasants, and precarious and exploited workers in industry and agriculture sectors. This is also well reflected in the fact that all Work Packages in MEDRESET met with difficulties in addressing the interviews to such actors. Any assessment of EU policies and future research should do as much as possible to involve such actors.

This reliance on civil society should, however, *not serve as an excuse for the EU to drop the burden entirely on them*. While EU aid is seen more positively than the aid of other actors, assistance to civil society is not enough when not backed up by political pressure. *By ignoring regression in human rights, the EU will continue to reinforce authoritarianism*. The EU's support for civil society cannot serve to depoliticize its role in sustaining these authoritarian regimes. This came across in the interviews in Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia (political ideas): on one hand the EU supports civil society organizations, and on the other hand sides with authoritarian regimes thus reinforcing the status quo (Huber et al. 2018). The real solution, as Khalid Mouna (2018) has argued, lies in supporting the local struggles for democracy.

Thus, *the EU should work more with grassroots actors and civil society organizations in all fields at the level of decision-making, from being consulted in the phase of negotiations between the EU and South Mediterranean states to project assessment*.

3. Instruments: Moving Against Fragmentation and Separation

There is a *fragmentation of EU policies. This is, firstly, evident in terms of substance (as already elaborated in detail above)*. In industry and energy, EU policies remain limited to fragmented financial and technical assistance programmes serving trade enhancement, trade facilitation and increased competitiveness in traditional sectors characterized by low added value and by intensity in unskilled labour. Similarly, we observe fragmentation and low involvement of the EU in the field of energy (Aboushady et al. 2019).

Secondly, fragmentation is also evident in instruments, specifically in the increasing bilateralism which dominates fields such as migration but also trade (see also MEDRESET elite survey, Dark 2018: 7–9). Bilateralism favours power asymmetries because trade agreements, for example, are negotiated between an economic giant such as the EU as a bloc with single Southern countries that are "in consequence 'weak and with little bargaining power vis-à-vis the EU, making the relationship highly unfair/unequal" (Huber et al. 2018: 9). According to Southern stakeholders, the concept of the Mediterranean does not exclusively rely on North–South integration, but also includes South–South cooperation (Aboushady et al. 2019). The region remains one of the least integrated in the world. Energy cooperation between the EU and the South Mediterranean countries is often on a member state basis (Bianchi et al. 2018: 11). As pointed out by SEM stakeholders for agriculture, without a macro/regional vision the Mediterranean is condemned to be an arena for control and risk-reduction policies rather than a space of opportunities. Multilateral and comprehensive policies are needed in all policy areas observed: human rights, migration, trade, energy or agriculture.

This fragmentation is further augmented by incoherence; EU member states do not act coherently with the EU agenda and tend to overshadow EU policies in all sectors. There are perceived contradictions between the position of the EU (specifically its agenda of democracy, human rights and social equality) and those of individual member states.

Furthermore, *fragmentation is driven by securitization*. Work Package 2 (geopolitics) found that similarly to the EU, all other powers in the Mediterranean – USA, Russia, China, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Turkey – are securitizing this space. Conventional approaches to "hard" security drive their policy, but their definitions of security are incompatible, leading to "dramatic divergences in their approaches and priority areas" which fragment the Mediterranean (MEDRESET 2017: 2). As the EU does not have a different vision for the Mediterranean, it allows other powers to determine the geopolitical space of which it is part.

As a result of such fragmentation, the Mediterranean is increasingly seen as a space of disparity, division and separation (Huber et al. 2018). What is, therefore, needed is a larger reflection process on the part of the EU and its member states on their approach to the Mediterranean which has been at the base of the EU's devised instruments. In her final report, Cebeci concludes that

> if the EU continues to pursue its Eurocentric, asymmetrical (unequal), top-down, depoliticizing, technocratic and securitizing policies in the region, based on an imbalanced construction of the Mediterranean where EU-Europeans are seen as superior to their Southern and Eastern Mediterranean counterparts, then we will continue producing and reproducing reports on the EU's ineffectiveness and limited potential in the Mediterranean. (Cebeci 2019: 19)

To reset this approach and stop the downward path of separation, we propose that the EU come forward with a new comprehensive *reconciliation, "do no harm" and dialogue policy*.

4. A Reconciliation, "Do No Harm" and Dialogue Policy for the Mediterranean

Reconciliation had been raised in our first round of interviews in Lebanon by a Palestinian refugee worker who proposed that the EU should respond to "its colonial past where countries of the Mediterranean were influenced by policies from different EU countries". Indeed, the EU has a somewhat a-historical approach perceiving itself as a departure from Europe's colonial past, even though some member states were still colonial/imperial powers when the European Economic Community (EEC) was founded. The interviewee proposed to

(A) Establish a reconciliation mechanism which would make the colonialist archive open and accessible for colonized nations to know about policies and practices of colonialist powers. (B) Issue an official apology for crimes and other forms of aggression conducted against colonized nations. (C) Encourage and support research that looks into colonialism and its impact on the current migration and socio-economic and political conflicts across the region. (Interviewee cited in unpublished MEDRESET interim report, autumn 2017)

Other interviewees suggested that reconciliation could be connected to two levels, national and regional. At the national level, the need for reconciliation in Syria, Israel/Palestine, in Egypt or in Lebanon was highlighted, along with the potential role the EU should and could play in fostering such reconciliation. At the regional level, the colonial baggage in Mediterranean relations, and the need to build a truly equal and non-xenophobic Mediterranean space came across. Interviewees highlighted that a broad reconciliation process could work both against xenophobia in Europe and against the nationalist, exclusive discourse of authoritarian governments; or that we need to rethink the idea of neighbourhood "that goes beyond the idea of putting limits to the borders in order to secure them. It is important to build a common shared history – 'histoire partagée' – and representation of neighbourhood" (Huber and Paciello 2018: 17).

What reconciliation means for the past, is what the "do no harm" principle would mean for the present. In our interviews, the EU was perceived to pursue several harmful policies and practices. Firstly, the EU is seen as having a selective commitment to human rights. It harms the rights of refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean, setting a bad example for others. Furthermore, while funding civil society organizations, it is silent about human right violations perpetrated by authoritarian and occupation regimes and it is cooperating with them to pursue its migration policies. It is perceived as delivering aid into the hands of corrupt and repressive governments and financially supporting their top-down initiatives. Also, by presenting human rights as European instead of universal values, it is jeopardizing the agency of local human rights actors and the action of women's organizations (Huber et al. 2018: 17). As pointed out by a Moroccan interviewee:

Europe holds a culturalist view towards countries of the south in general, and towards us specifically. It is thought that we are not fit for the human rights culture under the pretext that Islam is [an] impediment. Hence, Europeans think that we are establishing human rights institutions because they force us to do so. It does not occur to them that the human rights issue is our fight because it is we who have suffered and been put in

jail. It is both founded on a superiority point of view and contempt towards what we are trying to achieve. (Mouna 2018: 15)

Finally, by putting pressure on South Mediterranean countries to pursue a purely export-oriented development model, which pays no attention to local needs, the EU threatens social and economic rights, exacerbating inequalities and constraining the opportunities for a genuine economic and social development/inclusive growth.

Being instead guided by the "do no harm" principle would mean that the EU makes sure its policies and programmes do not infringe on local people's needs and human security. Thus, a social justice and human rights centred vision to empower people on all shores of the Mediterranean would be the necessary reference point to overcoming securitization and separation. Following the principle of "no harm" means above all a deep understanding of the local context and political economy power dynamics. To start going in that direction, the EU needs to start dialoguing and consulting with local civil society. That means not just inviting them once to Brussels, but really starting to listen to them. It also means dialogue as a means to reconnect across the Mediterranean and work against the perception of division, disparity and separation. As already elaborated above, *periodic screening reports, a study commission on an alternative development model and the inclusion of civil society in all stages of policy-making* would all work towards ensuring the "do no harm" principle.

Dialogue should also go beyond civil society and *aim to reconnect and work against the perceived separation of the Mediterranean for a shared future*. In MEDRESET's final policy brief (MEDRESET 2019b), we have already recommended that the EU set up a *Research Foundation for the Mediterranean* whose aim should be to foster local research by local researchers in local institutions all across the Mediterranean. It should also include funding for a strong mobility dimension to support travel within Europe and the Mediterranean, as well as for attending international conferences, including help for getting visas, etc. Such a foundation would be an excellent instrument to provide support to young people, higher education and research capacities/institutions in countries which have less means to invest in these, with positive effects on the Euro-Mediterranean area at large. Synergies with existing initiatives such as the Young Mediterranean Voices or EuroMeSCo could also be established. To further strengthen dialogue beyond research, a *similar foundation for media, film and arts* could be established, as well. Finally, the EU could consider launching a *Mediterranean high school exchange programme*. This would be an ambitious approach which can reconnect young people across the Mediterranean ensuring a shared future of societies with a longer lasting impact than any ministerial meetings as originally envisaged in the Barcelona Process ever can.

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