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DEMOCRATIC CHANGE AND URBANISATION IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE ARAB REVOLTS: EURO-MEDITERRANEAN CULTURAL COOPERATION IN LOCAL URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN MOROCCO AND TUNISIA

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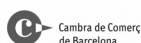
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*Hannah Abdullah**

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Abstract

The so-called “Arab Spring” of 2011 emerged from societies that had been suffering the negative consequences of rapid and unplanned urbanisation for over two decades. The political and socioeconomic discontent that spurred the revolts was closely related to the increase in urban poverty and high levels of inequality that came with these developments. In its response to the Arab revolts, the European Union (EU) only engaged marginally with their urban causes, and above all from a technical rather than political perspective. This focus on technical urban solutions was in line with the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) South and its prioritisation of security and stabilisation concerns over democracy promotion. This article analyses how Euro-Mediterranean cultural cooperation programmes, which form an integral part of the EU’s civil society agenda in the region, was an exception by offering a more political response to the urban discontent that spurred the revolts. The focus is on a programme that supported civil society organizations (CSOs) in Tunisia and Morocco in their effort to assert their “right to the city” by formulating cultural solutions to promote democratic and sustainable local urban development. The article examines how the programme sought to strike a balance between the ENP’s stabilisation and democratisation concerns by fostering collaborative relations between CSOs and public authorities, especially at local level. While the two country case studies are not reflective of EU cultural relations with the region as a whole, the analysis points towards possible ways in which cultural cooperation can engage with the complex relationship between democratic change and urbanisation, and how CSOs can become effective partners in this endeavour. At a more theoretical level, the article examines what role the EU’s strategy for cultural relations has played in its wider civil society agenda in the Southern Neighbourhood, and how urban issues have featured in this overlapping policy space.

Introduction

Cities were at the forefront of the political and social mobilisations across the Arab world in 2011. They were not only the site of the struggles but also often the object of dispute: contested spaces where different demands on and visions of urban space and life came into conflict (Stadnicki et al., 2014; Kanna, 2012). The so-called “Arab Spring” emerged from societies that had been suffering the negative consequences of rapid and unplanned urbanisation for over two decades. Still considered rural in the 1970s, Southern Mediterranean countries are today over 60% urban and estimates suggest that 80% of the population will be living in cities and towns by 2030 (UfM, 2018). The political and socioeconomic discontent that spurred the 2011 revolts was closely related to the “urbanisation of poverty” and high levels of inequality that came with this development (Bergh, 2010: 254). Inadequate urban policies that failed to respond to the rising demands on infrastructures, services, housing and jobs had led to an explosion of informal activities and developments. At the same time, in the non-oil countries, economic liberalisation came in the form of low-regulation policies that welcomed private investment and fostered “cities of extremes” (Bayat & Biekart, 2009). In the latter, gated communities and aspirational urban development projects exist in direct proximity to some of the poorest neighbourhoods. While the revolts were certainly not an exclusive urban phenomenon (Verdeil, 2011), the urban dimension was an important component of the expression of dissent (Allegra et al., 2013). The fact that both old and new regimes in the region introduced urban and territorial policy reforms soon after 2011 (Beier, 2016) – leaving aside, for now, the question of the effectiveness of these reforms – indicates that they understood the issue’s catalytic role.

The EU paid less attention to the urban causes of the revolts in its policy response. In as far as it addressed the issue its approach was largely technical rather than political. In 2013 the European Commission (EC) launched a new programme to help cities in the EU’s Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood address local sustainable development challenges (European Commission, 2013). In the same year, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the EU, the French Development Agency and the European Investment Bank (EIB) jointly launched the Urban Projects Finance Initiative (UPFI), which supports sustainable urban projects in the South and Eastern Mediterranean.¹ However, a closer look at the projects funded by these initiatives shows that they have prioritised the technical aspects of local sustainable development, focusing on challenges such as energy efficiency, sustainable economic growth and urban transport.² By contrast, the promotion of democratic socio-political change, through notions such as “local democracy”, “inclusive governance” or “social accountability”, have largely been absent from the EU’s urban development agenda in the Southern Neighbourhood. But it is precisely this socio-political dimension of urban development that touches on some of

1 <http://upfi-med.eib.org/en/>

2 The UPFI has recently begun to fund more socio-politically oriented projects. For example, in Algiers, it is conducting identification studies for a collaborative urban workshop on the upgrading of railway brownfield sites and the renewal of urban fabrics; in Tunisia, it is planning an intervention programme in old cities and urban fabrics with a strong historical and cultural character. See <http://upfi-med.eib.org/en/projects/>.

the core demands of the protests from 2011. By going out into the streets, the protestors did not only call for an end to their countries' neoliberal authoritarian regimes, but at a more local and tangible level they also sought to assert their "right to the city" (Zemni, 2016), i.e. their right to have a voice in the future development of their cities and towns, and demand urban policies that respond to their needs.

To a degree, the technical bias of the EU's post-2011 sustainable urban development agenda in the Mediterranean was compensated for by its civil society agenda, including Euro-Mediterranean cultural cooperation programmes. Although urban matters were not the primary concern of these programmes, they often addressed socio-spatial policies and other issues of conflicting urbanity. This article analyses how concrete cultural cooperation programmes partly remedied the socio-political deficit of EU-funded urban programmes in the region. It examines how these cultural cooperation programmes supported civil society groups in asserting their right to the city, thereby fostering more democratic and fairer urbanisation processes.

The focus of the analysis is on an EU cultural cooperation programme that supported projects led by CSOs in Tunisia and Morocco between 2016 and 2018. Tunisia and Morocco are amongst the countries in the region that offer the most enabling environment for cultural production and the development of cultural policies. They are also among the Southern Neighbourhood countries most interested in engaging in cultural relations with Europe, and with which the EU has strong cultural relations at bilateral level (Trobbsiani & Kirjazovaite, 2020: 95). While the analysis of the two country case studies is certainly not reflective of EU cultural relations with the region as a whole (Torbbsiani, 2017), it seeks to point to possible ways in which cultural cooperation can engage with the complex relationship between democratic change and urbanisation, and how local CSOs can become effective partners in this endeavour.

At a more theoretical level, the article examines what role the EU's strategy for cultural relations with the Southern Neighbourhood has played in its broader civil society agenda in the region, and how urban issues have featured in this overlapping policy space. It is important to note here that, in conjunction with the EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) (European External Action Service, 2016), the EU launched a new strategy for international cultural relations in June 2016 (European Commission & High Representative, 2016) that gave much attention to the Southern Mediterranean. While this emerging cultural diplomacy strategy has been the subject of some research,³ no attempt has so far been made to analyse it in the context of the EU's wider external civil society agenda in general, and, specifically, in the Southern Mediterranean. But EU's

3 See, for example, Isar (2015), Higgot and van Langenhove (2016), Figueira (2017), Triandafyllidou and Sz cs (2017), Trobbiani (2017a) and Carta and Higgot (2020).

external cultural action is a transversal policy field that is intimately linked with EU foreign policy in the areas of civil society and, more recently, urban development. In the Southern Mediterranean this interlinkage is particularly strong: the EU's cultural actions in the region have been explicitly directed at supporting civil society as a transformative socioeconomic and political force; and the UfM recently adopted the first Urban Agenda (UfM, 2017) for the region.

The article is structured as follows. The first part provides a brief discussion of the role of cultural cooperation in the EU's civil society agenda in the Southern Neighbourhood in the immediate aftermath of the Arab revolts and its focus on democratisation. Part two discusses how, in line with the broader ENP South, this focus shifted towards striking a balance between democracy promotion, on the one hand, and security and stability concerns, on the other, in the subsequent post-uprising era. Against this broader political backdrop, parts three and four move on to analyse a concrete EU cultural cooperation programme that supported CSO-led projects in Morocco and Tunisia, which sought to formulate cultural solutions to promote the democratic and sustainable governance of local urban development. The article analyses how the programme sought to find a middle way between democratisation and stabilisation by fostering collaborative relations between CSOs and public authorities. Particular attention is given to how the programme tried to build on recent decentralisation reforms in the neighbourhood by promoting CSO-state collaborations at local level.

The analysis is based on EU's policy documents, written project reports and in-depth interviews conducted in 2019 with civic activists who led EU-funded cultural projects in Tunisia and Morocco on the programmes in question, as well as with representatives of the sub-granting organisation that selected these projects and that constituted the link between local CSOs and the EU.⁴

⁴ Access to relevant project documents and data was facilitated by the sub-granting organisation (Interarts Foundation for International Cultural Cooperation, see below), which also provided me with the contacts of local project leaders based in Tunisia and Morocco. The interviews were semi-structured, and interviewees were sent the guiding questions in advance. I conducted two interviews with project leaders in Tunisia (of the MED DEMOS/PACE LAB and Sustainable Local Planning – Locality of Thibar projects, see below) and one with a project leader in Morocco (of the group Racines, which led the MARSAD project and supported the Think Tanger project, see below). During a trip to Tangiers in August 2019, I visited the studio (a public gallery space in Tangiers) of the group of artists and activists that conducted the Think Tanger and Proposal for a Metropole projects. The visit gave me some insights into the working context of the group and I was able to talk to some of the people that participated in the projects.

Euro-Mediterranean Cultural Cooperation and the EU's Civil Society Agenda

The EU recognised that the Arab revolts demanded a strong European response to support civil society. The events called for a revival of the third chapter of the Barcelona Process/Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) concerned with establishing “a partnership in social, cultural and human affairs: developing human resources, promoting understanding between cultures and exchanges between civil societies” (Barcelona Declaration, 1995). Exemplary of this view was a speech by the then Commissioner for Enlargement and ENP, Štefan Füle, who admitted that the EU had focused too much on short-term stability and security concerns at the expense of providing genuine democracy support to its southern neighbours (Füle, 2011). The two Joint Communications from the spring of 2011 (European Commission & High Representative, 2011; European Commission & High Representative, 2011a) promised a “new response” to the Southern Neighbourhood that prioritised the promotion of civil society and people-to-people contacts to help build deep and sustainable democracies (Colombo & Shapovalova, 2018). Operating with a definition of civil society as organised civil society – including, “all non-State, not-for-profit structures, non-partisan and non-violent, through which people organise to pursue shared objectives and ideals, whether political, cultural, social or economic” (European Commission, 2012) –, the EU set three priorities for its revised external civil society agenda: 1) to promote an enabling environment for CSOs; 2) to foster participation of CSOs in domestic policies, EU programming and international processes; and 3) to increase the capacity of CSOs to contribute to domestic sustainable development (ibid.).

Euro-Mediterranean cultural cooperation formed an important part of EU civil society support under the revised ENP. Since “culture in EU external relations” has been developed into a more systematic foreign policy field beginning in the early 2000s (Isar, 2015), the Southern Neighbourhood has arguably been the main geographical focus of EU's international cultural relations (Trobbiani & Kirjazovaite, 2020: 89). The Barcelona Declaration (1995), the founding document of the EMP, already highlighted the importance of intercultural dialogue for bringing people closer together and fostering peaceful cooperation, stability and prosperity. EMP flagship projects like the Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures (founded in 2004) and the Euro-Mediterranean University of Slovenia (founded in 2008) were created in this spirit. Following the Arab uprisings, the EU sought to reinvigorate its work on intercultural dialogue and culture in the region in the belief that it could “act as a catalyst for democratic changes and provide a driving force for the transformation of a society where civil society's free will can be freely expressed and respected” (European Commission, 2012a: 1). At the same time, EU's policy documents

concerning the Southern Mediterranean increasingly framed culture as a potent tool for capacity-building and the empowerment of local cultural operators to contribute to their country's sustainable socioeconomic development (Trobbiani, 2017: 18).

The most significant regional cultural programme launched under the ENP in response to the Arab revolts, Media and Culture for Development in the Southern Mediterranean (2013-2017, €17 million, hereafter MCDSM), put an explicit emphasis on capacity-building and on how culture can act as an enabler and driver of human-centred development.⁵ It included two capacity-building sub-programmes: Med Media (2014-2018, €5 million) and Med Culture (2014-2018, €3 million).⁶ To engage more directly with local actors, Med Culture operated through sub-granting. It targeted both governments and CSOs with the objective of promoting "the development of institutional and social environments that will confirm culture as a vector for freedom of expression and sustainable development."⁷ Local CSOs were engaged through three re-granting programmes (Helley & Galeazzi, 2017: 34), including SouthMed CV – Communities of Practice for the Public Value of Culture in the Southern Mediterranean (2015-2018, €2.5 million, hereafter SouthMed CV), which was led and coordinated by the Barcelona-based Interarts Foundation for International Cultural Cooperation.⁸ SouthMed CV delivered 38 grants to projects in seven countries (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine and Tunisia) that were selected through two open calls in 2015 and 2016.

SouthMed CV stands out from among the EU-funded cultural cooperation programmes launched in the years following the Arab revolts for its strong urban dimension. Its engagement with urban issues was twofold. Firstly, it prioritised projects that sought to have an impact on public space. For example, by challenging established conceptions and uses of public space, as well as modes of urban governance; by redesigning public spaces with a view to social inclusion; by drawing up sustainable urban development plans; and by monitoring national and local public policies related to culture and urban cultural matters. Secondly, building on the decentralisation reforms introduced in many Middle Eastern and North Africa (MENA) countries around the turn of the century and in the aftermath of the Arab revolts, SouthMed CV sought to strengthen the role of civil society in local urban governance by promoting opportunities for participation and collaboration. One of the core concerns of the programme was to support CSOs in their capacity to build alliances with public authorities by strengthening their managerial and advocacy skills (Farhat, 2018: 6).

⁵ For more on the contribution of culture to a human-centred development approach, see Hawkes (2001).

⁶ See <https://www.med-media.eu/> and <http://www.medculture.eu/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <http://www.smedcv.net>

Focusing on the country contexts of Morocco and Tunisia, the remainder of this article analyses a selection of SouthMed CV funded projects that worked on how public space can be developed culturally and how culture can contribute to the transition towards democratic and sustainable urban development. However, before looking more closely at the cultural projects and country contexts in question, it is necessary to discuss how EU policies toward the Southern Neighbourhood changed in the post-uprising era. Although MCDSM and its related programmes were conceived in the aftermath of the revolts, they were only launched in the years 2014 to 2015, when shifting local realities had already triggered a review of EU policies, including its civil society and cultural cooperation agendas.

A Middle Way, Between Democracy and Security Promotion

While the EU initially viewed the Arab revolts as a window of opportunity for democratic reform, mounting instability in the MENA region and its direct impact on European societies, in the form of refugees trying to reach Europe and rising terrorist attacks, soon led to security and stability concerns becoming dominant again (Colombo & Soler i Lecha, 2019). Most commentators agree that, despite the assertion of a paradigm shift in the EU's approach to democracy promotion in the neighbourhood, this shift was short-lived and hardly went beyond rhetoric (Balfour, 2012; Teti, 2012; Teti et al., 2013; Hanau Santini & Hassan, 2012; Dandashly, 2015; Noutcheva, 2015). The renewed prioritisation of security and stability concerns became evident with the 2015 review of the ENP (European Commission & High Representative, 2015), which gave more weight to good relations with the region's mostly authoritarian governments than the support for democratisation and human rights (Schumacher, 2016; Börzel & Lebanidze, 2017). A year later, the EUGS further consolidated this approach by elevating the concept of "resilience" into one of the guiding principles of EU foreign policy (Tocci, 2019). Above all, resilience stands for greater pragmatism and a more realistic understanding of the neighbourhood. It represents a middle way "between over-ambitious liberal peacebuilding and under-ambitious stability" (Wagner & Anholt, 2016: 415). By choosing this middle way, the EU replaced the integration logic of its neighbourhood policy and the focus on norms and values promotion of the past two decades⁹ with more pragmatic arrangements. According to this new "principled pragmatism" (European External Action Service, 2016), democracy promotion continues in those neighbouring countries where the situation is favourable. In the case of the many other repressive regimes, the EU limits its democratisation efforts to increasing the resilience of people and societies – mainly by fighting inequality and poverty and by promoting learning and innovation – in the hope that "home-grown positive change" will emerge (Biscop, 2016: 2).

The support of civil society continues to be central to the ENP under the paradigm of resilience.¹⁰ But the focus on mostly bottom-up democracy promotion, where political circumstances permit, has severe limitations. While the EU engages with CSOs and supports them financially, "it does not address the broader conditions (e.g. authoritarian regimes) that impinge on civil society's role in social transformation" (Colombo & Shapovalova, 2018: 503). This ambiguous stance fundamentally shrinks the space of action for CSOs and hampers the emergence of a truly independent civil society. Culture has become a particularly sensitive area of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation under these conditions. Traditionally critical of "official government tunes", the cultural sector is subject to censorship and repression in many countries of the region (Trobiani, 2018: 4). While EU support to independent cultural actors is often effective in more open and democratic countries like Tunisia, it is more problematic in semi-authoritarian states like Morocco. In

⁹ For an analysis of how this logic was applied to the Southern Neighbourhood, see Pace (2007).

¹⁰ Still in 2019, the EU is the main source of foreign support to civil society in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries (IEMed, 2019).

countries like Egypt, where EU-funded projects have to deal with strict government control, the scope of action is even more limited (Trobbiani & Kirjazovaite, 2020: 106).

To master the balancing act between normative support for human rights and democracy, on the one hand, and pragmatic security and stability concerns, on the other, the EU's cultural cooperation agenda with the Mediterranean has folded the former into the latter. Operating with a broad understanding of democracy, as extending beyond forms of government and towards issues of human rights, minority rights and basic freedoms, the EU has linked these concerns with security issues such as rising instability and terrorism (Dandashly, 2018: 64). In the MENA region, democracy promotion has been established as a strategic goal of EU security policy. In line with this democracy-security nexus, cultural cooperation with the region has also been framed as fostering security governance dynamics. The 2011 review of the ENP and its related policy documents framed culture as both a tool for promoting democracy and helping with stability and security by emphasising its contribution to sustainable economic and social development. The 2015 review of the ENP further shifted the emphasis towards the latter, only mentioning culture in relation to EU security goals regarding radicalisation and migration. Similarly, the 2016 strategy for international cultural relations that was adopted together with the EUGS refers to intercultural dialogue with the Arab world primarily as a stabilisation tool in times of rising "political tension, economic upheaval, violent radicalisation and migratory flows" (European Commission & High Representative, 2016: 6). When applied to the reality of Euro-Mediterranean cultural cooperation programmes, the EU's "fuzzy and contradictory approach" (Hanau Santini, 2013: 252) towards civil society becomes even more ambiguous. As I will show below, the balancing act between democracy promotion and security plays out differently depending on the national-political context and how local civil society actors make use of EU's support structures.

EU Support for Urban Cultural Activism in Morocco and Tunisia

A new generation of activists entered the political scene in the MENA countries in 2011 to demand political change. While much has been written on the emergence of these new socio-political movements, there is little analysis of how they evolved in the post-uprising era, which was (and continues to be) a period of profound transformations in civic engagement and political agency. How have young activists developed their citizenship skills and practices through registers of civic engagement that are meaningful to them and that connect local with global realities? What strategies are activists in transitional democracies, such as Tunisia and to a lesser degree Morocco, formulating to express their “being” citizens and reimagine the relationship between themselves and the state?¹¹

In their analysis of the situation in post-2011 Morocco, Bergh and Ahmadou (2018) draw on Isin’s influential notion of “acts of citizenship” (Isin 2009; Insin & Nielsen, 2008) to illustrate how, since the disintegration of the February 20 Movement, young activists have formed new groups to experiment with different expressions of citizenship through the appropriation or occupation of public space, at both the discursive and physical-urban level. A look at the broader MENA region shows that the “claiming [of] public space as an ‘act of citizenship’” (Bergh & Ahmadou, 2018: 101) has also become common practice in other countries such as Tunisia, where the revolts brought down the regime and where the meaning and uses of public space are still being redefined. In contrast to the social movements that drove the events of 2011, these new initiatives are no longer focused on demanding direct political participation – through, for example, the creation of political parties or trade unions – but on claiming certain rights in concrete socioeconomic and cultural settings by organising events and provoking dialogue on issues of public interest. Public urban space has become a preferred arena for these acts of citizenship that constitute enactments of political agency outside the sphere of formal politics and seek to “create new [...] culturally embedded sites of contestation, belonging and struggle” (Rovisco & Lunt, 2019: 616). Often they operate through techniques that go beyond the purely discursive, making use of alternative registers such as cultural and artistic forms that have a stronger symbolic dimension and are better able to generate participation, engaging the “hearts and minds” of people. In Morocco, for example, 7% of the 130 civil society associations that existed in 2016 were affiliated with the arts and culture (Azdem, 2018: 22).

The Med Culture sub-granting programme, SouthMed CV, engaged many of the region’s newly established cultural activist groups, either as main project funding applicants or as partners (Farhat, 2018a: 5). The programme’s full title, SouthMed CV Communities of Practice for the Public Value of Culture in the Southern Mediterranean, signals an

11 For an analysis of citizenship practices in the context of transitional democracies, see Cabañes (2019).

intention to support activist groups in their effort to redefine the role and meaning of culture in public space, and, thereby, redefine public space itself. Given the general weakness of cultural policies and the under-appreciation of the public value of culture in the region, the programme sought to “bring culture from the margins to the centre of the public sphere in the Southern Mediterranean, exploring its potential connections with economic, social and political development strategies.”¹² It tried to achieve these goals by funding CSO-led projects that intervened in public space and engaged in politically relevant issues of urbanity. Further, it encouraged projects that “strengthened the role of culture at local, national and regional level” by establishing new collaborative relations between CSOs and public or semi-public authorities, including “organisations active in the social, educational or environmental fields, youth and cultural centres, schools, universities, libraries, local authorities, etc.”¹³ By bolstering the lobbying and advocacy skills of CSOs, the intention was to help them build new alliances with public authorities and foster collaborative governance arrangements that could facilitate bottom-up innovation in cultural practices and culturally sensitive public policies. Even in those countries of the region where governments are more susceptible to the public value of culture, like Morocco and Tunisia, recent innovations in the cultural sector and cultural policies have mostly been driven by civil society. To support these processes, SouthMed CV aimed to establish new channels of communication and collaboration between dynamic civil society groups and a slow-to-react public governance apparatus.

¹² <http://www.smedcv.net/presentation-3/>

¹³ See the two project calls from 2015 and 2016: <http://www.smedcv.net/first-call-for-proposals/> and <http://www.smedcv.net/second-call-for-proposals/>. SouthMed CV's application guidelines specified that applications must involve at least two partners and that the main project applicant must be a non-profit organisation. Applicants were encouraged to include a range of partners from different sectors, especially the public sector (see <http://www.smedcv.net/guidelines/>).

Fostering Civil Society-State Relations at Local Level

When examined in the broader context of EU policies towards the Southern Neighbourhood, SouthMed CV's approach is in line with more general EU support for improving civil society-state relations and the democracy-security nexus that underpins this support. Many civic movements that have emerged in the region since 2011 continue to see themselves in opposition to state powers and overwhelmingly reject the public sector as a potential partner. A lack of trust in public institutions and their perceived inefficiency and non-transparency still prevails among large parts of organised civil society. By supporting civil society's access to policy processes, the EU has tried to foster CSO-state constellations in which civil society is positioned as a "partner" and/or "watchdog" of public authorities (Buzgogány, 2018: 189-190). While the first framing views civil society as complementing the state and stresses its inclusion in policy processes and its potential to shape policy outcomes, the second classic-liberal framing emphasises its autonomy from the state and its role in controlling state action. In both cases, civil society is meant to act as a democratising and, at the same time, stabilising force.

SouthMed CV's support for new civil society-state relations followed a similar logic. However, it paid special attention to fostering relations between CSOs and public authorities at local level. Two factors contributed to this decision. Firstly, it built on the many positive experiences with culture-driven sustainable urban development and regeneration in Europe and elsewhere, as well as on recent success stories from the region itself (e.g. of the Municipality of Ramallah in Palestine, the Greater Amman Municipality in Jordan, and various towns and cities in Tunisia) (Farhat, 2018a: 60). Further, and perhaps more significantly, the decision to focus on fostering relations between CSOs and local authorities was taken in the context of the decentralisation reforms that were adopted by several states in the region in response to the Arab revolts. Since 2011, Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan and Lebanon have initiated decentralisation reforms in an effort to overcome the crisis of confidence and legitimacy in state-society relations and to address two of the protestors' key demands: "more participative governance and more efficient and accountable public services" (Hourdet & Harnisch, 2018: 2). Decentralisation is a long-term process that involves complex changes in governmental structures, political cultures and societal self-understanding. Whether these changes have been successfully initiated in the above countries, with more powers being devolved to local authorities and local authorities building the necessary capacities to foster greater democracy, continues to be a subject of much debate (Harb & Atallah, 2015).

In the context of the large-scale absence of regional and national cultural policies in most MENA countries, SouthMed CV approached the decentralisation reforms as an opportunity to explore the potential and willingness of local authorities to promote cultural

development and to collaborate on Euro-Mediterranean cultural cooperation projects (Farhat, 2018: 5). As policy change is considerably easier at local level, the decentralisation reforms offered a welcome opportunity to experiment with cultural policy innovation in the region. Further, the focus on local-level collaborations between civil society and the state should be viewed as an attempt to support the implementation of decentralisation and its potential to facilitate more citizen participation.

With regard to the objective of fostering civil society-state relations, the most significant portfolio of projects executed under SouthMed CV was entitled “State of Culture”. It consisted of six projects that “focused on the different relationships (both critical and collaborative) that may exist between public authorities and independent cultural organisations” (Cots et al., 2018: 17). All but one of the six projects were from Tunisia (two projects) and Morocco (three projects) and they were led by some of the countries’ most important cultural groups.¹⁴ The prominence of the two countries in this portfolio can be explained by the fact that the dialogue between the state and civil society is most advanced in them. Compared with countries such as Egypt and Algeria, where the state tightly controls or even prevents the work of CSOs, CSOs in Tunisia and Morocco can act in relative freedom. But there are also marked differences between civil society-state relations in Tunisia – where long-time president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali was toppled in January 2011 and the country transitioned to democracy, holding its first democratic elections in 2014 – and Morocco – where King Mohammed VI remained ahead of the protests and in power by calling a referendum on constitutional reforms. According to Afrobarometer data from 2014/2015, trust in public institutions in Tunisia is by far higher than in Morocco. Whereas in the former 73% of the population trusts “somewhat” or “a lot” in public institutions, in Morocco only 49% expressed the same sentiment (Bratton & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016). These differences were also manifest in the kinds of relations CSOs funded under SouthMed CV sought to establish with public authorities in the two countries. Whereas the two Tunisian projects aimed to engage more directly with local authorities as partners, the ambitions of the three Moroccan projects were limited to entering into a loose consultative and watchdog relationship with public authorities.

Taking a closer look at the SouthMed CV projects implemented in Tunisia and Morocco, the remainder of this section examines how the relations between local authorities and civil society groups that SouthMed CV tried to foster unfolded in practice. How were CSOs strengthened in their capacity to act on and gain a voice in emerging decentralised decision-making structures and territorial governance? And, to what extent did relations of trust emerge between CSOs and local public institutions?

14 The sixth project, entitled “PerForm: Performing Arts Consultancy Office”, was from Egypt. See <http://www.smedcv.net/per-form-performing-arts-consultancy-office/>

Tunisia: The long road towards effective local partnerships

All the projects in the SouthMed CV portfolio “State of Culture” developed cultural strategies to try to incite processes of urban socioeconomic transformation and creative place-making. By addressing conflicting issues of urbanity, they sought to engage with institutionalised politics and influence the decisions of policy-makers, either by supporting their improvement or critiquing them. The two Tunisian projects were entitled MED DEMOS/PACE LAB (Implementation: February-October 2017)¹⁵ and Sustainable Local Planning – Locality of Thibar (Implementation: February 2017-April 2018).¹⁶ Both were set in smaller cities and towns beyond the countries’ main metropolitan axes.

MED DEMOS/PACE LAB (hereafter MED DEMOS) took place in Kairouan, a UNESCO World Heritage site and capital of the Kairouan Governorate. The project aimed to produce an urban plan for recovering and ensuring equal access to public space, especially for young people, women and other vulnerable groups. The methodology was interdisciplinary and participatory. It brought together local social and cultural CSOs with architecture students from Tunis and Casablanca, giving them the opportunity to collaboratively design people-friendly public spaces. The local community was engaged through workshops that sought to create an understanding of public space development as a collective process and responsibility. The project was led by the Kairouan Community Foundation (KCF), which was established in 2014 as the first multi-sectoral association in Tunisia, bringing together representatives of public authorities with NGOs, CSOs and businesses from Kairouan and central Tunisia to jointly foster local development and local collaborative governance.¹⁷ Other project partners were the Cultural Centre of Kairouan, the National School of Architecture and Urbanism in Tunis, and the Casablanca School of Architecture and Landscape in Morocco. The project involved close collaboration with local and regional public authorities and they have committed to implement parts of the urban plan that was devised.¹⁸

Sustainable Local Planning – Locality of Thibar (hereafter SLP) was a project led by the Tunisian Association of Landscape Architects and Engineers (TALAE), a non-governmental organisation created in 2013 that has represented Tunisia in the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA) since 2014. Other project partners were the Municipality of Thibar and the Association of Civil Society of Thibar. SLP responded to the Tunisian decentralisation reforms from 2015, which had led to the creation of 86 new municipalities (bringing the total number of municipalities from

¹⁵ <http://www.smedcv.net/med-demospace-lab/>

¹⁶ <http://www.smedcv.net/elaborating-a-sustainable-urban-plan-for-the-locality-of-thibar/>

¹⁷ See <http://fixkairouan.org/> and <https://arab.org/directory/kairouan-community-foundation/>. KCF was created with support from the Polish Development Policy Foundation and American Press Club Foundation.

¹⁸ Interview, Director of KCF, 25.07.2019.

264 to 350) and the expansion of the territory of several others to complement the role and function of regional governments.¹⁹ The objective of the project was to partner with one of the new municipalities on the formulation of a plan for local sustainable development that takes into account landscape design and natural and cultural heritage. The new Municipality of Thibar, in the Beja Governorate in northern Tunisia, was chosen because of its attractive landscape and rich cultural history, which have so far not been capitalised on to boost the town's and region's development. This choice reflected the hope of many people from Tunisia's marginalised regions that decentralisation would bring more attention to their regions and provide them with the chance to "show off" their tourism and other potentials to the rest of the country (Yerkes & Muasher, 2018: 9). SLP sought to propose sustainable ways for the socioeconomic development of the natural and cultural heritage of Thibar and its surrounding area. Like MED DEMOS, it took a participatory approach that engaged local citizens through workshops, focus groups and a survey. With the Municipality of Thibar being a partner on the project, some elements of the plan that was produced are currently being adopted into a larger local development plan.²⁰

A challenge for both MED DEMOS and SLP was that at the time of their execution the decentralisation reforms were still in their early stages. Although the Tunisian Constitution from 2014 made a clear commitment to decentralisation (Hoel, 2014) and decentralisation reforms were adopted in 2015, there was no strategy for their implementation. The Local Authorities Code (Code des Collectivités Locales), the law governing the decentralisation process, was only passed by parliament ten days before the country's first democratic local elections were held on 6 May 2018, after being repeatedly postponed (Yerkes & Muasher, 2018: 11).²¹ For SLP this meant that, although the Municipality of Thibar existed on paper, there were no municipal officials who TALAE could engage with. When TALAE developed the project, all municipalities were meant to be managed by non-elected special committees until the local elections took place. However, when the project began, the committee for Thibar was no longer in operation, apart from the president, who was the centrally appointed Governor of Beja. TALAE thus mainly collaborated with the regional governorate and they also received support from the Minister of Local Affairs and the Environment to get the project off the ground.²² Due to this complex situation, the process of establishing a working relationship with the different levels of government was very time-intensive and TALAE spent less time on research and planning than they would have liked.

In the case of MED DEMOS, which involved collaboration with the Municipality of Kairouan, one of the municipalities that already existed before 2015 but that was

19 Formerly, more than 50% of Tunisian territory was "non-municipalized", with one third of the population living outside of a municipal district and not being able to vote locally (Labiadh, 2016).

20 Interview, Project Manager, TALAE, 06.09.2019.

21 The elections were originally scheduled for October 2016, but then postponed to March 2017, then December 2017, then March 2018, and finally May 2018.

22 The Ministry of Local Affairs and the Environment was newly created in 2016. Together with the Ministry of the Interior it oversees the three levels of local government: the regional, governorate and municipal levels (Yerkes & Muasher, 2018: 18).

expanded in 2016, the delay in the decentralisation reforms meant dealing with an unelected special committee created less than a year earlier. As the Director of KCF explained, “they [the committee] did not have the necessary experience to manage the collaboration.”²³ The committee lacked the technical skills, and the development of participatory public spaces was not high up on their agenda. Low staffing rates and the lack of technical capacities continue to be a problem in both old and new municipalities, especially in the more marginal regions (UCLG, n.d.). The technical expertise that MED DEMOS and SLP offered the municipalities, through the involvement of architecture students, landscape architects and engineers, was positive in this sense. The projects also brought international experts to Kairouan and Thibar for workshops (MED DEMOS collaborated with the Polish Development Policy Foundation and SLP with the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects). However, the lack of technical personnel in the municipalities meant that these inputs could not be fully absorbed.

The Tunisian SouthMed CV projects illustrate how, while there was an intention to collaborate with local authorities, these intentions were largely frustrated due to the lack of municipal structures and resources at the time of implementation. Nevertheless, the activities that the CSOs organised and the urban and landscape plans they developed left a mark on Thibar and Kairouan. They raised awareness around the importance of public space, and their plans for local sustainable development were partially adopted by the new local authorities elected in May 2018. More recent experiences have also given the two CSOs more trust in the new local authorities. Members of TALAE reported that in other projects they have done since the local elections (not through TALAE but other associations) it was much easier to collaborate with the new municipalities.²⁴ Similarly, the Director of KCF observed that since the elections in Kairouan “they have the first young people now in these municipal offices, and they are motivated and believe in change and support the things we do.”²⁵

Morocco: Between collaboration and resistance

A publication that documented the results of SouthMed CV projects implemented across the region observed that “projects, which aspired to collaborate with existing local institutions, suggest a new state of mind that some consider ‘post-revolutionary’” (Cots et al., 2018: 17). While this description might apply to the cultural groups supported in Tunisia, it does not square so easily with the groups and projects funded in Morocco. The Moroccan projects in the portfolio “State of Culture” were MARSAD –

23 Interview, Director of KCF.

24 Interview, Project Manager, TALAE.

25 Interview, Director of KCF.

Mediterranean Action and Research for Sustainability and Development,²⁶ Think Tanger²⁷ and Proposal for a Metropole.²⁸ All three projects were connected by the fact that they were either led or supported by the Casablanca-based non-profit organisation Racines, which was created by a group of cultural and human rights activists in September 2010 and dissolved by order of a court ruling in December 2018. Racines was one of Morocco's most prolific and best-known cultural activist groups. It advocated for the integration of culture into public human, social and economic policies by conducting research and collecting data on cultural practices and policies, hosting conferences and debates, and disseminating information.²⁹

The aim of MARSAD, which was led by Racines in partnership with CSOs in Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon,³⁰ was to foster South-South regional cooperation on cultural policy. The project set up a regional observatory for monitoring and evaluating the design and implementation of cultural policies in the four countries. This involved transferring and adapting data collection and analysis methods developed by Racines for Morocco to the other country contexts. A multitude of reports, maps and other information on the respective countries' cultural landscapes were made available through a designated website (now inactive). The principal objective of this exercise was "to encourage institutional entities to develop cultural policies for the public through bottom-up recommendations" (Azdem, 2018: 19). Underscoring the particular relevance of the information for local authorities, the former Director of Racines, Mehdi Azdem, explained that, while the information was to serve as a resource for different kinds of actors, it provided an "innovative element for rethinking local cultural policies, not only for artists and/or professionals, but also for citizens and the general public" (Azdem, 2018: 19).

Think Tanger was a project funded under the first SouthMed CV call. It was launched in 2016 and led by Arty Farty Tanger (a branch of the French cultural association Arty Farty), in partnership with Technopark Tanger (a start-up incubator) and Racines. The project brought together artists, researchers, the private sector and other stakeholders to formulate creative responses to urban challenges in the city-region of Tangiers. Outliving the SouthMed CV funding period (February-October 2016), Think Tanger has evolved into an independent cultural platform that operates at the intersection of the arts, design, participatory research and urban practice.³¹ Proposal for a Metropole (hereafter PfM) was a Think Tanger project funded under the second SouthMed CV call (Implementation: February 2017-January 2018). It was coordinated by Think Tanger and supported by a Tangiers-based architecture firm and Dabateatr, a multidisciplinary art company.³² With PfM, Think Tanger sought to deepen its understanding of urban transformations in Tangiers and explore how the political and economic decisions that shape the city impact

26 <http://www.smedcv.net/marsad-mediterranean-action-and-research-for-sustainability-and-development/>

27 <http://www.smedcv.net/think-tanger/>

28 <http://www.smedcv.net/proposal-for-a-metropole/>

29 <https://www.racines.ma/en/content/about-racines>

30 For the list of partners, see <http://www.smedcv.net/marsad-mediterranean-action-and-research-for-sustainability-and-development/>

31 <https://www.facebook.com/thinktanger/>

32 <https://www.facebook.com/PAGE.DABATEATR/>

on its inhabitants. In the absence of public policies that promote urban cohesion and the territorial integration of outlying neighbourhoods, the project addressed these issues from a creative perspective and in a participatory manner. Through organising workshops, conferences and exhibitions, the group provided a space for public reflection and discussion on the transformation of Tangiers, as well as creative perspectives and tools to help people better understand and critically question the development of their city. The project also worked with marginalised communities in outlying neighbourhoods by designing social and artistic programmes with and for the local communities that aimed to motivate people to rethink and reshape public space.

In their projects, both Racines and Think Tanger aimed to establish collaborative relations with public authorities, while maintaining the role of independent observer and critic (see Azdem, 2018: 22; Hicham, 2018: 51-52). However, neither project engaged in any sustained dialogue or formal collaboration with public authorities. With PFM, Think Tanger performed more of a watchdog role by critically analysing urban public policies and their impact on citizens' everyday lives. While the group presented the project results to the municipal council in the hope that they "would be considered as a creative solution to the problems facing Tangier" (Cots et al., 2018: 17), no actual collaborative relationship came about.

In the case of Racines' project MARSAD, the watchdog role also had far more weight. The main objective of the project was to establish collaborative relations between CSOs from different countries of the region to create a regional observatory of cultural policies. While efforts were made to engage public institutions and decision-makers (e.g. by inviting them to plan meetings and conferences, and sharing project results and publications with them), these were unsuccessful. As the co-founder and former Executive Director of Racines observed: "I think that this was maybe one of the main challenges and difficulties – not just for MARSAD but the whole of SouthMed CV – how to involve public institutions and decision makers."³³ Yet, she also acknowledged that one possible reason for why MARSAD had such trouble engaging public authorities had to do with the fact that the project mostly operated at the national and regional level: "Of course it's easier to talk with local institutions than with the ministry."³⁴ Racines itself made this experience in November 2018 during the third edition of its internationally recognised flagship conference *Etats Généraux de la culture au Maroc* (The General State of Culture in Morocco), which focused on the theme "Cultural Policy in the Regions" (Racines, 2019). The intention was to evaluate the implementation of Morocco's "advanced regionalisation" plan – which was adopted as part of the 2011 Constitution, and foresaw giving local authorities increased budgetary and decision-

³³ Interview, co-founder and former Executive Director of Racines, 19.09.2019.

³⁴ Ibid.

making powers – by assessing the new role of local authorities in the formulation and implementation of cultural policy. The responsiveness of local public authorities to the event and their willingness to participate was much higher than that of national authorities during previous editions of the *Etats Généraux de la culture au Maroc*.³⁵

But, at a deeper level, the establishment of more collaborative relations between the two CSOs and public authorities was also hampered by a sense of distrust and the felt need to resist any kind of governmental influence on the part of the CSOs. Talking about the significance of Think Tanger in the wider context of post-Arab spring social movements, Hicham Bouzid, the project leader of PfM, portrays the group as part of a “wave of initiatives [that] represents a new form of resistance” to “the inefficiency of the political class to meet the expectations of society [and] the repression” (Bouzid, 2018: 51). The dissolution of Racines in December 2018 by court ruling, following a complaint of the governor of Casablanca-Anfa acting on behalf of the Interior Ministry, tangibly illustrates the limits to cultural freedom of expression in Morocco. In the autumn of 2018, Racines hosted an episode of the popular YouTube talk show *1 Dîner 2 Cons* (One Dinner, Two Idiots) at its offices, during which a speech by King Mohammed VI was critically analysed. The court ruling stated that the group had organised activities that constituted “a serious attack on state institutions and the Islamic religion, insulting public bodies and functionaries by accusing them of corruption” (cited in: Lindsey, 2019). For Racines, the ruling highlights the contradiction between the government’s official civil society discourse laid down in the new Moroccan Constitution, which guarantees “freedom of thought, opinion and expression in all its forms,” and the reality of government actions.³⁶ In such a context it becomes highly difficult for CSOs to perform the role of watchdog and critic of the state, let alone act in collaboration with the state.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See the group’s public statement on the court ruling: <https://www.racines.ma/fr/content/communique-de-presse-dissolution-de-racines-press-release-racines-dissolution-byn-shfy-hl#english>

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to explore how Euro-Mediterranean cultural cooperation programmes launched in the aftermath of the Arab revolts have engaged with the complex relationship between democratic change and urbanisation. The focus of the analysis was on a concrete EU funded sub-granting programme, SouthMed CV, which supported CSO-led projects that formulated cultural pathways for promoting democratic and sustainable urban development. The focus was on SouthMed CV funded projects implemented in Tunisia and Morocco. Particular attention was given to how SouthMed CV sought to strike a balance between the stabilisation and democratisation ambitions of the ENP South by fostering collaborative relations between CSOs and public authorities. Building on recent decentralisation reforms in Tunisia and Morocco, collaborative relations were fostered above all at local level. While the latter approach constitutes a promising solution to overcoming the ENP's stability-democratisation dilemma in theory, the analysis of the two Tunisian cases showed that things are less straightforward in practice. Decentralisation is a long-term process and partnerships between civil society and local authorities only evolve gradually. At the same time, limitations to the devolution of power and resources continue to hinder effective collaborative governance. But especially in democratic transition countries of the neighbourhood, like Tunisia, the evolving relationship between civil society and local authorities is one that needs to be analysed further. Collaborative relations between CSOs and local authorities in the area of urban and cultural policies are of particular relevance for such analyses, as they tend to provide considerable room for democratic decision-making and participation.

At another level, the article has shown how Euro-Mediterranean cultural cooperation is a transversal policy field that is particularly linked with neighbourhood policies in the areas of civil society support and urban development. Given the overwhelming absence of cultural policies in Southern Neighbourhood countries, CSOs are emerging as important partners for the EU in its effort to establish cultural relations with the region. However, if the EU seriously wants to treat civil society as a partner and build relations of trust, more support is needed to create an enabling environment. While the EU's principled pragmatism prevents it from intervening in situations where governments erect bureaucratic impediments or legally persecute CSOs (Johansson-Nogués, 2006), as was the case with Racines in Morocco, the EU can take other measures. Most importantly, it could shift from short-term funding instruments to more long-term structures of cooperation, especially in countries where cultural actors receive no government support or, worse, are undermined by the government (Trobbiani 2018: 6). In countries where there is more support and tolerance of cultural

freedom of expression, the EU should consider establishing more policy dialogues and co-ownership with domestic authorities in the elaboration and funding of cultural programmes (ibid.). This would help promote new domestic funding structures and foster innovation in cultural policy. If the EU wishes to fully unlock the many potentials of culture for sustainable development, including sustainable urban development, and for supporting societies in their transition to democracy, the provision of a more enabling environment is essential.

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