Future prospects of the Euro-Mediterranean integration

Ilan Chet  
Deputy Secretary General  
Higher Education and Research Division  
Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)

Emmanuelle Gardan  
Higher Education and Research Division  
Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)

Núria Jové  
Higher Education and Research Division  
Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)

Aoife Terry  
Higher Education and Research Division  
Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)

Júlia Trias  
Higher Education and Research Division  
Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)
Challenges and Opportunities | Where we stand

By calendar coincidence, two main events related to the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation define the agenda of the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean in 2015: the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Barcelona Process (1995) - from which legacy the Union for the Mediterranean and its Secretariat are direct heirs - and the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) aimed at offering adequate responses to the growing challenges of the Mediterranean region by involving, through a joint consultation process, relevant stakeholders and taking into account the wide and varied interests and concerns. For those working in favour of integration between both rims of the Mediterranean, both events are an occasion to analyse the current political and socio-economic situation in the region, while taking stock of the achievements and difficulties with respect to the previously established objectives and identifying future prospects arising from the new context.

Transforming the Euro-Mediterranean basin into a common area of peace and stability, building a zone of shared prosperity as well as developing human resources, promoting mutual understanding between cultures and exchanges between civil societies1 were the main goals of the Barcelona Process. Twenty years after the signature of the Barcelona Declaration and ten years after the implementation of the current ENP, despite positive advancements achieved at all levels of sectorial activities, it has been demonstrated that other challenges and happenings are withholding progress and derailing regional focus.

Joining the long-lasting conflicts in the Mediterranean, by perpetuating political instability and drastically impacting the economies of the region, situations in Syria and Libya have a tremendous impact on the socio-economic state of play in the region. The huge waves of refugees and displaced is escalating dramatically, with more than 4 million 2 and almost 28,0003 registered refugees respectively in addition to millions of internal displaced persons and asylum seekers. This human tragedy is added to the classical dilemma of illegal migration faced by the European continent. Unfortunately, so far this year more than 2,000 people4 have died or have disappeared in the Mediterranean attempting to reach Italian and Greek coasts. This drastic milestone indicates the Mediterranean as the most dangerous and deadliest migrant route for those who abandon their own countries and risk their lives in search for better economic opportunities, fleeing war or lack of freedom. However, in this humanitarian tragedy, we cannot forget that almost 188,0005 migrants were finally rescued after making the perilous journey to cross over to Europe.

The rates of youth unemployment in the countries of North of Africa (25%) and the Middle East (19%) are higher than any other developing region. Women are especially affected by unemployment: female participation in the labour force only reaches 25.4% in the Middle East and 28.1% in North Africa6. Paradoxically, in this region the level of education of youth does not guarantee finding a job. On the contrary, surveys show that unemployment rates are higher for young university graduates. The most flagrant case is Tunisia where unemployment rates of this group reach approximately 30% while those of young people with secondary and primary studies stand at 20% and 12% respectively7.

Nevertheless, in this dark panorama, it is worthwhile exploring the opportunities that could be developed. The population growth in the MENA region, among the highest in the world, is characterized by a significant demographic transition in which young people (aged 15-24) represent approximately 30% of the total. This, of course, represents a huge potential for stakeholders to take advantage and expand the field of human development. Indeed, investing in youth as well as in education and vocational training focusing on employability is, in the long term, a more effective and powerful tool than any other complementary security measure to be implemented in the region.

All above-mentioned challenges, affecting both Europe and the South and East of the Mediterranean, are calling for a major intercultural dialogue, stronger cooperation and, notably, further regional integration. Therefore, these issues can only be tackled through coordinated efforts: partnerships and synergies should be created, complementarities and commonalities found, and best practices exchanged and replicated.

The role of the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean (UMF Secretariat) is, precisely, to provide this appropriate collective regional response by combining the regional and policy dialogue with the promotion of tangible regional projects with an important socio-economic impact in the quality of life of the populations. In other words, a political strategy with on-ground action.

The role of the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean | Who we are

The UMF Secretariat is the only intergovernmental organisation that unites the 28 Member States of the European Union, nine6 Arab Mediterranean countries, Israel, Turkey and the Balkans. This is a highly valuable asset since all countries of the Euro-Mediterranean region, from both North and South, are meeting around the same table with one main guiding principle: co-ownership.

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7 Due to political reasons, Syria suspended its participation in December 2011.
This is possible thanks to the strong political will and leadership of the UfM Co-Presidency, led by the European Union, from the North, and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, from the South, along with all 43 UfM Member States. The Union for the Mediterranean is therefore, unique in the region, governed on the basis of a geographical balance also consistent with the ENP, as well as with Southern Mediterranean countries’ priorities and interests.

The UfM Secretariat acts as a platform for regional and policy dialogue, bringing together governments and a great diversity of actors in the region united in strengthening cooperation and integration in the Mediterranean. The UfM Secretariat is, in this sense, a “one-stop-shop” for exchanging ideas and best practices, weaving networks and building consensus. Since 2012, 8 high level conferences, 13 Senior Official Meetings and more than one hundred expert forums and round tables were organised by the UfM Secretariat and are good examples of this inclusive dynamic.

It is important to stress that the UfM Secretariat could never fulfil its mission without joining forces with the global ecosystem of organisations which constitute its institutional framework. In effect, in pursuing its objectives, the UfM Secretariat counts on a wide magnum of partners with which works in complete synergy. These partners are, among many others, the Parliamentary Assembly of the UfM (PA-UfM), the Anna Lindh Foundation, the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM), the Association of the Mediterranean Chambers of Commerce and Industry (ASCAME), the Union of Mediterranean Confederations of Enterprises (Business-Med), the Euro-Mediterranean University (EMUNI University) and the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM).

Furthermore, the UfM Secretariat is the operational institution where political decisions are put into action, and where regional and sub-regional projects are developed with the mobilisation and support of a multiplicity of stakeholders (parliamentarians, international financial organisations, development agencies, private sector companies, civil society organisations, universities and research centres, foundations, etc.).

Thanks to another important principle of action, variable geometry, every UfM Member State is allowed to take part in projects that may be of interest to them. Even though UfM project eligibility criteria requires an initial involvement of a minimum of three countries (including at least one Southern country), this flexible and pragmatic approach offers all UfM Member States the opportunity to join in at any stage of the project cycle.

To date, the activity of the UfM Secretariat covers major regional strategic matters such as energy, environment, transport interconnection and sustainable urban development, education and research, employment and gender issues. The UfM Secretariat acts as a catalyst of concrete projects on these fields which receive the unanimous endorsement of the UfM Senior Officials, representing the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the 43 Member States. These projects—either related to infrastructure or human development—can be framed in three cross-cutting pillars: 1) Youth employability and inclusive growth, 2) Women’s empowerment, and 3) Sustainable development.

Highlighted in the first of these three pillars, and in line with the subject of this article is the UfM flagship initiative “Med4Jobs” aimed at addressing unemployment in the Euro-Mediterranean region, in particular developing the skills of youth and women through education and training, reducing the gap between labour demand and job supply, and fostering a culture of entrepreneurship and private sector development with a special focus on SMEs and start-ups. Med4Jobs envisages identifying, upscaling and replicating successful job-creating projects in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean basin while establishing a North-South regional platform based on workshops for dialogue, sharing of best practices and private-public collaboration.

Emblematic projects of Med4Jobs initiative are, by way of illustration, MedNC9—a network of accredited schemes for the occupational and social integration of young people excluded from the labour market, namely school dropouts and unemployed graduates- and HOMERe10—an internship mobility programme between nine Mediterranean countries facilitating transition from higher education to qualified work in the country of origin—.

Both projects are led by the UfM Division of Higher Education and Research, which aims to encourage the development of high-level joint study and research programmes, facilitate student and researcher transnational mobility, increase students’ entrepreneurial skills and employability chances and foster innovation, knowledge and technology-sharing and its economic return on the industry.

In line with these priorities, the UfM-labelled project Higher Education on Food Security & Rural Development11, promoted by CIHEAM, combines the allocation of scholarships for Southern and Eastern Mediterranean students with the improvement of the ongoing CIHEAM Master of Science degrees and advanced training courses for professionals.

Advancing regional integration in education and research, a priority for the next decade|The way forward

One of the major goals which must be met in years to come is regional integration in the Mediterranean. Whether it be in the fields of trade, economy, transport interoperability, industrial cooperation, agriculture markets, environment and climate change, higher education or scientific research -but also in many other strategic fields- this should be the underlying objective of any new investment in the region. Intra-regional dialogue, exchange of ideas and experiences, joint endeavors and common projects are needed now more than ever.

In particular, education, research and innovation are key elements to secure greater progress and cooperation between both rims of the Mediterranean and also between Southern Mediterranean countries. Even though it is obvious that education brings significant gains to countries, we must not forget the human and social benefits of raising levels of knowledge and of building closer ties between schools, universities, students, professors and researchers. Not only through enhanced skills and higher employment opportunities, increased innovation potential and competitiveness, but also - if not mainly - through greater fulfilment of individuals, development of open-mindedness and mutual respect, more active citizenship, tolerance hence more governable, equal, peaceful and inclusive societies.

One UfM labelled exemplary project, which stems from this vision, is the Euro-Mediterranean University of Fes (in French, Université Euro-Méditerranéenne de Fès -UEMF12), a new regional campus of excellence that, having already launched its first programmes in temporary premises, will be officially inaugurated in Morocco in September 2016. UEMF aims at attracting committed and highly competent students from across the Mediterranean and training them, in Arabic, French and English languages, on strategic issues for the development of the region by contributing to build the first generation of Euro-Mediterranean-minded young professionals. UEMF programmes will be complementary with those from the EMUNI University (also awarded with the UfM label13). Both institutions, operating from their headquarters in Fes and Slovenia, will stand as regional hubs for Higher Education and Research in the Mediterranean region.

Structured scientific cooperation also contributes to long-term and greater mutual understanding between countries. Cooperative scientific research can provide joint responses to the most important societal challenges of the region, such as climate change, water provision, food security, economic development, migration, etc. It is, unquestionably, a crucial and stable instrument that should be further used in the region to strengthen relations. Promoting further scientific diplomacy in the Mediterranean area is also highly recommended, as it vehicles a common language for intercultural dialogue, joint achievements and, in fine, trust-building, in spite of political, economic or security variables.

With the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA), which Joint Programme has been submitted to the European Commission at the end of 2014 by more than 12 Mediterranean countries under the Italian leadership, there is for the first time a real prospect of durable scientific regional integration - far beyond cooperation - in the region. This initiative, which intends to set up an integrated long-term research programme on food systems and water resources, should be strongly encouraged and reinforced.

Its added-value -perceived in terms of opportunities for researchers and capacity building (training, mobility, and research infrastructures), competitiveness and job creation, development of inclusive sustainable and healthy societies, and, above all, regional stability- is resulting in a growing political and financial support. So much so, that the participating countries have committed up to 200 million euros to date. On the basis of the principles of co-ownership, mutual interest and shared benefits, PRIMA Member States have expressed their strong preference for the UfM Secretariat to host the Dedicated Implementation Structure (DIS) and thus provide the governance structure for the programme. The UfM Secretariat has already conveyed its availability for such a partnership to its governing body; the Senior Officials.

The importance of post-2015 challenges requires a change of perspective. The Euro-Mediterranean region should be viewed from a comprehensive and holistic approach embracing, simultaneously growth, political stability and security related issues if they are to be tackled consistently and permanently. This can only be achieved under the framework of an increased North-South common agenda based on shared objectives. The UfM institutional framework can be utilized to be instrumental as a forum that would support this collective work. The resumption of UfM Ministerial Conferences over the last years as well as the acceleration of the UfM pipeline of initiatives and projects demonstrates a strong engagement and mutual conviction by UfM Member States to advance together in that direction.

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Barcelona Process, to which the fundamental principles are embedded in the UfM activities, the human dimension of cooperation process should be placed at the forefront of Euro-Mediterranean relations. “Restoring harmony in civil society, reinforcing intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and strengthening regional integration are now more important than ever if we are to create a common space for solidarity and stability in the Euro-Mediterranean region”14.

In the field of education, the promotion of student, professor and researcher mobility flows, the harmonization of quality standards and recognition and accreditation procedures, the development of academic and vocational training networks and the use of online tools (which could help to not only guarantee access to education and absorb the growing student enrollment but also facilitate North-South links), can greatly improve integration in addition to employability for a promising future.

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13 EMUNI Master and PhD programmes: http://ufmsecretariat.org/three-new-ufm-projects-from-higher-education-and-research-division-are-labeled/
14 Conclusions of the high-level meeting on intercultural and interreligious dialogue held on 22-23 July 2015 at the Headquarters of the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean in Barcelona.