

Concept note – ECOSOC Webinar

Date: Wednesday, 20 May 2020

Time: 1 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Summary:

In light of the global COVID-19 pandemic, MAJALAT has developed a new activity plan for the years 2020-2021 that aims continue the work on the EU-neighborhood dialogue despite the restrictions on people's movement, using online communication tools. In this context, a series of webinars will be held in the upcoming months, building on the recommendations¹ drafted and discussed in previous events, including the Civil Society Forum in Brussels last December. The first series of webinars to take place will offer a space for representatives of civil society organizations to reflect on the impact of the crisis on the recommendations that we have developed. In this context, ANND will be hosting a webinar specifically on the Economic Development and Social Dialogue (ECOSOC) theme, where we will look back on the recommendations presented at the forum in this theme and review them in light of the recent developments.

Background and context:

The crisis resulting from the recent COVID-19 pandemic has taken its toll on the world's countries, without exception. Over a quarter million people have succumbed to the virus worldwide, out of over 3.6 million cases documented by the WHOⁱ. Both in the global north and south, economic structures and social protection systems have crashed or proven their ineffectiveness in dealing with such phenomena. One in five of all workers in the United States of America, the world's biggest economy, have filed for unemployment benefits since mid-Marchⁱⁱ, including millions who lost their health insurance.

Although the countries of West Asia and North Africa were able to learn from the experiences and effective measures of countries that were infected earlier, they have had their share of economic and social damage too. The Arab region will lose \$42 billion in gross domestic product according to ESCWA's estimationsⁱⁱⁱ, and 1.7 million jobs in the year 2020. By mid-March, market capital losses by businesses in the region reached \$420 billion according to UNDP^{iv}. That said, the number of cases and deaths, as well as the scale of testing and reporting, varied significantly among the region's countries.^v For instance, Algeria has recorded more than 27 times as many deaths per 1 million people as Jordan (11 to 0.4) while carrying out only 1.5% of the number of tests relative to the population size. And while the total deaths recorded in Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria have not crossed 1233, many of these countries seem to be underreporting or undertesting, as clear in the cases of Libya and Egypt, where only 340 and 879 tests per 1 million people have been carried out, while the world average for a country is close to 17,000.

¹ The ECOSOC recommendations from the Civil Society Forum can be found in the annex below.



Oil-producers in the region have paid the price of the dramatic decline in prices, with the crude oil barrel reaching as little as 40% the price it started the year with. Countries already witnessing alarming unemployment rates or ongoing economic crises, and those where seasonal work dominates the labor market, are expecting recession and therefore more job losses and lower purchasing power. Moreover, although governments' responses have largely been serious in terms of imposing lockdowns, border closures and social distancing, the popularity of the measures especially in terms of restrictions to collective political action, have varied. The crisis has prompted many local voices to point at the failure of governments to protect their citizens and residents, especially in terms of health and labor rights.

These conversations have also been alive in wealthier countries, whose social protection systems and public planning competences affected by neoliberal transformation failed to respond universally, and collectively, to the vast impact immediate impact of the crisis. While the performance of European countries varied in quality and timeliness, the continent has hosted 44% of all cases and witnessed close to 60% of total deaths globally^{vi}. European countries and institutions have been criticized^{vii} for weak coordination in their responses, especially in the earlier days of the pandemic. However, the EU has taken several serious response measures^{viii}, including allocating \$540 billion in support for European economies², with \$100 billion to fund soft loans for the protection of jobs and unemployment benefits on the short term in European countries that request support^{ix}. The union's focus has also been widened beyond its own borders in dealing with the pandemic's aftermath, with a \$20 Billion economic support package dedicated to neighboring countries, including \$1.5 billion in short and medium term support for the social and economic recovery of southern neighbors, and over half a billion to strengthen these countries' health sectors^x. Moreover, the EU is reallocating resources from its ongoing projects in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon towards the national health systems; with the support taking the form of needed equipment or technical assistance^{xi}.

While none of the southern neighborhood countries have made a request for urgent support from the EU, the situation of their populations remains fragile in light of weak social and labour protection systems. In a survey of the member organizations in the Arab NGO Network for Development, workers in informal employment were reported as the most vulnerable (90%), followed by workers in the private sector (78%), the health sector (60%), and the education sector (37%).

Looking into the future, these countries will need to prioritize the creation of secure jobs and the transformation of their economies onto a more resilient and sustainable path. The role of the EU in this process is yet to be revealed, but it is crucial that more focus is set in EU programs and policies on development objectives that include reducing economic inequalities and improving access to healthcare and stable income, rather than simply on the growth of economies in terms of gross domestic product. This would require engaging local civil society actors and their knowledge on the particular gaps and needs of their countries. The multi-faceted nature of the current crisis clearly

² To put it in perspective, this amount constitutes exactly four times three quarters of the money invested by the U.S. in Europe as part of the Marshall Plan.



points at the need for customized and wholistic solutions, away from any one-size-fits-all models or programs.

Webinar format:

The webinar will be a 2.5 hour-long conversational meeting, which will begin by an introduction on Majalat, and brief presentations on the ECOSOC recommendations from the Civil Society Forum, and on background and context of the webinar, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects, and the EU's response to it.

The next hour and a half will be dedicated to a discussion, guided by the questions mentioned below, where representative of various CSOs will have the chance to present their analyses of the situation and the lessons they have drawn from it. After that, the conversation will focus on reviewing the recommendations in more detail, and considering any necessary improvements or changes given the conclusions of the earlier discussion.

Guiding questions for the discussion:

- What are our observations on the effects of the pandemic on the economic and social wellbeing of peoples of the region?
 - o Specifically, what lessons can be drawn concerning the economic and social policies of national governments? Including in terms of trade, food sovereignty, redistribution, social protection, and the nature and role of the private sector?
 - o Where does the European Union stand on these policies, and what is its potential contribution to their enactment or change? What recommendations can we offer in this context?
- How will the globalized economy's crash facing the pandemic affect the European Union's economic outlook?
- How might Europe's own economic and social crisis affect the union's relations with the southern neighbors and its policy orientations towards them?
- How do we assess the process in which the EU is mobilizing economic support packages to countries in the neighboring south? Did it engage local civil society actors? What critical observations and recommendations can be made on resource allocation, timeliness, impact, or other aspects?
 - o What are the challenges of reorientation of EU funds? Does it bring any trade-offs for the long-term development needs of Southern partner countries? Has there been any needs assessments at Southern partner countries side to coordinate this reallocation/reorientation? What role is played by CSOs?
- How well coordinated has the response been between European and neighborhood states? Did we observe the level of coordination required to meet the challenges of the pandemic and its ensuing crises?
 - o What form of policies and relations with the EU are needed to ensure a solid multi-lateral response to future pandemics in among European and neighborhood countries?



Annex: Recommendations (ECOSOC) from the Civil Society Forum in Brussels.

On the role of the private sector

- Creating a mechanism to monitor and hold accountable existing and future business enterprises in conflict zones in the Southern Neighbourhood under the reconstruction phase, such as Libya and Syria.
- Working on promoting transparency and access to information mechanisms in partnership countries and on the level of EU to support a joint monitoring and accountability mechanism.

On Trade and Investment Policies in the region

- Expanding the dialogue between the EU and CSOs and other related parties around the assessment of the ongoing trade talks and on previous policies and trade agreements and their implications on development in order to propose specific alternatives that take into consideration equality, social justice and development priorities in the countries of the Southern Neighbourhood.
- Organising a structured dialogue between the European Union, partner countries, CSOs and trade unions on the agreements from the region (currently Tunisia) as an integral part of the agreement negotiations. In addition, working on ex-ante impact assessment of trade agreements to evaluate its coherence with other European policies.
- Supporting research and development programs for sustainable development in the countries of the Southern Neighbourhood. In addition, supporting knowledge and technological exchange as part of the agreements.
- Concerning the ongoing negotiations about the DCFTA with Tunisia, and other foreseen trade agreements: 1) Avoiding removing tariff barriers on internally subsidized goods until the question of European internal support is decided in the WTO considering the US-EU conflict over tariffs. 2) For non-tariff barriers, avoiding using standards and quotas with protectionism objectives for goods that Tunisia is allowed to export. 3) Adopting international monitoring standards similar to those between EU member States, while preserving standards assuring decent work.
- Creating a binding multilateral mechanism involving civil society to monitor the impact of European private investment and European transnational corporation companies in Southern Neighbourhood countries, with attention to adapting standards by types of companies, their size, and the sectors in which they invest

ⁱ As per the available statistics on May 7. https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200507-covid-19-sitrep-108.pdf?sfvrsn=44cc8ed8_2

ⁱⁱ <https://www.dol.gov/ui/data.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/escwa-covid-19-economic-cost-arab-region-en.pdf>

^{iv} <https://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/coronavirus.html>



^v All the numbers that follow in this paragraph originate from the Worldometers database, as of May 7 at 20:54 GMT.

^{vi} As per the available statistics on May 7. https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200507covid-19-sitrep-108.pdf?sfvrsn=44cc8ed8_2

^{vii} <https://www.s4d4c.eu/covid-19-crisis-in-europe-a-failure-of-science-diplomacy/>

^{viii} <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/priorities/eu-response-to-coronavirus/20200327STO76004/10-things-the-eu-is-doing-to-fight-the-coronavirus>

^{ix} <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20200416STO77205/covid-19-s-economic-impact-EU100-billion-to-keep-people-in-jobs>

^x https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/coronavirus_support_south.pdf

^{xi} [ibid](#)

