



Liaison Committee

## *Meso-level Dialogue on Palestine between NGOs and the European Commission*

*1<sup>st</sup> Meeting - Bruxelles, 30 Octobre 1998  
Communication by the Italian Platform of NGOs for Palestine*

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### **1. The Resolution of the European NGOs**

On April 25<sup>th</sup> of this year the General Assembly of the European development Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) voted a resolution proposed by the Italian Platform of NGOs for Palestine and by the Italian Assembly of NGOs concerning actions in favour of the peace process in the Middle East.

As all you know, the resolution claims for a stronger commitment of the Commission, of the European Parliament and of all the Member States in favour of a quick resumption of the peace process and of the respect of the Oslo Agreements.

Namely, the European NGOs claimed to make conditional the commercial agreements between the European Union (EU) and Israel on the restarting and respect of the peace process and Oslo Agreements.

The European NGOs invited to support a boycott campaign of the products from the Israeli settlements, as pressure measure on the Israeli Government to respect the Palestinian's people rights.

The European civil society has then been invited to mobilise itself and to join the Palestinians and Israeli democratic and progressive organisations in such boycott campaign.

### **2. The imperative for a stronger political role of the European Union (EU)**

There is a common concern about the need to increase as much as possible the EU political role in the peace process. Such political role is a priority for the EU also in order to strengthen the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership process launched at the Barcelona Conference in 1995. Stability and prosperity in the Mediterranean area cannot be conceived and pursued without a strong political commitment for fair and lasting peace in the region.

We acknowledge as an important political sign in this sense the nomination of a Special Envoy in Middle East from the EU.

Nevertheless, further steps must be accomplished and such political willing should be made as clear as possible in all relevant seats.

We consider not at all more tolerable the commercial facilities accorded to Israel while the compliance of the commercial agreement with the EU is still far to be reached and while big abuses and huge frauds are committed by Israel in prejudice of the weak Palestinian economy and of the EU itself. It is well known – for example – the fraud of the orange juice that caused loss to the EU for something like 40 millions Euros.

We are interested to know which are the concrete steps the EU is doing (or is planning to do in the next future) to achieve the compliance of the commercial agreements signed with Israel and with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), without affecting the weak Palestinian economy.

It is well known, in fact, that several Palestinians producers are also practically obliged to violate such agreements to maintain alive their economical activities. Therefore the still weak Palestine economy unfortunately relies partially also on the violation of such agreements.

In other words, any eventual economic sanctions against products made in Israel should duly keep into account that the current reality is that a lot of Palestinian products - to be exported - must get the wording "made in Israel" as well as often the only way to import materials for Palestinians is to declare that they are addressed to the Israeli market.

Our feeling is that the peace process is faint. The agreements on the redeployment of the Israeli Army are considered among Palestinians just as a weak instrument to prolong the agony in which the peace process is. The common sense is that the real and everyday life problems such as the closures of the Territories, the control of the natural resources, of the water, the social and health problems, the problem of the mobility of Palestinians inside and outside the Territories, the Israeli settlements, etc. are still too far to be concretely solved.

Of course we hope that the recent steps done by Israel and Palestine National Authority (PNA) will get soon some positive and concrete results. But to be honest, we have to admit that the common sense in Europe on the situation in Palestine often is much far from the reality.

If stronger and severe measures won't be taken by the International Community and by the European Union - mostly in the economic field - we will assist in the very next future to a new and diffused explosion of violence and conflicts in the region, with severe and quick repercussions also in Europe.

It is not a case that various humanitarian agencies such as the Red Cross Federation are already preparing themselves to face up a new incoming explosion of the conflict.

### **3. The EU cooperation with Palestinians**

Such stronger political role should back-up and give more impact to the economic and technical co-operation commitment of the EU towards the reconstruction of Palestine.

The European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) has played an important role in such cooperation in recent years and the European NGOs have been relevant actors.

Just in the last 6 years ECHO assigned something as 50 millions Euros for operations in favour of Palestinians mainly in Palestine and Lebanon.

Emergency has not ended. Needs for emergency and humanitarian aid are still a lot and risks for worsening of social, economic and political situation are now alive as never before.

The ECHO actions must continue and their effects can be improved, through proper co-ordination mechanisms and adjustments.

Nevertheless we realise that is now the time also to give more impulse to middle and long term rehabilitation and development programmes, through operational instruments different than and complementary to ECHO.

Apart from the acute emergency, there is also a structural emergency that must be faced up with appropriate instruments.

It is the now time to encourage as much as possible development projects aimed to reinforce the ongoing development processes in the Palestinian society, in several crucial sectors: environment protections; human resources training; income generating activities; health and social issues; support for local organizations for civil rights; institution building, etc.

Some conditions are nevertheless requested to give more impact to such kind of projects: the political back up and action from the EU and the professional qualifications of European NGOs.

The impact of humanitarian as development projects in Palestine is currently heavily threatened by the weakness of the peace process. Co-operation projects risk being almost useless in presence of a lack of the political conditions that should permit to consolidate any kind of development process.

On the other side, all international NGOs should be as much as possible aware of the need to be professionally qualified for development projects and should be technically prepared as the local critical situation requires.

Humanitarian and rehabilitation projects should then be conceived in a well-defined short, middle and long term strategy to the elaboration of which the dialogue between EU and NGOs is essential.

### **4. The role of the European (and International) NGOs**

In this context, the role of European (and international as well) NGOs is fundamental.

Firstly, the European NGOs can concretely contribute to the growth of a Palestinian democratic and civil society.

In this sense the Palestinian society is a fruitful land. There are so many initiatives, grassroots associations, local groups, local NGOs in all spheres of the civil life. Many of these are valid and are expression of the Palestinian people and civil society. Unfortunately some of them are inconsistent and others are just the screens for particularisms, for private and political interests and goals that have nothing to do with the real needs and interests of the majority of the Palestinians.

A lasting, consistent and rooted presence of European NGOs can contribute to stimulate a process in the Palestinian society by virtue of which good and sound Palestinian NGOs will naturally be strengthened and empowered and the insane and particularistic groups will lose ground.

European NGOs can also facilitate better relationships, co-ordination and integration of Palestinian NGOs among themselves and with the Palestinian National Authority. In this moment of organization of a new Palestinian State, the contribution and the collaboration of all valid actors are needed as much as ever. The European Union and the International community should favour in any way such integration and co-operation.

The European NGOs are players that in such a way are and must be outside from the political diatribes internal to the Palestinian society. Therefore they can act as a bridge between the civil and political dimensions of the Palestinian society. European NGOs could enhance the dialogue between local NGOs and the PNA, especially at the present when the PNA is defining a law to regulate the activity of the Palestinian NGOs.

Secondly, the work of the European NGOs represents a fundamental contribution to encourage the dialogue and the meeting among peoples in the Mediterranean area. Keeping alive in Europe the awareness of the ongoing tragedy in the Middle East is essential to the peace process and to the Mediterranean integration process too.

Lastly, there are also practical reasons for which donors should more rely on NGOs to implement co-operation programmes. NGOs are no-profit, can mobilise high qualified and technical resources from their countries, can promote the participation of European qualified institutions as municipalities, local administrations, etc. Moreover, NGOs are used to establish direct, structural and locally based relationships with the beneficiaries. Therefore their acceptance from the Palestinian civil society is facilitated.

In other words, in most of the sectors for which co-operation is needed in Palestine, European NGOs can provide qualified technical expertise and at the same time can guarantee a sound relationship with the local civil society.

The role of European NGOs must not be limited to humanitarian and emergency operations. The increasing involvement of European NGOs in development programmes would allow a better and stronger rooting of the NGOs in the Palestinian civil society, empowering their role of democratic and civil promotion.

The critical situation and the tragedy of Palestinians claim for a big and permanent effort for all of us NGOs to be up to the task we can play.

The adoption of common Codes of Conduct can be an instrument to qualify the European NGOs practices in front of our origin countries, of the donors, of our local partners and in front of the beneficiaries of our projects. A Code of Conduct has the merit to openly evidence common strategies, methods, and aims and therefore is an instrument of transparency allowing everybody to control and monitor the NGOs practices.

As Italian Platform for Palestine we recently adopted a Code of Conduct with this aim. We want to take the opportunity of this meeting to propose such Code of Conduct to all other European NGOs, possibly discuss and modify it, in order to define a common Code of Conduct for the European NGOs for Palestine.

## **5. Conclusion**

In Palestine as in many other countries where we work, the everyday struggle for the life of millions of people often is originated by political crisis.

Therefore the answers needed are manifold: material aid, humanitarian aid, economical aid, social aid, etc., but also the practice of sound political strategies. Such kind of strategies are often the keystone to radically change the life of millions of people and to give effect to the huge economical and human efforts made by the International community.

The European and International NGOs are required to be not only implementing agency of cooperation programmes. More and more as NGOs we intend to be political actors able to take part in discussion with the policy makers and to contribute to the definition of sound political strategies.

In this sense, we hope this dialogue with the European Commission will be more and more maintained and kept opened.