The EU and its neighbours: How to strengthen the economy and civil society?

Learning from each other in order to strengthen their own economies through more partnership with the EU. In Marrakech, the Saham Foundation and the Bertelsmann Stiftung discussed possible solutions for achieving more intensive social and economic cooperation.

CONTACT PERSON

Christian Hanelt

Europe’s Neighbourhood Policy covers the EU’s economic, social and political cooperation with its 16 neighbours directly to the south and east. Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan in the south and Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia in the east exchange up to 70% of their imports and exports with the EU. Good trading conditions and intelligent integration into the EU internal market are important for these countries if they want to modernise their economies and create more work and better life prospects, especially for their young people. These six EU neighbouring countries have concluded different bilateral trade agreements with the EU. The networking of actors from these countries and
the exchange of knowledge between them on partnership-based trade relations with the EU is not only a concern of the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s European project “Strategies for a New EU Neighbourhood”, but was also a key topic for discussion at the stakeholder dialogue in Marrakech on 14 and 15 February 2020. The Moroccan Saham Foundation and the German Bertelsmann Stiftung invited 25 renowned representatives / decision-makers and experts from business, politics, academia and civil society to the dialogue dedicated to “Bringing the EU and its neighbours together – Promoting civil society actors in socioeconomic cooperation and youth-integration work”.

In recent years, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have concluded a so-called deepened and broadened free trade agreement with the EU. Tunisia is negotiating a similar agreement, Jordan shares a free trade area with the EU and Morocco has “advanced status” with the EU. The three Eastern European countries have so far had both positive and negative experiences with the opening of their markets. As a positive trend, one participant pointed out that the adoption of EU export production standards has promoted the rule of law and increased competitiveness on the European and international markets, attracting more investment and creating more jobs.

**Increasing trade, creating jobs, strengthening civil society**

Another idea discussed was that trade treaties and economic relations may be embedded in a common positive vision for the development of shared prosperity between Europe and its neighbouring regions. A contribution could be made here by broader communication involving more people and civil society organisations in the countries concerned.

In view of demographic change, technological progress and social peace, it is very important that jobs and future prospects be created for young people in the Mediterranean and the European neighbourhood. The knowledge of projects dedicated to this topic, mutual learning from other actors who have worked on these projects, and the networking among them guided the debate on strategies for growth, work and prosperity.

For example, the Saham Foundation drew attention to its new project, which aims to promote the social and professional reintegration of young NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) people by offering them an integrated day centre with targeted professional training, psychological support services and cultural and sports activities. The Spanish Fondación Bertelsmann reported on its project experience in Spain using dual vocational training as a tool to reduce youth unemployment. Reports were shared of successful concepts used by individual business schools in Jordan and programmes of a National
Investment Fund for young SMEs in Morocco. European representatives spoke about EU programmes such as Erasmus+, EU4Youth and twinning projects for reforms in education.

As various proposals made clear, an expansion of more practical vocational training options could place more unemployed young people in forward-looking jobs. At the same time, the criticism was expressed that in many neighbouring countries, the idea still prevails that one can only achieve social prestige through academic studies.

**Africa and China as challenges for the EU and its neighbours**

Various aspects of migration between the southern or eastern neighbourhood and the EU, the increasing socio-economic interdependence of the southern neighbourhood with countries of sub-Saharan Africa, and the challenge presented by China’s technological and economic power were also seen as factors that may strengthen social, economic and political relations between the European Union and countries in its immediate neighbourhood.

For further reading, the organizers of this Stakeholder Dialogue offer an information paper which provides additional insights, in-depth information, background news and explanations of the issues debated.
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