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Activists Warn Europe Of Faulty Foreign Policies



◀ Roberto Bissio - Mirjam van Reisen - Simon Stocker | Photo Collage: GMedia

By Jaya Ramachandran

IDN-InDepth NewsAnalysis

BRUSSELS (IDN) - European anti-poverty and development cooperation policies are being strongly criticised by activists from within the 27-nation bloc and neighbouring countries as the tide of unrest in the Middle East swells and grips mounting public attention.

"The unsustainability of governments that do not promote social cohesion for all, is the subline of what the Egyptian crisis is telling us, and which could equally affect the European Union member states," says Roberto Bissio, coordinator of 'Social Watch', an international network of citizens' organizations.

The uprising in Egypt is a popular demand for democracy, in a context aggravated by mishandling of the financial and economic crisis, he adds. While the banks have been bailed out the IMF (International Monetary Fund) has further restrained public budgets.

The Social Watch report launched on February 1, 2011 points out that "in Egypt, aid from Europe has been directed to help keep (President Hosni) Mubarak in power with too little support to civil society organisations demanding a more equal and just distribution of resources."

The European Union (EU) has granted Egypt 2.26 billion Euros (3.12 billion USD) since 1995. In October 2010, it pledged 449 million Euros (623 million USD) "to support economic reforms and development between 2010 and 2013."

In a memorandum of understanding, the EU and Egypt agreed on a "national indicative programme (2011-2013)" aiming to support the Egyptian reform plans within the economic and social development programmes.

The EU also pledged 110 million Euros to support the health care sector, 10 million for rural development, 20 million in support for government institutions and 20 million for a wind farm project.

Analysts doubt that this money was really used as agreed.

In any case, EU foreign affairs spokeswoman Maja Kocijancic has rejected using aid to twist the arm of the regime. "Suspension of aid is slightly too premature. We are studying what actions can be taken but we say what we have always said, which is that actions should not target the population," the 'EU Observer' reported on January 26, 2011.

It commented: "Some of the weapons and vehicles such as helicopters, tanks and anti-riot trucks that may be used against the Egyptian people are sourced from the U.S. and EU. U.S. weapon sales to the country include Black Hawk helicopters, Abrams tanks and Humvees, while Egyptian anti-riot vans are supplied by Italy's Iveco SpA."

According to the EU Observer, research based on bloc's most recent ledger of foreign weapons sales, 18 EU member states sold a total of 75.7 million Euros worth of arms to Egypt in 2009.

In the meantime, Chickens are coming home to roost. "Now that impoverished people insist on their rights, this revolution will have far-reaching consequences for the Middle East," activists say.

Expressing solidarity with the activists in Egypt, Social Watch emphasises that the crisis in that country is caused by inequality of distribution. European aid has been insufficiently targeted towards ensuring the inclusion of marginalised people living in poverty.

"It is a social revolution" says Lebanese activist Kinda Mohamadieh, spokeswoman from the Arab NGO network for Development which has members across the Arab region. "As civil society organisers our focus is on ensuring the post Mubarak era will have greater accountability mechanisms to the people," she adds.

While the crisis has an internal Egyptian agenda, it will have enormous ramifications for the region. The group is concerned about the lack of a robust response by the European Union, activists say.

"This is the end of Mubarak," asserts Mirjam van Reisen, Professor International Social Responsibility at Tilburg University. "The Berlin Wall has come down in the Southern border of Europe. Northern Sudan, Eritrea, Yemen, Jordan -- people in the whole region are taking inspiration."

She adds: "When the Berlin Wall fell (1989), Russia was key. Israel is the nuclear power in the region now. Israel's own survival will ... depend on its ability to make peace with its neighbours respecting human rights for all."

Van Reisen wants the EU to "make it very clear" to Israel that people in the region must be listened to. This will be an opportunity in the Middle East to bring democratically elected voices of the region to the table in a political process for a sustainable negotiated peace, she suggests.



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"We encourage that EU Member States demand the EU (first permanent) President (Herman van) Rompuy provides Israel with a clear direction that its responses must be in accordance with international law. People in Egypt are demanding basic democratic rights: basic foods stuffs, basic education, basic health and the right of assembly. It will justify the Palestinian demand for basic rights," Van Reisen said in a statement forwarded to IDN-InDepthNews.

She is the founder of the Brussels-based Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA) working on a wide variety of subjects relating to the EU's external policies, including legal frameworks, the annual budget and programming.

Referring to other aspects of the Social Watch report, Simon Stocker, Director of the development network 'Eurostep' says it shows "the growing poverty in Europe, which is not high enough on the European agenda."

He adds: "The Europe 2020 strategy prioritises economic growth over social policy. The emergence of slums in European cities, inhabited by undocumented migrants is evidence that social justice needs to move up on the EU policy agenda."

Eurostep, based in Brussels, is a network of autonomous European non-governmental development organisations working towards peace, justice and equality in a world free of poverty. Its membership, rooted in their own societies, works together to influence Europe's role in the world, particularly in pursuing the eradication of injustice and poverty.

It advocates changes in Europe's policies and practice based on the perspectives drawn from direct experiences of an active involvement of its members and their partners in development in over 100 countries across the world.

Fintan Farrell from the European anti-poverty network argues: "It is time the European Union establishes a consistent approach to social protection, both inside and outside the European Union."

Genoveva Tisheva from the Gender Research Centre says: "EU's foreign policy should focus on poverty eradication, and make sure women equally benefit. Aid should not be used to keep dictators in place. We have experienced ourselves that the people ultimately will demand justice and claim their rights." (IDN-InDepthNews/01.02.2011)

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