

BUILDING BRIDGES: Engaging Civil Society from Muslim Communities and Countries with the Multilateral Sphere

Programme Overview April 2009

The overall objective of this Programme is to strengthen democratic global governance through the empowerment of civil society from Muslim states and communities. There are two priority planned outcomes: (1) Civil society from the OIC member states will gain accreditation, or other effective consultative relationship, with the Organization of the Islamic Conference; and (2) Civil society from OIC countries and other Muslim communities will: (a) identify two priority entry points to the United Nations and (b) establish formal relations with these bodies.¹

The assessment within FIM leading to this Programme was that civil society from the Muslim world is all too often absent from, or poorly represented within, dialogues with multilateral bodies. Within the FIM network there exists an extensive body of experiential knowledge in dealing with a diversity of multilateral organizations. At the same time FIM has developed relations with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) within OIC countries and other Muslim communities that are seeking ways to increase their influence on multilateralism. It is important to note that, while FIM initiated this Programme and brings considerable experience with CSOs and multilateral bodies, Programme leadership rests with CSOs from OIC countries. All strategic decisions taken are the result of discussions amongst core member organizations. FIM's role is that of a neutral convener and facilitator.

Since January of 2006, FIM has convened seven meetings of a growing alliance of civil society leaders from OIC countries committed to, what has become, the *BUILDING BRIDGES: Engaging Civil Society from Muslim Countries and Communities with the Multilateral Sphere* Programme: January 2006 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, October 2006 in Doha, Qatar, January 2007 in Amman, Jordan, October 2007 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in Dakar, Senegal in March of 2008, in Lahore, Pakistan in November of 2008, and in Cairo, Egypt in December of 2008. Over 130 civil society actors from over 120 NGOs, in 28 OIC countries have attended these events and contributed to the conceptualization of this Programme. These events are opportunities for civil society from OIC states to meet, dialogue, and brainstorm and are the building blocks for defining and advancing this initiative.

BUILDING BRIDGES: Kuala Lumpur, Doha, and Amman Meetings

The objective of the Kuala Lumpur meeting was to identify one or two priority areas of joint action for Muslim civil society to impact the multilateral system. Two case studies that examined efforts by civil society from within the Muslim world to influence multilateralism were prepared for this meeting: *The Darfur Consortium, the UN Security Council and the International Criminal Court (ICC): Taking First Steps Towards Justice in Darfur* and *CEDAW, Our Unrealized Dream*. Importantly, the two priority outcomes (above) were identified.

The second Programme meeting was convened in Doha, Qatar in October of 2006 as a side event to the *Sixth International Conference of New or Restored Democracies (ICNRD)*. FIM organized and chaired a workshop: *BUILDING BRIDGES II: Engaging Civil Society from OIC Countries and Other Muslim Communities with the Multilateral Sphere*, as part of the NGO

Forum on New and Restored Democracies. The objective of this meeting was to solicit ideas on how to attain NGO accreditation within the OIC in the next five years. This meeting garnered increased support for the objectives of this initiative. Importantly, it became clear that the first priority would be engagement with the OIC and that FIM would focus its convening powers on this first objective and turn to the UN objective once the OIC Phase was underway.

Following the Doha workshop, the FIM president met with two Programme donors who had attended. There was an agreement that, with their support, FIM would convene a small, follow-up to the Doha workshop in Jordan in early January of 2007. The objectives of this meeting, held in Amman on January 11 and 12, 2007, were to: (a) finalize an operational strategy which would enable NGOs or CSOs to obtain accreditation with the OIC and (b) allot specific responsibilities and tasks to committed organizations and individuals. A Programme Working Paper: *Overview and Analysis of the OIC* was circulated to participants in advance of the meeting.

The Jordan meeting initiated strategy and implementation discussions. As part of the operational strategy, three broad entry points for influencing the OIC were identified. The first entry point is the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), where the interests of the OIC, and CSOs within OIC member states, converge. The OIC is officially committed to the MDGs and the CSO community is actively working toward their attainment. The second entry point is the various OIC Committees and the third, the Office of the Secretary General and/or the OIC President.

The consensus amongst alliance partners is that these entry points can be constructively and collaboratively pursued with the OIC. At the same time, the second, UN-focused, objective remains within the Programme's overall scope. It is expected that lessons learned as we pursue the first objective, CSO accreditation within the OIC, will contribute to achieving the second objective, a stronger voice at the UN of civil society from the Muslim world.

The Amman group identified several strategic objectives designed to strengthen a resource base of critical information and build Programme and administrative support in the OIC regions. A follow-up strategic meeting was planned for October 2007 to be held in Dhaka Bangladesh.

BUILDING BRIDGES: Dhaka, Thiès, and Lahore

The October 2007 Dhaka meeting was a turning point for the Programme and for the engagement of CSOs from OIC countries. Thirteen civil society leaders primarily from the South Asia region were introduced to a Programme Working Paper on models of accreditation with multilateral bodies: *A Study of Formal Relationships between Civil Society and Multilateral Bodies: Accreditation and other Consultative Modalities*. This original research analyzed the lessons learned from formal and informal relations between civil society and selected major multilateral bodies, including ECOSOC, the Commonwealth of Nations and UNCTAD. Presentations were also made on the OIC's *Ten-Year Programme of Action*, and the *Report of the Secretary General on the Current Status of the Implementation of the Ten-Year Programme of Action*.

For two days, participants collaborated to strengthen the alliance and implement the Programme. Outcomes of this meeting included: the naming of a nine-person Coordinating Council composed of eight civil society organizations from the Middle East, South Asia, and West Africa (Lebanon, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, India, Senegal, and Nigeria). The

FIM President and CEO, a Canadian, is an observer member. A decentralized Programme structure was approved.

The Dhaka meeting exceeded its objectives and moved this Programme further along the road to fuller and more democratic relationships between Muslim civil society and the multilateral system. Importantly, this initiative gained new and committed partners who will expand and strengthen the alliance in their regions. Subsequent to the Bangladesh meeting, BUILDING BRIDGES partners held country meetings for civil society actors in Bangladesh and Pakistan. A first Coordinating Council meeting was held in Montréal, Canada in February, 2008.

In Thiès, Senegal in March of 2008, 38 civil society actors, the majority from West Africa, participated in a *BUILDING BRIDGES* orientation and brainstorming session. This event coincided with the March 2008 11th Summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. This event included the first formal meeting to be held between *BUILDING BRIDGES* Partners and a senior OIC official, the Under Secretary General responsible for Humanitarian Assistance and Civil Society Relations. The Under Secretary was willing to meet again to explore possible OIC/*BUILDING BRIDGES* collaboration.

A second *BUILDING BRIDGES* Coordinating Council meeting was held following this event and many strategic decisions were made including the establishment of a focal person in Cairo to take advantage of proximity and access to the OIC General Secretary's headquarters in Saudi Arabia and of a "floating" office in Dakar for a three-year period coinciding with the location and duration of the OIC Presidency. A stronger *BUILDING BRIDGES* presence in OIC states will increase convening and information dissemination capacity and access to potential funding sources in OIC states. A three-year *BUILDING BRIDGES* strategy and plan of action was outlined and has subsequently been developed. Long term funding for this Programme is now being sought.

In November of 2008, participants from 40 different NGOs attended a *BUILDING BRIDGES* orientation and workshop in Lahore, Pakistan. This was the largest country - based meeting of CSOs to date. Participants appointed a focal person for the BUILDING BRIDGES Programme in Pakistan, appointed a 12-member country - based Steering Committee and initiated planning for the next national meeting including preparation of a 'peoples' communication for civil society in OIC member states. In December, in Cairo, the BUILDING BRIDGES Coordinating Council followed up on Lahore outcomes and advanced implementation of the BUILDING BRIDGES Plan of Action. Increased UN – focused activities are planned for the 2009 to 2010 period.

Programme Status

A Regional Orientation and Coordinating Council meeting is planned for Beirut, Lebanon in June of 2009.

ⁱ BUILDING BRIDGES Programme meeting reports and working papers are available at <http://www.fimcivilsociety.org/>