

## **Building Bridges: Engaging Civil Society from Muslim Communities and Countries with the Multilateral Sphere**

### **Project Overview June 2008**

The overall objective of this project is to strengthen democratic global governance through the empowerment of Muslim civil society. 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.

The assessment within FIM leading to this project 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 project and brings considerable experience with CSOs and multilateral bodies, project 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 five 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* Project: January 2006 in Kuala Lumpur, October 2006 in Doha, Qatar, January 2007 in Amman, Jordan, and October 2007 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and in Dakar, Senegal in March of 2008. A sixth event to be held in Islamabad, Pakistan in September of 2008 is in the planning stages. Over 90 civil society actors, from 70 NGOs, in 28 OIC countries have attended these events and contributed to the conceptualization of this project. These events are opportunities for Muslim civil society 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 project 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 project 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. Given the need to begin to address the knowledge gap on the OIC, an *Overview and Analysis of the OIC* was prepared and circulated to participants in advance of this 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 now. At the same time, the second, UN-focused, objective remains within the project'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 project 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 and Thiès**

The October 2007 Dhaka meeting was a turning point for the project and for the engagement of CSOs from OIC countries. Thirteen civil society leaders primarily from the South Asia region were introduced to a study 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 project. Outcomes of this meeting included: the naming of a nine-person Steering Committee 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 project structure was approved.

The Dhaka meeting exceeded its objectives and moved this project 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, Steering Committee members held country meetings for national civil society actors in Bangladesh and Pakistan. A first Steering Committee 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 11<sup>th</sup> 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 Steering Committee meeting was held following this event and many strategic decisions were made including the establishment of an office in Cairo to take advantage of proximity and access to the OIC General Secretary' headquarters in Saudi Arabia and of a pilot, "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 is in the process of being developed.

### **Project Status**

*Building Bridges* – Pakistan is currently in the planning stage and will be held in Islamabad, October 16-18, 2008.