

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

Project Overview December 2007

The objectives of this project are: (1) Civil society from OIC member states will gain accreditation with the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC); and (2) Civil society from OIC and other Muslim communities will increase their influence on the United Nations.

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. The FIM Board felt that this was a priority area of action if we were to be consistent with our mandate. Within the FIM network there exists an important body of experiential knowledge in dealing with a wide 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, its 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 four 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. A fifth meeting, to be held in Dakar, Senegal in March of 2008 is in the planning stages. Following is a brief Project summary

Building Bridges: Kuala Lumpur, Doha, and Amman Meetings

The objectives of the Kuala Lumpur meeting were to: identify up to 50 CSOs, including 30 from civil society within OIC countries, who are in agreement with the project objective and willing and capable of finding joint solutions; and identify one or two priority areas of joint action over the following two to three years. 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 Project objectives were identified: to lobby for NGO accreditation within the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC); and to increase the influence of civil society from OIC countries in the UN.

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 Project. 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. Importantly, by the end of 2006, over 50 countries and/or civil society leaders, the majority from OIC countries, were committed to this project.

Building Bridges - OIC: Dhaka, Bangladesh

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 on an eight-person Steering Committee and interim Chair (the Steering Committee will hold its first meeting in Montréal in February 2008); creation and approval of a decentralized project structure; further progress in planning alliance

partner meetings with past and incoming OIC representatives; decision to draft a 12-month strategy; commitments amongst alliance partners to hold a series of regional meetings in South Asia, the Middle East and Africa and to bring friendly CSOs into the alliance partnership; and identification of a possible location for a Mid-East secretariat for the Building Bridges project.

The Dhaka meeting exceeded its objectives and has moved this project further along the road to fuller and more democratic relationships between Muslim civil society and the multilateral system. Importantly, the project has gained new and committed partners who will expand and strengthen the alliance in their regions. The next alliance meeting, *Building Bridges IV – OIC*, is being organized as a parallel conference to the OIC Summit to be held in March of 2008 in Dakar, Senegal. Participants will take advantage of the OIC Summit to dialogue with members of national delegations who are sympathetic to the possibility of increased dialogue between the OIC and CSOs in the OIC region.

Current Building Bridges Project Status

Over the past two years, the Project foundation has been established and significant momentum has been gained. A first Project Steering Committee meeting is being organized for Montréal in February of 2008 and FIM is working with alliance partners toward convening the Dakar meeting.

For Dhaka Meeting Report

Please click here

For Amman Meeting Notes

Please click here

For Doha Workshop Report

Please click here

For Kuala Lumpur Workshop Report

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