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Workshop on Civil Society Engagement at the League of Arab States

The Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD) (Canada), Transparency Maroc (TM), Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA) and Maharat Foundation (Lebanon) launched their project on Building Opportunities for Civil Society Engagement with the League of Arab States with a workshop in Rabat on 22-23 March 2018. The project seeks to explore ways to enhance transparency and opportunities for participation in the work of the League.

The workshop, which was attended by civil society and media representatives, discussed the serious democratic deficit at the League as compared to other inter-governmental organisations (IGOs), including regional bodies like the [Council of Europe](#) and [Organization of American States](#). Compared to these other IGOs, the League of Arab States releases far less information about its activities and operates in a far less participatory fashion.

Participants noted that IGOs are bound by the obligation to provide access to the information they hold (the right to information), which is recognised under international human rights law. They also have an obligation to operate in a participatory fashion, as provided for in Article 13 of the UN Convention Against Corruption. Being open and participatory promotes accountability, improves decision-making and helps combat corruption. It is now imperative for Arab IGOs, including the League of Arab States, to join in the international trend among IGOs to do better in these areas.

At the end of the workshop, participants agreed on the following recommendations for the League of Arab States to improve its performance in terms of openness and participation:

1. Consultations about Engagement

The LAS should conduct an open and inclusive consultation with Arab civil society with a view to putting in place a new framework for engagement. This should respect the following:

- The process should be collaborative in nature, with the LAS working closely with civil society to explore options for a strong engagement framework.
- The process should be transparent, with civil society being provided with access to all of the documents it needs to participate fully in the consultation.
- The LAS should make a commitment at the beginning to revise substantially its current approach to civil society engagement, including by adopting a new policy framework for this.

- Consideration should be given to creating a new, dedicated structure within the LAS to lead on this process, in an attempt to build trust with CSOs and to overcome previous tensions.

2. Access to Information

Ensuring access to information is key to building trust and to facilitating real engagement. The LAS should practise far greater levels of openness than in the past. Over time, it should adopt a dedicated information disclosure policy. In the meantime, it should do the following:

- Publish, sufficiently in advance, the agendas of key meetings along with key background documents relating to matters that are placed on the agenda, subject only to legitimate grounds for secrecy.
- Respond to requests for information, including by nominating staff with dedicated responsibilities for doing this.

3. Short-term Engagement Measures

The LAS should undertake the following measures to improve engagement over the short term, pending the outcome of the consultation:

- The current observer status system should be transformed into a consultative status approach.
- The process of obtaining status should be open, streamlined and insulated from political or other irrelevant considerations, so that status is given to any organisation which meets the conditions for this.
- To the extent possible, the grant of status should apply directly to a range of LAS bodies, particularly those dealing with human rights and economic and social development.
- Status should give the holder a broad range of engagement rights, and not merely the right to attend meetings and listen to official actors.
- A number of engagement options beyond the status system should be put in place, such as the ability to apply on an *ad hoc* basis to attend a particular meeting or to work with the LAS to implement projects or policies.
- Financing and other forms of support for engagement (such as training) should be made available.

This information can also be accessed in French and Arabic at: <https://www.law-democracy.org/live/morocco-workshop-on-civil-society-engagement-at-the-league-of-arab-states/>.

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