

CONCLUSIONS

by Mr. Marc Finaud

At the end of this comparative reading of the role of civil society in the various experiences of autonomy in Northeast India, on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, in Vojvodina and in Andalusia, and the provisions of the Moroccan autonomy initiative the Sahara Region, the following observations can be made.

1) Naturally, as already noted during previous comparative seminars, **each case examined has its own specificities**, its own history, its own political, institutional, economic and cultural context. The influence of the colonial legacy is obvious in the cases of India and Nicaragua; just as that of the transition from an authoritarian regime towards democracy in the cases of Serbia and Spain. However, these experiences and the situation in the Sahara **have one thing in common**: the shared commitment at the central and regional levels to finding balance of power allowing the people of the autonomous region to remain within the national community as well as the widest direct management by this people of their own affairs, including respect for their specific rights.

2) Another frequent finding can be mentioned: even when statuses or the constitutional, legislative and regulatory framework theoretically seems appropriate to strike a balance as indicated above, **it is their actual implementation that matters the most**, which is often affected by internal politics at the national or regional level. This makes it all the more important to ensure civil society is able, through its organizations, to exercise vigilance and control over this process which requires continuous improvement.

3) Even if devolution of central power to the autonomous region comes in various shapes and sizes (federal structures as in the case of India, autonomy status in unitary states such as Nicaragua, Serbia, Spain or Morocco), there can be **tensions and the mechanism can be called into question**, meaning varying degrees of cooperation or competition between the national and the regional level. It thus seems absolutely indispensable to ensure the autonomy status is guaranteed in the national Constitution and hard to challenge, as in the Sahara Region.

4) In most cases, **civil society or non-governmental organizations in the autonomous region are seen as the "guardians" of the autonomy** they fought for (according to the analysis by Ms Socorro Woods from Nicaragua). However, when the leaders of these NGOs become official members of state institutions at the regional level, it can give rise to a conflict of interest. Their independence should therefore be guaranteed as provided for in the Moroccan Initiative.

5) Regarding the **role of civil society** in the establishment and implementation of regional autonomy statuses, it can be threefold:

- a) Activities related to *dispute management and resolution*: peacebuilding, reconciliation, transitional justice, integration, especially in view of the persistence of ethnic divisions. Until the dispute is settled, there can be risks of political persecution in these sensitive areas;
- b) Protection and promotion of *human rights and democratic freedoms*, often involving equitable distribution of the land and natural resources, as well as the rights of

indigenous or vulnerable populations (women, children, the disabled, migrants, minorities, etc.);

- c) *Community services* in various areas related to economic, social and cultural affairs, including health, education, youth, sports, arts, etc. Some of these activities coincide with the previous ones, in particular when they help bridge ethnic gaps (as in the case of the Exit music festival in the Vojvodina) or develop minority culture or language (as provided for in the Moroccan Constitution and Initiative for the Hassani culture).

6) Finally, in most cases there is an **international dimension to the issue**:

- a) Regarding guarantees of respect for *human rights and democratic freedoms* through international mechanisms (United Nations) or regional ones (Organization of American States, Council of Europe, etc.) in which regional NGOs can play an active role;
- b) In terms of assistance to regional NGOs and capacity building through international NGOs or foreign countries (taking into account the sensitive issue of foreign financing sometimes used by the central state to control regional NGOs);
- c) Regarding the role of regional NGOs in *transnational cooperation*, especially with similar ethnic groups in neighbouring states (Hungarian communities in the Balkans, for instance), but also when it comes to overcoming regional ethnic tensions, which can be sources of violence.