Beyond spring: Civil society’s role in the Middle East and North Africa

Three years ago, a wave of revolts swept across the Middle East and North Africa. Many people who were previously silent began to speak out about social and economic injustices and called for change.

The violent and authoritarian backlash that followed has disillusioned many and societies have become more polarised. Some even yearn for the ‘peaceful’ times of authoritarian control.¹

Others, however, see the events of the Arab Spring as the beginning of something bigger, and describe them as ‘dignity revolutions’ that have injected civil society with energy.²

Indeed, civil society has tangibly expanded since 2011. More voices are making their way into the public and political space, becoming more determined and assertive. Trade, student, and women’s unions; independent policy research bodies and think tanks; independent media; local human rights groups; and non-hierarchical youth-led groupings, known as ‘hirakat’, all play a bigger role.

More people throughout society – poor, rich, rural, urban, female, male, religious, secular, old, young – have been mobilised and are contributing to the conversation on change.

¹ Harling, Peter and Sarah Birke, ‘The Arab World into the Unknown.’ The Arabist (blog), 14 January 2014.
The role of civil society in promoting women’s political participation

Women played an important part in the Arab Spring uprisings but some are now asking whether the current situation is more like an ‘Arab Autumn’ for women’s rights. Certainly, the prospects for achieving full and equal women’s political participation now seem more distant than ever.

This was not how things seemed when events started to unfold in late 2010. Women stood beside men to demand change in Tunisia and Tahrir Square, Egypt. They provided support to the insurgency that overthrew Colonel Gaddafi’s regime in Libya.

Deep change across the region seemed inevitable as people rose to demand political and economic rights. Many expected that this would inevitably lead to greater democracy, including further advances in women’s political participation.

But this is not how the picture looks three years on. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region remains firmly rooted at the bottom of the World Economic Forum’s latest Global Gender Gap Report in women’s political participation and empowerment indices.

Throughout the region, women hold less than 13 per cent of parliamentary seats. When women are elected, this is frequently because they are connected to powerful male figures (fathers, husbands), rather than on their own merits. Women ministers are still rare and usually allocated portfolios such as social affairs rather than more powerful jobs such as finance or foreign affairs.

In some countries, rather than making advances, the challenge has been to hold onto the limited progress that had previously been made.

So where did it all go wrong? And what can be done about it?

INTRAC has been working with the British Council over the past year on the Women Participating in Public Life (WPIPL) Project. This has involved an action research approach to enable coalitions of women’s organisations and activists to work on locally identified priority issues to promote women’s political participation in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco.

Of course, it is dangerous to generalise about the entire region. Nevertheless, a number of frequently encountered issues have been identified from the WPIPL Project, providing an agenda for future civil society action:

1. The patriarchal system that has been a defining characteristic of the region persists. It was perhaps unduly optimistic to expect that attitudes rooted in generations of tradition, underpinned by narrow religious interpretations, would change overnight. Not just men but also many women continue to doubt both whether it is morally right for women to play a full political role and whether they possess the necessary capabilities to do so.

2. A more open democratic system has led to outcomes that caught many by surprise. In Tunisia and Morocco, as well as Egypt, Islamist parties entered government with very different agendas from those of many activists. Concern about women’s rights has traditionally been the preserve of a liberal intellectual elite. This highlights the need to engage with an often unconvinced wider public on these issues. It also raises questions as to what common ground can be found between liberal civil society actors and those with a more Islamist outlook.

3. Building up the self-confidence and know-how of women to stand in...
elections and deal with political life remains a challenge. As has been discovered in other parts of the world, it is a daunting prospect to be one of the pioneers in standing for election and then operating within a political system largely developed by and for men.

4. Determining how to make constitutional and legislative frameworks favourable for enhanced women’s participation (such as through the use of quotas), and ensuring they are put into practice.

5. The relationship between the economic independence of women and their ability to participate politically needs to be better understood and addressed.

These are all areas where civil society can play an important role, building on what has already been started. In Egypt, for example, the coalition formed through the WPIPL Project has focused on seeking to restore the parliamentary quota for women that existed before the revolution.

One participant, Naglaa Aboulmagd, has described how the project enabled her to work for the first time as part of a female team on such an issue and how she was able to address the committee working on the new Egyptian constitution as part of this process.

Whether through higher-level advocacy or local-level awareness raising with communities, change will only occur as a result of such efforts by a range of individuals and organisations.

While the Arab uprisings have not yet led to the outcomes many want, they opened up avenues for future change, such as using social media to coordinate civil society actions and reach out to a generation that may previously have been less engaged.

Political power is rarely ceded voluntarily but must be vigorously demanded. Civil society should be at the forefront of women's efforts to do this.

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Involved in civil society in the Middle East and North Africa? To see what INTRAC and its regionally experienced team can do to support your organisation, contact our Arabic-speaking consultant Suzanne Hammad at shammad@intrac.org or check out www.intrac.org

Youth engagement and social media: Emerging trends in Saudi Arabia

After the events of 9/11, Saudi philanthropists faced false accusations of internationally supporting terrorism and funding terrorist groups. To avoid any further such accusations, many decided to direct their donations to the national third sector, thus spurring a new era of growth in civil society.

Over the past decade alone, there has been an increase in family and corporate foundations, intermediary organisations, social entrepreneurship and social businesses, and in donors establishing endowments for social causes.

Moreover, there has been a significant growth in the contribution of universities to the development of the third sector, through the establishment of academic programmes, endowed chairs for philanthropic research, and centres for philanthropy and non-profit management.

This threefold rise – in funds, in numbers of civil society organisations, and in research – has resulted in the emergence of good practices including in capacity building, quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation, measuring impact, and the use of technology.

More fundamentally, there has been a momentous recognition of the varied roles civil society can play in communities, as well as a significant improvement in the services it provides.

These trends have both been driven by and resulted in the increasing desire of the younger generation in Saudi Arabia to take responsibility and become active participants in social change.

Like in most other Arab countries, more than half the population in Saudi Arabia is under 25. Furthermore, young men and women in the Arab region today are the most educated segment of the population.
Increasing numbers of youth and social volunteer groups, addressing different entrepreneurs are forming small have started to incorporate volunteering situations, and organising awareness social issues, helping in disaster development of the region.

They therefore have the potential to make a considerable contribution to the education institutions consequence, educational institutions have started to incorporate volunteering in their curricular and extracurricular activities, while local governments have established youth councils headed by local governors to give more voice to youth in public issues.

Civic engagement arises when citizens become involved in their society and community, both as individuals and through volunteer organisations. It can include service to the community through involvement in health, education, and charitable organisations. Overall, civic engagement is growing amongst citizens of Saudi Arabia, particularly youth.

But something important is changing. While many young Saudis are decidedly engaged in traditional forms of civil society, equivalent or greater numbers are participating in new social media, known as virtual civil society.

As the network of new media in Saudi Arabia is becoming larger and more complex, a sizeable number of Saudis – in particular, young Saudis – are participating in it. According to the 2012 Arab Social Media Report by Dubai School of Government’s Governance and Innovation Program, the number of Facebook users in Saudi Arabia increased from 2.3 million to 5.5 million in two years. Youth between 15 and 29 make up around 70 per cent of these users. In addition, 800,000 Twitter users in Saudi Arabia post around 50 million tweets per month.

The study indicated 32 per cent of participants felt using social media empowered them to influence change in their communities, even where social media was not directly linked to popular or political movements. This demonstrates an organic societal change taking place among social media users.

The study also found 85 per cent of Saudi respondents said they feel more connected to their community and society through social networking tools. Furthermore, 47 per cent of the Saudi respondents said social media has shifted their attitudes, making them more open and tolerant of other people’s points of view.

Currently, Saudi newspapers are on the internet and readers’ comments on articles show the rise of a critical conscience amongst them.

Given these developments, one can speak of the emergence of a virtual Saudi civil society, a cyberspace in which different individuals and groups can act freely. However, this virtual civil society cannot replace or act on behalf of ‘real’ civil society, which is considered a main contributor to development alongside the government and the private sector. The challenge for the future is therefore to connect one with the other.

Saudi Arabia continues to battle a tarnished reputation. Philanthropy, volunteerism, and active civic engagement can help improve the country’s image and track record. It is the new dynamics in civil society, virtual and otherwise, that can change global perspectives, rather than relying on wealth and power alone.

Mobilising to meet needs

Civil society organisations have played a large role in mobilising to meet civilians’ needs since the onset of the war in Syria. Organisations that existed prior to the war have been working relentlessly. However, their work alone is no longer enough. The war in Syria has therefore given rise to the emergence of many new actors that are leading the relief efforts in response to the escalating humanitarian crisis.

Prior to the war, civil society in Syria was almost non-existent. The few organisations that existed were loosely aligned with the state. That said, civil society was beginning to emerge although it was under the close watch of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MOSAL), which was responsible for fostering the charity sector in the country.

It is worth mentioning that until 2001, MOSAL did not own a computer. This alone gives an idea of the ministry’s underdevelopment as well as general lack of information management.

Civil society is providing basic supplies across the country in non-state-controlled areas where infrastructure has collapsed. The absence of state hospitals has led to the establishment of hundreds of field hospitals across the country to meet the needs of thousands of casualties.

New civil society actors, with the support of diaspora organisations, are running these field hospitals in terms of providing medical equipment and medication, as well as the operating costs of the hospitals themselves. Many doctors and other medical personnel from the diaspora community have travelled to Syria to work in the field and share their expertise with local health care workers.

The diaspora community itself has established a number of organisations, which together with pre-existing local civil society groups, have been able to access and support afflicted people. The
Civil society’s response to the crisis in Syria

Programmes delivered over the last two years have varied in nature but have included food security, WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene), and job creation programmes for families living under siege.

Many international non-governmental organisations are only more recently emerging on the scene and it is through civil society organisations from the diaspora that they are reaching affected people. Despite all that is going on, civil society has been able to provide a lifeline for millions of people.

However, civil society is facing a number of issues that are creating obstacles in the response to the humanitarian crisis. The most challenging issue is the security and protection of humanitarian workers.

Even the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, which is closely affiliated with the state and the only organisation with official approval to implement programmes, has at time of writing lost 34 of its volunteers. This is only a microcosm of what is going on across the country, where thousands of aid workers and doctors have lost their lives while saving the lives of others.

The humanitarian sector and international agencies now have the opportunity to come together to support civil society, which has proven itself well able to mobilise and meet the needs of the afflicted people. In a recent panel discussion, Ben Parker of the UN even stated that the amateurs are doing a better job than the professional humanitarian workers in providing assistance.

International agencies have an opportunity to support the different organisations that make up civil society by providing training on humanitarian principles, the Geneva Convention, and the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief. Some international agencies are already doing this. However, Syria still needs more funding going into capacity building and training of grassroots and diaspora organisations, as there is a real opportunity to make a difference and save lives through them. It is important that the international agencies work through the existing mechanisms that are facilitating access to afflicted communities to deliver aid and assistance.

Despite the deteriorating humanitarian situation, there is a positive note to take away and think about: individuals, motivated by the state of anarchy, have come to self-organise and work together not only to provide assistance but also to lay the foundations of a more inclusive civil society in a peaceful Syria.

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Of faith, advocacy and rights: Supporting partners in the Middle East

As a northern, faith-based organisation working in the Middle East and North Africa, Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) takes a multi-pronged approach to supporting civil society. This comes from the belief that strengthening civil society, particularly at the grassroots, is a key element in the development of any country. Civil society organisations (CSOs) provide a means of organising, influencing and engaging with government and other service providers that hold power, influence and decision-making roles.

NCA works in Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria with around 20 local and national partners. At the heart of our strategy is support for faith-based organisations to enable grassroots organisations to protect and promote the dignity and rights of marginalised and oppressed people. The following gives a flavour of how we blend conflict sensitivity, a rights-based approach, and faith in our work with partners.

A networked and integrated approach to conflict and development

In war and conflict, humanitarian aid and development cooperation may fuel tensions. For example, in the war in Syria, and in the internal conflict in Palestine, taking a conflict-sensitive approach is extremely important. NCA has committed itself to conflict-sensitive programming. This is based on continuous analysis considering the impact of external assistance on dividers (actors who threaten peace and stability) and connectors (actors who support peace and stability).

Integrating long-term development cooperation with emergency preparedness and advocacy is crucial. An example of this integration lies in the relationship between CSOs and the hospitals and clinics of faith-based partners. In emergencies these serve key functions, providing emergency medical care and bases for distribution of relief as well as avenues for reporting on violations of humanitarian law via local and international media.

Networks offer a valuable platform for joined-up responses. For example, the ACT Palestine Forum, which incorporates eight ACT Alliance members,1 has developed a joint emergency preparedness plan. To address humanitarian needs in Gaza and the West Bank and mobilise responses for Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons, ACT Appeals, which are mechanisms for joint planning and coordination, have also been developed.

Creating synergies for advocacy

This joint working is replicated across much of the work NCA partners carry out in the Middle East. Partners working within the same sectors come together through mechanisms such as UN clusters and ACT local forums, as well as other local and national networks. Similarly, there are growing partnerships between Middle Eastern CSOs and Northern institutions, for example to develop capacity in the health sector.

Many of these partnerships are advocacy-oriented. Advocacy is rooted in our partners’ practical work to address the concerns of local communities. One example is advocacy to address the right of patients to travel between Gaza and Jerusalem for specialised care.

The diaconal institutions of the churches in Jerusalem also provide services to the Palestinian population and are seeking to address the falling number of Palestinian residents in Jerusalem due to restrictions on residency rights.

A good example of how solidarity can be nurtured is the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) of the World Council of Churches, which local Palestinian church leaders called for. Volunteers from the North are mobilised for practical peace work in Palestinian communities, bearing witness to human rights violations, providing protection, and returning home with their stories.

Accountability and capacity building

NCA provides capacity development support for its partners to address long-term institutional and organisational change. Capacity development focuses on improving how organisations function as a whole and addresses needs identified by partners and ACT members.

Accountability features highly in capacity development. In line with Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) standards and commitments, accountability focuses on provision of information, securing rights holders’ participation, and developing feedback and complaints systems.

The Women’s Security Index (Israel)2 is an example of an innovative tool for social accountability and awareness-raising. Developed by six local feminist organisations with the support of NCA, the index maps changes in Jewish and Palestinian women’s experiences regarding their safety and security, providing a source of data for activists, NGOs and policy makers.

By working in different ways with local partners, NCA hopes to strengthen the capacity of civil society to play a central role in building peace and establishing effective states in the Middle East.

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1 ACT (Action by Churches Together) Alliance is a coalition of more than 140 churches and affiliated organisations working in over 140 countries. National ACT Forums are central arenas for joint advocacy and mutual capacity development.
The state and civil society in Jordan: Moving from distrust towards trust and participation

Civil society and the Jordanian state have long had an uneasy relationship involving mistrust and doubt on both sides. This relationship has been turbulent. During several phases in Jordan’s history, the state sought to control or exclude civil society. In other phases, however, dialogue, participation and cooperation prevailed.

The state’s relationship with civil society in Jordan has always been affected by the current political, social, and economic situation. When Great Britain dominated Jordan, the relationship was negative, as civil society resisted colonial rule, prompting the state to impose restrictions on organisations and monitor their activities. During this time, women’s groups and political parties were the most effective actors.

Jordan was established as an independent state in 1946. In response to the Israeli occupation of parts of the Palestinian territories in the 1950s and 1960s, civil society began to change its priorities and resist the occupation. During this era, political parties and trade unions emerged, which contributed to discord between the state and civil society. Since then, Jordanian civil society has been influenced by the longstanding Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The state’s negative attitude towards civil society continued through the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, politically-oriented civil society institutions were largely absent. Civil society was mostly limited to socially-oriented associations, clubs, and cultural institutions.

In 1989, Jordan witnessed a historic shift with the lifting of martial law and general elections were held for the first time since 1967.

Opposition political parties restored their legitimacy and registered after the issuance of a law regulating their work. Hence, new civil institutions were established, which worked in the fields of human rights and democracy and conducted studies and research. Thus, an era of openness towards civil society emerged and a positive atmosphere, although still cautious, prevailed between civil society and the state.

However, this relationship quickly deteriorated with the 1994 signing of the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty, which civil society rejected.

At the outset of the new millennium, King Abdullah II ascended the throne and enacted many political, legislative, and economic reforms, including entering a number of international economic and political conventions. These reforms encompassed giving civil society a key role in decision-making and public life.

The state devoted some of its programmes and funding to civil society, which contributed to an increase in the number of civil society institutions and the emergence of new civic organisations, including some working in the area of transparency and anti-corruption. In addition, there was a rise in new patterns of associations such as closed and private associations.

Recognising that development plans and policies had failed over the years contributed to the transformation of the state’s view of civil society. It started to view civil society as a partner in the development process. Successive governments changed their discourse from being critical to calling for genuine partnerships. Nevertheless, in practice the state remained cautious of civil society and imposed legislation designed to control and monitor its activities.

Jordan’s openness to the world and its involvement in globalisation have imposed on the state the need to reforge its relationship with civil society. Civil society organisations, both domestically and internationally, have pushed the state to review and update legislation governing the work of civil society.

Youth have played a large role in the last decade. Their higher education rates and new vision of civil society have driven change. In fact, since 2000, many civil society organisations have been established by youth groups that came together around issues of concern. An example is the Al-Thoria Studies Centre, which was established by youth and has a young staff base.

In the last two years, a new challenge for civil society institutions has emerged with the influx of Syrian refugees as a result of the war in Syria. Civil society institutions have been forced to shift their work from reform programmes to relief and assistance programmes. Some have moved to work in areas where refugees are located, especially in the north of Jordan near the Syrian border. This has affected the momentum for reform in Jordan.

A partnership between the state and civil society is a necessity. In Jordan, where protests have been relatively peaceful compared to those in neighbouring countries, both the state and civil society are motivated to address internal issues to avoid such confrontation. Both want a society based on justice, equality and governed by the rule of law, which should promote a relationship based on dialogue and partnership rather than conflict and tension.

The state and civil society are interdependent and interrelated. The state derives its values and strengths from civil society. At the same time, the state is the framework which fosters and guides society. When there is a stable and constructive relationship between the state and civil society, democracy is reinforced.

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Theory of Change Approaches to Planning and Impact Assessment
9-11 June 2014
Course fee: £595 (non-residential)/£745 (residential)

This course gives participants an understanding of what Theories of Change are; how they complement other planning, evaluation and impact assessment processes; and how they can be applied in different organisational contexts and situations. Knowledge and skills from this course can be applied to the development of Theory of Change approaches to planning, evaluation and assessing impact within programmes and organisations.

Advocacy and Policy Influencing
23-27 June 2014
Course fee: £1,045 (non-residential)/£1,295 (residential)

This course gives participants a thorough understanding of how to influence the policy-making process in their own context to achieve policy change. You will learn skills to help you plan and deliver effective advocacy strategies, enhance your ability to lobby decision makers, and gain confidence in the ways in which you relate to different audiences. You will also have a more thorough understanding of power dynamics in an advocacy context.

Advanced Monitoring and Evaluation
30 June-4 July 2014
Course fee (does not include one-on-one coaching): £1,045 (non-residential)/£1,295 (residential)
OR 1-5 September 2014 plus later coaching Course fee (includes one-on-one coaching): £1,150 (non-residential)/£1,399 (residential)

This course builds on participants’ understanding and skills of how to develop sustainable and cost-effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes and practices within their own projects and organisations. It is also relevant for those trying to improve and enhance current M&E processes, supporting partners to develop and implement effective M&E, and focusing on ensuring M&E contributes towards improving organisational learning and accountability.

The September course has two parts: a five-day face-to-face course in Oxford, UK, and a 50-minute one-to-one coaching session after the course (via Skype) with the course trainer.

Advocacy and Policy Influencing (Blended learning)
Part 1: 22-25 September; Part 2: Week of 20 October;
Part 3: 11 November 2014
Course fee: £850
Location: Delivered remotely via webinar and Skype

This programme will give you the knowledge and skills to influence policy and practice in your own context. You will learn skills to help plan and deliver an effective advocacy strategy, enhance your ability to lobby decision makers, and gain confidence in relating to different audiences. You will also gain the skills to analyse power dynamics and choose advocacy activities so they have maximum impact.

Week 1: Four days of training consisting of a daily three hours of trainer-delivered content (via webinar) and three hours of self-directed and peer learning. Week 5: 50-minute one-to-one coaching session via phone or Skype. Week 8: Final three-hour webinar. Throughout process: independent work on resources and optional modules.

Monitoring and Evaluation (Foundation)
6-10 October 2014 plus later coaching
Course fee: £1,150 (non-residential)/£1,399 (residential)

This foundation course is designed to develop individuals’ understanding of what monitoring and evaluation (M&E) entails, why it is so vital, and how to do it well and in a participatory way. This course ensures that those who are new to M&E have a thorough understanding of the concepts and skills to do M&E effectively. Participants will learn to use a range of M&E tools and activities that will help them improve accountability, learning, and effectiveness of projects and programmes.

This course has two parts: a five-day face-to-face course in Oxford, UK, and a 50-minute one-to-one coaching session after the course (via Skype) with the course trainer.

Monitoring and Evaluation (Blended Learning)
Part 1: 13-16 October; Part 2: Week of 10 November;
Part 3: 2 December 2014
Course fee: £850
Location: Delivered remotely via webinar and Skype

See above for course description. See ‘Advocacy and Policy Influencing (Blended learning)’ for course structure.