

Introduction

In the last decade young people came to age in Arab societies growing up in economic hardships with authoritarian governments, often poorly governed with severe lack of representation and diversity. In 2001, close to 70 percent of Jordan's population was below 30 years old. The population explosion of today's youth have put a heavy weight on the educational systems, health care services, and other resources that are generally deficient due to fragile infrastructure and poor management. Youth has been systematically underrepresented in public affairs, which socially and politically exclude them from decision-making processes, promotes frustration toward and alienation from their government and civil society.

Of course, it is not all this bleak. Youth in many Arab states have been mobilized in 2011 to take the streets, demanding for an end of corruption and dictatorship. Millions of young Arab citizens have raised their voices and have therefore been great assets and actors of change to their countries. Social entrepreneurship and community-organizing activism is sprouting across the region, but also non-violent demonstrations and young people going to vote: all promising signs of healthy civic engagement.

The Arab Spring has been credited with the mobilization of thousands of youth, which is a rather straightforward analysis as the Arab youth population make up as high as 75 percent of the total Arab population. Was the Arab Spring initiated with efforts of civil society and the international donor community in Arab countries? This paper examines what the role of civil society and the international donor community has been in the mobilization of youth during the Arab Spring, and in how far civil society is currently able to take up new roles and

responsibilities to promote cohesive societies where young people feel connected to the state and its civil society.

The Good

The last decades, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have received foreign aid from the global community to promote social cohesion by reducing socioeconomic inequalities, where poverty is a prominent force effecting social exclusion. Useful mechanisms have been implemented through initiatives in the MENA region that successfully distribute resources across social groups, for example through improvement of access to health services, availability of credit and social protection, fair opportunities in basic and higher education and development of community infrastructures. Also, the promotion of democracy and good governance has been high on the agenda. Measurements have been taken to build national capacities, promote human rights and freedoms.

The Bad

However, comprising the majority of the population, youth is still left behind to this day in the Arab region. Youth has remained excluded, lacking civic participation. For example, in many Arab societies age affects those marginalized. Even in booming economies such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, youth are disadvantaged on the job market, where many positions are monopolized by seniors who receive more benefits, exercise more power, and have higher wages. Due to the socioeconomic exclusion, a sense of belonging and solidarity to society is missing among Arab youth.

The Ugly

The social exclusion of youth remains even after the Arab Spring. A summary of several reason is given below:

1. *Youth organizations are hard to find* in the region, because a real investment in youth-led organizations is missing. While youth movements have been sprouting up in the Arab region, demanding for social, political and economic changes, a year after the Arab Spring hardly any lasting contributions have been made by funding agencies in promising youth initiatives. Rather, the international donors decide to continue to fund the organizations they are familiar with and have a long-lasting relationship with. Unfortunately, this sustains the existing structures that exclude youth from public affairs (see point 2.). At the grassroots level, this leads to many youth initiatives that remain unstructured, lack capacity, with quick turnarounds, often not surviving one year of existence, quickly growing inactive with their members staying behind disillusioned in creating lasting change.

2. *Lack of Effective Outreach:* While donor's "Call for Proposals" aim to fund projects that focus on youth, they often choose the established non-governmental organizations and royal NGOs, that are controlled by royal family members, over newcomers. The same civil society without a clear track record of working effectively with youth and young professionals win the bids to suddenly shift their focus to youth. Those young members that they are able to involve are often the same young people that show up at events and activities of other organizations: the same young people recycled within the NGO world. For example, many young people are very active on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. While non-governmental organizations are now creating their own fan pages and twitter accounts, they do not reach out to large groups of youth. And those who do have a large number of followers, due to good marketing campaigns, often fail to actively interact and engage with their members and are unsuccessful in spreading appealing messages according to their strategy and objectives.

3. *Limited Relationships, Absence of Trust:* During the last decades, the international donor community has channeled funding to the existing civil society organization that did not focus on youth, or those who did, only had limited resources to effectively reach out to young people. While the relationship between funding agencies and civil society might have been healthy, it

did not reach the depth it should have and were unable to alleviate the structural exclusion of youth. Currently in the aftermath of the Arab Spring the public trust among youth is not suddenly restored or swiftly build. Not only the relationship of civil society with the young population is limited; but also the relationship of the donors with youth-led organizations. The international donor community is now looking hard to build solid relationships with new, youth-led organizations, but confidence-building measurements takes time, a lot of it. Therefore, international donors seem to take again and again the safer route and stick with those organizations they know and thus supports those within their closed network.

4. *Freezing/Moving of Funds:* with Tunisia and Egypt's governments toppled, the international donor community seemed to have found their emergency break to stop pending funding opportunities and delay decisions. While Tunisia and Egypt were able to access emergency funds, those money resources seem to come from pots allocated to other Arab states where similar social and political tensions were seen. This resulted in many NGOs not receiving funds they were counting on due to canceled or delayed contracts. The lack of transparency and ineffective mechanisms to allocate emergency funding by the donor community, contributes to the inadequate civil society development in the region to respond to the needs and interests of local communities.

5. *Constraints by National Laws and Security Apparatus* Non-governmental organizations and other groups in civil society have been suppressed for years in their effectiveness, due to imposed restrictive laws and the security apparatus holding a close eye on their practices. In Jordan, laws surrounding public associations have been restrictive. For example, publicly criticizing the King and government officials and institutions is criminalized, with the recent 2010 revisions increasing the penalties for speech offenses extending to online expressions, which continues to feed the fear among young people not to speak out their opinions on public affairs. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring this space has remained constrained, which has a negative impact on the active role of young people in public affairs and therefore remain

socially excluded. This leads to an NGO world that also after transformations of the Arab Spring stay depoliticized and is unable to or refrain from being independent entities, muted down by the regimes, afraid of repercussions.

6. Fear of Creativity and Innovation: While funding agencies are requesting innovative and creative solutions to societal problems for many years, the projects that have been funded, seem to be on the unimaginative side, uninspiring, mundane, repetitive and maintaining the status quo. Often the most straightforward ideas submitted to a donor, that closely relates to the strategy of the donor, are funded - and end up being far from creative and innovative. For example, our organization partnered several times in 2011 with a well-established partner, who have a track record of securing funding. Our partner, on their turn, partnered with other civil society organizations as well, applying for the same calls. Each time, the “boring”, “within-the-box” proposals made it to the next round, or received funding, while proposals with innovative strategies, creative approaches, but well-grounded, were pushed aside. Committees deciding on who to fund, seem to perceive creativity and innovation as a risky move, unwilling to take the bold step and try out new techniques and tactics to solve the current-day problems faced in the MENA region.

7. Absence of Community-Organizing Initiatives: NGOs, before and after the Spring of 2011 have not invested in effective community-organizing strategies such as building shared commitment, accessing existing resources from within local communities and effectively telling stories, creating public narratives that speak to the beneficiaries. Local communities have their own networks that can be tapped into. Using these pre-existing networks can help to spread the messages you want to tell and mobilize people to promote or defend a certain cause. However, NGOs are experts in building capacity without putting the learned into real action. Existing local networks remain untapped, including those connected to key figures in society that NGOs have access to. Pre-existing networks are generally not identified, and if they are, NGOs do not maintain and invest in those networks that can empower their work and outreach. While

trainings are given, conferences are held, courses are given, participants do not get the chance to go back to their communities to implement the learned and remain socially excluded from the public sphere. All funds are put in supporting trainings, courses and gatherings in expensive retreats, five-star hotels, while much cheaper venues can be found, channeling the left-over into actions that promote social cohesive communities. Beneficiaries in local communities should be supported to actively identify the problems they want to tackle, have their voices heard by decision-makers and local authorities and undertake action plans that promote their interests.

Conclusion

In June 2011 Ms. Rana Sabbagh, columnist at the Al Arab Al Yawm, explained in an interview with Media & Outreach Director of *Leaders of Tomorrow* and Journalist of the New York Times, Ms. Rana Sweis, that political will to implement reform is missing. Ms. Sabbagh might have been right, as now, more than 10 months later, the recommendations of the Jordanian National Dialogue Committee have merely been published but not moved forward toward genuine reform actions - neither by the government nor civil society.

Credibility of civil society has remained low and has thus far remained low in the aftermath of the Arab Spring 2011. The Arab Spring took the donor community, foreign governments and international organizations by surprise. Years of investment in strategies with focus on poverty alleviation, improvement of political participation and social development did not offer a smooth transition to more democratic, stable communities where groups are well represented and governments respond timely and effectively to the needs of its citizens. Civil society in many Arab states has been lacking functionality. It is essential to be further developed and needs to be seriously invested in, which means stepping away from the Old Gard of NGOs and take chances to invest in young, innovative groups and organizations to ensure effective mechanisms that function independent and free of the government to better serve the local needs and interests of citizens, in particular youth and young professionals.