

# The impact of Civil Society in Jordan on the national and regional policies



## Overview

In the last two decades Jordanian civil society has occupied, an unprecedented status, where it started playing new roles and is seen as a partner to the government and the private sector in facing the economic and social problems plaguing the country. In addition, the civil society organizations, particularly advocacy organizations, are increasingly playing important roles in the public arena, as they orchestrate the public debate on sensitive issues such as citizenship and women participation, and suggest the development of special laws on the rights of assembly, organization and expression, as well as the electoral system.

Beginning in the late 1980s, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan instituted a series of economic reforms that have streamlined business start-ups, encouraged foreign investment, and reduced bureaucracy. Despite these reforms to the economic sector, the country has maintained a tight grip on political reforms. Specifically, as the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has increased, so too have the restrictions on their activities. As such, while there is a picture of political liberalization in Jordan, NGOs have very little influence in the political sphere.

## Monitoring, surveillance of political activity

NGOs in Jordan are typically closely regulated by a country's ministry of social affairs or the ministry of the interior, civil society groups have not made a real dent in the Arab world and Jordan. Many CSOs in Jordan manage to survive and sometimes even become rather active within the limited space the government has granted them.

In general, the nature of local the civil society NGOs in Jordan varies; some have conducted advocacy campaigns to improve government policy on issues on which they work (such as the environment or rural development, Gender). But the majority does not engage in broader political activities—especially anything involving direct opposition to government. Generally their fundamental mission is not to challenge systems and institutions of politics. Rather, it is to provide the services and socioeconomic development necessary to maintain social stability. In general service NGOs in Jordan are appealing because they are non-Islamist, and at the same time nonpolitical. Thus they were less likely to pose a threat to the government in the way that other sectors of civil society might if they were empowered.

## Realities and Current Situation

The reality of the civil society across the Arab world and in Jordan is deeply fragmented. The different sectors of civil society sometimes work side by side but can rarely coalesce in a sustained fashion. This hinders the ability of civil society to unite groups of citizens around common goals in a way that might generate pressure on regimes.

Strapped NGOs usually try to be responsive to donor agendas in the hope of receiving funding, even when the recommended activities do not have much local resonance. Additionally funding is very competitive and funding from GCC countries does not come directly to the NGO's. We notice that large numbers of Jordanian NGOs working on the environment and on women's issues and recently on the Syrian crisis, recent donor favorites, as well as in the launching of advocacy campaigns by service NGOs that have never before undertaken such activities. The line between donors' useful suggestion of new ideas and the imposition of an external agenda is a fine one.

## Relationship between Civil Society Organizations and Governments

CSOs in Jordan and the Arab world are increasingly demanding involvement in the policy formulation process. They argue that they now play a major role in the implementation of the policies that are formulated by the government, especially those that deal with sustainable development, refugee crisis and poverty alleviation. In other words, the CSOs' programs are directly affected by the policies that the government produces. CSOs feel that in order for the government to formulate policies that are appropriate for sustainable development, their involvement is necessary since they work for development and can make important inputs to the policy making process. This involvement of CSOs in policy issues will increase the likelihood that the CSOs understand the policies fully as well as ensure that policies are appropriate to the needs of the people, feasible and implementable on the ground. They can use grassroots experiences and innovations as the basis for improved policies and strengthening local capacities and structures for ongoing public participation. CSOs can provide information that is vital for the development of policies that are appropriate to the community the policy is meant to serve. CSOs, as watchdogs, can also apply pressure on the government to ensure that appropriate policies are enacted and implemented. In the implementation of policies, CSOs can monitor the application of the laws and also, where compatible with community interests, design programs that complement rather than undermine or contradict government policies in addition to improve the performance of the government and other CSO.

Involvement in policy formation is linked to giving NGOs the space to operate independently. It is through NGO/CBOs that governments can measure the success of their policies on the ground. However, often most states in our region interpret constructive criticism and feedback as an attack on their legitimacy. If this mentality remains the role of civil society in the MENA region will be limited.

## Moving Forward (Factors to the success of political initiatives and civil society organizations)

To be effective, Jordanian NGOs must overcome not only legal and political obstacles, but also internal challenges. The Jordanian government should welcome, not restrict, international funds and training to help Jordanian civil society organizations improve their internal governance and external outreach. NGO services should be seen as an added value to the State not competition. This governmental mentality prevents innovation and leaves thousands if not millions of citizens of Arab states without access to basic services.

Civil society must work on a strong advocacy strategy to influence policy campaigns to be carried out in ways that strengthen grassroots organizations and their direct voice in affairs affecting them, working from the bottom up to up bottom approach to prevent the evolution of a civil society with a strong professional advocacy sector and a weak (unorganized and nonparticipative) grassroots base

Some of the key factors that contribute to the success of CSO policy initiatives include:

1. willingness and ability to negotiate and effectively lobby with government, elites and other sectors,
2. a vision of narrow and comprehensive policy goals and good strategies to accomplish them,
3. changed perception of the state,
4. financial and technical resources to campaign, mobilize, network, analyze and disseminate,
5. good and speedy decision making within CSOs.

## Obstacles Facing Civil Society Organizations

Unfortunately, these are precisely the factors in which CSOs in developing countries such as Jordan are constrained. Lobbying and negotiations require skills and tactics to persuade and effectively communicate and a level of confidence and independent thinking that some of the grassroots constituencies lack. Scarcity of funds and technically competent staff is a persistent problem. Lack of internal accountability, transparency, divergent interests and norms limit the perception of their effectiveness and legitimacy.

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## Recommendations

Civil society sector is instrumental in promoting local economic development, alleviating poverty, advocating policy change, contributing to good governance and campaigning for the SDGs. Their contribution, however, needs to be strengthened. Critical engagement on the SDGs can increasingly become the approach for many CSOs, adapting, extending, updating, and localizing the goals, as appropriate to their own situation. Moreover, increased regional and national awareness, dialogue and a true partnership will strengthen engagement and set us firmly on the road for policy change. With a proper understanding of the role of civil society, and better government policies, Jordanian CSOs can help the government overcome the obstacles to necessary reforms and can contribute to social and political stability and economic prosperity.

