

Civic Service in the Arab Region

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This article summarizes historical and cultural influences on the development of voluntary action in the Arab region. The role of religion is highlighted. Also discussed are demographic, economic, and political factors that have influenced the development of volunteer and civic service programs in the region. Although systematic information and research are limited, civic service program examples are detailed. These examples include religiously based service programs, service-learning programs at the university level, and local programs. Official civic service initiatives and national policies are not specified or widespread, but program developments may have the potential to develop into such policies. More research is recommended regarding the role of the state and civil society in the development of civic service programs and the role of civic service in social and economic development.

Keywords: *volunteerism; civic service; civil society; Arab region; Egypt*

This article reviews the history, development, and status of civic service in the Arab region. Although the concept of civic service is not widespread in the region, it is nonetheless possible to identify programs and policies that are examples of this form of volunteerism. To present a more complete picture of civic service in the Arab region, it is necessary to trace the history and influences on volunteerism overall.

Foremost, it is important to understand the role of Islam in shaping the forms and functions of volunteerism. Also, social and economic factors have influenced the development and formation of civic service including youth movements and international cooperation. Democratization processes and the promulgation of human rights movements in the Arab region may be precursors to more widespread civic action.

The article begins with a short synopsis of the Arab region followed by identifying unique aspects of civic service in Arab nations. Next, historical, religious, and cultural contexts are explicated followed by social and

economic developments and their impact on civic service development in the region. In the conclusion, program and policy implications are suggested, and recommendations are made for future research.

THE ARAB REGION

The Arab region includes 22 countries that are members of the Arab League. The Arab homeland stretches about 5,000 miles from the Atlantic coast of Northern Africa in the West to the Arabian Sea in the East, and from the Mediterranean Sea in the North to Central Africa in the South (Arab Information Center, 1999; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2003). Arab states are noteworthy in that many have traditions that are largely nondemocratic, and Islamic principles may be reflected in the legal framework or the structure of the state itself.

The Arab region has played a leading role in the history of human civilization and development. However, in recent centuries, this leadership gave way to occupation, and much of the region fell into poverty. The relatively recent discovery of oil in some countries has provided tremendous revenue flows that have made some countries extremely wealthy on the basis of per capita income.

Nonetheless, development of the overall population remains a challenge. Labor power in the region was estimated to be 87 million persons in the year 2000, primarily nonskilled or semiskilled workers, with ascending unemployment rates that average about 14%. A large proportion of labor power continues to be in the agricultural sector.

Education, where highly developed, plays an important role in socioeconomic development, although there is wide variation between the Arab countries. For example, the enrollment rate in primary education is 100% in Jordan, Syria, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait and 94% in Egypt, but it is only 50% in Sudan and 37% in Mauritania. A large proportion of people in some countries remain illiterate.

The total population of the Arab region is increasing rapidly, rising from 221 million in 1990 to nearly 290 million in the year 2000. Across the region, 40% of the population is younger than the age of 15. This youthful population structure contributes to growing interest in civic service and other programs related to the development of youth.

DEFINITION OF CIVIC SERVICE IN THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

As a starting point, we can begin with the definition advanced by Sherraden (2001) who suggested that civic service as "an organized period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national, or world

community, recognized and valued by society, with minimal monetary compensation" (p. 2). In the Arab world, systematic knowledge of civic service in this sense does not yet exist. There have been no comprehensive studies, which limits our ability to summarize overall patterns and draw conclusions about the forms and nature of service. Generally speaking, there is no clear distinction between volunteering and civic service. Civic service has not been recognized as an official term to describe this type of volunteerism, even if programs qualify as civic service according to the definition above. Moreover, civic service as a phrase might be used in the context of military service thus revealing the strong association of the term *service* with military duties and citizenship.

When applying this definition to the Arab region, we do find programs that are well structured and organized and involve governments and civil society organizations. These programs represent voluntary action that cannot be defined solely as individual action that occurs infrequently or occasionally. Rather, the action is intensive, organized, and involves substantial numbers of individuals. However, given little knowledge, it remains to be determined how valued these programs might be on the part of the larger society and the state. Also, in terms of minimal monetary compensation, there is a strong belief in Arab culture that all voluntary work should be performed without any monetary compensation. During the last few years, however, more volunteers are attracted or motivated to volunteer, because it may improve their career prospects.

At present, civic service in the Arab world is expressed mostly through international volunteer programs, national work camp programs, corporate volunteerism, service-learning programs, and local civic service programs that are targeted mainly at youth and young adults.

HISTORICAL INFLUENCES ON VOLUNTARY ACTION IN THE ARAB REGION

THE ROLE OF RELIGION

In the Arab region, voluntary action has strong roots within religious traditions. There are several ways in which voluntary action in the region derives its strength from Islam (Sakr, 2003). One is the tradition of charity through *zakat* and *sadaka*. Zakat is almsgiving to the poor and the needy and is obligatory for all wealthy Muslims. As one of Islam's five pillars, this practice is based on social responsibility thereby reflecting the view that an individual is always a part of the community, and what belongs to him or her in the ultimate sense belongs to the community (Arab Information Center, 1999). Therefore, to have a right to what one has, the individual has to donate a proportion of his or her wealth. This might be considered as a redistribution mechanism from

the haves to the have-nots. Sadaka is also a type of donation, though more voluntary in nature, and is believed to make the donor spiritually closer to God.

Caps and levels of giving are established in various Arab countries. Benthall (1999) noted that zakat in modern Muslim countries is most frequently a voluntary or optional payment. This Quranic injunction to almsgiving has become a foundation of the Islamic organized charity, and organizations are functioning solely based on zakat contributions including such large institutions as International Islamic Relief (Benthall, 1999). Through such charity organizations, it has been possible to fund a large array of voluntary associations and social service organizations, which provide relief and welfare services and are largely based on work performed by short- and long-term volunteers (Benthall, 1999).

Apart from well-known traditions of zakat and sadaka, there is also *dawah*, which is the idea of inviting others to Islam and conveying the message of Islam to them. But, according to Sakr (2003), the idea of *dawah* might also have broader implications, especially in the context of volunteering. He stated that *dawah* might constitute doing good for the community through unpaid service, thus setting an example of volunteering both for faith and the common good.

The principle of social solidarity in Islam is another widespread value supporting voluntary actions (Kandil, 1993). For example, in the rural Palestinian Territories, there is a historical cultural practice called *owneh*. It represents a type of community assistance or mutual aid that is provided to fellow villagers in need of help—for instance, in collecting a harvest, picking olives, or building a house (UNDP, 2000). Another Islamic practice from early times are Sufi orders, which were informally organized groups of Muslims who came together to support and help other people. Sufi orders still exist in Arab countries as well as in all other parts of the world; currently, they include about 87 groups of about 3 million members (Kandil, 1999). Such practices reflect the strong relationship between religion and voluntary action.

DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

At the beginning of the 19th century, the first nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or associations began to emerge in the Arab region. These associations and organizations focused their efforts on education and literacy programs, delivery of health services, development of informal social security systems, and other types of support for the poor (Kandil, 1996). Kandil (1999) noted that altogether several historical factors shaped the development of civil society in the region. These included the British and French occupation of most of the Arab countries and the absence of social policies, particularly in health and education, due to general weakness of Arab states in the 19th century. Religious missionaries also played an important role in the region by establishing programs in education and health care targeted toward the poor. The growth of Western minorities in the Arab population also encouraged

Arab citizens and governments to pay more attention to national education. Finally, national elites mobilized the population against Western colonialism through voluntary action.

The 20th century brought independence movements, which also contributed to the development of civil society and the growth of voluntary action. Most of the Arab governments adopted social policies within a context of limited democracy. Such policies sometimes led to establishment of national programs, but they did not promote grassroots movements of citizens thus limiting the development of the voluntary sector.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE STATUS OF CIVIC SERVICE IN THE ARAB REGION

Social, economic, political, and cultural variables have influenced the status of civic service in the Arab region. In general, the last 2 decades of development of the region have been characterized by regional and internal conflicts, unfavorable demographic trends, growing unemployment rates, and fiscal crises in some countries.

DEMOGRAPHIC, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL FACTORS

The population of the Arab region is nearly 300 million and continues to grow at an annual rate of about 3% (UNDP, 2003). Some Arab countries have small populations (e.g., no more than half a million in Qatar and Bahrain), whereas others have large populations (e.g., Egypt with nearly 70 million and massive urbanization in Cairo). The large population of children and youth has important implications for youth policies, education, health, and social well-being in the Arab nations. At the same time, this suggests huge potential for expansion of policies and programs that may engage youth and young adults in the social and economic development of their countries.

Addressing youth issues and involving more youth in development is a general trend in the Arab region. One example of how young volunteers can be involved in development work is a joint program between the Lebanese Ministry of Social Welfare and local communities in voluntary work camps for young people (ages 18 through 25). This program functions within a national and international framework. In 2001, there were seven camps and 499 volunteers (Kanaan, 2001). Another good example is the Volunteer Child Program in Egypt, a project implemented in partnership with Egypt's Ministry of Education. This was the first project in Egypt in the field of volunteering to target young children. From September 2002 until the end of the project in December 2003, the children organized blood donations, undertook health and environmental awareness campaigns, and established small libraries in orphanages and schools for the disabled (World Volunteer Web, 2002b).

Generally speaking, the region is socially and economically diverse. The lowest levels of per capita gross domestic product are found in Sudan, Yemen, and Mauritania where large sectors of the population are under the subsistence level (Arab Fund for Social & Economic Development, 2000). Other countries with vast oil reserves and revenues are much wealthier such as Qatar, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia.

Interestingly, the wealthier Arab countries in the Gulf area generally have limited voluntary sectors and volunteerism, which could be related to greater state resources and centralization of social service provisions. In contrast, civil society is more intensive and active in such countries as Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan, Jordan, and Yemen where governments have fewer resources (Kandil, 1999).

To meet the challenges of globalization, many countries in the region have embarked on new policies of economic liberalization and privatization during the 1980s and 1990s (Kandil, 1999). As a result of such adjustment, government expenditures in the fields of health care, education, and social welfare were significantly decreased in some countries (Kandil, 1999). Gaps increased in social service provision thereby contributing to marginalization of vulnerable groups including children and youth, women, and the poor. These new economic policies, however, also contributed to development of programs sponsored by the voluntary sector. In 2002, some Arab countries (Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and Yemen) adopted strategies for poverty alleviation for the first time, which triggered intensive program planning for the years 2003 to 2007. NGOs that are the members of Egypt's Informal Volunteer Network, made up exclusively of volunteers, have also worked more actively with poor communities. They offer microcredit schemes, emergency funds, literacy training, and other services (World Volunteer Web, 2002a).

Another important influence on the growth of volunteerism and the potential status of civic service is democratization in Arab societies. Democratization may be directly related to development of a strong civil society and an increase in citizens' participation in decision making. In this regard, the Arab region can be historically characterized by strong, centralized governments and limited decentralization. However, democratization processes in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen, Kuwait, and Bahrain have led to positive impacts on civil society and volunteer involvement. In other countries such as Sudan, the grip of the state has tightened, perhaps impeding activities of the voluntary sector.

CULTURE AND SOCIAL FACTORS

As already discussed, cultural factors are important in analyzing the development of civic service. These factors are reflected in voluntary work and attitudes of people toward volunteering and civic service. As a result of socialist policies that were practiced for decades in Arab societies, along with limited democratic practices and participation, the values and attitudes of large

sectors of society are characterized by apathy and weak participation. Citizens perceive development as the responsibility of the large and bureaucratic state. These factors may also explain the limited effort of the state in supporting voluntary-based service programs.

Another essential point pertaining to culture and tradition is the position of women in society. Throughout the region, female participation in social and economic life is limited. According to the *Arab Human Development Report 2002* (UNDP, 2003), in nearly all Arab countries, women suffer from unequal citizenship. On the UNDP's gender-empowerment measure, Arab states are found close to the bottom, only one step above the oppressive states of sub-Saharan Africa (*The Economist*, 2002; as a caveat, this measurement covers only 14 of 22 Arab states due to unavailable data from the other nations). In some countries such as Kuwait, women are still not allowed to vote (Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2003). Gender inequality is evident in illiteracy rates among women 15 years of age and older, which in some countries may be as high as 50% to 75% (United Nations [UN], 2002).

Thus, women's rights, especially for education, are a major theme in volunteering programs in countries like Egypt, Lebanon, and Tunisia where women tend to enjoy broader social and political freedoms compared to others countries in the region (Nanes, 2003). The issues of gender justice, gender equality, and violence against women have led to large-scale, grassroots social movements organized and supported by volunteers. One example of such activity was the Campaign to Eliminate "Crimes of Honor" in Jordan. These so-called crimes of honor are, in fact, murders committed by a male family member against women suspected in adultery or improper sexual behavior. Completely based on volunteer efforts, the organizers of this campaign pursued repealing the national laws in Jordan granting very lenient sentences to the males committing the crimes (Nanes, 2003).

As described earlier, religion is a defining factor in shaping the character of volunteerism and service in the Arab region. The role of Islamic as well as Christian organizations cannot be underestimated in analyzing the formation of civil society in the Arab world (Kandil, 1996). Faith-based NGOs usually have a very clear vision regarding service in addition to the commitment to help and support others. The most prevalent service programs are those implemented by religious associations or NGOs. Some 32% of voluntary organizations in Egypt are religious organizations, both Islamic and Christian (Kandil, 1996). These programs aim to support educational services, health issues, orphan care, and youth development.

One example is the Coptic Evangelic Organization in Egypt. This organization has a long history and intensive programming with very committed volunteers who work in the poorest areas of Cairo as well as some rural areas contributing to local community development. Youth, community leaders, and women work as volunteers. The program is also targeted at professionals, such as physicians, who also volunteer. Volunteers participate in drug abuse education, environmental development, and social justice campaigns as well

as education and health programs that focus on poor areas over a period of 3 to 5 years.

Another example is the agency named Shari'ia Islamic Organization with 62 branches covering all of Egypt's governorates. This agency has adopted a national program of social welfare for orphans that includes such elements as education, health care, and income generation.

One of the important models of civic service in Egypt is the provision of health service in poor areas through about 3,000 mosques. Hundreds of volunteer physicians are engaged, volunteering 2 days per week for 1 or 2 years. This type of health service is vital in Egypt due to high prices in this sector caused by privatization of health services during the 1980s.

In Lebanon, service programs vary according to Lebanese religious subdivisions. Most of these programs focus on education, health care, and youth development. The Islamic Social Welfare Institution and the Dr. Mohammed Khaled Institution in Lebanon support service programs involving children and youth in educational and awareness programs. These organizations have volunteer programs for the elderly as well.

Unique, religion-based volunteer models are found in Yemen and Sudan where the number of people living near or under the subsistence level is large. Voluntary groups organize cooperation in poor, rural, and urban areas. They engage communities in meeting the basic needs of the population, developing infrastructure, protecting the environment, and providing assistance to the needy.

THE ROLES OF THE STATE AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The role of the state in volunteerism and service in Arab countries is expressed in two major ways. First, the state provides a political and legal environment to support, enhance, and encourage the voluntary sector. Since 2000, Arab countries like Egypt, Morocco, Palestine, Yemen, and Bahrain have developed new legislation to support the voluntary sector. It is anticipated that these legal systems will facilitate development of service programs in these countries. Second, the state has extensive power in shaping attitudes toward volunteering, providing public support, and acknowledging volunteer programs.

Some governments in selected Arab countries have embarked on national civic service programs by transforming national military programs and/or introducing service learning through local universities and educational establishments. In Egypt, for example, a program was initiated in 1973 that involves young college and university graduates who are paid a small amount of money to work as volunteers for 6 months to 1 year and who then are exempted from military service. Program participants work in such fields as education, health services, family planning, community development, and disaster relief (Kandil, 1999). According to the most recent statistics, the number of male and female graduates participating in 1999 was about 22,000; by

2001, the number was more than 36,000 thereby indicating increased interest on behalf of young graduates (Ministry of Social Affairs of Egypt, 2002).

In Lebanon, the national service program is called the "service of the flag program" for youth 18 years of age and older. This program is primarily administered by the army. As a response to the destruction caused by the prolonged civil war, Lebanon enacted a number of social integration policies in the 1990s of which this program is one example. Young people participating in the program are brought in from different regions of the country and from different denominations to promote civic education (UN, 2002).

Ministries of youth and/or social welfare organizations in many Arab countries have also been actively involved in launching national civic service and volunteer programs. For example, several volunteer projects are administered by the Ministry of Youth in the United Arab Emirates. These programs emphasize self-reliance, cooperation, and group participation through summer camps (UN, 2002). At the same time, the government stresses the importance of religion and strives to retain and maintain traditional social values to preserve the unique characteristics and nature of local communities based on the teachings from the Sharia of Islam (UN, 2002). The Ministry of Youth in Egypt established units across the country to promote volunteering through different projects (Kanaan, 2001). The Ministry of Social Welfare in Lebanon has participated in the development of voluntary work camps (World Volunteer Web, 2002a). Palestinian authorities have established the National Voluntary Work Council as a government body engaged in volunteer policy formation. This council supervises local committees with members from ministries, municipalities, universities, women's unions, and youth organizations (UNDP, 2000).

Service-learning programs also have been developed in the region, although there is no generally accepted policy in the Arab states endorsing and enforcing them. The exception might be Palestine, however, where existing policy mandates voluntary work as a graduation requirement for all undergraduate students. According to UNDP (2000), beginning in 2001, all university graduates in Palestine were presumably required to complete 120 hours of volunteering for credit.

Birzeit University, which is also located in the Palestinian Territories, has had a service-learning program since 1972. All Birzeit undergraduate students are required to perform community service for credit. Community projects cover a variety of areas. These include infrastructure, such as paving the roads in refugee camps and remote settlements; agriculture, such as helping farmers collect the harvest; environment, such as reforestation projects; and education and social inclusion, such as literacy campaigns (Birzeit University, 2004). Anecdotal evidence is also available for other service-learning programs in other Arab countries (e.g., the American University in Cairo's Learning Through Providing Social Services program and programs in state universities in Lebanon and Jordan; World Volunteer Web, 2002a).

National governments also cooperate with some international organizations by adopting national policies related to volunteerism and civic service. One example is the UNILIT initiative, which stands for UNiversity Students for LITeracy. This was first conceived at the Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education in March 1998 after which the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO's) Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab states started a project targeted at increasing literacy rates based on the idea, "Each one, teach one" (UNESCO, 2003). The idea of this program is that each university student contributes to eradication of illiteracy and helps at least four illiterate individuals. UNESCO indicates that Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, and Morocco have launched UNILIT pilot projects in their selected universities. Large-scale proliferation of this program in the region is conditional upon availability of funding, commitment of the governments, and participants' acceptance and ownership of the program goals (UNESCO, 2003).

The private sector is potentially another important player. Information on private-sector involvement and contribution to volunteer and civic service programs in the region is limited; however, there are some noteworthy examples. In Egypt, the government works in cooperation with private corporations participating on a voluntary basis on a 5-year housing-development program. Through this program, youth volunteers are provided with accommodations, and new houses and schools are being built and equipped. Another program provides training to recent graduates to improve their job skills. This program involves businesses and corporations and is funded through the U.S. Agency for International Development (Kandil, 1999). In Lebanon, the Corporate Volunteer Council was established by a group of local corporations that have active employee and retiree volunteer programs or are interested in initiating such programs (Association for Volunteer Services, 2001).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In general, official policies for promotion of civic service in the Arab region are not well established. Civic service is not framed as such and is fragmented within national agendas. The absence of such policies calls for a more comprehensive analysis of what the role of civic service might be in the Arab region and how traditional values and beliefs can contribute to better use of volunteer resources aimed at social and economic development.

Altogether, there are three major challenges facing the development of civic service programs in the Arab region. The first challenge is the absence of a clear vision with respect to the value and potential of civic service in Arab societies. Support of the voluntary sector is growing, although without recogniz-

ing the concept of civic service as such. This helps explain the absence of explicit civic service policies at both national and local levels in most Arab countries, although a number of civic service programs actually exist. The second issue is funding. Important models of service programs are supported by religious organizations and with foreign funds, but the roles of government and the private sector in funding are more limited. Ultimately, Arab states and enterprises will have to become more involved if civic service is to grow. The third challenge is the apparently limited supply of volunteers, which is a general problem in the Arab region. Mobilizing and triggering volunteers' enthusiasm will be necessary for building the voluntary sector. This apparent challenge of supply, however, may in fact be more a challenge of demand. If a vision and calls for service were more clear, if this vision were connected to deep roots in Islamic mutual assistance, and if more funding were available to create volunteer and civic service positions, there is reason to believe that citizens in Arab nations would respond.

Notwithstanding these challenges, there is potential for developing civic service and promoting volunteer efforts in the Arab region. Innovations and local commitments in service and volunteering are promising. In the long term, it may be desirable to go beyond the traditional, faith-based, or military frameworks of service.

To lay the groundwork for these potential developments, it will be necessary to have more systematic information and data on what civic service actually means for Arab societies and how it might be promoted. Also, case studies of successful programs would be very helpful. Such research can serve as a basis for further policy creation and program development.

Looking to a larger research agenda, existing civic service programs and policies in the region need to be identified and documented. There should also be a program of comparative studies within the region to highlight different approaches from which every country could learn. Turning to impacts, there would be great value added in careful studies of the value of service projects to participants, communities, and societies. There is today a general absence of data and knowledge about the social and economic contributions of the voluntary sector overall, not to mention civic service specifically. Also, it will be important to document the roles of the state and civil society in promoting and establishing civic service programs.

Subsequently, information can be distributed through written publications, Web-based publications, workshops, and seminars to NGOs, professional organizations, research centers, universities, government authorities, and international organizations to take advantage of a growing knowledge base, advocate for development of civic service programs, and motivate continuing research. In conclusion, the future seems promising in some Arab countries regarding the development of civic service, but data and information will be required to realize that potential.

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