

FUNDER LEARNING VISIT TO THE ARAB REGION
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THE CULTURE OF GIVING IN THE MIDDLE EAST

What are the traditions associated with philanthropy in the MENA region? What does the current and shifting landscape of philanthropy look like? What is the scope for a human rights approach to giving?

Speakers:

- **Barbara Ibrahim**, Director, John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement, The American University of Cairo
- **Elie Abouaoun**, Executive Director, Arab Human Rights Fund

Facilitator:

- **Michael Hirschhorn**, Executive Director, International Human Rights Funders Group; President, Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Foundation

Michael opened the session by introducing Barbara Ibrahim of the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement at the American University of Cairo, and Elie Abouaoun, Executive Director of the Arab Human Rights Fund. Barbara started by giving a presentation which was followed by a brief discussion.

Barbara recalled the experience of having her own partner being imprisoned for criticizing the Mubarak regime in the past. This experience was a triggering factor in making her decide to found the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement, which was officially set up in 2006.

The presentation emphasized the strong tradition of giving in the Arab world – much of it is religion-based, some originates from Bedouin culture. The predominant idea is that those who are blessed with wealth should give to those who are not. At the time of the ‘Arab spring’, many people decided to give spontaneously, just like many decided to help their communities on a volunteering basis.

Islam generally embraces personal wealth as long as it is not acquired at the expense of others’ wellbeing. The basis for ‘giving’ in Islam is the pursuit of social justice. However, it is important to note that traditional philanthropy does also exist among non-Muslim religious minorities. Challenges faced by Arab philanthropy at the time of the upheavals were:

- Secrecy in giving inhibited transparency, documentation or sharing of best practices.
- Tax incentives to donate were absent.
- Wealthy Arab families were not allowed to set up institutions of higher education.
- Severe legal constraints: assets can be seized by the state.
- Field of work focused on Quranic categories: orphans, widows, the poor, etc.
- Ongoing discussion whether ‘zakat’ can be used to fund non-Muslim beneficiaries.

Barbara said that one of the key issues now is to shift the boundaries between political and civic activism. Being aware of the role played by religion and faith-based organizations remains important. The Muslim Brotherhood has formed a political party and put forward a presidential candidate; many

new organizations are motivated by faith, even though this does not necessarily always show in their work. Furthermore, philanthropy needs to become more open to innovation – much giving comes from the royal families or those being close to governments, which can inhibit the use of donations to further human rights. The upheavals have provided a space for creativity and innovation – using this momentum is important to tackle social problems. Lastly, there needs to be a debate about appropriate responses from the international donor community.

Barbara briefly talked about how even within the Arab world, different countries face different challenges: Whilst Egypt has a large number of civil society organizations (CSOs), it has a relatively low literacy rate (66%). In Libya, the literacy rate is higher (89%), but the number of CSOs is low.

As mentioned previously, Egypt has seen a rise in philanthropic giving, mainly sparked by the Arab revolutions. Much of this happens on the community level, often in the form of volunteering, but donations are also made across borders (e.g. to Libya, Palestine) and increasingly social media is used to raise funds. Political candidates hoping to win votes have also been giving cash handouts.

Looking ahead, it is crucial to focus on regulatory reform to move away from NGO laws towards enshrining basic freedom, including freedom of assembly, in the constitution. International donors are advised to find Arab funding partners rather than contacting CSOs directly and thereby potentially putting them in danger (this has been practices successfully in the area of technical assistance). Building knowledge platforms and strengthening collaboration rather than duplicating work is equally important. Appropriate external support is needed for this, with international organizations being willing to visit, learn and listen, and partner with local philanthropy organizations.

One participant mentioned that her organization has been making grants in the region. Their approach is to start from a perspective of consultation and contextualization, to understand the needs of CSOs and the environment they are operating in. They always ask organizations what else they need besides money – i.e. strategic planning or bringing in new partners. The Fund has increasingly invested in providing technical assistance through local agencies. The focus is on funding institutions and activism rather than projects. They do not normally set a time limit.

A participant from Cordaid highlighted that they were planning a youth consultation in Tunis two months after the learning visit. The aim of this will be to ask young activists and other stakeholders what support is needed to take activism forward. Cordaid is planning to share the outcomes of the consultations with the wider donor community.

A participant noted that there is real distrust of foreign funding in the Arab region, with conspiracy theories frequently being used to discredit international donors.

Panelists were asked the following question: discussions around philanthropy in Muslim countries often focus on 'zakat' (religious giving) and 'waqf' (religious endowment). Is it possible for organisations like the Gerhart Center to use more liberal models, e.g. businessmen supporting democracy?

Barbara replied that the Gerhart Center's previous publications focused on business leaders, but that the majority of donors were found to be motivated by faith. This can be effective, from a human rights perspective, when faith-based motivations do not translate into religious giving, i.e. not only members of the same sect benefit. The language used is often about service, moral and ethical societies and

communities, and fairness. These linguistic differences should be taken seriously when thinking about what motivates people to give money and time.

Elie Abouaoun emphasized that current developments in the Arab world offer a unique opportunity for human rights groups to mainstream human rights into the language of regional donors. The main challenge thereby is not only to encourage people with financial resources to give, but also to provide them with mechanisms to do so.

One of the chronic impediments to human rights philanthropy are the weaknesses at the level of civil society: There needs to be a shift from groups being service providers to them shaping the political process. The link between field activism and policy making is often weak or non-existent, which has had a negative impact on the perceived sustainability of CSOs. In reality, service provision often absorbs all capacity of these organizations.

There is a perception that foreign funding is 'distorting' the work of CSOs. To gain credibility, organisations ideally receive funding from constituent donors. In the past, repressive laws in many countries of the region often led to disengagement of resource holders in supporting human rights. The Arab Human Rights Fund (AHRF) is one of the first organizations to focus on cultivating a culture of human rights philanthropy in the region. The Fund's resources have increased considerably in recent years, partly because of the upheavals and the environment they have created.

AHRF is currently focusing on engaging the private sector in human rights philanthropy. At the moment, Corporate Social Responsibility strategies in the region include microcredits and environmental schemes. AHRF uses the UN Policy Framework for Business and Human Rights to show businesses that there is a dimension of rights to be supported, and that this creates a win-win situation for domestic civil society as much as for the private sector.

Elie's key message to international donors is that they should try and build effective partnerships, also beyond funding. Often concepts are designed elsewhere and then implemented on the ground. Instead, local actors should be involved in programme and project planning. Finally, international donors should share their experience with philanthropists in the region to enable them to learn.

Question & Answer Session:

One participant highlighted the following two issues:

- Building partnerships is essential to avoid feeding into conspiracy theories about foreign money manipulating the political process.
- Structures and accountability are weak. Very few CSOs have a proper structure with changes in leadership – often, it's one person who makes the decisions, without any institutional process.

One participant from a women's fund stressed the importance of recognizing that donors normally identify grantees with similar aims and values. Their fund looks at grantees as experts and aims to build peer-to-peer partnerships with local women's funds.

Another participant said that her organizations gives out activist-led small grants, focusing on environmental issues, human rights, empowering the youth. She emphasized that human rights and social justice cannot exist without environmental sustainability.

Another participant stated that the European Foundation Centre in cooperation with other organizations is supporting a process to find out whether there is a collaborative manner in which transitions in the MENA region can be supported.

One participant voiced the impression that youth organizations most urgently need tools to communicate effectively.

A participant noted that her organization allows grantees to use funding in a flexible way to benefit their constituencies. As a re-granter, the foundation finds that donors are increasingly imposing more restrictions and reporting requirements which can be a burden for grantees. Corporate funders often have pre-conceived notions of what funding should achieve. She said that, being a women's fund with a broad agenda, they need to remain open to supporting multiple strategies (micro-finance, education, advocacy, etc.).

A participant from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund reported that RBF has recently worked on how to bridge policy making and grassroots voices. Investments were made to enable local groups to travel to important meetings. The participant offered to share more information about RBF's work in this area.

Another participant stated that it is important to note that contexts differ from country to country. In Libya, there is much less hostility towards foreign funding than in Egypt, partly due to the constructive role that foreign powers played in overthrowing Ghaddafi. In Tunisia, this relationship is more difficult as there was a perceived lack of international support for the revolution.

One participant noted that a big problem in Libya is not foreign funding but that donations are given by a limited number of businessmen. Libyan NGO law does not restrict foreign funding - the only requirement is to disclose it.

Barbara stated that funders need to understand local contexts, otherwise funding can be hurtful. NGOism is a big problem in this regard, and donors should remain open to supporting other entities such as youth coalitions. What revolutionaries in all countries of the region were dreaming of is a new kind of leadership: collective and inclusive. These ambitions need to be strengthened.

Elie responded that unfortunately, CSOs have little legitimacy in many parts of the region. There was an example of a group in Lebanon which tries to unite people against the sectarian system – they were not able to gather more than a few hundred people together. Recommendation to encourage your partners to improve legitimacy in their own constituencies.

Final recommendations:

- Understand the local context.
- Strengthen intermediaries.
- Look beyond capitals and big cities.
- Explore what support is needed other than money.
- Provide long-term institutional support where possible.
- Hold multi-stakeholder conversations to find out how movements can be supported.
- Try to integrate the human rights into the language of local donors.
- Provide local donors with mechanisms to give.

- Help to achieve a shift from CSOs delivering services to involving them in policy-making.
- Share philanthropic practices across borders.
- Fund flexibly.