



Telebriefing:
EGYPT IN CONTEXT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUNDERS
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Speakers:

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[Juan Cole](#), Director, Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies; Professor of History, University of Michigan

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Although the crisis in Syria currently dominates headlines, the crisis in Egypt persists. Unfolding events have profound implications for human rights and social progress in that crucial country and for the wider region. This telebriefing aimed to provide grantmakers with an understanding of how civil society organizations and networks are managing during this tumultuous period.

Juan Cole, Director, Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies; Professor of History, University of Michigan

Juan Cole provided background information and analysis on the past two-and-a-half years of Egyptian history, from Mubarak's overthrow to the present.

- Youth protestors made use of an existing organizational network, using the internet as a force-multiplier, to convince the elites to exile and eventually try Mubarak. In the wake of these actions, 23 top military officers acted as shadow executives for the country's transitional period. They remained highly influential even as the country moved toward more democratic practices.
- Human rights and civil liberties violations, including military trials of civilians, were rampant.
- In June 2012, Muslim Brotherhood presidential candidate Mohamed Morsi was elected, marking a major shift in Egyptian politics: Prior to this election (and the prior parliamentary elections), the Brotherhood had been a more or less underground organization.
- The elite officers who still had substantial power were unhappy with the results. Morsi forced two high-ranking officers to resign, and promoted officers who might hold a more favorable view of the Brotherhood.
- Morsi's popularity waned as he cracked down on freedom of expression and utilized the same hard-line tactics as Mubarak.
- He declared himself above the courts, leading to protests, and eventual crackdowns.



- Egyptian youth movements gathered 22 million signatures calling for a recall election, and mobilized massive crowds.
- The military staged a “coup” and violently repressed Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins, killing hundreds.
- The human rights situation in Egypt is now worse than under Mubarak in many ways: There are thought-crime arrests, protestors who have been indicted with treason, and organizations that are persecuted for receiving funds from abroad.

Clarisa Bencomo, Program Officer, Ford Foundation - Cairo Office

Clarisa Bencomo addressed the uncertain environment in which civil society groups working on the ground in Egypt are operating.

- Some issues predate the current unrest, but certain challenges have spiked in the past few months.
- Uncertainty in the regulatory environment means that civil society organizations don't know what they can or can't do and how long it will take. Pending new legislation should create clarity and, even if imperfect, provide a framework for legal challenges; civil society organizations are actively pushing for better legislation.
- Many in the NGO world and in civil society are unsure who to be in contact with in the government, since there is high turnover and ongoing polarization. This affects funders as well.
- All political forces are using polarizing language about foreigners, interventionism, and hidden agendas to discredit critics.
- Governmental donors have been sending mixed messages and are currently in a “wait and see” mode. This contributes to popular perceptions of a foreign political agenda.

Regan Ralph, Executive Director, Fund for Global Human Rights

Regan Ralph discussed the situation for human rights organizations working in Egypt.

- Uncertainty shapes the activism in which human rights groups on the ground engage, as well. There have been new initiatives starting outside of Cairo that look at ongoing human rights problems and address the concerns that brought about the revolution in the first place: social justice and economic rights.
- These groups have attempted to do outreach and make connections, but are unsure what will happen when they raise concerns with the government.
- Representatives of the government and police have very complicated interactions with civil society. The police don't feel accountable for their actions, and NGO staff are being rebuffed and harassed by police when they try to work with or bring cases to them.
- The organizations have great clarity about the issues they work on, and have been able to build communities and constituencies in places where it wasn't possible before. However, this could



change quickly as even popular media sends out complicated, polarizing messages about the work and reputation of NGOs.

- Even prior to the Arab Spring, these organizations had been dealing with some variation of the same challenges that are taking place now; they're used to adapting and haven't stopped.

Mirjam van Dorssen, Oxfam Country Director, Egypt

Mirjam van Dorssen addressed the implications for Oxfam partners and other human rights and rights-based development organizations in the current climate.

- Human rights groups and rights-based development organizations feel that they must walk a fine line when addressing human rights issues. They are used to working in an adverse context but with the current polarization, every action might have repercussions. They must calculate any criticism very carefully so as not to alienate constituencies or the authorities.
- These organizations face many questions:
 - How can they keep operating in this climate moving forward?
 - What does it mean to be a human rights organization in a politically charged, complex society?
 - How can they carry out their mission without being perceived as partisan?
- Over the past years, civil society organizations had become stronger at working together and in networks, but the current polarized situation is causing difficulties for overall cooperation. Hopefully, this will be temporarily.

Question-and-Answer Session:

What actions is the Egyptian government currently taking to encourage or discourage foreign funding?

Mirjam:

- The previous and current governments have been working to draft a new NGO law including regulations for foreign funding. The law's future is unclear, and at present, local organizations need to receive permission from the Ministry of Social Solidarity in order to receive foreign funding. Civil society actors have been lobbying to influence the drafting processes in order to secure a law that enables civil society and in line with international standards.

Clarisa:

- It can be difficult to discern patterns, but there is a climate of intimidation. For example, some human rights organizations have had difficulties cashing checks at banks; the leading



government newspaper has reported on pending prosecution of human rights activists and journalists for receiving foreign funding, statements that officials later denied.

- It appears that the some elements in the government are trying to gauge the amount of pushback they would face if they were to crack down again.

What specific opportunities exist for funders to support civil society in this period?

Regan:

- Funders must remain flexible as they deliver resources. Human rights organizations need support, but funders may pull back due to the upheaval.
- Receiving funding from bilaterals often comes at a high political price for an organization.
- Donors have historically supported NGOs by going through a process overseen by the Ministry of Social Solidarity. Registered organizations must seek approval from the Ministry to receive funding, and each grant is reviewed and needs to be approved by the Ministry.
 - Very few grants have been approved: In one case, it took 12 months for money to come through and, in another, the organization has been waiting for 18 months and still hasn't heard a definitive answer.
 - This situation may get better or worse with the pending NGO law.
- The Fund for Global Human Rights is looking for other ways to legally deliver resources while navigating around bureaucratic hurdles:
 - Drawing up specific contracts or hiring people as consultants to work on behalf of organizations.
 - Many organizations have had to incorporate as different kinds of entities, such as law firms. Funders have to ascertain their intentions (i.e. "charitable and not-for-profit") and find a way to get money to them.
- Despite the politicized nature of foreign funding, that's the funding that will allow new organizations to keep their doors open. Many don't require enormous resources, but do need some support.

In the two-and-a-half years that have passed since Mubarak's overthrow, what are some funding failures from which we could learn or avoid in the future?

Clarisa:

- These are not necessarily funding failures, but rather, grant-making decisions that have contributed to popular mistrust of civil society organizations and allegations foreign funding agendas:
 - The rush to support newly mobilized groups and groups outside of the capital led some donors to make grants for projects that were not always well thought out, to groups



with weak capacity that quickly found themselves operating in a very challenging environment.

- Many governmental donors focused on elections and political processes, while neglecting the demands for social justice that drove the revolution.
- Funders need to do a better job of fostering functional networks and divisions of labor, especially across credible international, regional, and national partners.

What is underfunded/overfunded in Egypt?

Regan:

- Many organizations that work in human rights haven't been able to obtain NGO status.
- Big donors didn't ask questions or look at organizations outside of the framework they were given, so some smaller initiatives with very important goals were overlooked entirely.
 - Some of these organizations will do long-term work to build constituencies for human rights. You have to build relationships first to navigate the political terrain.

How do we read the different positions of secular movements? Are they supporting the military?

Juan:

- Secular might be the wrong word; many who objected to the Muslim Brotherhood are also very devout. It's more of a divide between the religious right and the rest.
- The Brotherhood had been viewed as a legitimate social force, but then tried to take power. Now, people view it as a tight-knit cult, though this is probably a temporary view.
- Among secular forces, there are two groups: the leftists who fall under a Nasserite model (nationalism, anti-imperialism, socialism), and the liberals who fall more under the philosophy of John Stuart Mill (freedom of the individual in opposition to unlimited state control).
 - These groups each have a lot of support.
 - The military has succeeded by allying with these groups.
- The future of the religious right is in doubt, so we might see the emergence of a broader secular movement.

What are crucial milestones that your partners are looking for? Drafting a constitution?

Mirjam:

- Drafting a new constitution or changing the current one will be an important milestone. Currently, a 50-person committee is working on the constitution. Rights organizations are trying to influence committee members on issues such as women's rights and socioeconomic rights.



- Economic and social rights need to be addressed. Community groups that are able to organize youth and local community members (men and women) have been working on these issues for years and see a big need in continuing to do so.
- Elections at local and municipal levels will become very important in this process.
- Within the current government, there are some members that partners can work with and are hopeful about.

What impact have the events in Egypt had on the region at large?

Juan:

- There has been a destabilizing impact.
- In Tunisia, there were local events that were destabilizing, but many youth in Tunisia formed a movement based on the Egyptian model, calling for the dissolution of elected government.
 - Tunisian labor unions also joined in.
 - Many other political and religious actors took a leaf from the Egyptian book.
 - The government was on the verge of releasing the constitution and setting up elections, but now that timescale has been thrown off by events in Egypt.
- In Libya, it's hard to tell, but there was an instance in which opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood attacked the Brotherhood's headquarters.

What is one key message that you want grantmakers to come away with?

- Regan: What people aren't hearing about and aren't seeing is the effort of communities across the country to really change their circumstances. Try to reach those organizations, while understanding that grantmaking may look very different and their needs may be different than in a more traditional context. Be flexible, think long-term.
- Clarisa: At least at the moment it seems like there will be very important openings for the government and civil society to work together and funders can facilitate that by strengthening civil society's capacity to be seen as credible partners on policy issues. Egypt faces many social and economic challenges, and some civil society organizations that can bridge the grass roots and policy divide are finding new spaces opening up.
- Mirjam: Flexibility and long-term commitment are important. By understanding the local context, we can allow for smaller groups to get support. We must also allow for these smaller organizations to function with autonomy, since associations with foreign organizations can sometimes backfire.

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