

ARAB HUMAN RIGHTS FUND

Taking the blinkers off the Arab human rights community

Yousry Moustafa

Clearly, human rights organizations have an important part to play in helping to establish social justice. Discrimination, deprivation and marginalization, terms central to the concept of social injustice, are also at the heart of their mission. However, in the Arab region at least, the focus of human rights groups on legal and political rights has led to a divide between them and more grassroots organizations which are embracing much wider notions of social justice. Bridging that gulf, and marrying the concepts of social justice and human rights, is one of the main pillars of the Arab Human Rights Fund (AHRF).



Yousry Moustafa is Project Manager for Promotion of Women's Rights, GTZ-Egypt, and a board member of AHRF. Email yousry.moustafa@gtz.de

Over the last few years, the notion of social justice, though still highly contested, has come to encompass economic, political, social and cultural elements. Human rights organizations, however, focus mainly on discrimination. While this is useful in analysing examples of injustice from the perspective of specific excluded groups, such as women and minorities, it is not adequate for analysing the broader social canvas.

Human rights organizations generally attack injustice by campaigning for the modification of policies and laws. This has its limitations. Economic and social rights are still to a large extent not actionable at law, while legal interventions continue to be ineffectual when issues relating to poverty and material deprivation are in question. As a result, human rights organizations in the Arab region have been criticized for focusing on civil and political rights and overlooking economic and social rights, key aspects of social justice. The interventions of the human rights community with regard to social justice are still limited.

The premise of the AHRF

The result is that a gulf has opened up in the Arab region between human rights organizations, with their narrower focus on the civil and the political, and grassroots organizations working with a larger idea of social justice. Bridging this divide is the greatest

challenge facing the human rights community and its supporting institutions. It has also informed the mission of AHRF, which has two elements: to be a grantmaker supporting human rights organizations in the region; and to act as a resource centre for philanthropy for social justice.

In our view, human rights organizations lacked – and still do lack – access to materials that would enable them to formulate a wider view of social justice: studies, needs assessments and reports of programmes are frequently inaccessible to them because there is no central repository of such information, and in many cases it has not been translated. They therefore lack both the conceptual basis and the language to enable them to broaden their view of social justice. The second strand of our mission, therefore, aims to create such a repository of resources and to provide a platform for the discussion of social justice among human rights organizations.

In practice, however, this second element of our mission has been thrown a little off course. Partly, this was a result of the circumstances surrounding AHRF's launch. Our headquarters are in Lebanon, and at the time of the proposed launch, in 2008, the country was involved in the war between Israel and Hezbollah. When the launch finally took place, we were under pressure to start grantmaking and we lacked the time and resources to fully work out the social justice element of our mandate.

In the meantime, we have tried to set the example of a wider perspective on social justice by fostering diversity, both geographically and thematically. AHRF has supported NGOs from around 12 Arab countries including Arab NGOs inside Israel, and areas of conflict like Iraq and Somalia. Thematically, we want to show that we support all forms of rights. Our grantees are working on civil and political rights, social and economic rights, women's rights, child rights, minority rights, and the rights of people with different sexual orientations. We are working, for example, with a local community group to support the rights of the Nubian minority in Egypt to housing. In Lebanon, we are working with an organization that defends the rights of people with different sexual orientations.

2010: restating the focus

We will continue to send the message that all forms of rights are important to the achievement of social justice through our grantmaking. In the meantime, this year we hired an external consultant and undertook a review of our activities. Over the next two years,

the fund will attempt to refocus on bridging the gap between the human rights community and grassroots development groups. As I noted earlier, the first step is knowledge management. It is proposed that the fund will collect and disseminate knowledge on human rights and social justice and develop a forum for discussion of social justice among human rights organizations in the region.

Partly because of this conceptual gulf, another thing lacking at the moment in the human rights community is the capacity to work with grassroots organizations. Because of this, an element of our revised strategy will be to seek to work in partnership with organizations that have good grassroots connections. One of these is the Coptic Evangelical Association for Social Development, an umbrella organization of grassroots groups, which adopts a rights-based approach to development. AHRF could approach NGOs such as these to reach out to grassroots groups through working in cooperation. In this way, AHRF itself can help to make the missing link between the human rights community and grassroots groups with a social justice mandate.

AHRF's niche

The new approach will also restate our original intention: to work on social justice from a human rights perspective. At present, as far as I know, we are the only support organization in the region doing exclusively this. Our view is that we can contribute to the region's development in two important ways: first, by acting as a resource centre for the region's human rights community and, second, by raising funds from the Arab region itself for human rights and social justice work. One of the by-products of the legalistic approach to rights is that, because it is often seen as political, local donors fight shy of funding it. However, they will support work for social justice if this is posed in terms of helping people overcome deprivation or exclusion.

For us, the work is still in its early stages, but we believe that it is essential if human rights and social justice are to be seen as parts of the same whole, rather than two distinct ideas, and if human rights organizations are to play their full part in establishing social justice in the Arab region. @

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