

Strategic Implications of Dignity Revolutions for Western Donors

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This article is an updated summary of Hivos' briefing note [Dignity Revolutions and Western Donors: Redefining Relevance](#).

The Arab Spring was a “political Big Bang” that shocked and awed the world, including the revolutionaries themselves. These dignity revolutions across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are monumental, endogenous events with strategic implications for Western donors. Why did we not see it coming?



Popular revolutions erupted amid donor disconnect between project outcomes and process impacts. While regimes upgraded processes and shared “authoritarian best practices,” international funders stuck to project-by-project outcome assessments that said little about contributions to qualitative change on the ground.

Western donors overemphasized the state and its capacity to reshape social dynamics in its favor, while underemphasizing society and its capacity to confront the culture of fear. Critically, Western donors overlooked the impacts of the invisible triple revolution the region has witnessed over the past 50 years: education, gender, and political awareness. The mass participation of youth, particularly girls, in higher education, and the state's failure to meet the generation's high expectations, raised political awareness among educated, unemployed and underemployed young people. Policymakers, Middle East experts, and democracy promoters recognized these causal factors but failed to comprehend the potential for change.

Kawa Hassan of Hivos recommends that Western donors consider two qualitative paradigm shifts:

- From democracy promotion to accompanying transformative changes initiated, led and ultimately determined by the people of the region; and
- From “Arab Exceptionalism” to a “Tahrir Square Republic.” This ‘Republic’ symbolizes citizens’ determination to bring down dictators, unity between Muslims and Christians, women’s empowerment – despite setbacks to women’s rights in some countries in the immediate aftermath of the revolutions –and participation of secular and Islamist voices in democratic politics.

Western donors should not underestimate the determination of empowered citizens to fight for and negotiate new social contracts aimed at achieving accountable, inclusive and responsive political and economic systems.

In practice, funders should consider six strategic principles:

1. **Whose knowledge counts:** After the uprisings, there was a flood of “Western tourist-revolutionary academics in search of ‘authentic’ Tahrir revolutionaries,” seeking to become experts on the Arab Spring.¹ Donors should consult knowledge produced in the region, about the region, in genuine and equal partnership with Western experts and actors.

¹ Mona Abaza. Academic tourists sight-seeing the Arab Spring. english.ahram.org.eg/News/22373.aspx. Accessed 27 November 2013.

2. **Dynamic, demand-driven context analysis:** Donors should partner with think tanks, researchers, and experts in the MENA region who can provide context prior to the start of projects and strategic planning. Such partnerships can examine the role of emerging actors in transition processes, and how non-organized groups – like slum populations, day laborers, rural unemployed, and unemployed university graduates, to name a few – mobilize and contribute to change.
3. **Strategic patience in a rapidly changing context:** Revolutionary transitions are long-term processes with progress and setbacks. The road to democracy is bumpy, at times bloody, and far from guaranteed, and transitions can be expected to last at least ten to fifteen years. This timeline conflicts with the short-term views of donors who want to demonstrate immediate impact and progress to their constituencies. Donors need to balance the urgency to act quickly with strategic patience.
4. **Learning from local actors and social movements:** “Unusual suspects” – such as rural populations and unorganized communities – play important roles in uprisings but were not on most donors’ radar. The revolutions were, for the most part, initiated by informally organised secular youth with loose links, and in some cases without links, to formal NGOs. Donors should learn from these actors and reflect critically on assumptions about social change and how it emerges and evolves.
5. **Engaging with all actors, including Islamists.** Engagement should not be based on the false premise that Islamists are embedded in their societies and seculars are not. Social shifts and victories among Islamic parties will continue in the short-, medium-, and long-term. Western donors should partner with emerging progressive Islamic actors and support coalitions for change across the Islamic-secular divide.
6. **Foreign funding: genuine suspicions and political instrumentation.** The fall of authoritarian regimes provides real opportunities for donors to support politically sensitive democracy and human rights projects. Yet the ousting of aging dictators has not abolished their regimes or their practices. Branding civil society activists who receive foreign funding as agents of the West aimed at regime change is a common tactic that contributes to perceptions of a “conspiracy” behind foreign funding. A February 2012 Gallup survey on foreign funding for civil society in Egypt shows that 85% of Egyptians opposed direct US funding for civil society organizations.² Despite differences among countries, Egypt shows that Western donors need to be aware of this delicate dilemma.

The Middle East is strategically changing: so must Western donors. The lesson from these creative revolutions is to be prepared and willing to learn from local actors and to critically reflect on assumptions about social change and activism in general and in authoritarian, revolutionary and post-revolutionary contexts in particular. Western donors need to revolutionize their thinking and doing, from initial planning to implementation. Nothing less than their strategic relevance is at stake.

Download the full [briefing note](#) or see additional publications at www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Civil-Society-in-West-Asia. For more information, contact Kawa Hassan at k.hassan@hivos.nl.

² *Egyptian Opposition to US and Other Foreign Aid Increases, Majority now also opposes aid from international organizations.* <http://www.gallup.com/poll/153512/egyptian-opposition-foreign-aid-increases.aspx>. Accessed 27 November 2013.