

## Funder Learning Visit to the Arab Region Tunis 8-10 May 2012

### Transitions in MENA and Abroad: What Do They Teach Us?

*With the dynamics at play in the region, what are the priorities, opportunities and challenges for human rights? What lessons from transitional contexts elsewhere inform the important considerations and caveats that grantmakers should bear in mind as they explore opportunities to work in the region? What are viable entry points and funding areas for grantmakers?*

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Moderator: **Hanan Rabbani**, Senior Program Officer, Women's Rights and Gender Development, Open Society Foundations - Arab Regional Office

### Welcome & Introduction

- Are revolutions bound to create change? Where is social justice in the change? This session will address (1) what transition actually means and (2) what the risks and opportunities are for grant-makers when funding in the MENA region.
- Marc Freeman will set the general framework and Abdelbasset Ben Hassen will speak about lessons for funding in Tunisia and more generally in the Arab region.

### Funding in Contexts of Political Transition

- The past four decades have seen waves of democratic transitions and post-conflict transitions – examples being South Africa, South-eastern Europe and East Asia.
- It is important to bear in mind that every country and every political and historic context is unique. However, there is a huge range of common dilemmas and methods that are useful to explore when starting to think about funding in transition contexts.
- Transitions are the leap moments of history: Great opportunities arise where countries can leap forward or backward, with an equal amount of risks and opportunities involved.
- Transitions are singular moments. A society evolves through different transitional moments rather than through continuous change.
- Transitions are moments in which social contracts are reshaped. This includes the social contracts (1) among citizens, (2) between citizens and the state, and (3) between the state and its neighbour countries.
- Common challenges:
  - Having to operate in a crisis mode and do long-term planning at the same time. As there is not much a state can deliver in the short run, it will be crucial for its leader and society as a whole to have a long-term vision (an example being Nelson Mandela's vision of a "rainbow nation" – or, more pragmatically thinking, the possibility to join the European Union). Generally, there will be pressure to get things done as quickly as possible.

- Knowledge and capacity deficits: There will often be a lack of knowledge of international law, of how to run a country, etc.
- Dysfunctional state institutions: Existing state institutions can be ridden by corruption, nepotism and generally not do the job the populace expects them to do. In this case there might be a need for consultation, dialogue and training about what it means to have a civil service, a parliament, etc.
- Non-state institutions might turn out to be more superficial and hollow than it seemed.
- The local media might not be used to operate in a free and democratic environment.
- The corporate sector might not know how to function in competitive markets.
- Often there is a legacy of past violence which needs to be addressed.
- There is a risk in putting pressure on a domestic context through an international assistance machine that arrives from the outside. Experts and organisations moving into transition contexts often arrive with pre-existing ideas of “how to do transition”. More time should be spend building knowledge and perspectives.
- A common bias is that organisations primarily speak to English-speaking individuals who had access to education; or simply to whoever they get access to. One should bear in mind that consulting less “accessible” groups and stakeholders might be crucial for making a successful contribution.
- The world of expertise is highly sectoral and very specialised; what often matters most is knowledge of how different things connect, but we do not necessarily have this knowledge.
- Dialogues tend to happen in separate silos (civil society, business, governments); we should think more about spaces where state and society meet, such as school boards (civilians and state officials) or ad hoc commissions (truth commissions, policy reform commissions). Finding those points of contact is an important part of managing a successful transition.

## Lessons for Funding in Tunisia (and the wider region)

- The Tunisian revolution was a revolution against fear.
- It is now important to re-visit the relationship between social justice and political justice; these are complex issues and need to be treated in relation to each other.
- We need to look not only for answers, but also for the right questions.
- The Tunisian people have shown that they can shape their history. After the revolution, we formed a commission composed of CSOs, political parties, syndicates, consultants, etc. to draft the six laws of the transition, which human rights are a crucial part of. This was a positive example for cross-sector cooperation and it worked because the commission was a space for negotiation and dialogue where ideas of “how to live together” could be jointly explored. This demonstrates the importance of creating spaces for discussion and dialogue and – for donors – supporting processes rather than just specific activities.
- State institutions need to be reformed. Our (Tunisian) experience of consulting foreign experts was a positive one, we did not perceive those helping us as patronising.
- Another important step in transition is to reflect on this process with locals. In our case, training was provided to civil society organisations to respond to this need.
- The following needs should be addressed:
  - Introducing human rights into the public discourse and into practice.
  - Increasing citizen participation and strengthening the civil society movement to challenge any attempt at re-installing authoritarianism and repression.
- This can be achieved by:
  - Supporting creative initiatives for participation.
  - Supporting links between human rights and education, as well as human rights and culture.

## Discussion

Q: What do the Arab revolutions have in common?

- Even though the historical and political contexts Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, etc. were all different, all revolutions were civil and fought for social justice and dignity; it was a revolution of values.

Q: Support processes – why processes?

- Processes enable us to study the needs of people and build knowledge about the reality of a society and space.

Q: Transitional justice or amnesty?

- Throughout those societies affected by the Arab spring, there is an expectation of seeing justice for crimes that happened under the rule of dictators. Many communities are traumatised and the mothers of those who were murdered or taken to jail and never came back are now asking for justice.
- Historically, amnesties have often been the starting point for reconciliation, rather than transitional justice. Truth commissions can be used as a solution “in between” justice and amnesty.
- Sometimes the term “transitional justice” itself is the problem - instead one can speak about “facing the past”.
- Pursuing transitional justice in Tunisia would be a difficult long-term process. Currently, 33 organisations are pushing for creating law on establishing a truth commission.
- Transitional justice is about creating knowledge (about the number of cases, those affected, etc.), how to lobby the government and build alliances.
- Transitional justice processes often lack the participation of victims. And victims’ grievances are very different from place to place. Experience of Libya: Those who died in the revolution are seen as martyrs, but people want to see justice for deaths occurred under Ghaddafi. Collective, community-based reparations are important here.

Q: What can philanthropy contribute?

- What you choose to fund should advance the transition, not jeopardise it.
  - More politically sensitive forms of human rights funding required during transitions. If you push too hard, this might hurt the process.
- Philanthropy can help this region to document what has happened
  - Retrieving not only crimes and casualties, but also history of achievements.
  - An example for an under-explored issue are the results of last elections in Tunisia: under-researched, few papers published, not enough analysis.
  - Generating knowledge to understand differences and commonalities between different countries who are experiencing a revolution as part of the Arab Spring.
- The people should be helped to develop a vision and strategy for their country, as well as better knowledge about the communities.
- Helping communities to mobilise around issues to achieve progress.
- Transforming the deep civil culture in Tunisia and beyond into citizen education and human rights education.