

In Focus:

Philanthropy in the Arab Region at the Dawn of a New Era

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The Arab region has experienced a number of historical developments in the last year, a dynamic of change unseen since the 1950s. A much needed exercise at this stage is to reflect on how these changes will affect philanthropy in the region. As funders may realize, adopting a blanket approach to funding strategies is undoubtedly counterproductive. Instead, human rights funders should first explore the shared realities that exist within the region, including the negative perception of human rights, overcoming the deeply entrenched consequences of oppressive government regimes, and the challenges of managing and balancing foreign funding. In order to create effective funding strategies, we, as funders, should further explore how these realities are affecting human rights philanthropy and will continue to do so as the transition process unfolds.



Human Rights Organizations in the Arab Region

While it seems obvious that the recent popular uprisings have opened windows of opportunities for the philanthropic sector, the accrued weakness of civil society -- including human rights groups -- over the last six decades will not be easy to overcome. The devolution of government services, performance, and accountability in many Arab countries led to an increased role for NGOs to fill the gaps left by underperforming governments, paralyzed or ineffective parliaments (when they existed at all), and corrupt public administration. Unfortunately, NGOs were unable to make an effective contribution to the policy-making process. This negatively affected the credibility and sustainability of NGOs in the region and, more specifically, of human rights organizations.

Human Rights and Political Agendas

At times, the work of human rights organizations was depicted (whether rightly or not) as serving political agendas, leading to apprehension. During the popular uprisings, most opposition groups in the Arab region used human rights groups to act against established regimes. This contributed to the perception of human rights activism as a struggle for power instead of a fight for values or rights. Additionally, the absence of independent Arab-originated funding to support human rights initiatives strengthened the monopoly of foreign donors, which exacerbated the negative perception that rights groups are acting in alignment with foreign agendas. The fact that most of these organizations failed to embrace high standards in their work, especially within the context of political repression, further increased public skepticism towards human rights. These factors also prevented human rights groups from building mass support through small donors and volunteers.

Government Repression

At another level, the repressive framework in most countries within the region contributed to the

disengagement of many actors, not the least being the private sector and high net worth individuals. “Capital holders” channeled their donations to “safe interventions,” mostly to social, cultural, and environmental organizations. Initiatives related to human rights, policy-making, accountability, and similar topics were avoided due to the perceived risks of creating conflict with governments.

How Increased Funding Affects Civil Society

Recent developments in the region have triggered the interest of many governmental and private actors from outside of the region. Countries flooded with money by major donors and NGOs are growing at disconcertingly rapid speeds. Consequently, donations will now be sought and used by a large number of organizations of various capacities and purposes in the countries undergoing transitions. In the countries undergoing transition, this chaotic development within the civil society sector (specifically for organizations working on human rights, democratization and the like) is a major challenge to effective philanthropy. In addition to the challenge of managing the influx of foreign funding, we need an increase in local funding to create balance and establish the credibility of human rights work.

Funders’ Role

The transition process in the Arab region (as in most other regions that have undergone transition) will be painful and lengthy. Previous experience demonstrates that such transitions are not reversible and, no matter how costly, they will lead to a renewed social contract in each of the affected countries. Moreover, this dynamic will spill over into other countries.

In this context, philanthropy will have a vital role to play. One significant challenge to fulfilling this role will be whether the proponents of global philanthropy will be able to partner with local and regional grantmaking organizations to maximize their knowledge of the local context. This is critical to ensuring that funding strategies are effective and sustainable.

The protesters in the Arab streets unanimously demanded “dignity,” “freedom,” and “social justice.” Fulfilling the expectations of the protesters requires an all-inclusive approach by actors involved in social change. The public sector, civil society organizations, academia, social opinion-makers, donors and the private sector need to acknowledge that each has a role to play and agree to cooperate with the other actors. Moreover, international donors will need genuine and strong partnerships with local actors in order to thoroughly understand local contexts. This type of partnership is not as simple as it might look and will need time to be cultivated. The first question is whether, this time, international donors are keen on listening to voices from the region?

Resources for Funders

- 1) [Review background materials](#) on relevant topics, including democracy, Islamism, and philanthropy, prepared for IHRFG’s recent Funder Learning Visit to Tunis (May 8-10, 2012).
- 2) Read Dr. Abouaoun’s upcoming piece on [IHRFG’s Blog](#) on his impressions on the Tunis Funder Learning Visit (posted on 5/21/2012).
- 3) Contact Dr. Abouaoun at eabouaoun@ahrfund.org.