

Research Paper

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New Social Enterprises in Jordan

Redefining the Meaning of Civil Society



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Summary

- Jordanian civil society has long been distorted by state control and the dominance of large, formal, professionalized non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of royal and foreign patronage. Local activists and commentators question the ability and desire of such NGOs to play a credible role in informing, engaging and influencing the public and policy-makers.
- The emergence of new, local grassroots civil society organizations (CSOs) – or what this paper calls ‘organic civic initiatives’ – is changing how Jordanians conceive of civil society. Structured as not-for-profit companies, these initiatives generate revenues through small-scale social enterprise, rather than relying on financing from government bodies or foreign donors.
- Extensive interviews with the founders of such initiatives underline a perception that the traditional model of civil society in Jordan is flawed. In response, alternative forms of activism are developing under the radar, largely unnoticed by a donor community that still focuses on large-scale formal NGOs. The new initiatives take a more bottom-up approach to engaging with and mobilizing civil society. They view communities as assets and potential sources of cooperation, rather than as objects of centrally determined solutions derived from Western practices.
- The new organizations are helping to provide a private space for the debate of public issues, reflecting an emerging sense of civic engagement and local agency in Jordan. Yet civil society organizers believe that the Jordanian government is creating regulatory hurdles to prevent small-scale CSOs from expanding. Government officials, conversely, argue that these new organizations are inefficient and poorly managed. Tensions and mistrust between civil society and government officials undermine the potential for new initiatives to expand and develop.
- The lack of constructive engagement represents a missed opportunity. Instead of treating civil society with mistrust, the government should allow and encourage it to mediate between the state and the public. CSOs can make citizens aware of their rights and responsibilities, while fostering open channels of communication that allow the government to hear and act on public concerns.
- The obstacles to the integration of civil society into the mainstream policy debate also reflect national security preoccupations. Jordan’s external challenges have led to the prioritization of a narrow definition of security, focused on militarization rather than on broader concepts of human security. As a result, work on essential issues such as the economy, education and the social fabric has been sidelined.
- The emergence of these organic civic initiatives and their bottom-up approach of inculcating informed, engaged and tolerant citizens is one of the factors that could support a smoother transition to a functioning democracy in Jordan.

Introduction

Five years on from the ‘Arab Spring’, many observers assume that youth activists in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have been discouraged from pursuing social and political change, including from trying to democratize their societies. This view is reinforced by mounting barriers to engagement, including government repression of dissent. In fact, in many countries young people remain highly engaged with social and political issues. However, they are exploring creative new approaches to community activism that are subtler, less visible and often less explicitly political than street protests. In this way they seek to circumvent some of the existing constraints on civil society in authoritarian contexts.

This research paper explores one such ‘workaround’ in Jordan, where a younger generation of educated activists is attempting to navigate the middle ground between maintaining the status quo and pushing for regime change – neither of which is a viable or desirable option for them. The question implied by these grassroots initiatives is whether there is a viable space for non-traditional actors to foster constructive reform in society, rather than being forced to choose between stagnation and instability.

In part, the impetus for emerging new forms of civil society reflects the failure of the Arab uprisings to meet popular aspirations for ‘bread, dignity and social justice’.¹ In the five years since 2010, economic growth in the MENA region has slowed. Growth averaged 5.3 per cent a year in 2000–11, but this slipped to 3.2 per cent a year in 2012–15.² Civil liberties have become even more restricted. A 2015 Freedom House report rated the MENA region as the worst in the world for political rights and civil liberties. In the report’s international ranking of political freedom, Jordan, which in the 1990s ranked higher than Tunisia or Egypt, is now on the same rank (5.5) as Egypt and is classified as ‘not free’, having historically been assessed as ‘partly free’.³

Nevertheless, youth and civil society activists have continued to search for avenues through which to pursue reform. Although the focus of this paper is on the establishment of not-for-profit companies as social enterprises in Jordan, similar innovative modes of civil society engagement are visible more broadly around the region – including in Egypt, Lebanon, Kuwait and Palestine. These new enterprises tend to focus on education and human development, with a long-term agenda of fostering dialogue and mutual trust between the state and society.

In Jordan that trust is still largely absent. On the one hand, government officials are often sceptical of the role of civil society. In September 2014 the then prime minister, Abdullah Ensour, publicly stated that ‘most civil society organizations were created only for corruption’.⁴ On the other hand, there is widespread cynicism among the Jordanian public about existing, formalized NGO structures. The perception is that such organizations are little more than the puppets of donors, are too pro-government, or simply act as service providers to fill holes in state welfare provision rather than driving structural change. There is a lack of awareness about the potentially more productive role that civil society can play in developing the public sphere and supporting dialogue between the public and the state.

¹ Kinninmont, J. (2012), *‘Bread, Dignity and Social Justice’: The Political Economy of Egypt’s Transition*, Briefing Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/183047> (accessed 11 Jul. 2016).

² IMF (2015), *IMF Regional Economic Outlook Update: Middle East and Central Asia*, May 2015, ‘Statistical Appendix’, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/reo/2015/mcd/eng/mreo0515.htm>. MENA data exclude Syria from 2012 onwards owing to the lack of data in the context of the war.

³ Freedom House (2015), *Freedom in the World 2015*, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/01152015_FIW_2015_final.pdf (accessed Dec. 2015).

⁴ Addoustour (2014), ‘Ensour Confirms most of CSOs were created for corruption’, 23 September 2014, <http://goo.gl/A66gah> (accessed 1 Oct. 2015).

Youth activists who want to develop an authentic grassroots civil society are therefore reinventing their approach in order to build new perceptions of civil society organizations (CSOs) as trustworthy and effective. They also want to reclaim the definition of civil society as a ‘mechanism of collective empowerment that enhances the ability of citizens to protect their interests and rights from arbitrary or capricious state power’.⁵

The new social enterprises claim to differentiate themselves from established NGOs, by treating communities as assets and potential sources of cooperation rather than as the objects of centrally determined solutions. Instead of depending upon donor money, they generate revenues locally through small-scale business initiatives, which reinforce their relationships with the communities in which they operate. The appeal of this informal model is evident in the rapid growth of organic civic initiatives in the past few years. The author estimates that there are now about 100 such organizations operating in Jordan (out of around 400 organizations registered under a relatively new legal framework for not-for-profit companies, which also includes private schools and hospitals).

The new initiatives have their limitations. Like established NGOs, they struggle to influence national-level policy-making due to heavy regulation, a lack of effective dialogue with decision-makers, and the intimidating rhetoric of many officials towards civil society. Many of the new organizations avoid direct communication with the government or advertising their political views. This allows them a certain freedom and independence, but it also limits their impact and makes it hard for them to scale up their activities. Nevertheless, their ability to convene and privately discuss public issues indicates a more active sense of agency coming to Jordanians.

Jordan’s King Abdullah II has said that the country is on a trajectory towards democracy, and that it is at a ‘decisive juncture’.⁶ One step in that direction is the newly drafted election law, which aims to widen participation in political life and to foster a more policy-driven political culture instead of the existing tendency to vote according to tribal affiliations. Another is the strengthening and deepening of civil society. If the country is to achieve genuinely participatory politics, it needs to develop the building blocks of democracy, including tolerant, engaged, respectful and informed communities. The authorities have traditionally seen an independent civil society as a threat, but the trend towards organic civic initiatives underlines the potential of CSOs as constructive actors that could help the government to manage economic and social challenges by drawing on the talent and ideas of the country’s youth.

Methodology

The findings of this research paper are based on around 45 interviews with NGOs, non-profit companies, government officials, journalists and international donor agencies, most of which were conducted during fieldwork in Amman between January and March 2015. The interviews were semi-structured, conducted in person and over Skype. The interviewees agreed to be quoted but without mention of their name or affiliation.

The paper draws on a review of NGO laws and a literature review on the development of civil society concepts and forms in Jordan, as well as on virtual discussions on the internet, online forums and social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter). It also draws on extensive analysis of the Facebook

⁵ Wiktorowicz, Q. (2000), ‘Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan’, *Comparative Politics*, 33(1), p. 43.

⁶ Abdullah II ibn Al Hussein (2012), ‘Our Journey to Forge Our Path Towards Democracy’, first paper in ‘Discussion Papers’ series on King Abdullah II Official Website, 29 December 2012, http://kingabdullah.jo/index.php/en_US/pages/view/id/247.html (accessed 1 Oct. 2015).

pages of the organizations in question, and some group discussions on the status of civil society in Jordan, to help understand the grassroots discourse around civil society in the country.

The research also benefits from the author's personal and professional experiences of working with national and international NGOs in Jordan over the course of seven years.

Why care about civil society?

This paper uses the term 'civil society' to describe a mechanism to enforce checks and balances on those who hold power, and a safe space for people to negotiate the common well-being of their societies. The term encompasses both formal NGOs and a wider set of informal civic initiatives.

To be effective, civil society must enable citizens to advocate individual and group interests, connect the voices of minorities, and foster an informed population. (This latter role is especially important because an informed public tends to expect, or even demand, accountability and social justice.) Civil society creates a space in which institutions other than the government can support positive social change without necessarily presenting themselves as being in opposition, or an alternative, to the government. Partnership is a key word here.

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On the basis of this definition, the interviewees generally considered civil society to be underdeveloped in Jordan. One interviewee described Jordan's NGO scene as a 'microwavable type of civil society'⁷ – i.e. one that has not evolved naturally from grassroots level and instead emulates ready-made foreign models. Another interviewee argued that 'there is no national base to ask for reforms' in terms of a critical mass of domestic civil society movements. The available space for such initiatives is monopolized by royal NGOs, and there is 'no proper financing, no political culture, a tribal society with many sub-identities ... [and no] enabling legal environment or rule of law'.⁸

The challenges for civil society need to be seen in the context of the broader nature of policy-making and decision-making in Jordan. The country's constitution nominally separates the powers of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. But real power is concentrated in the hands of the executive, namely the king and the prime minister he appoints. The legislature can only approve, reject or modify bills, which are always initiated and drafted by the executive, while the justice system consists of royal appointees. Political parties are weak. Senior political positions, especially in the cabinet, are often awarded on the basis of loyalty to the monarchy.⁹

This patronage-based model has created a context in which little value is assigned to the knowledge and skills necessary for effective policy-making.¹⁰ Government officials and senior managers are viewed as little more than clerical staff. As one Jordanian author put it, government workers are expected to 'mindlessly enforc[e] higher commands'.¹¹ Decisions are made without real participation or input from the public.

⁷ Interview with author, Amman, January 2015.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Political parties were banned from 1957 until late 1989, which makes the concept of political affiliations quite novel in Jordan.

¹⁰ Jreisat, J. E. (1997), *Politics Without Process: Administering Development in the Arab World*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

¹¹ Ibid.

Jordanians lack meaningful formal or informal mechanisms for communicating grievances, concerns, demands or aspirations to the government. When the public and mainstream civil society raise concerns, they typically call upon the king (rather than the government) to intervene, reflecting their understanding of where real power lies. However, this reinforces the sense that any positive change is likely to remain a privilege in the gift of the king, rather than something achievable through institutional reform. One example of this was a campaign calling for Jordanian women to have the right to pass on their nationality to non-Jordanian husbands and children. Activists wrote to the king asking him to intervene on their behalf, invoking what they called the monarch's 'long-standing legacy of being a refuge for his citizens on such controversial issues'.¹²

This system perpetuates a lack of popular trust in government. Civil society has thus far been unable to bridge the gap between decision-makers and the public. The institutional environment is not conducive to sincere cooperation, and the legal environment remains restrictive despite some limited reforms. Moreover, individual CSOs do not cooperate effectively or advocate on behalf of civil society as a whole. Instead, they tend to compete with each other for resources and constituencies. As is often the case in middle-income countries, the sector is seen as an elite space associated with Western-educated liberals who lack contact with real society and who impose solutions without consultation. By some accounts, civil society therefore resembles in structure the very same body, the state, that it seeks to hold to account.

However, Jordan is in need of an informed and engaged population if it is to accomplish the democratic reforms that the country's leadership has promised; and if it is to manage the risks of internal social conflict arising from the various economic, demographic and security changes currently under way.

The Arab uprisings showed that in repressed and disengaged populations, violence and civil unrest can erupt without warning. The aftermath of these events has shown the need for social movements and civil society to become better organized and more consensual, in order to reduce social polarization and the risk of conflict. Many have attributed Tunisia's relatively peaceful trajectory after its 2011 uprising to the country's well-developed civil society, among other factors.¹³

Creating a pressure valve for public grievances is particularly important for Jordan in the light of current internal and regional pressures. The civil war in Syria, to Jordan's north, has left Jordan hosting nearly 1.3 million displaced persons,¹⁴ who are unlikely to be able to return to their homes in the foreseeable future. Iraq, to Jordan's northeast, is also in conflict. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 drove many thousands of Iraqis into Jordan and created space for the rise of extremist groups. In addition, the decades-old Arab–Israeli conflict to Jordan's west has made the country home to nearly 2 million Palestinians.

These challenges have prompted policy-makers to prioritize a narrow definition of security, focused on militarization rather than on broader concepts of human security. In turn, this has led

¹² Hoqooq blog (2011), حملة أمي أردنية وجنسياتها حق لي تناشد الملك بالإيعاز للحكومة بإعادة النظر بالتعديلات الدستورية, [My Mother is Jordanian and her nationality is my right campaign appeals to the King to instruct the government to reconsider the constitutional amendments], 15 September 2011, <https://hoqook.wordpress.com/2011/09/15/>.

¹³ See, for instance, Chomiak, L. (2014), 'Architecture of Resistance in Tunisia', in Khatib, L. and Lust, E. (2014) (eds), *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism*, 1st ed., Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press. Four Tunisian trade union leaders were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 for their role in a national dialogue that helped to guide the peaceful post-2011 transition.

¹⁴ As of December 2015 there were 632,762 refugees registered with the UNHCR in Jordan. A 2015 Chatham House research paper states: 'The Jordanian government estimates that around 1.3 million Syrians are living in Jordan, including both unregistered refugees and Syrians who had been living there before the war.' Carrion, D. (2015), *Syrian Refugees in Jordan: Confronting Difficult Truths*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/syrian-refugees-jordan-confronting-difficult-truths> (accessed 4 Dec. 2015).

to the sidelining of essential issues such as the economy, the social fabric and education. Officials often argue that debating domestic reforms is a luxury in such a troubled neighbourhood. Yet while regional conflict and instability do indeed constitute serious challenges, external threats have been used as excuses for incomplete reform.¹⁵ An official focus on border security means little if the country is rupturing inside its borders.

Long-standing problems of unemployment, poverty, and inadequate infrastructure and basic services reflect three main root causes: an entrenched system of rentierism and clientelism that is becoming economically unsustainable as population growth stretches national resources; the fragility of Jordan's social fabric, given the pull of sub-national identities; and a 'spoon-feeding' approach to education, which prioritizes rote learning over creative and critical thinking, and which is failing to provide the skills needed in the job market.

These factors are connected. Youth activists interviewed for this paper argued that Jordan's patronage economy undermines community and national solidarity. After all, it is not the wealthy who are waiting for the state to improve education or healthcare; they can use private facilities. The poor, meanwhile, are marginalized. Moreover, unlike in many democratic countries, many social goods in Jordan are provided by royal grant rather than by right.

Popular attitudes and social conditioning are not always conducive to reform: the state has raised people to think that good citizenship means following the government and not questioning its actions, a perception encouraged by the education system. As one interviewee says: 'Universities in Jordan don't qualify students either for public life or for employment.'¹⁶ The official unemployment rate for university graduates is 16.7 per cent,¹⁷ but the actual rate is widely thought to be higher. In its annual *Economic and Social Report*,¹⁸ the country's Economic and Social Council, a state advisory body, attributed the rise in violence in Jordanian universities¹⁹ to a lack of platforms for self-expression. A Jordanian blogger wrote on the same issue in 2011: 'Violence is the last resort of the incompetent, but it is also the first resort for the disconnected. If your voice isn't being heard then your fists become your weapon of choice.'²⁰

The Arab Spring made the Jordanian public more aware of these issues than ever. In 2011–12, protests took place almost every Friday, highlighting popular frustration with unemployment, poverty and corruption. Importantly, the protests involved a wide spectrum of society (Jordanians, Jordanians of Palestinian origin, and unaffiliated youth movements). Even members of the Jordanian tribes, traditionally viewed as the monarchy's key support base, were demanding to be treated as citizens rather than subjects.

Street protests subsequently ebbed as Jordanians became more cautious following the violent collapse of neighbouring countries. Nonetheless, criticism of the government has become increasingly commonplace in private spaces, with many Jordanians frustrated that long-promised economic reforms have not yielded tangible improvements in living standards.

¹⁵ This argument is made, for instance, in Ryan, C. R. (2013), 'Jordan's security dilemmas', *Foreign Policy*, 1 May 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/05/01/jordans-security-dilemmas/> (accessed 1 Oct. 2015).

¹⁶ Interview with author, Amman, December 2014.

¹⁷ Data are for the second quarter of 2015. See Department of Statistics (2015), 'The Unemployment Rate during the second quarter of 2015', press release, 22 July 2015, http://dos.gov.jo/dos_home_a/main/archive/unemp/2015/Emp_q2_%202015.pdf [Arabic].

¹⁸ Jordan Economic and Social Council (2014), 'AlTaqreer Aliqtisadi Wa Alijtima'i 2013' [The Economic and Social Report 2013], 12 December 2014, <http://www.esc.jo/esc2013%20.pdf> (accessed 1 Oct. 2015) [Arabic].

¹⁹ Further information about violence on campuses can be found in Al-Samadi, T. (2013), 'Tribal-Fueled University Violence on Rise in Jordan', *Al-Monitor*, 15 April 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/04/jordanian-tribal-violence.html#> (accessed 4 Dec. 2015).

²⁰ Tarawnah, N. (2011), 'On Violence in Jordan Lately', *The Black Iris* blog, <http://black-iris.com/2011/01/09/on-violence-in-jordan-lately/> (accessed 1 Oct. 2015).

At the same time, fears of the General Intelligence Directorate (*mukhabarat*) that have historically encouraged self-censorship appear to have diminished. A 2014 report by the Economic and Social Council cites two widespread instances of people ‘publicly and proudly’ challenging the state: through water and electricity theft or ‘illegal usage’; and through cheating in the *Tawjihi* secondary school examination.²¹ These small-scale acts of disobedience, referred to as ‘everyday resistance’,²² reflect frustrations with the larger system. People do not have proper channels for expressing their outrage, so they end up violating what they perceive to be government property, even though these acts are detrimental to the common good.

Activists’ lack of political skills, experience and organization – itself a function of the inadequate channels for promoting change in society – means that they have struggled to be effective in demanding a specific programme of reforms. They have failed thus far to develop a collective voice, and their credibility is often limited by an inability to engage or debate effectively, or to respect other points of view. Political scientist Larry Diamond describes these skills as the values of democratic life. They ‘cannot simply be taught’, but must be experienced through practice.²³

The demographic, social and economic changes that Jordan is undergoing will require creative new approaches, in which civil society can play a valuable role.

Since the 2011–12 wave of protests, Jordan’s leadership has promised to accelerate political reforms. In a series of five discussion papers,²⁴ the king has asked citizens to participate more effectively in politics by choosing members of parliament according to their policy platforms rather than on the basis of regional or kinship loyalties.²⁵ He has asserted the need to hold elected officials to account, and for the public to remain ‘continuously engaged’. However, these discussion papers have remained an academic exercise, lacking corresponding measures to turn theory into policy.

The demographic, social and economic changes that Jordan is undergoing will require creative new approaches, in which civil society can play a valuable role. Given the influx of refugees into Jordan, there is a need for a tolerant society to embrace the new arrivals. The changing media environment, with ideas travelling faster than ever, means that people have to become both more open-minded and more critical. Moreover, demographic forces – with people aged 15–45 accounting for half of the population – are placing strains on the economy that can only be addressed through a multidimensional policy approach.²⁶

If all this makes the need for a functioning civil society an urgent one, its development requires the authorities to stop seeing civil society in adversarial terms, and instead to work with it in partnership. Equally, civil society groups could be doing more to treat the government as a partner. For instance, the king’s discussion papers present an opportunity to hold the ruling elites to account and ask why the ‘old guard’ is not making real efforts to translate ideas into reality.

²¹ Jordan Economic and Social Council (2014), ‘AlTaqreer Aliqtisadi Wa Alijtima’I 2013’.

²² The term was coined in Scott, J. C. (1985), *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University Press.

²³ Diamond, L. (2004), ‘What Civil Society Can Do To Develop Democracy’, Stanford University blog, https://web.stanford.edu/~ldiamond/iraq/Develop_Democracy021002.htm (accessed Jul. 2015).

²⁴ King Abdullah II Official Website, ‘Discussion Papers’, http://www.kingabdullah.jo/index.php/en_US/pages/view/id/244.html (accessed 1 Oct. 2015).

²⁵ Ibid. The first discussion paper was entitled ‘Our Journey to Forge Our Path Towards Democracy’, http://kingabdullah.jo/index.php/en_US/pages/view/id/247.html (accessed 1 Oct. 2015).

²⁶ According to the author’s correspondence with the Department of Statistics, the country’s 2015 census showed 50.2 per cent of population as aged 15–45.

What are the new actors trying to change?

The country's civil society scene has been growing since 1989, in line with a wider process of neoliberal reform, which has included some limited political reforms. However, the rise in the number of NGOs has not resulted in a better-functioning civil society in terms of improved welfare, greater political participation and more engaged communities.

The 2014 Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index, a ranking produced by the eponymous German foundation, described Jordan as having weak civil society traditions, a view borne out by the perceptions of those interviewed for this paper.²⁷ One of the main reasons is that traditionally NGOs have been heavily controlled by the state – whether through heavy regulation; complicated bureaucracy; challenges to the formal associational entities outside informal tribal and religious associations; or through the dominance of royal NGOs (RONGOs), quasi-governmental NGOs (quangos) and 'government'-NGOs (GONGOs).

Quangos such as the Jordanian National Commission for Women are semi-independent from the government. RONGOs are established under the patronage of a member of the royal family. Examples include the Jordan River Foundation, headed by Queen Rania, and the King Hussein/Noor Al Hussein Foundation headed by Queen Noor. Their boards of directors comprise prominent government figures and affluent businessmen.

Younger-generation activists criticize RONGOs for, in effect, denying other organizations funding and space in which to operate. Established by royal decree, RONGOs enjoy preferential access to money and decision-makers. They are not subject to the same scrutiny or restrictive laws on association as most NGOs. Royal patronage enhances their status in the eyes of donors – whether local businesspeople or international bodies – keen to establish connections with the royal family. RONGOs also have advantages in terms of experience, scale, professionalism and connections when applying for grants and implementing development projects. It should be noted, though, that even for these organizations there is no level playing field. Politics within the royal family dictate which foundations receive most funds and media coverage.

Overall, the younger generation of activists tends to see the established RONGOs, quangos and NGOs as donor-driven, top-down, Western-structured allies of the government and the political elite, unaccountable to their constituencies and with operational practices at odds with their professed missions. As a consequence, today's young activists are experimenting with new forms of organization: smaller-scale, localized, independent initiatives that are structured less hierarchically.

Gap-fillers or change-makers?

Younger-generation civic activists criticize the service delivery focus of most traditional NGOs. They argue that civil society is being used to fill gaps in public programmes left by the state's withdrawal from its traditional role in service provision. For example, the main national Poverty Pockets Empowerment Programme (2005–14), funded by the government, is implemented

²⁷ The index, updated every two years, 'provides a ranking that combines qualitative, in-depth evaluations with quantitative scores for the performance of 129 developing and transition countries and analyses transformation processes toward democracy and a market economy in international comparison'. See <http://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/jor/ity/2014/itr/mena/#summary>.

through four main RONGOs.²⁸ These are referred to in the official press release as ‘national institutions ... to carry out effective poverty reduction strategies’ aiming at ‘breaking the cycle of poverty through a holistic approach with grass-roots involvement’.²⁹ This entails working through smaller local community-based organizations in each location to provide infrastructure services in education and healthcare, along with job opportunities through income-generating projects. Yet these are all services traditionally provided by the government.

One problem with such a ‘gap-filling’ role is that it essentially distorts civil society’s mission of advocating change. This is a long-standing concern, as the growth since 1989 of civil society in Jordan and elsewhere has been linked to the adoption of neoliberal structural economic adjustment policies. A 1996 World Bank evaluation found that the state’s development and employment fund, established by the Jordanian government in 1990 to coordinate government and NGO activities for alleviating poverty, had been ‘useful in helping to win support for the adjustment programme’, but that ‘its actual role in aiding the poor was limited’.³⁰

More recently, the economy has suffered a series of shocks: the impact of the global financial crisis in 2008–09, the uncertainty caused by the post-2010 Arab uprisings, and the arrival of waves of refugees from Iraq and Syria. Hence, civil society is of necessity being recruited into a wider process of privatization of public services funded by foreign aid.

The state’s retreat from its traditional role in social provision also reflects fiscal challenges: in 2015 the government ran a budget deficit equivalent to around 6 per cent of GDP,³¹ and for some years prior to that it has had to adopt IMF-prescribed austerity measures to secure donor funding.³² In 2014, the Economic and Social Council acknowledged that the government was no longer able to ‘effectively manage’ or to address society’s needs in every area, and that it could no longer be the main funder of development.³³ It emphasized collaboration with CSOs and NGOs as the best option for developing local resources and reducing the burden on government.

This is all the more relevant because the central government is reluctant to delegate authority to municipalities, for fear of ceding power to local government. The state’s collaboration with civil society is largely confined to RONGOs, which the central government sees as good for public relations, and as more capable than other CSOs when it comes to addressing the needs of grassroots consistencies. This partially explains why RONGOs are implementing poverty alleviation interventions normally regarded as the duties of municipalities – including the provision of waste containers and the construction of football fields and road infrastructure.

The irony is that the RONGOs then subcontract local grassroots organizations to carry out such works, in effect turning the latter into employment generators and business owners rather than advocates of societal change. This focus on service delivery is far removed from their capacities and mandate. Moreover, the small size and barely existent organizational structures of most such groups

²⁸ The four RONGOs are: the Jordan River Foundation, the Noor Al Hussein Foundation, the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development, and the Social Development Centres Society. For more details, see Azzeh, L. (2011), ‘Jordan: Poverty pockets empowerment programme launched’, *Jordan Times* via Thomson Reuters Zawya.com, 27 June 2011, <http://goo.gl/wuBj8i>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ World Bank (1996), ‘Structural Adjustment in Jordan’, Independent Evaluation Group, Precis No. 116, 6 January 1996, <http://lnweb90.worldbank.org/oed/oeddoclib.nsf/24cc3bb1f94ae11c85256808006a0046/68fdcdf2217bf3d852567f5005d8ce6?OpenDocument>.

³¹ Global Finance Magazine (undated), ‘Jordan GDP and Economic Data’, <https://www.gfmag.com/global-data/country-data/jordan-gdp-country-report> (accessed 22 Jun. 2016).

³² Al-Khalidi, S. (2012), ‘Jordan approves austerity moves to reduce deficit’, Reuters, 20 May 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/20/jordan-budget-austerity-idUSL5E8GK03120120520> (accessed Nov. 2015).

³³ Jordan Economic and Social Council (2014), ‘Al Taqreer Aliqtisadi Wa Aljtimai’ 2013’.

limit what is practical to achieve. A USAID report on the sustainability of Jordanian CSOs showed that 70 per cent lacked any strategic plans,³⁴ let alone the ability to run half-million-dollar income-generating enterprises.

Another common critique is that dependence on state funds offers a way of silencing or co-opting CSOs. Wanting to survive and stay ‘in the business’, they self-censor and avoid challenging government policies or being vocal about political issues. They reinforce the hegemonic discourse of the RONGOs, not necessarily because they genuinely share the same beliefs, but because developing a close relationship with well-connected organizations is the only way to gain government contracts.

All told, the result is a stagnant civil society, stuck around providing services that the government deems important, and unable to engage or inform citizens of their rights and responsibilities or to represent citizens’ views from the ground up.³⁵ This is precisely the situation that newer civic activists are seeking to change, by developing their own self-sustaining business models rather than depending on funding from the government or international donors.

From Western models to local inspiration

The civic activists interviewed for this paper perceive international donor agencies as detached from realities on the ground, and preoccupied with producing outputs that can be measured within short-term project reporting cycles rather than with achieving long-term impact. Related to this is a tendency to tackle symptoms rather than causes. As one interviewee said: ‘Look how many schools we have and they keep building new ones with thousands of dollars, yet did anyone think of changing the failing educational system?’³⁶

As in many other countries, much public criticism centres on how a large proportion of aid money goes not directly to helping the deprived but instead to paying the high salaries of expatriate staff, who are sometimes perceived as being part of a development industry rather than intrinsically motivated by worthy causes.

Another tendency that the younger generation of activists wants to change is local CSOs’ emulation of the social, economic and political development models of Western NGOs. Activists see this as unwarranted deference. One argued that if the local CSOs were more ‘real’ – as in more authentic and connected to the local population – ‘donors [would] follow them, not vice versa’.³⁷ Interviewees noted that donors favour pro-government CSOs to avoid upsetting the authorities. Several criticized what they see as a culture of favouritism among donors, as this focuses funding on a few established elites and tends to exclude grassroots organizations. While some grassroots organizations reject foreign funding as a matter of principle, others simply will not bid for funding because they assume that the recipients have been chosen in advance.

³⁴ USAID (2013), *The 2013 CSO Sustainability Index for the Middle East and North Africa*, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/2013MENA_CSOSI%20Final.pdf.

³⁵ The RONGOs might argue that their work with the poor is more important than addressing political rights. Yet it is extremely hard to find any research or report that confirms their success in tackling poverty. A recent report by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the Jordanian government stated that the ‘number of poverty pockets (defined as districts/sub-districts with 25% population or more below the national poverty line) increased from 22 poverty pockets in 2006 to 32 poverty pockets in 2008’. UNDP and Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation – Jordan (2012), *THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT THE POOR: Findings from Poverty Pockets Survey in Jordan*, http://www.undp.org/content/dam/jordan/docs/Poverty/Jordan_Poverty%20Pocket%20Report.pdf. On another note, one interviewee who manages a RONGO acknowledged that ‘we suffer from the government bureaucracy but yes, we are very pro-government in nature, and I just realized this’. Interview with author, Amman, January 2015.

³⁶ Interview with author, Amman, March 2015.

³⁷ Interview with author, Amman, January 2015.

Legal restrictions on civil society

Civil society in the Arab world has always been hobbled by the political elite's suspicion of its role. Governments have tended to see civil society as potentially disruptive or dangerous. This has resulted in strict regulation, further tightened in some instances since the Arab Spring. Relatedly, governments often view the legitimate role of civil society as being limited to charitable functions rather than one of enabling citizens to mobilize on policy issues.

In the Jordanian context, four main factors discourage CSOs from playing an effective role in policy dialogue. First, tight controls on their political activities, funding and the agendas of their general meetings limit their ability to be vocal on political issues. Second, even when legal provisions have been nominally liberalized, bureaucrats often fail to implement the letter or the spirit of updated regulations, and are often unfamiliar with the concept of civic activism. Third, there remains an intimidating narrative among government officials and the wider public, portraying CSOs as a threat to national stability (in part as a function of being funded by foreign donors). Fourth, the nature of the Jordanian political system is not conducive to political participation by diverse actors, given the lack of effective political parties or a strong parliament with which CSOs could cooperate.

In Jordanian society, personal influence and connections still override the rule of law.

Jordan's legal environment with respect to civil society is nonetheless relatively permissive compared with other countries in the Arab region, even though the government still has sweeping powers to determine who operates in the sector and under what mandate. To obtain permission to operate, CSOs must go through a lengthy approval process while the authorities scrutinize board members' affiliations and political views. CSOs are required not to engage in any activity deemed to be of a political nature. CSOs need to give the Ministry of Social Development advance notice of their meetings, and the minister or a representative is entitled to sit in on meetings. CSOs generally see this as interference and surveillance. One interviewee argued that such restrictions mainly exist on paper. In practice, the government lacks the resources to send representatives to meetings. However, the option is always there. The government is also legally entitled to access CSOs' bank accounts and decide which organizations are eligible for foreign funding. This exacerbates the problems of self-censorship mentioned above. Moreover, the government has the ability to dissolve organizations on vague pretexts.³⁸ In Jordanian society, personal influence and connections still override the rule of law.

Before the law on associations was amended in 2008, the country's legal framework treated all NGOs as charitable organizations. This is no longer universally the case, but awareness of the legal changes is still very limited among civil servants. They continue to deal with NGOs as if they were charities – often pressuring them to change their activities to areas such as poverty relief. In the words of one interviewee: 'They don't know the mandate of civic activism, so they deal with any association as one providing services or donations to poor families and disabled persons.'³⁹ Another young activist complained: 'I went to [get] approval to hold a public debate about the publication law. The government employee told me, "Why do you want to have the meeting in a public place? Just do

³⁸ A decade ago, Human Rights Watch advised that NGOs should only be dissolved by judicial order, and with a clear statement of the reasons for their dissolution. In 2015 the Associations Registry website began to publish an updated list of organizations that had been dissolved, but with little explanation of the reasons for their dissolution. The website listed 177 organizations as having been dissolved in 2015, for reasons that included: inactivity for more than a year, wrongdoing of various kinds, and failure to update their current status in compliance with the law.

³⁹ Interview with author, Amman, March 2015.

it in a closed meeting room and don't give us a headache?"⁴⁰ Moreover, some interviewees mentioned that the little awareness that exists among front-line staff of the legal rights of CSOs disappears the minute they leave Amman: 'In other governorates, they are still following the old law and they don't know about the new ones.'⁴¹

Similarly, after the Arab Spring, the law on public gatherings was amended so that holding a public event would no longer require the explicit permission of the authorities. In theory, organizers are now only required to notify the authorities of their plans; once the authorities receive the notice, organizers can assume that they are allowed to go ahead.

Yet in one recent case recounted to the author, a Jordanian CSO planned to hold a public debate about the death penalty outside a café in downtown Amman. Thirty minutes before the event was due to begin, the owner of the café received a phone call from a person purported to be from the city governor's office, asking him to stop the activity because it wasn't officially authorized. The owner, worried about his business status, cancelled the event. The official press release following this incident stated that the organizer had not notified the governor about the planned public debate. The organizer said that he had followed the legal requirements by sending a letter of notification to the governor. However, he did not receive a reply confirming that his note had been received – confirmation that would, in effect, have fulfilled the same function as an explicit permit.⁴² Thus, the letter of the law had changed but not the spirit in which it was implemented. These sorts of problems apply to the new batch of CSOs as much as to traditional NGOs; in some cases the new initiatives organize private debates on public issues rather than attempting public gatherings.

The new civic initiatives: the scene redefined

A defining feature of the mobilization of younger-generation civic activists has been the emergence of what this author terms 'organic civic initiatives'. These are a new form of social enterprise, established under a 2010 law as non-profit companies. Under this structure, a Jordanian is allowed to form his or her own company to work in areas related to four pre-designated social objectives: education, health, capacity-building and microfinance. The companies are exempt from tax as long as profits are reinvested in the relevant social cause, though this is decided on a case-by-case basis by the authorities. Whereas registering an NGO with the Ministry of Social Development is cumbersome and slow, activists say that it takes 45 minutes to register as a non-profit with the Ministry of Industry and Commerce. Non-profits also face somewhat fewer legal restrictions on their functioning.

There are now around 100 such organic civil initiatives in existence. The popularity of non-profit companies as a form of civil society has been ascribed to several political, cultural and structural factors. The Arab Spring was associated with the rise of a more informed and critical generation, prone to asking questions and rejecting established institutions. It also informed an entrepreneurial spirit, with young people aspiring to be 'productive, not just consuming donations', as one interviewee put it. These factors, together with nostalgia for local roots and culture, encouraged young activists to prefer local solutions for community development over the imported, top-down donors' models. The rise of social media also created international networks that provide a space for young people to engage and have their views heard.

⁴⁰ Interview with author, Skype, September 2015.

⁴¹ Interview with author, Amman, March 2015.

⁴² Interview with author, Amman, October 2015.

These organic civic initiatives fund their social missions through selling services and products to domestic and some selected international NGOs, the government and the public. Generally, the services and products that each group provides are related in some way to its social mission. For example, Tammey (described in Case study 1) designs youth development projects and commits part of its income to development initiatives such as a learning programme broadcast via local radio. Another example is the Taghmees initiative (Case study 2), which focuses on providing learning experiences through fortnightly gatherings. It sells home-made foods, prepared by women in deprived areas, both at its events and in other parts of Jordan.

Despite the variety in approaches, organizers articulate some shared principles: building citizens' self-confidence as agents of change, creating a space for people to air hopes and grievances, and speaking truth to power using grassroots approaches. A core theme is the importance of drawing on local culture. As one interviewee said: 'Rather than organizing a conference about co-existence between Muslims and Christians, we rely on storytelling from the elderly on the practices they followed to live peacefully together for decades.'⁴³ The initiatives also emphasize human development, explicitly valuing local communities' agency in setting priorities for themselves, rather than focusing on donors' predefined objectives.

This contrasts with the common complaint about traditional NGOs' agendas being externally dictated. One civil activist said: 'We went to a rural place and started talking to them about their daily lives. When asked what they see as a daily challenge, people spontaneously said unemployment and women's rights.'⁴⁴ The activist argued that this was the result of donors going to communities and framing the problems observed in terms of programmes they intended to implement. She also said that people are now more aware of the language donors want to hear, and therefore tailor their answers to donors' perceived priorities in the hope of increasing their chances of receiving aid. Another activist mentioned a huge campaign about AIDS prevention in one of the most conservative villages in Jordan: 'Probably it was on the donor's agenda and the NGO had to implement it because they want to stay in business. Such a village could have benefited from another intervention.'⁴⁵

These examples are by no means unusual. It is often the case in the foreign aid sector that identifying a particular issue creates a self-fulfilling agenda, as a community or region is framed as part of a 'problem' that then informs priorities and decision-making in the head offices of donor organizations. At a local level, in turn, people start believing the perceived problems to be real, distrusting their ability to tackle challenges on their own, or adopting donors' rhetoric to obtain financial benefits.

In contrast, the community-centric approach of the new non-profit social enterprises is helping to create a feeling of belonging and ownership among groups previously excluded by 'one size fits all' aid projects typical of the established forms of civil society. The new approach also boosts awareness and appreciation of local culture, which some claim is undermined by the established donor model as supposedly novel concepts are imported into the host country with little cultural awareness. One clear example is the 'volunteerism' culture in USAID projects in Jordan, which ignored a long-standing community tradition of social solidarity and mutual support, especially in rural areas. This tradition is called 'al-owneh', which literally translates as 'cooperation' or 'lending someone a helping hand'.

⁴³ Interview with author, Amman, January 2015.

⁴⁴ Interview with author, Amman, January 2015.

⁴⁵ Interview with author, Amman, January 2015.

The imposition of new mechanisms on communities without respecting or building on what they already have creates confusion. It also limits activism. Recently, a post on the Facebook page of the US embassy in Jordan listed reasons why volunteering is desirable. Respondents to the post expressed their willingness to volunteer, along with concern that they did not know how or where to do so – in effect betraying their assumption that volunteerism has to be conducted within a formal institution or a programme.

Who are the new actors?

The activists involved with the new organic civic initiatives are mainly around 25–35 years old, and tend to come from middle- or upper middle-class backgrounds. Many are Western-educated. Some are affluent enough to have been able to leave full-time jobs in order to establish these initiatives; others pursue them in their spare time. Activists' previous experience varies: some come from professional civil society roles but have been frustrated by the limited impact of their work with established NGOs; others include dentists, business consultants and doctors.

For now, most of these initiatives are based in Amman. Outside the capital, civil society still mainly consists of community-based organizations that pursue charity-like activities such as distributing food to the poor, running free medical services days, and providing equipment to the disabled.

The themes addressed by the new non-profit companies vary. They have included broad issues, such as socio-economic empowerment and community and youth development; and more focused ones, such as documenting local heritage and providing platforms to discuss environmental and infrastructure issues.

Until recently – and unlike other CSOs – these new non-profit social enterprises were granted unconditional permission, on registration, to receive foreign donations. This meant that they didn't need prior permission from the government, so long as donations were properly documented in their financial records. However, on 18 October 2015 a new mechanism for receiving foreign funding was introduced, under which NGOs and non-profit companies must receive prior permission from the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation to receive foreign donations, especially in programmes related to the Jordan Response Platform to the Syria Crisis and the country's own national and development goals.⁴⁶

Despite this apparently draconian turn, a number of the organic civic initiatives have been relatively indifferent to the change in policy. This reflects the fact that, as mentioned, many eschew donor money for reasons of credibility, authenticity, efficiency and independence.

Political relationships and policy impact

The organic civic initiatives tend to avoid association with formal politics. First, as mentioned, their legal mandate limits their work to the four areas of education, health, capacity-building and microfinance. This makes it risky to assume a political role that could be seen by the government as outside their mandate.

⁴⁶ The new so-called 'mechanism for receiving foreign funding', issued in October 2015, added extensive administrative procedures for NGOs and non-profit companies seeking permission to receive foreign funding. However, this mechanism does not comply with Jordanian law, and creates additional administrative tasks that impede donors and NGOs from pursuing their programmes. For example, Law No. 17 says that for an NGO to get approval on foreign funding, the application should be sent to the Council of Ministers. The new mechanism creates an additional step by also requiring NGOs to submit their funding requests to the Societies Registrar in the Ministry of Social Development.

Second, they saw that the Arab uprisings were followed by conflict and violence in neighbouring countries. They are therefore seeking a softer, ‘sugar-coated’ approach to influencing decision-makers and pushing for policy change. Consequently, they don’t consider themselves entirely absent from the political scene as such, but rather as manoeuvring cautiously around it. As one activist put it: ‘It’s not that we are absent, the tools, tactics and language of confrontation are just different nowadays.’⁴⁷ Social media makes it easier for their agendas, and the voice of the general public, to be heard. They believe that political change comes from within, and that for change to happen it is necessary to have an informed population. This explains their preference for working on a person-to-person basis, informing people of their rights and responsibilities rather than assuming an overtly confrontational political role.

A third reason for the new initiatives’ reluctance to get involved in politics is simply fatigue with institutional barriers to activism. As a result, many are more interested in exploring new avenues for positively affecting their communities.

No structural social change is visible yet as a result of this form of activism. Instead, groups view their impact in terms of being able to influence their immediate local constituencies, even if these constituencies are small. This also reflects the fact that organic civic initiatives are not looking for large and quick gains, instead working on behavioural attitudes in the hope of achieving long-term effects. They would prefer to be perceived as authentic and credible rather than to scale up their initiatives too hastily.

However, it is unlikely that organic civic initiatives will stay out of formal politics forever, especially given the absence of representative and visionary political parties in Jordan. The new initiatives have already combined social and economic causes, and will at some point add political ones to the scope of their work. They are trying to be more creative in asking for political rights, but lack the necessary skills and experience ‘to play such a decisive role in the meantime’.⁴⁸ It remains unclear how and when a transition to a more overtly political role will occur, and what its likely trigger will be.

Organic civic initiatives: challenges and criticisms

When asked about their challenges, organic civic initiatives responded that money was not their main concern. A greater issue was the uncertainty about future legal restrictions in a context in which civil society comes under suspicion and laws can change suddenly and arbitrarily. The changes in laws on foreign financing, and new requirements for even small non-profit companies to appoint a legal adviser and an accountant to supervise and audit their financial records, add to enterprises’ costs while reducing their fundraising options. Conversely, the ease of registering risks a proliferation of ‘copycat’ organizations. In at least one case, the authorities set up a website imitating one of the organic civic initiatives, even choosing an almost identical name. The initiative was a website called Forsa [‘Opportunity’],⁴⁹ which offered a platform for information on scholarships and internships for youth; the official version, established by a RONGO, the King Abdullah II Fund for Development, was called Forus [‘Opportunities’].⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Interview with author, Amman, January 2015.

⁴⁸ Yaghi, M. and Clarek, J. (2014), ‘Jordan: Evolving Activism in a Divided Society’, in Khatib and Lust (2014), *Taking to the Streets*.

⁴⁹ <http://www.for9a.com/>.

⁵⁰ <http://forus.jo/ar/Pages/default.aspx>.

Another challenge is the lack of a philanthropic culture in the private sector. Organic civic initiatives are generally uninterested in marketing sponsors' brands, even though there is a perception that the private sector wants to be associated with RONGOs, in order to be closer to the royal family.

Interviewees also complained about the deficit of solid evidence, statistics and research on the social problems they seek to address: 'We teach ourselves, we read a lot and spend much time speaking to community members in an attempt to make sense of the happenings. However, if some sort of studies were available, it would have saved us much time and criticism.'⁵¹

Organic civic initiatives also face criticism and scepticism on account of their novelty. There is little public awareness of their role. Moreover, the fact that most of the people running such initiatives are middle- to upper middle-class and Western-educated means that they are sometimes perceived as elitist. A lack of evidence-based interventions encourages the pursuit of issues according to their personal importance to the organizations' founders rather than their relevance to the community. Some organic civic initiatives are criticized for being 'one-man shows', named after their founder, which raises questions about their sustainability and governance. Finally, the fact that numerous initiatives operate on a very small scale – precisely in order to maintain their integrity and stay true to their ideals – raises questions about their effectiveness. So far they have tended to avoid not only scaling up their operations to national level, but also openly challenging – or, conversely, collaborating with – government or traditional NGOs.

Case studies

Case study 1: Tammey for Human Development

An initiative to foster different thinking processes with, for and by youth

Headquartered in Amman, Tammey for Human Development is a micro-consultancy that operates in research, education and youth projects. Its name means 'silt', which is intended to imply fertility, development and diversity. The organization sees young people as 'untapped assets' who have the potential to shape local and national development processes by coming up with innovative models to challenge the bureaucracy to excel. Tammey's operating model reflects the notion that there are many ways in which people can develop themselves other than through imposed structures, and that it is possible to find solutions that draw on a person's or community's own values rather than those of donors.

To generate income, Tammey's team of seven provides services and consultancy (individually or under the organization's umbrella) to UN agencies, governmental organizations, international and domestic NGOs, civil society, private organizations and youth groups in the Arab states. The scope of Tammey's work covers several aspects of youth development: supporting research and youth policies, managing youth projects, designing non-traditional youth learning processes, and capacity-building.

Tammey reinvests 10–20 per cent of its net income into the community in different forms: either to support initiatives and solutions, or to run programmes and activities that aim to catalyse and cultivate creative options for youth development, such as an eight-week volunteering programme and a radio programme for young people. Tammey also offers its headquarters as a multipurpose 'safe learning space', available free of charge for youth groups. People use the venue and equipment for meetings, rehearsals, shooting short films and a book club.

⁵¹ Interview with author, Amman, March 2015.

Tammei also provides funding to community solutions that focus on social and economic solidarity. It recently supported a 'socio-economic solidarity business' called Izwiti, located in downtown Amman, which revived the long-standing but neglected cultural practice of exchanging meals between neighbours. Customers pay for sandwiches, minimally priced, but may voluntarily buy a token for an additional sandwich, which they place on the wall for a needy person to come and collect.

Taking into consideration the Arab region's specificity and the issues surrounding Palestine, Tammei is also active in raising awareness about 'normalization' in relation to the Israeli occupation – that is, the possibility of treating Israel as a normal state and fostering relationships with it. Recently, Tammei has been working on an awareness campaign about the proposed gas agreement between the Israeli and Jordanian governments.

Case study 2: Taghmees Social Kitchen

A new definition of immersive study

Taghmees – or 'Social Kitchen' – is a public community learning experience and an enterprise for strengthening home-based economies. The name refers to a traditional Arab way of eating, which involves bread and dips. It also reflects the idea behind the initiative: 'to immerse oneself deeply into ... a discussion, an experience, or life'.⁵² Taghmees is designed to reclaim learning spaces by gathering participants, referred to as 'family members', and encouraging them to engage and critically reflect on issues while eating together.

Participants sit in circles to ensure there is no hierarchy and that everyone's experience is welcomed and respected equally. In Jordanian culture, where patriarchy and patrimonialism are deeply entrenched, allowing people to express themselves in a safe, non-hierarchical environment means building their confidence that their opinions matter. This also enhances their critical thinking. As one of the organizers says: 'We do not bring an expert to address people; it is to let people talk and exchange ideas, engaging in discussions about their experiences.'⁵³

One gathering discussed the issue of standards in public life. It was timed to coincide with the release of *Tawjihi* secondary school exam results, which is a big moment in a student's life in Jordan. Students at this stage experience strict evaluation from their families and acquaintances. As a result, many tend to feel that their social value is measured by their exam grades. Taghmees's session sought to explore wider interpretations of success and failure by enabling participants to share different perspectives.

Taghmees generates its funds through an income-generating initiative. According to one of its co-founders: 'We're not looking for donor funding or grants. We recognize that these foreign funds come in the form of loans to Jordan, which are then paid off by increased taxes on a majority of already struggling people, who never asked for our help to begin with.'⁵⁴ Taghmees buys seasonal food (such as white cheese, jams and olive oil) from local women, for distribution both at its gatherings and more widely. At Taghmees meetings, members voluntarily contribute money for the food, placing it in a jar that reads 'family jar for learning'. According to one of Taghmees's co-founders: 'We'd like the support of those that see the benefit in what we offer and value the spirit we're trying to create to help keep our kitchen alive.'⁵⁵

The choice of terminology is seen by the participants and wider public as less alienating than the usual NGO jargon. Taghmees substitutes the word 'beneficiaries' with 'family members', capacity-building with '*mujawara*', which means learning by sharing experiences with neighbours and other participants. The initiative provides a platform for people who did not succeed in the conventional education system to feel of worth. This is achieved, in part, by substituting the concept of academic learning with that of learning from life experience. In contrast, Taghmees's co-founder talks of schools as places 'where knowledge is deposited and unchallenged'.

⁵² Freij, M. (2014), 'Initiative encourages public to 'dip' into meaningful conversations', *Jordan Times*, 9 October 2014, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/initiative-encourages-public-dip%E2%80%99-meaningful-conversations>.

⁵³ Interview with author, Amman, March 2015.

⁵⁴ Interview with author, Amman, March 2015.

⁵⁵ Interview with author, Amman, March 2015.

Case study 3: Zikra

A social enterprise based on the concept of exchange tourism

Zikra, a social enterprise based in rural Ghour AlMazra'a in the south of Jordan, offers domestic exchange tours that allow city-dwellers and members of a rural community to meet and learn from each other. At the heart of its work is a belief that capitalizing on people's abilities, focusing on what they have rather than what they lack, and embedding mutually beneficial learning experiences are the best ways to lift people out of poverty.

The enterprise's initial strategy, after its founding in 2009, was identical to that of many development NGOs in seeing the poor as passive beneficiaries of aid. Zikra collected items donated by the rich urban population and distributed them to the less fortunate people of Ghour AlMazra'a. However, Zikra's founder came to believe that the patron–client relationship of a charity may help the poor momentarily, resulting in a 'feel good' factor but not alleviating poverty permanently.

Accordingly, after interacting with the locals, Zikra took another direction. It evolved from one-way charitable offerings to a structure of two-way exchanges and partnership aimed at expanding people's capabilities. These exchanges involve urban Ammanites signing up for day trips to Ghour AlMazra'a, where the locals escort them through different stops and activities that reflect their everyday life. Village women introduce the visitors to activities that include tomato-picking, bread-baking, making cosmetics and knitting, while children also participate by demonstrating traditional street games. This kind of 'exchange tourism' utilizes the assets of the rural communities and gives them a sense of pride in their culture; urban visitors, in turn, have an opportunity to appreciate a rural lifestyle based on producing and farming rather than on consumerism. The trip concludes with a traditional lunch of tomato and bread cooked together by the locals and the visitors.

The revenues generated from the trips are invested in three programmes: the Interest-Free Micro Loan Fund, the Development through Art and Culture Program, and the Zikra Education Fund. Families who take out interest-free loans to invest in an income-generating enterprise repay the loans by participating as hosts for the above-mentioned tours.

In the Development through Art and Culture Program, Zikra partners with private companies and talented individuals to conduct vocational and arts workshops (in handicrafts, photography and film-making) in Ghour AlMazra'a. In exchange, the facilitators receive an understanding of the village lifestyle and engage in community discovery trips with local participants. As a result, many hidden talents from Ghour AlMazra'a have been discovered and enhanced, and some have even become internationally known. In addition to giving the community innovative means of self-expression, these workshops provide it with unconventional sources of income.

Case study 4: 7Hills Skate Park

A community-built skate park in Amman

In October 2014, three friends initiated an online crowdfunding campaign to renovate a public space and build a skate park in Amman. The idea was triggered by the fact that people lack public recreational facilities in the Jordanian capital.

The co-founders chose a crowdfunding campaign in preference to pursuing corporate- or donor-led funding options. 'The idea is neither to turn into marketing channels for the corporate sector nor to be implementers for donors' policies; we wanted to create something from the people to the people, as community owned as possible.'⁵⁶ The government facilitated the paperwork for permission to build the skate park, and was informed that money would be raised online. However, it never asked the co-founders to set up a legal entity or to get the prior consent of the Ministry of Social Development and the Council of Ministers, as the law stipulates when receiving both domestic⁵⁷ and foreign funding.⁵⁸

The money was sent from crowdfunding website www.Indiegogo.com to an NGO, Make Life Skate Life, run by one of the co-founders based in Germany. Since the NGO is not registered in Jordan as a foreign NGO, he travelled to Jordan with the money and started funding construction of the park. The construction process involved both professional builders and community members working as volunteers. 'We even had a 60-year-old man who would show up every day and help us move the bricks.' The park now offers a space for young people to enjoy. Many of the skaters come from broken homes or refugee families, and this park was built in the hope of giving them a healthy, free and accessible resource for having fun.⁵⁹ An on-site equipment loan system was established to provide free skateboard rentals for those who cannot afford to buy their own.

Through online crowdfunding, the organizers were able to complete the project within three months without the paperwork or scrutiny that a traditional aid arrangement would require. However, the co-founders do report back to the individual funders periodically via online updates. 'The community is very happy, even the Imam in the mosque brought us *Knafeh*.'⁶⁰ When asked if they are thinking of registering their initiative formally, the co-founders answered that they are not, as this would incur an extra financial and time burden.

This initiative shares some features with the other organizations described above. One is a growing sense of engagement with global issues, facilitated by technology and social media. There is a sense of detachment from the agendas of international donors, and a desire to move away from formal frameworks and institutions towards informal work and new types of organization. While the idea of a skate park may seem a luxury for some, the moral behind it is meaningful: 'In skating, if you're not falling, you're not trying,' says one of the co-founders. 'I guess the reason I've stuck with it this long is I don't mind failing.'⁶¹ The initiative shows the possibilities for innovative funding and organization models to take place below the radar, especially if they are for initiatives unrelated to formal politics. Below the surface, such models also constitute potentially significant enablers of social change, underpinned by a more active approach on the part of engaged young citizens.

⁵⁶ Interview with author, Skype, September 2015.

⁵⁷ Domestic public fundraising requires the prior approval of the Ministry of Social Development as per Regulation 1 of 1957. In addition, Article 9(c) of the Law does not allow a branch of a foreign society to collect donations or receive funding within the Kingdom except with the prior consent of the Council of Ministers.

⁵⁸ Foreign funding, including any gifts, grants, or donations given to a society, requires the prior notification of and approval from the Council of Ministers. The notification should include the source of funding, the amount, the means of transfer and the objectives for which the funding will be spent, in addition to any special conditions.

⁵⁹ Aziza, S. (2014), "It's going to be rad": Amman skaters work to build 7Hills Skate Park', Mondoweiss, 28 October 2014, <http://mondoweiss.net/2014/10/skaters-build-7hills#sthash.o9tVq2EV.dpuf>.

⁶⁰ *Knafeh* is a famous Middle Eastern dessert served to celebrate happy occasions.

⁶¹ Aziza (2014), "It's going to be rad": Amman skaters work to build 7Hills Skate Park'.

Conclusions and recommendations

Civil society in Jordan faces criticism from two angles: some see it as merely upholding the status quo and failing to provide alternative solutions to social, development and political challenges; others, including some in positions of authority, see any independent civil society activity as a threat. Between these two extremes, a new generation of civic activists is exploring different ways of doing things. They are operating through organic civic initiatives that register as not-for-profit companies rather than as formal NGOs. This allows them to eschew foreign funding and seek more independent and authentic outreach with their constituencies. These emerging forms of civil society still face limitations and restrictions. However, they have the potential to play a constructive role in strengthening social solidarity, and in encouraging more active and informed engagement by citizens.

The dominant, formal NGOs in Jordan are largely disconnected from politics or policy debates. Most notably, their core mission is often intentionally, and covertly, distorted by the government and donors. This happens when the government contracts NGOs as service providers to implement projects and programmes. The job of providing basic community support keeps established NGOs busy, but it also means that they become depoliticized and unable to pursue a more radical role as advocates and agents of change. At the same time, the asymmetrical power structure in Jordan – in which the state is dominant – embeds NGOs within the system and ensures that the need to win contracts from the state silences dissenting voices.⁶²

The new organic civic initiatives tell us that there is a vibrant civil scene going on in Jordan. The nature of their engagement with communities and their operational practices promote a tolerant and more informed discourse among the people.

The new organic civic initiatives tell us that there is a vibrant civil scene going on in Jordan. The nature of their engagement with communities and their operational practices promote a tolerant and more informed discourse among the people. Moreover, this less hierarchical, more inclusive way of operating is in itself a challenge to accepted social norms in Jordan. It represents a form of ‘civil society 2.0’, based on the norms of sharing and collaboration that are increasingly prevalent in Web 2.0,⁶³ on social media and through crowdfunding initiatives. Practitioners are experimenting with alternative forms of organization on a small scale. This embryonic activism could enrich civil society and contribute to the development of a stronger democratic culture.

Recommendations

- Organic civic initiatives would benefit from channels to facilitate interaction with the government, the private sector and established civil society bodies such as RONGOs. This would help to raise awareness of the existence of new forms of civic activism, and of their authentic and creative approaches to development. Exchange study trips could be organized to provide staff from established NGOs with an on-the-ground perspective into different approaches.

⁶² In Jordan, the majority of foreign funds are channelled through the government. NGOs therefore have an interest in remaining on good relations with the government.

⁶³ Web 2.0 – A key element of the technology is that it allows people to create, share, collaborate and communicate. Source: <http://www.unimelb.edu.au/copyright/information/guides/wikisblogsweb2blue.pdf>.

- The government needs to allow space for civil society. At the same time, a strong civil society needs a strong government; the two complement each other and should be seen as partners rather than adversaries. Change starts from individuals, but is better sustained when institutions such as the state are involved.
- More work is needed to foster a spirit of cooperation. The tendency is for government and civil society to mutually assume bad intentions on the other's part. However, a constructive relationship is achievable. Between the two extremes of those who want to protect the status quo and those who want radical change, a meeting point in the middle is required. Civil society is the place where this middle ground can be developed.
- Donors and established NGOs should recognize that these new actors, despite minimal resources, are having a meaningful impact. They should give them space to design their own programmes. Donors should adopt a more open-minded approach that sees local communities as assets rather than problems.
- Donors need to connect with reality on the ground, and avoid taking the easy option of assigning jobs to the big, established NGOs. For instance, they could form an advisory board that includes young activists as well as the established NGOs to define priorities and authentic/relevant ways of implementing the funded projects.
- The Jordanian private sector should invest in the work of organic civic initiatives, going beyond the traditional approaches to corporate social responsibility.
- A civil society incubator should be established. It would be similar to business incubators that embrace start-ups and support them until they grow profitable. This incubator would enable the exchange of ideas and support among organic civic initiatives, as a means of nurturing their strengths. Academics and researchers would provide input on the required background of civic activism, lobbying and development practices. Private businesses could offer practical advice on day-to-day business operations, keeping in mind that the end result is human development rather than profit.
- Cooperation also needs to improve among civil society actors themselves. CSOs as a whole would benefit from developing a collective voice, to win the public's trust and persuade the government to take them more seriously. CSOs therefore need to think beyond their own interests, and adopt strategies that allow them to stay relevant and react flexibly as donor priorities shift.

The emergence of the organic civic initiatives covered in this paper is starting to change Jordanians' experience of civil society. These organizations should be dealt with as constructive actors that could help the government to manage economic and social challenges by drawing on the talent and ideas of the country's youth.

About the author

Heba W. AlNasser was an Academy Asfari Fellow at Chatham House in 2014–15. Following the completion of her fellowship in December 2015, she joined the British Council in Oman in the role of deputy director of its Next Generation Gulf programme.

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Before joining Chatham House, Heba worked for a number of national and international NGOs – most notably for the Noor Al Hussein Foundation, where she ran the foundation’s Monitoring and Evaluation Unit for a range of development projects such as poverty alleviation, women and youth empowerment, and business development. She is also a certified dialogue education practitioner with Global Learning Partners and a freelance evaluation consultant.

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Cover image: Taghmees Social Kitchen, one of an emerging breed of organic civic initiatives in Jordan, holds a session on food and food justice in solidarity with the worldwide 'March on Monsanto' movement against the use of genetically modified organisms in food. Amman, 26 October 2013.

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