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Challenges of Jordanian Civil Society during the Last Quarter of 2023

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Phenix for Sustainable Development

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General Context

During the last quarter of 2023, additional dimensions emerged in the political stances taken in response to the genocide in Gaza, as the repercussions of civil clashes directly affected the relationship between civil society organizations and foreign donor entities, which resulted in a contraction of resources and available operational



The disruption in relations between foreign donor organizations and civil society organizations led to the cancellation of many projects and cooperation agreements, significantly hindering the continuity of these organizations' work. Foreign funding serves as the primary resource for civil society organizations in Jordan, given the limited local funding, which does not meet all their needs.

Foreign funding has varying impacts on civil society organizations. On one hand, it strengthens the organizational and technical capacities of the organizations, contributes to staff skill development, and improves performance. It also provides opportunities to expand the scope of activities within typically larger budgets than those of local funding.

On the other hand, financial dependence on foreign donors may limit the independence of civil society organizations, as some of these donors may politicize projects according to international agendas that do not align with the actual needs of the local community.

It has become clear that the local context is not supportive of civil society organizations' work in Jordan, as legislation and practices still restrict their right to access resources. This highlights deeply-rooted challenges that have placed civil society at risk of shrinking operational space and dwindling resources in light of recent political developments.

Methodology for Preparing the Report

This report is based on a review of various studies, literature, and articles concerning the challenges faced by civil society organizations in Jordan. Focus group discussions were held with diverse groups of civil society organizations across the Kingdom's governorates to identify the challenges these organizations encounter in their relationship with donor entities. Additionally, discussion sessions were organized with representatives from various civil society organizations in Jordan to further investigate the context.

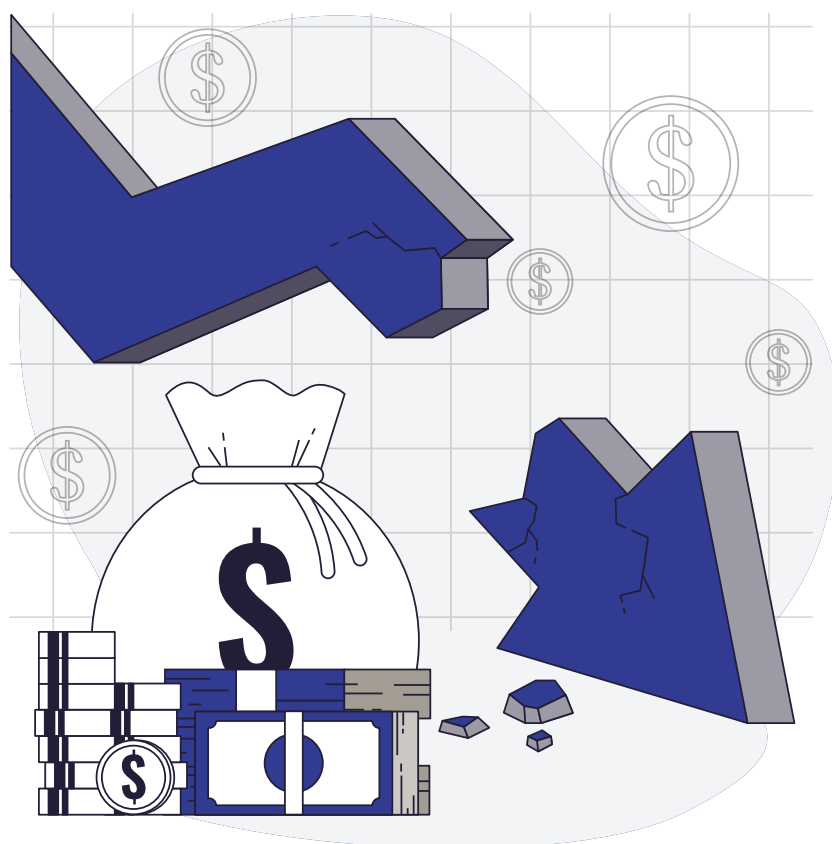
First: Shrinking Financial Support

As a result of the recent practices and stances taken by foreign countries, donor nations have reduced the available operational space for both themselves and civil society organizations in Jordan. This has negatively impacted the global reputation of these countries and resulted in significant losses to their long-standing efforts, particularly regarding their ideological capital accumulated over the years, in the context of promoting development and human rights in the Middle East.

Undoubtedly, this situation will impact public support for humanitarian and development assistance programs provided by these countries. Many agreements and projects between civil society organizations and these entities have been cancelled, complicating the sustainability of these organizations' work amid financial, legal, and political challenges. This could subject civil society to pressures from donor entities with conflicting values.¹

There is a need for a broader reassessment and redefinition of the parameters of relations with foreign donor entities, based on the principles of independence, while prioritizing justice and human rights over financial and institutional partnerships.

Ahmad Awad, Phenix Informative and Studies Center.



Second: The Legitimacy of Funding Between Acceptance and Betrayal

The debate around the legitimacy of foreign funding for civil society organizations has resurfaced. Funding is crucial for these organizations to carry out their activities and advocate for human rights, as stipulated by international human rights conventions and relevant international instruments, which guarantee civil society organizations the right to access the resources necessary for their continuity and effectiveness.

However, foreign funding imposes challenges related to organizations' independence and their ability to resist political pressures. Concerns about the legitimacy of such funding arise when foreign donors take contradictory stances on human rights issues, leading to doubts about their true intentions and commitment to defending human rights. As a result, the discourse of accusing civil society organizations of following the agendas of foreign donor states reappears.²

The foreign funding provided to civil society organizations by capitalist countries is a right, not a gift.

Amna Al-Zoabi, The Jordanian Women's Union

This is not the first time that accusations of betrayal have been directed at civil society organizations. Many practices reflect scepticism about the role of civil society, such as hindering its work during registration or while operating. Despite this, civil society organizations, by law, submit annual reports to state institutions detailing their activities, including how funds are spent and the projects they have implemented. Any corruption by individuals should be seen as personal misconduct and cannot be generalized to the entire civil society sector.³

There is no genuine belief in the role of civil society organizations in Jordan by the government and the local community; there remains a lack of trust in these organizations.

Omar Al-Nawaysah, Hayah Center (Rased)

Third: Inequality and Conditionality of Funding

The relationship between civil society organizations and foreign funding entities is inherently unequal, as disparities in resources lead to absolute financial dependence on foreign donors. This can result in a loss of local organizations' independence and their ability to make decisions autonomously.⁴

It can be argued that the local context, which is not supportive of civil society's work, exacerbates this inequality. Civil society organizations in Jordan are influenced by the laws, regulations, and policies that govern their operations. Some laws are complex and impose unjustified restrictions, particularly the approval process for foreign funding.⁵

As one organization mentions: "There is administrative inefficiency and bureaucratic complications that limit the opportunity for associations to access funding." Another organization adds: "I received preliminary approval for foreign funding, but was later surprised by the rejection of the funding without a logical justification."⁶

The international legal and political framework also affects the flow of external funding to civil society organizations in Jordan. Some countries and donors impose restrictions on international funding for various reasons, including security concerns, political considerations, or changes in priorities due to crises and international agendas. These factors affect the quantity and quality of funding available to civil society organizations in Jordan, either increasing, decreasing, or reallocating it based on new priorities.⁷

One organization states: "There are global political decisions that no one can control, alongside internal government decisions that are influenced by and influence international donors, which naturally reflect on the funding and work of the organizations."⁸

The relationship with donors is an unequal one, as there is no supportive context for civil society as a priority. The war is not creating but revealing the challenges.

Nidal Mansour, Center For Defending Freedom of Journalists.

Not all civil society organizations have a clear consensus on being subject to conditions from foreign donor agencies. On one hand, many organizations have stated that they comply with direct conditions imposed by the donors, while others have indicated that they receive "indirect hints" of funding withdrawal due to not carrying out projects in alignment with the vision of the funding organizations.

This is evident in the current phase, where an unwritten internal authority is being exercised by some foreign donors, pressuring organizations to adopt positions that align with the policies and statements of these countries. If the stance of the organization does not match the position of the donor, funding may be withdrawn or suspended as a penalty.

On the other hand, most experienced civil society organizations agree that they have not received any conditions from foreign donors throughout their operations. Civil society has become more mature and is now able to decide which entities to partner with and which ones to avoid.⁹ Therefore, it is essential to have a "blacklist" of foreign donors who employ such pressure tactics.¹⁰

We need secure, unconditional funding and an active role for civil society organizations in setting national priorities.

Hadeel Abd Al-Aziz, Justice Center For Legal Aid.

It is worth noting that there are standard requirements that may be associated with the provision of foreign funding to civil society organizations:

Administrative and Methodological Standards:

These are the requirements related to enforcing a specific model for writing project proposals. These are not conditions that affect the sovereignty of civil society organizations, but rather aim to create a common language between the funders and the organizations, standardizing the approach and work system.

Technical Standards:

These refer to the funder's requirements concerning the service provided, including a description of the target group, the areas where the project will be implemented, and other related details.

Political and cultural criteria:

These criteria take various forms, including defining the background of the target group, such as political affiliation, and specifying areas and regions of work over others, such as restricting funding for certain activities in specific areas. Additionally, they may involve promoting ideas that affect the culture of society according to the funder's perspective.¹¹

Fourth: Lack of Clear Priorities

The lack of clarity and alignment in priorities between the government, foreign donors, and civil society organizations (CSOs) reveals disparities in focus and a lack of shared strategies. This challenge arises from the absence of effective communication between all relevant parties, leading to a lack of mutual understanding and a misalignment of priorities. Consequently, resources are often wasted ineffectively, and directed toward projects that may not address the actual needs of the local community.

Jordan, as a developing country, seeks to improve its policies through developmental programs. Given its limited resources and the political challenges imposed by its geographic location, Jordan relies heavily on foreign funding, with civil society organizations playing a key role in the development process.¹²

However, discrepancies in setting priorities and competition for foreign funding between the government and civil society organizations weaken the achievement of an effective and integrated developmental impact.

National needs and priorities in Jordan are typically defined through planning and consultation processes. This starts with assessing local needs and challenges across various sectors, such as education, health, sustainable development, unemployment, and poverty. Based on these assessments, national strategies and policies are developed, followed by the allocation of budgets and resources for their implementation. The problem lies in the fact that civil society is not part of this planning and consultation process.

There is an issue with the clarity of priorities; if the priorities were clear, part of the social responsibility would be directed toward achieving them.

Ali Fayyad, Partners-Jordan

On the other hand, Jordan receives external aid to support the general budget by providing direct assistance to the government to enhance the sustainability of the state's public finances and enable it to implement its programs and policies. The difference between this type of grant and grants for development projects and programs is that it provides general funding, which the government can use to finance various activities and programs without focusing on specific projects. These details of how it is used are usually not disclosed, unlike grants provided for supporting specific development projects.

A triad body should be formed, consisting of donors, the government, and civil society institutions, through which Jordan's priorities and the issues that need to be addressed can be identified. The decision should not be in the hands of the government alone.

Daoud Ketab, Community Media Network.



This does not align with the standards of disclosure and transparency and negatively impacts the trust between the government and civil society organizations.¹³ Unreported foreign aid policies can lead to the reinforcement of the ruling regime and the strengthening of the existing power structures at the expense of the development of democracy.¹⁴ Ordinary grants to support the general budget amounted to \$1,115.87 million in 2022.¹⁵

Foreign donor priorities are typically shaped by the goals and vision of the donor organizations themselves, which they aim to achieve through the funded projects. These organizations may adopt international strategic orientations related to specific issues such as sustainable development and human rights, and may also be interested in supporting projects in particular geographic areas based on the needs and conditions of those regions. In cases of crises, such as natural disasters or political conflicts, donor priorities may shift to address the urgent needs of the local community.

Undoubtedly, national priorities and needs play a crucial role in guiding the strategies and activities of civil society organizations, within an intertwined relationship with donors who present their priorities when providing foreign aid to the government and civil society organizations. The ideal scenario is for civil society to be part of the process of building and developing priorities during consultations, ensuring that it is not merely a directed tool, but a key player in the process of comprehensive development.¹⁶

In this context, a group of 129 civil society organizations Stated that national priorities should focus on economic growth, livelihoods, civil liberties, civic participation, and the quality and availability of public services such as education and healthcare. These were described as their current priorities that they aim to work on. However, when reviewing the External Aid Report, there was some variation in the importance of these priorities, with some not being classified in the same way or, in some cases, not included at all. This disparity disrupts efforts to strengthen human rights pathways and slows the achievement of sustainable development impact.

The unhealthy relationship with the Jordanian state, due to the demonizing view of civil society organizations and the imposition of governmental norms on these organizations, undermines their existence and the diversity of their goals, which should primarily serve civil society. This situation requires renegotiating with donors and the government to create joint mechanisms for implementing urgent priorities, without compromising the independence of civil society organizations.¹⁷

One organization, in a focus group discussion, stated: «In cooperation with donors and the government, we need to conduct a comprehensive field survey periodically to assess the evolving priorities of the local community, especially during times of crises and critical political and economic conditions.»¹⁸

Fifth: Weakness of Foreign Funding Alternatives

The sources of funding for civil society organizations are divided into local and foreign sources. Local funding can be defined as the financial resources obtained by civil society organizations from their ongoing activities, such as membership fees, donations, and investment returns for the organization. This also includes donations from individuals, private sector companies, and government funding from ministries and national funds.

The continued operation of civil society organizations largely depends on diversifying their funding sources. Experience confirms that foreign-funded development projects, regardless of their long-term duration, are still unsustainable because they are built within a broad and changing international context. While some civil society organizations view foreign funding as an opportunity to expand the scope of their activities and achieve their goals, others believe it may lead to changes in the organizations' objectives, resulting in the provision of services and programs that align with the interests of donors rather than local needs.¹⁹

Local funding enables civil society organizations to achieve their independence and develop their programs and activities based on the needs of the local community. However, at the same time, it is not appropriate to lump all local funding sources together, as, based on the experiences of civil society organizations, several factors influence the opportunities these organizations have to access one or more of these sources. One of the most significant of these factors is personal relationships with certain individuals within government bodies or with companies from the private sector.²⁰

Local funding policies are considered vague by the government and do not reflect best practices in this context, whether related to the Association Support Fund or the conditions for obtaining government support for foreign-funded development projects. As a result, civil society organizations have turned to foreign funding from external sources, which include international financial institutions, global organizations, international civil society organizations, as well as government-affiliated institutions and international academic and research institutions.

The problem is that the private sector provides funding to certain organizations that work in its own interests, which means these organizations tend to focus on specific directions that do not address issues of development and human rights.

Laila Naffa'a, Arab Women's Association.

Funding from Jordanian private sector companies is often directed toward the "Zakat" Fund and other government bodies due to tax advantages. Donations to the government's Zakat Fund can yield tax deductions of up to 100% of the donation amount, while tax incentives for donations to civil society organizations are less appealing to the private sector.²¹

Most associations across various regions of the country agree that funding from the private sector is very weak. Civil society organizations face significant challenges in attracting local funding from the private sector, as it requires effort and relationship-building, which is difficult in the context of scarce resources. This type of funding—when available—primarily benefits charitable organizations; however, there are numerous challenges related to a lack of transparency.

Personal relationships play a significant role in local funding, as they influence where organizations can secure financial and charitable donations through their strong connections.

Hala Murad, Dibeen Association.

One organization stated, "We face a problem with private sector donors because their perspective is misleading. When they donate 1,000 Jordanian dinars, they request a receipt from the organization showing 3,000 Jordanian dinars."²²

Sixth: Limited Focus on Localization

The concept of localization²³ revolves around granting local partners greater control and ownership over development initiatives and the promotion of human rights. Localization is regarded as one of the international community's priorities for development, as it enables civil society organizations to lead, design, and implement effective projects. This, in turn, depends on the existence of a favourable and supportive environment for civil society.²⁴

Civil society organizations also bear the responsibility of deconstructing the local agenda and identifying common approaches for its implementation. This necessitates improving their relationships with the government and funding bodies, as well as engaging in networks and alliances that enhance their responsiveness to localization.

Zaina Darwish, ARDD.



The experience of quasi-governmental and royal organizations in the shift toward localization is often regarded as successful, as they do not require numerous official approvals, can effectively reach diverse groups across most regions of the country, and enjoy a positive reputation among local communities.²⁵

Therefore, it is essential to unify the efforts of all organizations in collaboration with stakeholders to support small and emerging organizations in their move toward localization. This, in turn, enhances these organizations' independence and decision-making capabilities.

We are partners in both work and principle, and within this framework, we achieve independence. We must adopt a vision to which we align ourselves and emphasize the importance of accountability.

Dr.Ferial Al-Assaf, National Center for Human Rights.



The shift toward localization requires that civil society organizations be able to access foreign funding and work with external donors, as well as establish, operate, and sustain themselves. Due to restrictive laws and practices, the ability of civil society organizations to fulfil their role is constrained by a narrowing of their operating space. It is the responsibility of donors and the private sector to increase investments in support of civil society and intensify efforts to remove barriers, enabling civil society organizations worldwide to fully participate in localization efforts.

Recommendations

1. Develop a Response Plan to enhance the role of civil society during crises and political developments to ensure the identification and handling of urgent priorities. This includes creating a document outlining civil society's engagement with foreign donors and developing a set of principles and standards that ensure the independence of civil society while aligning with human rights principles.
2. Bridge Gaps in the Legislative Environment for civil society organizations by removing all legal and practical restrictions that hinder the effective operation of civil society organizations. This includes amending the association's law and the mechanisms for accessing foreign funding.
3. Review the Regulations and Conditions of the Fundraising System to provide civil society organizations with greater opportunities to access local funding sources. This includes supporting tax regulations to encourage more donations from the private sector.
4. Develop Facilitative Terms for Grants and Donations offered by the government to civil society organizations, ensuring that they are clearer and more transparent.
5. Standardize the Principles and Standards of Foreign Countries about human rights and international law, ensuring consistent application across all regions without discrimination. This also includes holding these countries accountable for their positions and decisions.
6. Strengthen Mechanisms for Continuous Communication and Coordination between the government, civil society organizations, foreign donors, and the private sector. This includes establishing regular dialogue regarding planning processes, conducting consultations on priorities, and directing funding to address community needs.
7. Encourage Civil Society Organizations to disclose clear details regarding the use of both local and foreign funding and how they achieve financial transparency in their operations.
8. Adopt an Inclusive Approach to Civil Society's Shift Toward Localization, focusing on enhancing local partnerships and the roles of organizations in designing and implementing projects.

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