Helpdesk Research Report: Poverty Reduction Actors in the MENA Region
20.08.08

Query: Please identify literature on actors in poverty reduction in the Middle East and North Africa region. These can include NGOs, civil society organisations, religious actors, political movements, governments, etc. Please focus on national and regional actors, and not European and US influence.

Enquirer: DFID Middle East and North Africa Department

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1. Overview

Most analysts agree that declining oil revenues and the liberalisation processes of the 1980s in many of the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have resulted in a ‘retreat’ of the state from the social services arena. This has led to an increase in civil society activity, characterised principally by an increase in the number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and Islamic associations.

Development actors in the Middle East and North Africa region have been the subject of scholarly attention for some years. As this is a broad area, however, this query report prioritises literature from 2000 onwards. Much of the recent literature seems to focus on the role of Islamic organisations. Many analysts highlight the large number of these that are already operational in many countries of the region, mostly providing services to some of the poorest communities. Some argue that these organisations enjoy greater levels of credibility because of their Islamic credentials. However, others claim that their exclusivism, and unwillingness to work with secular organisations hampers the goals of effectiveness and true participation. These commentators question the extent to which Islamic organisations are instruments of Islamist political movements, and whether they constitute a real force for economic and political change.

The role of NGOs is also widely discussed. The literature highlights that in recent years the focus of NGOs in the region has evolved from traditional service delivery to more advocacy based activities, emphasising issue of empowerment, accountability, and human rights. These newer activities have had mixed success, mainly due to the continuing restrictiveness of government policy. However, it is widely agreed that civil society and non-government
organisations have an important role to play in responding to developing social issues the region. Various youth-based organisations have emerged, for example, to address the challenges resulting from the increase in youth populations across the region. Much of the literature offers an assessment of the opportunities and constraints faced by these and other organisations in the region. In some cases, this is explicitly directed at international donors, to factor into their funding and partnership decisions. As such, some of these assessments are highlighted below.

2. Key Documents

Government Policy

Karshenas, M. and Moghadam, V., 2006, ‘Social Policy in the Middle East: Economic, Political and Gender Dynamics’ Palgrave

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Note: I have not been able to review this book. The summary below is adapted from the publisher’s abstract.

This book provides political and economic perspectives on social policy and its evolution in the Middle East and North Africa. Chapters on Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey analyse origins of social policy in populist or modernising state activities, the decline of social policy in the era of neoliberalism and prospects for its renewal in a democratising and development context. The collection includes historical and comparative data, as well as a gender analysis of social policy.

A review of this publication is available:

In this review, the author highlights some of the key points from the book: “Public spending on health and education (in the MENA region) has been comparatively high. However, much of that spending has been distributed in a clientelistic manner, biased towards urban populations and as benefits to public sector workers.” (p.119)

He also argues: "There are general lessons to be drawn from this collection of studies. Social policy here comes through as non-ideological. The level and usage of social spending is explained by the combination of economic capacity and government capacity. No 'Islamic social doctrine' emerges to have given direction to social policies in these countries. The influence of Islam is indirect, first through family law - which 'contradicts any sentiment of universality and the notion that social policy seeks to ensure social equity' (p. 224) - and secondly through regime fear of Islamist opposition. Furthermore, if social policies are for purposes beyond the social, in these studies they overwhelmingly serve the purpose of raw social control. Social policies are obviously always an instrument of rule and in authoritarian regimes they are perforce an instrument of authoritarian rule.” (pp. 120-121)

An example of this is Tunisia, which appears to be "the star pupil in this class, governed by a strong state with strong social policy and maintaining a level of public social spending generating a 'highly significant' redistribution of income. In 2001, social transfers per household were higher than the guaranteed minimum wage. However, beneath that veneer is a country organised as a party-state with a regime struggling on the one hand to maintain legitimacy and on the other hand to control popular unrest and the danger of Islamic opposition. 'The power that the party still enjoys derives from its handling of social policy—
that is from clientelism’ (p. 33) [...] This is a welfare state that works in the sense ‘that there has been a noticeable reduction in poverty and discrimination against women’ (p. 73). But the reverse side of the coin is a repressive and controlling welfare state, ‘not based on recognition and exercise of social rights but on “social favours” monopolised by the party-state. Tunisia is an exemplary case of a system where social policy is at the same time the vehicle of social improvement and the instrument of political despotism’ (p. 73-4).” (pp. 119-120)

Islamic Associations


This book examines the structure and dynamics of moderate Islamic institutions and their social and political impact. It provides case studies of Islamic medical clinics in Egypt, the Islamic Center Charity Society in Jordan, and the Islah Women’s Charitable Society in Yemen. The author argues that because of the operational needs of the institutions themselves and the programmatic agendas of the moderate Islamist movement of which they are a part, these organisations are in fact run by and for the middle class. Instead of the vertical recruitment or mobilisation of the poor that they are often presumed to promote, Islamic social institutions play an important role in strengthening social networks that bind middle class doctors, directors, donors, volunteers, patients, and clients together. Ties of trust, solidarity, and teamwork develop along these horizontal lines, indirectly leading to the development of new social networks and, potentially, the diffusion of new ideas.

The author also provides an idea of the scale of coverage by these organisations: “Unable to adequately provide sufficient welfare services and saddled with massive debts Middle Eastern states have been slowly retreating from areas they claimed over 100 years ago; this process was most intense during the first half of the twentieth century. Nongovernmental associations and, particularly, Islamic social institutions have been highly successful in filling in the resulting gap. Studies conservatively estimate the number of Islamic voluntary associations is 2,457 out of a total of 12,832 voluntary associations in Egypt. This number represents the largest category of private voluntary organisations (PVOs) in the country. While exact figures are not available, in Yemen, there are over 2,000 registered NGOs, approximately 70 percent of which are estimated to be highly conservative or religiously motivated. In Jordan, the largest NGO is the Islamic Center Charity School (ICCS), run by the Muslim Brotherhood. In 1998, it alone ran forty-two schools and day care centres and a community college and managed forty-five health clinics and two commercial hospitals. Twelve thousand students attend the Islamic Center Charity Society's schools and day care centres.” (p. 12)


This paper looks at the emergence of youth organisations in Egyptian civil society and examines their potential to bring reform. The author finds that they engage in voluntary social welfare activities by providing traditional charitable services, as well as health and environment awareness campaigns, vocational training programmes and human
development courses. She also finds that they assign Islam an important role without using the language of political Islam, which often propagates the establishment of an Islamic state. Instead, they view Islam as instrumental in helping the individual to become an active and useful citizen. The role of Islam is considered at length. The author argues: “When identifying potential forces for reform and development in the Middle East, we should turn our attention to other actors than the explicitly political ones. Furthermore, we must take into consideration organisations in which Islam plays an important role. Usually, Western NGOs and donor agencies search for partners among secular advocacy organisations working within fields such as human rights, democratisation and women’s empowerment. This applies equally to youth, where efforts are often made to mobilise young people to engage more in formal politics. However, in countries such as Egypt, formal political participation is not an option for the vast majority of young people. In addition, the number of advocacy organisations is small and their influence relatively weak. Due to their explicitly secularist approach, they do not enjoy much support among the population in general, nor among young people in particular. Instead, both moral and financial support is given to religiously-oriented organisations working within the field of social welfare, the majority of which have a conventional approach to social welfare, focusing solely on the provision of basic necessities to the poor.” (p. 1)


This paper argues that many Jordanians perceive formal politics in Jordan as illegitimate, corrupt and authoritarian. Therefore, when searching for agents of change and reform, it is important to look beyond the formal political system. Current interest however tends to focus on secular organisations and institutions, overlooking religious ones, even though these make up a large part of Jordanian civil society. For the author, “(P)articularly interesting in this respect are the country’s more than 800 social welfare organisations, which are engaged in activities such as education, health care and cash and in-kind assistance to orphans, the sick and poor families. They constitute the largest group of organisations in Jordanian civil society and embrace hundreds of thousands of people, whether as employees, volunteers or beneficiaries. Unlike many of the organisations supported by Western scholars and policymakers, the majority of these organisations are explicitly religious, albeit to different degrees. In some organisations, Islam permeates everything that is said and done; in others, it is merely something that pops up once in a while. Common to all, however, is the fact that religion functions as an important inspirational and motivational factor” (p.1). This paper aims to explore whether these organisations can be considered potential agents of democratic change or rather as preservers of the status quo. In addition, it seeks to address whether Islam can be used as a means of control or empowerment. In order to answer these questions, the paper discusses the positions taken by these organisations on issues such as women’s rights, participation and pluralism, particular in light of the role of Islam.


This article aims to contribute to the discussion about the role of Islamic voluntary welfare associations in providing services to poor groups. The author argues that these associations are usually seen in terms of an Islamic revival in the Arab world. While other analysts emphasise their instrumental function (i.e. a means employed by Islamist organisations to propagate a particular religious or moral ideology amongst the poorer segments of Muslim societies; or to foster cooperative ties among existing and potential Islamists from the middle classes), the author stresses that they also have an empowerment function. He argues, however, that the degree to which voluntary associations affiliated to political Islam may
contribute to the empowerment of subaltern groups is largely ignored. This article therefore aims to analyse the role of Muslim NGOs in terms of the empowerment of the underprivileged. Specifically, it addresses the questions of whether Islamic charities empower their beneficiaries or rather induce new forms of paternalism. The author argues that these options are not mutually exclusive. By analysing the ideals and practices of Islamic charities in Jordan, he shows that empowerment and paternalism should be understood in their socially and ideologically informed contexts.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

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This article argues that despite the growth of NGOs since the advent of political liberalisation and democratisation in Jordan, they remain circumscribed by the realities of continued state power. Because Jordan’s political transition was informed by a desire to perpetuate regime survival in the midst of economic crisis, NGOs continue to experience political limits to their activities. The regime primarily relies upon three strategies to control the NGO community: (a) administrative repression and oversight; (b) civil society ‘infiltration’ through royal nongovernmental organisations and other government NGOs; and (c) centralisation through the General Union of Voluntary Societies.

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This article highlights the increase in the number of women’s NGOs as one of the dominant trends in the evolution of the Arab women’s movements. These NGOs are involved in the areas such as health, education, legal literacy, income generation and rights advocacy. This is arguably as a result of the failure of Arab states to bring about social change and development. The emergence of these NGOs is widely viewed as the development of an Arab civil society which can check the authoritarian state. However, as many receive funding from international donors and are hence subject to donor agendas, they have also been viewed as a new and growing form of dependency on the West.

The article also argues that the NGO as a form of organisation is different in important ways from social movements. Arab women’s NGOs may be able to play a role in advocating Arab women’s rights in the international arena, providing services for needy groups, proposing new policies and visions, generating and disseminating information. However, for comprehensive and sustainable development, a different form of organisation with a more locally grounded vision and a more sustainable power basis for social change is needed.


This article discusses the change that took place within the Palestinian Islamic movement, which was characterised by a shift in emphasis from the political and military to social/cultural reform and community development work. It aims to explore why and how this occurred; what position Islamic NGOs occupy within the movement; and the extent to which Islamic NGOs constitute a force of order and moderation. The article highlights that Islamic institutions reportedly comprise between 10-40 percent of all social institutions in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. For individual sectors such as education, according to a Ministry of Education
official, 65 percent of all Gazan educational institutions below secondary level are Islamic. These institutions play an important and visible role in relief and charity work; early and primary education; library development; education and rehabilitation for the disabled; primary and tertiary healthcare ("one of the best hospitals in the occupied territories is Islamic, i.e. founded, administered and financed by Islamists" (p.26)); women’s income-generating activities; literacy training; orphan care; care for the elderly; the care and placement of abandoned children; and youth and sports activities. According to the author, “Islamic services directly reach tens of thousands of people and impact hundreds of thousands more” (p.26). The article goes on to outline some characteristics of these institutions:

1. “management and staff are typically well educated. Highly trained and professional (many individuals hold advanced degrees from Western universities.
2. [...] the services provided by Islamic NGOs are generally of high quality and are perceived as such by the population
3. [...] Islamic NGOs almost uniformly define niches and work in sectors and localities where considerable needs are largely unmet. Their constituencies are mostly the poor and marginalized [...], and in some localities of the Gaza Strip and West Bank, Islamic NGOs appear to be the only ones working with these groups.
4. [...] all heads of Islamic institutions interviewed adamantly maintained that anyone, regardless of socioeconomic, religious or political background, could participate in their programs
5. [...] all Islamic NGOs are official and legally registered with the appropriate Palestinian ministries [...] Furthermore, they take monies from a variety of sources willing to support them, religious or secular
6. Islamic institutions do not typically work with non-Islamic institutions [...] Furthermore, Islamic NGOs are very competitive, even territorial, and there appears to be very little collaboration or partnerships among them
7. [...] there is no comprehensive social program or master plan (at the macro level) among Islamists or within the Islamic movement that serves as a framework for institutional development or program planning. The lack of an organizing vision linking social programs to a social plan reveals the absence of long-range thinking or planning. Instead, the programs and projects of Islamic NGOs are the initiatives of individuals and the institutions to which they belong.” (pp. 25-26)

http://www.jstor.org/sici?sici=0899-2851(200021)214%3C38%3AEANCFS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-M

This article argues that NGOs in Egypt command vast resources and prestige. Since 1985, there has been a dramatic increase in a new type of NGO, which combines the traditional function of providing social services with an emphasis on issues of empowerment, democratisation, women’s issues and human rights. The author aims to assess how successful these ‘advocacy NGOs’ have been in promoting social and political change. She argues: “The experience of the last ten years has shown that advocacy NGOs’ ability to effect meaningful political and social change is rather limited. Tackling their own political struggles as well as complying with donors’ agendas has strained these NGOs’ ability to fulfil their mission. In addition, their outspokenness and increasing numbers have provoked a backlash from the Mubarak administration further compromising their ability to challenge the State’s prerogatives” (pp. 38-39). In addition, “development and human rights projects have had a limited impact on political and social change in Egypt. The general lack of popular support for the advocacy NGOs’ mission has led activities to seek solace in international organisations. Yet this alliance has diverted their focus away from working with and for the “people’s priorities” while further compromising their legitimacy by the simple fact that they work with foreign organisations” (p.41).
Civil Society


This report highlights the key role to be played by civil society and its organisations — as catalysts for change in Egypt. It explores the role of CSOs and identifies constraints to their activities. It also reviews progress in human development and the achievements of the MDGs in Egypt, with an emphasis on the role of NGOs as the major CSO players in poverty alleviation. Chapter One outlines the challenges facing civil society organisations in Egypt. These are:

- **Financial viability and membership:** To date, the operating results of CSOs (2007 figures) are estimated at a modest 2 billion Egyptian pounds in revenues, of 15,150 associations.

- **The political and legislative environment:** “there remains a huge gap between the intentions stated in the political discourse and the reality on the ground. […] Civil society is rarely, if ever, considered an equal partner in the initial planning, or drafting of plans, and participation is usually limited to consultation sessions. The State focuses attention on civil society’s role in public service provision (especially health and education), but advocacy organizations that support civic and democratic development are viewed with suspicion.” (p.9)

- **Internal challenges:** “These include vague and multiple mission goals, lack of democratic practices inside organisations, poor technical capacity of staff, and top down relationships between CSOs and their constituencies. Frequently, these are symptoms of inexperience, but they result in a low level of public trust in CSOs and also limit their ability to influence government policies. While there is evidence of much greater professionalism, especially within business associations, development-oriented NGOs and advocacy groups, there is a need, overall, to upgrade skills.” (p.10)

- **Networking:** “(M)ost coalitions, and alliances among human rights organizations in Egypt (nearly 61 organizations in 2007) remain ‘unofficial.’ […] The concept of networks is still relatively new, and the preconditions for successful participation, notably management skills and resources, are often missing. In 2000, only 5% of 4,300 Egyptian civil associations operating in development were members of Arab or global networks.” (p.10)

- **The social and cultural environment:** One serious problem is the absence of a culture of voluntarism, a visible manifestation being low participation rates from youth in the 18-35 age bracket. […] Another deficiency is a poor understanding of the value of collective work. Inter-group ventures are not in great evidence, nor are partnerships sufficiently exploited.” (p.10)

The report also looks at various other areas in detail: the status of Human Development and the MDGs; a mapping of civil society in Egypt; internal and external obstacles for civil society in Egypt; the crisis over syndicates and interest groups; state and CSO partnerships in poverty alleviation; the relationship between the private sector and civil society; and the interplay between health and sanitation.

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This article summarises historical and cultural influences on the development of voluntary action in the Arab region. It discusses the religious, demographic, economic, and political factors that have influenced the development of volunteer and civic service programmes in the region. For example, the increasing population of children and youth in the region has led to a growing trend in addressing youth issues and involving more youth in development. Another important influence on the growth of volunteerism and the potential status of civic service is the rise of democratisation in Arab societies. In the past, socialist policies and limited democratic practices and participation translated into weak participation and apathy of large sectors of society. Citizens perceived development as the responsibility of the large and bureaucratic state. The author suggests that these factors may also explain the limited effort of the state in supporting voluntary-based service programs.

Women's rights, especially for education, however, have been a major theme in volunteering programs in countries like Egypt, Lebanon, and Tunisia where women tend to enjoy broader social and political freedoms compared to others countries in the region. “As described earlier, religion is a defining factor in shaping the character of volunteerism and service in the Arab region. The role of Islamic as well as Christian organisations cannot be underestimated in analysing the formation of civil society in the Arab world (Kandil, 1996). Faith-based NGOs usually have a very clear vision regarding service in addition to the commitment to help and support others. The most prevalent service programmes are those implemented by religious associations or NGOs. Some 32% of voluntary organizations in Egypt are religious organizations, both Islamic and Christian (Kandil, 1996). These programs aim to support educational services, health issues, orphan care, and youth development.” (p.45S)

The author offers several examples of voluntary programmes. One of these is in Egypt: “One of the important models of civic service in Egypt is the provision of health service in poor areas through about 3,000 mosques. Hundreds of volunteer physicians are engaged, volunteering 2 days per week for 1 or 2 years. This type of health service is vital in Egypt due to high prices in this sector caused by privatization of health services during the 1980s.” (p.46S)

http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/ab82a6805797760f80256b4f005da1ab/9c2befd0ee1c73b380256b5e004ce4c3/$FILE/bayat.pdf

This article aims to explore social activism and its relationship to social development in the Middle East. It examines the various strategies that the region's urban grass-roots organisations pursue to bring about social and political change. The author argues liberalisation of Middle Eastern states during the 1980s brought about important socioeconomic changes, enriching the upper echelons of society and increasing income disparity. The author argues: “Collective responses to these new conditions have varied. […] However, community activism in the form of urban social movements is rare in the Middle East. Local soup kitchens, neighbourhood associations, church groups, or street trade-unionism are hardly common features in the region. The prevalence of authoritarian and inefficient states, the legacy of populism, and the strength of family and kinship ties render primary solidarities more pertinent than secondary associations and social movements. There is, however, an argument that considers the Islamist movements in the region as the Middle Eastern version of urban social movements. No doubt Islamist movements, notably that of social Islam, represent a significant means through which some disadvantaged groups survive hardship and better their lives. These movements contribute to social welfare not only by direct provision of services and assistance to the needy; they also tend to compel rival social groups and institutions, such as state agencies and secular NGOs, to do the same. Despite these contributions, it is doubtful that Islamism can mobilize at a grassroots level for social development. Its religious exclusivism, discrimination against secular forces and
religious minorities, as well as women who conform to Islamism, defeat any idea of free participation (p. iv). The author goes on to argue that NGOs may fill the gap left by the retreat of the state and the shortcomings of political Islam in mobilising at the grassroots for social development. “Indeed, because of their small size, efficiency and commitment to the cause of the poor, NGOs are seen as a real means for grassroots participation in development. They are sometimes viewed as a bulwark against the creeping spread of Islamic fundamentalism by offering an alternative outlet to the Islamist agenda.” (p. v)

3. Additional information

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