

viewpoint

Conflict and post-conflict – what role for civil society?



An aerial view of Nicosia, Cyprus.

The world has been captivated by recent events in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. First in Tunisia, then in Egypt, then in Bahrain, Libya, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere, people have taken to the streets to demand a stake in their country's future.

Just as the movements that have challenged their governments seem to have been largely indigenous, so the nature of the systems and governments should be left to local people to decide. Outsiders should not seek to impose their own solutions.

But while attention will inevitably focus on the state and political leadership, it is vital not to forget the role that civil society can play in whatever new systems emerge in the MENA region.

Civil society in the Middle East and North Africa varies, but is generally regarded as not particularly strong, when compared to other parts of the world. The reasons for this are partly historic, but are also due to authoritarian governments (often backed by external

powers), which have seen a strong civil society as a potential focus for opposition and 'instability'. But it would be a mistake to assume that the starting point is zero. Civil society has deep roots in the region and has proved surprisingly resilient in the face of often difficult circumstances.

If the energies manifested through street protests can be harnessed and the existing base of civil society developed, then there is undoubtedly great potential role for civil society to play in promoting social development and bridging divides in the MENA region.

While every situation is unique, it is interesting to reflect upon the role of civil society in other conflict and post-conflict situations around the world. This issue of ONTRAC looks at the question from various angles and may offer some useful lessons.

Learning from other experiences

Most commonly, the 'Arab Spring' is being compared to the events of 1989 when revolution swept through the Soviet Bloc and 1991 when the Soviet

Contents

viewpoint

Conflict and post-conflict – what role for civil society?.....	1
Civil society and conflict: experience from Kyrgyzstan	3
The role of civil society in building trust and reconciliation in Cyprus	4
Somaliland – civil society, democracy and development	5
Reclaiming security to meet poor people's needs.....	7

In this issue:

Against the backdrop of popular protests across the Middle East and North Africa region during the Spring of 2011, this issue looks at the role that civil society can play in promoting social development and bridging divides.

Rod MacLeod's viewpoint sets the scene, and provides some specific pointers for civil society in the MENA region. The remaining articles in this issue then consider the experiences of civil societies in other conflict and post-conflict situations, and the lessons that can be drawn from these. Charles Buxton addresses the current questioning in Kyrgyzstan of civil society as a force working against conflict.

The case of Somaliland is discussed by Michael Walls and Steve Kibble. They highlight the important role played by civil society since the declaration of independence, and focus on the examples of successful, indigenous state-building that have occurred. Norman Gillespie looks at the longstanding divisions in Cyprus, highlighting some of the initial findings of INTRAC research on how civil society can build trust and promote reconciliation across the island. Thomas Donnelly tackles the question of the role of aid in conflict situations, arguing that it is not just a question of how aid is used, but also where it is used.

Union itself collapsed. Democratisation and the growth of civil society were hailed by many as inevitably leading to a brighter future in countries like

Kyrgyzstan. But as **Charlie Buxton** notes, a linear upwards progression has not always been sustained and, after two 'revolutions' in the past five years, many now question the role of civil society as a force working against conflict. He argues for more intensive efforts to recognise and support indigenous civil society with a broad vision, to enable it to reach into the provinces and work across ethnic divides.

While there has been less physical conflict recently, **Cyprus** presents a longer standing example of unresolved division.

Norman Gillespie highlights some interesting initial findings from INTRAC's current research into how civil society can build trust and promote reconciliation. While political negotiations may be deadlocked, civil society provides contacts and opportunities for interaction between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, promoting greater understanding of 'the other'. In due course, this can lead to confidence building and an appreciation of inter-dependence, which transcends entrenched party ideological positions. At the same time, civil society faces many challenges in the wider environment of a divided Cyprus, which need to be overcome.

Michael Walls and **Steve Kibble** talk about the case of **Somaliland** as an example of successful, indigenous state-building, highlighting the important role played by civil society since the declaration of independence in 1991. Although much remains to be done by both government and civil society, the growth of local groups and their links with international actors provide a foundation for the future.

The role of **aid** to increase 'security' needs careful consideration and dialogue with civil society, argues **Thomas Donnelly**. It is not just a question of *where* aid is used but also *how* it is used. Substantial new resources will affect the political and economic dynamics within a society and could potentially destabilise. Civil society must engage with the debate about 'security and justice' to ensure that aid is administered in a 'conflict sensitive' fashion and promotes locally-owned, accountable security.

Creating more space for civil society

Returning to the MENA region, there is now an opportunity to carve out a greater space for civil society, which takes account of what has happened elsewhere:

- As new constitutions are developed (or existing constitutions are revised), the rights of civil society to exist, function and contribute could be enshrined and be legally enforceable through an independent judiciary.
- Ministries or departments could be instituted or strengthened, with a specific mandate to support the development of a healthy civil society.
- Mechanisms could be developed to ensure greater involvement of civil society in decision making processes. Consultative groups on specific issues can be formed, and must aim to allow voices of the poor and marginalised to be heard when policies are being formulated, at both local and national levels.
- More intangibly, a political culture could be encouraged in which governments understand and recognise that civil society voices, while perhaps critical and irritating to them at times, in the long run strengthen governance and stability, rather than undermining it.

Strengthening civil society to meet the challenges

At the same time, civil society in the Middle East and North Africa needs to raise its game to take advantage of a potentially more favourable environment. Specifically, it should aim to:

- Listen to and transmit the voices of their constituencies.
- Deliver work of a high quality to professional standards, which meets the real needs of intended beneficiaries.
- Move beyond charitable works to include more sustainable development and policy influencing work, based on solid evidence.
- Strengthen internal governance and accountability.

Local and external supporters of civil society also need to play their role (e.g.

with resources, facilitating linkages within and outside the region, supporting capacity development) to help civil society in the region to achieve this.

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More from INTRAC on civil society

One of INTRAC's key aims is to work to clarify, improve and defend the role of civil society in development. We do this across the full range of our activities.

Resources

Our resources database (www.intrac.org/resources.php) contains over 130 papers on issues around civil society, freely available to download. We also have eight books on civil society available to buy, priced from only £6.

Research

Alongside our current research in Cyprus (see Norman Gillespie's article on page 4), we have also recently undertaken research into the work of civil society in fragile states. More information and downloadable resources can be found at www.intrac.org/pages/en/working-in-fragile-states.html

Programmes

As well as our long-running civil society programme in Central Asia (visit www.intrac.org/pages/en/central-asia.html for detailed information, and resources in both English and Russian) we ran a successful similar programme in Cyprus, working alongside bi-communal partners. Resources and information about this programme can be found at www.intrac.org/pages/en/cyprus.html

Events

Previous INTRAC conferences and events have looked at various issues around civil society capacity building and strengthening. Visit www.intrac.org/pages/en/past-events.html for more information, and to download the conference reports.