



USEF PANEL DISCUSSION NOTES

November 8, 2004

The Role of Egypt's Civil Society in Development and Reform

Moderator

Amy Hawthorne, Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Speaker

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The United States-Egypt Friendship Society (USEF), in conjunction with Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, hosted a November 8th presentation on “The Role of Egypt’s Civil Society in Development and Reform.”

Mr. Abadir, who has worked extensively with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Egypt, began by recapping the landmark March 2004 Alexandria Library Conference. The conference convened hundreds of political analysts and civil society leaders to discuss reform in the Arab region. The end product of the conference – a document entitled *Arab Reform Issues, Vision and Implementation* – looks at political, economic, social, and cultural reform. Among the issues discussed are: democracy, freedom of thought, economic liberalization, prioritizing family education, developing civil society institutions, rational and scientific scholarship, and eradicating discrimination against women. Several committees were created at the conclusion of the conference to begin implementation of the reforms discussed.

Abadir proceeded to review the history of NGOs in Egypt, discussing their evolution during the liberal era prior to the 1952 revolution, the period of limited public space from the 1950s to the 1980s, and during the current period of opening, from the 1980s to the present. Prior to 1952, NGOs (some of which can trace their roots to the 1800s) enjoyed freedom of expression and a liberal, civil society atmosphere. Under the socialist regimes of the 1950s to 1980s, NGOs had fewer freedoms to organize; some of them ceased to function altogether. At the same time, society saw an increase in government-sponsored NGOs, displacing private initiatives.

In present-day Egypt, NGOs fall into one of three categories: (1) “service-oriented,” delivering education, health, and employment services and providing a societal “safety net” during Egypt’s transition from a socialist to a market economy; (2) “development- and advocacy oriented,” moving beyond services to address root causes of societal problems; or (3) inactive. More recently, there has been a move for those in the first category to become more involved in addressing root causes as well as delivering services.

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Abadir noted that political consciousness needs to be developed among Egyptians, adding that NGOs active in the second category could play a large role in developing this consciousness.

Abadir concluded his presentation by outlining challenges that NGOs need to overcome in order to progress in Egypt:

- Establish good governance – this is a fairly new concept for Egyptian NGOs, but one that is beginning to be addressed. Attention is now given to issues such as accountability, transparency, sharing and transferring power, and women and youth participation.
- Build strong managerial and financial systems – NGOs should invest in creating a professional volunteer sector, encourage volunteerism, and develop the concept of philanthropy in Egyptian society.
- Develop effective models to address “root causes” – NGOs should address the source of the problem (e.g., poor quality of education in primary schools) instead of simply addressing symptoms of problems (e.g., illiteracy).
- Strengthen the sustainability of NGOs – NGOs should develop local sources of income through involvement of the wealthier sections of Egyptian society and exploration of income-generating projects.
- Advocate and network – NGOs need to learn how to network and increase their political weight in proportion to their numbers.

Q & A Highlights

Q: What reform issues are NGOs currently focusing on?

A: NGOs are currently engaged in the following issues: status of prisoners/prisoners' rights; changing environmental law and implementing the changes; and women's rights.

Q: What role does the business sector play in working with NGOs?

A: Businesses do play a minor role, but not a significant one in comparison to the size of the business sector. Surprisingly, there was even a case in which a business applied for a grant from a program on which he served as a reviewer, asking for outside funds to implement a development project rather than using its own. Egyptian businesses need to become accustomed to the concept of philanthropy as a social responsibility.

Q: The government of Egypt has reserved for itself to the right to veto the establishment of an NGO as well shut it down. How has this situation affected NGOs?

A: Yes, NGOs do have to wait for government approval before they become official. However, the new law addressing this issue allows NGOs to begin working while they wait for government approval. In addition, NGOs must also obtain government approval for any funds they receive from international organizations. Although this imposes some limitations, Egyptian society cannot wait until this law is changed before they embark on building a strong civil society. They must learn to work within the constraints of the law.

Q: What are the follow-up plans for the decisions taken at the Alexandria Library Conference?

A: The conference, which as a non-government sponsored, popular initiative, established follow up initiatives including the establishment of observatory committees. These

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committees have held separate follow-up meetings to discuss how to implement the ideas generated from the meeting.

Q: Is it not the case that NGOs that provide services (e.g., health services) are better suited to sustaining themselves because they charge fees (however small) for their services as opposed to human rights NGOs which do not engage in money-generating projects?

A: One cannot tell whether an organization is successful until looking at its balance sheets. While some medical-service organizations are successful, many of them do not charge enough to cover their costs. These organizations, as well as those involved in human rights work, will need to find other sources of funding.

Q: Good governance is essential to the progress of Egyptian NGOs. Many NGOs complain about the lack of good governance in the government. At the same time, however, the NGOs are losing donors because of unclear governance policies.

A: CEOSS is actually focusing on building good governance practices within the NGO community. CEOSS has found that many organizations are beginning to change their structures to address their shortcomings.

Q: There are essentially two types of NGOs – those supported by private or Western donors and those considered Islamic NGOs. What is the interaction between these groups and how involved are the Islamic NGOs in the self-reform process?

A: Some Islamic NGOs are participating in CEOSS workshops. However, CEOSS has a policy not to work with groups that have political agendas in the sense of creation of political partners or running for ruling. Thus, CEOSS does not work with Islamic groups that seek to become politically active but establish partnerships with NGOs including Islamic one that are involved in development.

Q: Egyptian Americans are willing to financially help Egyptian NGOs and other causes. However, the lack of accountability is extremely discouraging.

A: Egyptian Americans and other donors must safeguard their donations by developing relationships with those NGOs that understand how to deal with the Ministry of Social Affairs, which handles foreign donations, and that offer better accountability.

Karen Souryal, Hands Along the Nile Development Services, added that instilling accountability in Egyptian NGOs first requires gaining their trust, building a strong, personal relationship with them, and then slowly introducing them to American accountability structures.

Q: What is the portrayal of NGOs in the media and what affect does this have on them?

A: The media has neglected the NGO sector for a long time. Unfortunately, some NGOs have received bad press coverage on their human rights work, which has specifically tarnished their reputation and may hurt the sector as well. NGOs need to be trained in how to work with the media to their advantage.

Q: What proportion of NGOs receives government grants?

A: Approximately five to six thousand out of a total of circa 17,000 NGOs.

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Q: What do you predict will be the extent of civil society involvement in political life in the next five to ten years?

A: Raising individual political consciousness and participation is important. However, NGOs need first to fully understand and implement a democratic system within its structure and strategies before they can call for political reform nationally.