



Position Paper

The Role of CSOs in Political Participation and Democratization in Jordan

THE CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES (CSS)
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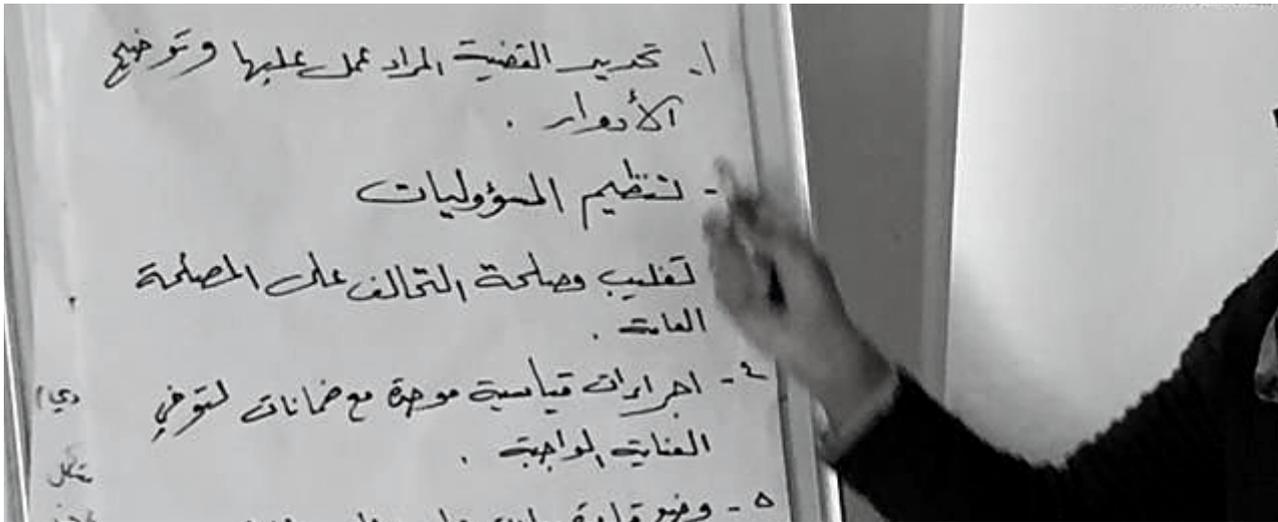
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This position paper is based on primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected by the Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) at the University of Jordan in July 2021, as part of QARARUNA-CSS project, from two samples; national sample (2,484 respondents) and a targeted sample of CSO staff (237 respondents). The findings were reported in a quantitative report which can be found on ([INSERT LINK](#)). Secondary data was conducted through a desk review.

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INTRODUCTION



As the term 'civil society' nears the centennial of introduction to public debate [1], it is high time to reflect on the impact and challenges of the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Jordan. Despite noteworthy progress accomplished in the societal and political spheres, there is a number of challenges for CSOs in the current environment. Several crossroads ahead of the more effective and efficient role of the CSOs hinder their future role.

The pervasive challenge for CSOs throughout the years has been the delineation of their roles in civic space. Throughout the upturns and downfalls of the last century, the absence of a specific legal definition, by which the local community, governmental and non-governmental institutions and scholars work, the influence of CSOs necessarily remains limited. The lack of a clear definition particularly challenges the impact on political participation and democratization.

[1] In an article published in the Journal of the Arab Middle East newspaper in 1923, the term 'civil society' was used in Jordan for the first time. See Muhammad Shreiqi (5 January 1923), Social Cooperation. Journal of the Arab Middle East nr. 23, Amman

Over decades, the gap between a false sense of power granted and the actual impactfulness of CSOs in Jordan grew. The crucial challenge seems to remain the regime's effort to install a system of social control over associational activities rendering them easily predictable. Hence civil organizations were encouraged in the appellation of "political liberalization." Jordan essentially introduced a defense mechanism against instability and economic/political crisis. Hardly exceptional case in the region with similar systems, particularly in Egypt and Morocco [2].

Today, CSOs continue to face these challenges, seriously hindering their role in instituting political reform in Jordan. Unable to mobilize grassroots movements on a large scale and rally a broad constituency, many CSOs are closing towards the regime-made glass ceiling. The lack of a clear, unified registration body for CSOs keeps the opportunity for cronyism in finance distribution by the dispersion of the decision-making process. Additionally, for political-oriented CSOs, the diffusion of their efforts and complicated alliance-building hinders their effectiveness in challenging regime democratization.

Still, the present conditions to CSOs' governance are but one of several challenges, most important of which is funding related [3]. Even within the stipulated government-granted boundaries, many CSOs face the challenge of attracting financial backing for various reasons, from the lack of "professionalism" for foreign investors to the very niche nature of their purpose and pervasive cronyism.

This study aims to help CSOs to help them to adjust and enhance their internal governance and capacities in reaching out to their target communities and improve self-presentation. Therefore, this project is introducing evidence-based data to identify possible gaps and assist in developing necessary capacities. In this paper, we discuss the position of Jordanian CSOs, how their role in political participation and democratization is shaped, what challenges obscure their participation potential in political change and peaceful democratic transition, and the means for activating and better engaging CSOs in the decision-making process.

[2] Wiktorowicz, Q. (2000). Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan. *Comparative Politics*, 33(1), 43-61. doi:10.2307/422423. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/422423?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

[3] Shteivi, M. 2014. The Role of Civil Society Organizations in the Political Reform Process in Jordan. *European Journal of Social Sciences*. Editorial Advisory Board, 41(4), pp.546-570.

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The notion of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Jordan had gradually emerged following the introduction of the term 'civil society' in the country for the first time in 1923. Naturally, this movement was opposed by "the persistence of a tribal and clan-oriented environment..., the volatile political circumstances..., and a set of restrictive laws..."[4].

Once an independent state was formed putting an end to the British colonial era in 1946, approximately 50 CSOs in the form of cultural, sports and social clubs were established [5]. Between the years of 1958 to 1965, the number of CSOs increased to 116 [6].

These community-based clubs, usually described as social associations, were then governed by the tribal-clan presence. Even though their structure considerably differed from modern-day CSOs, they shared many attributes, as they were 'non-governmental', 'voluntary' associations, community-based (meaning their members are from the community and work for the community) and established to reflect the interest and values of the Jordanian society; centred on religious, cultural, political, and tribal norms and systems of beliefs.

Later in the 1980s and 1990s, an economic crisis fuelled by debt and inflation threatened the Jordanian government's stability, hindering its ability to provide services to its citizens. Riots broke out after the government issued a series of economic reforms, including removing subsidies on fuel prices in 1989.

[4] Muhammad Shreiqi (5 January 1923), Social Cooperation. Journal of the Arab Middle East nr. 23, Amma

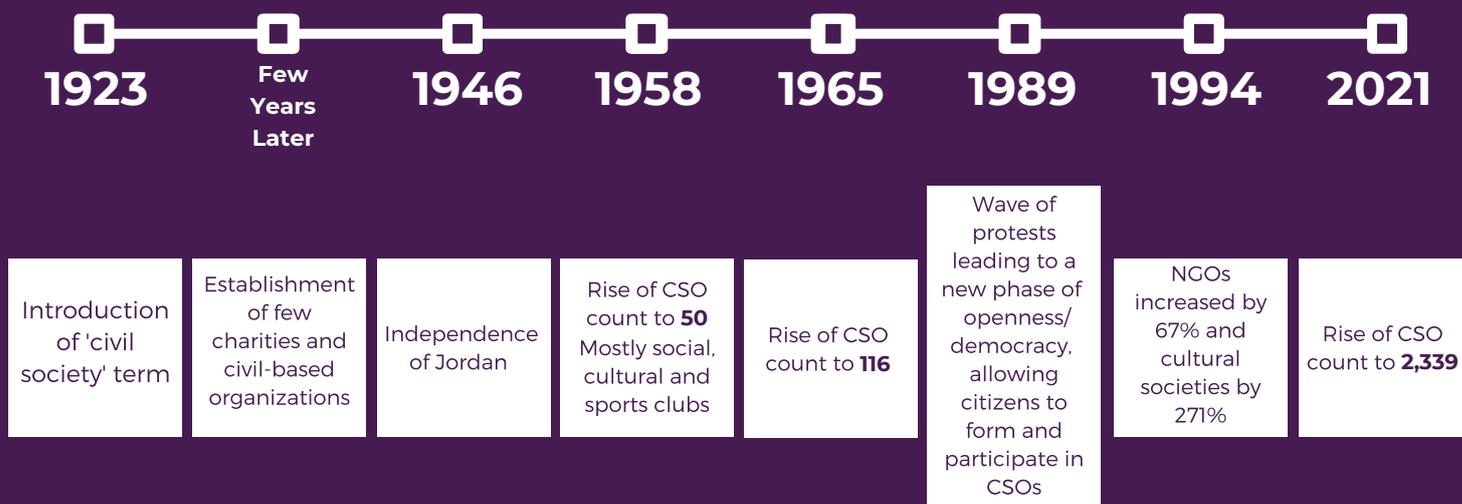
[5] Urdun alJadid Research Center (2011). Enhance the engagement of Jordanian civil society. Amman.

[6] Mohammad Anagreh (2010). 'Historic Station: Civil Society Institutions [Translated from Arabic]. Retrieved from <https://www.addustour.com/articles/645922--محطة-تاريخية-مؤسسات-المجتمع-المدني>

In response, the government enacted political liberalization measures, resulting in the termination of martial law, the legalization of political parties, and holding parliamentary elections. These foundational measures had given rise to CSOs as we know them nowadays, allowing them to flourish and increase in number, specifically charities and professional associations [7].

Therefore, Jordan witnessed an expansion of CSOs like never before. Between 1989 and 1994, the number of Jordanian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) increased by 67% and cultural societies, which were allowed minimal activity during marital law, increased by 271% [8].

What sets the history of civil society in Jordan and other Middle Eastern countries apart from that of other regions, notably Eastern Europe and Latin America, is how political change occurred. While the growth of civil society and CSOs in Jordan and the Middle East followed government reforms, as the states' defence mechanism against civil unrest and anarchy, CSOs in Eastern Europe and Latin America were founded to lobby for political change against their dictators [9].



[7] Wiktorowicz, Q. (2000). Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan. *Comparative Politics*, 33(1), 43-61. doi:10.2307/422423. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/422423?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

THE STATUS QUO OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN JORDAN

The definition conundrum among stakeholders of what precisely constitutes CSOs in Jordan, limits the precision of describing the status quo and position of CSOs, particularly when it comes to identifying their degree of contribution to political participation and democratization.

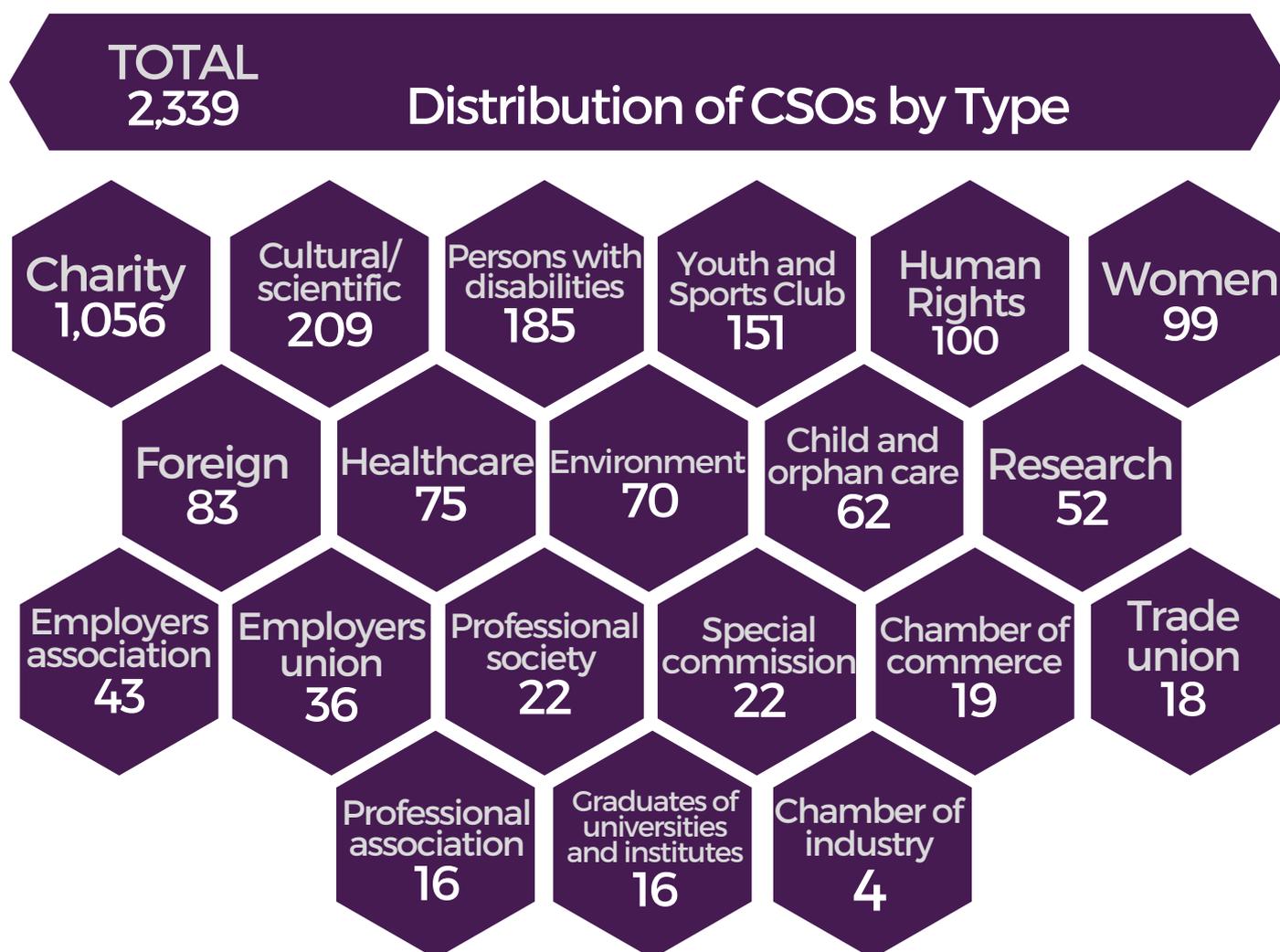
Some international definitions give more degree of freedom to CSOs regarding political influence than others, such as the World Bank [10], as opposed to the more charity-associated definition by the United Nations Department of Global Communications (UN-DGC) [11].

For the purpose of this study, CSOs were defined to be a wide range of non-governmental organizations, associations, and non-profit organizations that have a presence in public life and are interested in expressing the interests and values of their members or the surrounding civil society, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or charitable considerations.

[10] CSOs as defined by the World Bank: "The wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) therefore refer to a wide of array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations."

[11] CSOs as defined by the United Nations Department of Global Communications: "Any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organized on a local, national or international level. Task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest, civil society organizations (CSOs) perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens' concerns to Governments, monitor policies, and encourage political participation at the community level..... Typically, they are organized around specific issues, such as the UN pillars of peace and security, human rights, and development"

According to an official count that most agrees with the definition embraced by this study, there are 2,339 CSOs in Jordan [12], of which charities by far comprise the majority (45%). The confounding distribution of CSOs by type (as shown in the graph), adds to the perplexity of arriving at an accurate interpretation of CSOs' position. For instance, some CSOs are registered as 'employers associations', whereas others as 'employers unions', with little distinction between the two categories; same goes for 'professional societies' and 'professional associations'. Notably, there are no CSOs enlisted as "political", "democracy" or "advocacy" organizations.



[12] Guide to CSOs in Jordan, 2021. Retrieved from Civil Society Organizations in Jordan, Comprehensive Guide to Civil Society Organizations in Jordan (civilsociety-jo.net)

In their comprehensive 2016 Civil Society Assessment report for Jordan, the USAID identified almost 80% of all CSOs as community-based organizations (CBOs). In addition, they were able to recognize several problems that impeded the work of the CSOs then; most importantly the largely donor driven CSO funding; low level of professionalism and weak leadership in civil society; poor management and allocation of resources; fragmentation; and that civil society in Jordan does not reflect the needs of society [13].

Most of these drawbacks are reiterated today. The lack of a clear and transparent legal framework, the high dependency level on donor financing, and the closely associated perception of professionalism by the donors seeking a specific skill set based on the 'westernized' perspective deem smaller and upcoming CSOs unsuitable [14]. This position paper will introduce and interpret these challenges in the context of the research questions.

Firstly, the lack of legal definitions and some classification of CSOs cause evaluation of their influence on democratization and civil society involvement in the field of politics highly challenging. No CSO database provides classification among the various natures of these organizations. In other words, while some are focused on democracy and participation promotion, which is the main focus of this study, there is a significant section of CSOs not focusing on predominantly political tasks.

Thus, the mixture of legally non-definable organizations artificially distorts the study results by hampering the focus of the research. The more CSOs focused on apolitical activities, the worse the result of their effectiveness in urging any actual political change by the sheer numbers. Therefore, for a more accurate evaluation of the impact of politically oriented CSOs, a new type of legislative classification in a more organized manner is required.

[13] Civil Society Assessment. (2016). Retrieved from https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00M5C4.pdf

[14]Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) at the University of Jordan – Qararuna Project (August, 2021). Political Participation and Promotion of Democracy: Role of Civil Society Organizations in Jordan. Quantitative Report.

**All forthcoming data in this section are derived from this study.*

The plurality of CSO staff participants (41.2%) report dissatisfaction regarding their current supervisory body, implying fragmentation. There are at least 7 registration entities for CSOs in Jordan, including the Industry and Trade, Interior and Environment ministries. In reality, however, CSOs' preferred supervisory bodies are among the Social Development, Culture, Political and Parliamentary and Youth Ministries.

Secondly, there is the nontransparent donor mechanism. The majority of Jordanians (62%) assume that project planning for local CSOs is mostly driven by donors' directions and priorities. More alarmingly, a similar percent thinks that funding is distributed unequally among CSOs. Predominantly (75%), it is due to nepotism and is being reflected negatively on the work of CSOs. In addition, an overwhelming majority (68%) think that donors override CSOs. This result indicated a lack of an oversight body and transparency.

Crucially, the pursue of 'professionalism' from the foreign donors poses another steep challenge for many smaller CSOs. With their already limited options and budget, they can hardly afford to spend their resources on obtaining these skills.

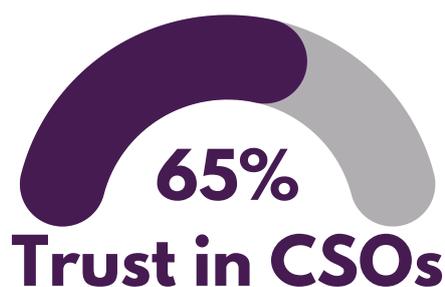
That is why programs like the Qararuna-CSS traineeship program support the smaller political CSO platforms in obtaining qualifications necessary to allure financial backing, the basics of alliance building among the CSOs, and more efficient monitoring of the state institutions including the parliament.

Thirdly, an overwhelming majority (84%) of CSO staff participants report the perceived lack of competence imposes a prevalent hurdle towards CSOs. Whereas their inadequate leadership and poor management are pronounced by them forming "exclusive groups" and allowing for nepotism (73%), establishing CSOs to serve private/personal interests (69%), and some members overriding the institution (77%). Financial abuse, however, remains moderately-highly prevalent among CSOs; as per 63% of the CSO staff participants.

The COVID-19 pandemic, moreover, came only to exacerbate these pre-existing impediments, as the overwhelming majority of CSO staff participants (84%) reported a negative overall impact of the consequences of the global outbreak on their work.

On a positive spectrum, Jordanians today appreciate CSOs more than ever before, with 83% reporting a moderate-to-high significance for CSOs' presence in Jordan.

The majority (64%) also think CSOs are carrying out their tasks adequately, (67%) think they are working for the public good, and (65%) say they deserve to be trusted. These figures suggest a visible difference in the community by CSOs, especially in rural areas.



Some of this progress could be attributed to the advancement in social media; as the majority (90%) of CSO staff participants agree that social media granted their organizations a platform to publicly discuss sensitive and otherwise inaccessible topics, broadening their horizons and areas of work. 34% of CSOs predominantly rely on social media to debate such topics.

Moreover, CSO staff participants report a satisfactory degree of equal employment opportunities at CSOs (79%), democracy in the selection of administrative members (79%), and cooperation/partnership between CSOs (72%).

On CSOs' role in political participation and democratization, 87% of CSO staff participants who work at CSO that are actively involved in political mobilization perceive themselves as moderately-to-highly persuasive organizations, 74% think that CSOs have become influential actors in the process of decision-making in Jordan, and 67% think CSOs have the ability to form a civil alliance to activate popular monitoring of the parliament.

Specifically, 52% think CSOs play a sufficient role in promoting democracy in Jordan and a lesser 37% in promoting political participation; even though 58% think CSOs are supportive of political life. The most common activities they conduct in this regard are raising awareness (81.4%) and holding training (38.4%), whereas only a few build coalitions with other CSOs (7.2%), monitor elections (3.0%), or hold advocacy campaigns (2.5%).

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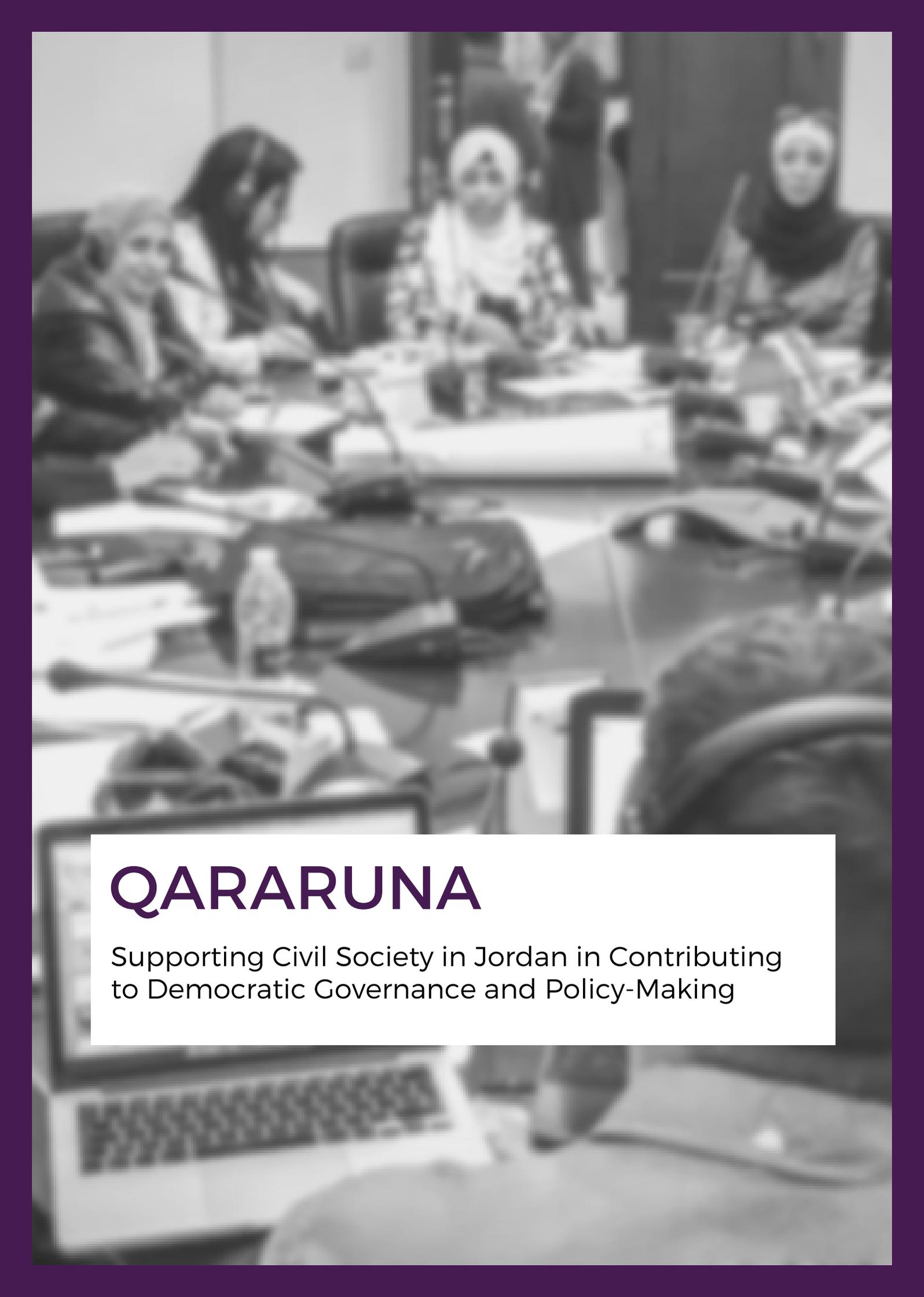
Noteworthy, almost one-third (32.4%) of national sample respondents think that female-headed organizations perform better than those by men, whereas 20.0% think the opposite is true. A total of 12.4% more respondents think that women perform better than men in administering CSOs. Therefore, CSOs seem to be an important new instrument improving gender equality in civil society not only by their efforts but by their own structure organizations and inclusiveness.

Democratic selection of administrative members (78.9%), equal employment opportunity (78.5%), and cooperation and partnership between civil society organizations (CSOs) (71.7%) were found to be largely prevalent among CSOs working on political participation and democratization in Jordan.

Social media granted CSOs (89.5%) a platform to publicly discuss some issues and topics, that were otherwise sensitive and unattainable.

The CSOs could play an even more crucial role in promoting political participation should they establish a closer relationship with the decision-making bodies (94%), one that is preferably based on partnership (67%) or monitoring and accountability (22%).

On the one hand, there are valid reasons for CSOs not playing a more significant role in promoting political participation. Among others, the decision-making bodies neglect the role CSOs can play in this regard, and the community does not fully comprehend this role. As for their lacking performance in promoting democracy, CSO staff participants blame the absence of coalitions among CSOs to work for this common cause, scarcity of funding, weak communication with community members, the existing set of laws and regulations, and lack of know-how.



QARARUNA

Supporting Civil Society in Jordan in Contributing
to Democratic Governance and Policy-Making

CHALLENGES FACED BY CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

The activation of the role of CSOs has been vital for the state development, the modernization of institutions, and the facilitation of economic, social and political reforms. For decades now, experts have been debating the efficacy of CSOs in instituting political reform, some pointing to the limited yet vital ways in which CSOs increase political participation and awareness and center the national dialogue towards inclusion and the rule of law, and others claiming a less significant role.

Regardless what their role is, it is inconceivable to foresee the success of CSOs and their contribution to current reform policies and policymaking without underlining the challenges and obstacles these organizations face in pursuit of their ambitions and full potentials.

A)The Donor/Beneficiary Predicament

With emphasis on the importance of CSOs in Jordan, specifically in democratic reforms, political development and economic growth, the international foreign funds have been steadily increasing. Such increase is justified by the necessity to empower the local society-led institutions. Hence, these funds aim to finance the establishment of CSOs, initiation of western-led democracy programs, promotion and expansion of women and youth political participation in parliamentary monitoring and local elections [15], and more recently, combating radical extremism [16].

[15] See, for example, the funds allocated by the National Endowment for Democracy in 2021 to strengthen and expand civic space, enhancing youth political engagement, protecting civic space. Retrieved from <https://www.ned.org/region/middle-east-and-northern-africa/jordan-2020/>

[16] See, for example, 'The Diwaneyat' initiative led by The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and funded by the Dutch government. Retrieved from <http://wanainstitute.org/en/news/role-civil-society-organizations-combating-extremist-ideology>

The United States alone allocated \$796.9 million in 2019, and \$1.599 billion in 2020 in support of the 'government and civil society' sector in Jordan. That represents 46% of the US foreign aid in 2019 and 67% in 2020, respectively. The advancement of democracy, human rights, good governance, the enhancement and promotion of democratic participation, and capacity-building of CSOs were just some of the primary fields of investment [17].

However, the CSOs' extensive dependence on foreign aid further emphasizes the unequal situation between the leading CSOs' prominence and the new upcoming repressed ones. As mentioned, most of the international funders target demonstratively professional mandates, strong leadership, educational background, and a similar structure/intervention model to Western CSOs [18]. While small traditional CSOs that lack the expertise to meet the Western social, economic, and political development models are excluded and considered inadequate.

Furthermore, the donor/beneficiary relationship is centered around a strictly top-down and financially-driven approach. The consequences of this approach are two-fold: on one hand, the complex power dynamics between the local and foreign international donors limit the actualization of CSOs' space by centralizing the role of the donors in all stages of the decision-making process in project planning, implementation, and delivery of services, hence, preserving the Western autocratic system of control over the local CSOs; and on the other hand, the lack of national funds obligates CSOs to work by the international donors' interests and models of intervention to secure funding, thus, neglecting the true needs of the local communities.

Lastly, some CSOs prefer to be disassociated from certain foreign donors due to their individual perceptions/objections to the unilateral Western political dimensions these donors bring to the country. Therefore, they prefer not to conform to the international donor policies and process of globalization, in the cause of preserving the tribal, religious, and ethnic forms of belonging of civil society.

[17] See U.S. Foreign Assistance Government Website.

[18] Ferguson, P.A. 2017. The State of Jordanian Women's Organizations-Five Years Beyond the Arab Spring. *Politics and governance*, 5(2), pp.59-68

B) Quasi Non-existent Inter-CSO Partnership

The notion of solitude CSO work remains highly popular in Jordan, as opposed to working as coalitions. This constitutes one of the major challenges that hinder the effective contribution of CSOs to the development of the nation across all sectors.

Even though there is considerable advocacy towards the significance of exerting collective political pressure on government policies, activities and reforms, alliances among CSOs remain weak and short-termed. According to CSO staff participants, building coalitions are among the least common activities they conduct to influence the democratization process and strengthen political participation in Jordan (7%) [19].

The fundamental reasons that lead to the current state of virtually non-existent partnerships among CSOs are: (1) the scarcity/lack of sustainable funding that supports the broader mission of building coalitions among CSOs, (2) inter-CSO conflict of interest, (3) lack of knowhow and low appreciation of building alliances, (4) weak coordination among CSOs, (5) forming partnerships based on tribal and kinship ties that rarely address national interests, and most importantly (6) the absence of legal and precise mechanisms for forming CSO coalitions, especially for political motives [20].

[19] Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) at the University of Jordan – Qararuna Project (August, 2021). Political Participation and Promotion of Democracy: Role of Civil Society Organizations in Jordan. Quantitative Report.

[20] Center for Strategic Studies (2019). Supporting Civil Society in Jordan in Contributing to Democratic Governance and Policy-Making (QARARUNA) – Qualitative Report. Role of CSOs in Influencing Democratic Change [Translated from Arabic]. Unpublished.

C) The Structural Depoliticization and Delegitimization of the Role of CSOs

The narrow scope of which CSOs can strive for political participation and democratization can partially be attributed to the political environment in which they are forced to operate. In Jordan, the Law of Public Meetings enacted in 1953 under martial law prohibits any unregistered political group activity, limiting collective activities and making them subject to disciplinary action. In addition, all CSOs must register with a government ministry that oversees, regulates, and reports on all activities; requiring them to operate under their surveillance.

The depoliticization and delegitimization of CSOs begins with government censorship over the sources and purposes (project scope/ activities) for CSOs' funds; an everyday endeavour. Furthermore, the legislative and executive bodies reject to pass any law that would legitimize the political status of the civil society, as they have for political parties, contravening their right to political engagement. Lastly, the government's limited assessment of CSOs' role remains largely defined by charity [21], training and awareness on benign topics; restricting the institutionalization of CSOs to charity-like services. For many, this widens the trust gap between decision-makers and the civil society.

[21] Al-Nasser, H.W. 2016. *New social enterprises in Jordan: Redefining the meaning of civil society*. Chatham House.

WAYS FORWARD

(1) The conventional definition of CSOs in Jordan must be expanded, to include political activism, and agreed upon by all concerned stakeholders, particularly the legislative and executive bodies. This can be achieved by passing a law that acknowledges and legitimizes the political status of CSOs. Taking this step forward would not only protect CSOs and expand their freedom of expression and association but would also bridge the trust gap between the government and the civil society, and positively impact the ongoing political reform process and the peaceful democratic transition as CSOs have greater presence across the state and better access to resources, compared to political parties.

(2) In order to enhance CSOs' governance, their registration bodies must be limited to all or one of the ministries of Social Development, Youth, Culture and/or Political and Parliamentary Affairs. In either case, a single supervisory body must take on the obligation to develop an interdisciplinary approach to govern CSOs; as per the support of 80% of Jordanians [22]. This will yield a unanimous, more accurate, easily accessible database on CSOs in Jordan, encourage inter-sectoral cooperation and coalition-building, and enhance accountability of CSOs and the legislative/supervisory bodies.

(3) There are 20 classifications for CSOs in Jordan, some of which are redundant and create confusion. Revising these classifications helps the government, donors and CSOs identify and address the specific requirements, tools, resources, agendas and challenges more efficiently and accurately, as well as contributes to instituting a more efficient governance strategy for them.

(4) There is a lack of public awareness of the possible role of CSOs' popularization of political rights, responsibilities of civil society, and the role of CSOs in political reform. Only a limited number of Jordanians (13%) believe that CSOs should have a role in political development, and 32% think that CSOs provide sufficient alternative educational models on pressing political issues [23]. This fact calls for more funding allocated to conduct community campaigns on crucial political issues.

[22] Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) at the University of Jordan – Qararuna Project (August, 2021). Political Participation and Promotion of Democracy: Role of Civil Society Organizations in Jordan. Quantitative Report.

[23] Ibid.

WAYS FORWARD

(5) A considerable 44% of Jordanians feel excluded from the decisions made by CSOs [24]. Therefore, CSOs must find supplementary and create ways to involve the local community in their annual planning of projects, discussing every detail of their needs. Moreover, many Jordanians are not aware of the programs targeted to support women, youth and person with disabilities in their areas. Thus, CSOs must improve on their advocacy/outreach techniques.

(6) The majority of CSO staff respondents (89.5%) think that social media granted CSOs a platform for a public discussion of sensitive and unattainable topics. Of those, one-third (33.8%) reported that these issues make up 76-100% of their organization's activities, and 61.8% said they make 51-100% of their work [25].

(7) A considerably higher percentage of Jordanians think that female headed CSOs perform better than those run by men (12% difference) [26], therefore, it is highly recommended that donors search for and support more women-led CSOs.

(8) Approximate 39% of Jordanians think that CSOs played some role in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 [27]. Therefore, the government, headed by the ministries of Health and Planning, must include CSOs in planning for the management of future crises. CSOs can and should provide more than merely financial support and public awareness.

(9) With the increased allocation of foreign fund to the civil society and CSOs in Jordan, existing challenges are likely to exacerbate. Therefore, the top-down donor approach must be shifted to include the input and decisions of CSOs, the Western models of development must be put to the test prior to mass scale implementation, and accordingly modified to meet the local requirements, and the government must protect CSOs against donor exploitation. Moreover, international donors must incorporate the use of the local language (Arabic) in receiving proposals and reports from CSOs.

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