

Chapter 10

The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Youth Development

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Modern societies are based on three pillars: government, private sector, and civil society. In order for society to maintain stability a balance has to be maintained between the three. Any attempt to weaken any of these pillars would negatively affect the stability of the entire society, especially if such attempt would come from one of the pillars. Youth are the backbone of any society and the hope for a better future, thus investing in youth today is a path to ensure the success and prosperity of society tomorrow. One of the ways is to actively include the youth in the civil society and voluntary community works.

Intellectual and political interests in civil society diminished during the Cold War era, and the 1980s were a period of stagnation in this regard. This is especially true in the Middle East, where democracy has had a difficult time flourishing. Nevertheless, civil society became active and influential again in the 1990s and reached a peak after the so-called “fourth democratic wave” (better known as the Arab Spring) in 2010 and continues until today.

Following an increase in the number of civil society organizations in the region, the Secretariat of the Arab Parliamentary Union issued a memorandum in July 2005 stating that the number of organizations increased from 70,000 in 1994 to 120,000 in 1998. In Egypt alone there were 15,320 civil society organizations in early 1990s, in Jordan 670 organizations were registered in 1996, while Lebanon recorded 5,000 organizations, and in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) the number reached 3,250 in 2017.

The civil society organizations have also become prominent partners in global development and assistance process. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reports indicate that the annual contributions to community organizations by the civilian population reached about 11 to 12 billion dollars by late 1990s.

To build a modern civil society, it is necessary to have three essential elements:

- Voluntary association,
- Organized civil society and;
- A “Purpose” and “Role”

The fourth element is looking at the concept of civil society and its institutions as part of a wider conceptual system that includes concepts of individualism, citizenship, human rights, political participation and constitutional legitimacy. The mentioned values are part of an integrated structure representing the pillars of a democratic society. Robert Putnam, professor of public policy at the Harvard University and one of the most important theorists of social capitalism stated that “there is no democracy without civil society and no civil society without democracy.”

Civil Society in the Kurdistan Region

In the KRI, the civil society began forming in the 1990s, following the Region’s liberation from the clutch of the Ba’ath regime and having established its own local government. In other parts of Iraq civil society formed even later, after the fall of the Ba’ath regime in April 2003. Therefore, we cannot find much written about civil society in Iraq or in the Kurdistan Region.

During the Saddam Hussein’s control, the Ba’ath party ruled the entire country, and civil society was limited to establishing unions and syndicates (i.e., students, youth, and women, among others, belonged to unions). In reality, the one-party political system established these institutions as a tool to further control the society and push for its own agenda rather than looking after the interest of the organizations and their members, let alone society as a whole. This period of governing was best described in a statement by the sociologist, Dr. Faleh Abdul-Jabbar, “everyone should read the socialist experiment because it includes things that we can never do.”¹

It is worth mentioning that there is still no documented study of the history of the civil society in Kurdistan because of three reasons:

¹ Lecture at the Iraqi Institution for Democracy in 2002.

- The Kurdistan Region received a local administration only after 1991, which is when genuine civil society organizations and social movements began emerging.
- The scholars and academic researches failed to conduct studies and research on civil societies as they did not consider them organized enough to have a voice and make any significant changes in society.
- The KRI civil society activists failed to document their activities and did not have proper coordination and information sharing mechanisms, making it difficult to link changes to the groups.

Very few attempts were made to form civil society organizations in the mid-1980s, considering the Al-Anfal campaign, when the Ba'ath party killed around 182,000 Kurds. Any attempts made did not have a considerable impact on the ground. After 1991, the civil society organizations in the Kurdistan Region were viewed as the humanitarian and relief vehicle addressing the basic needs of the community. At the time, people were in desperate need of basic living items due to poor economic conditions and infrastructure, a lack of services, an inexperienced local government, and the double economic blockade imposed by the Ba'ath central government on Kurdistan, and the international community on Iraq as a whole.

International organizations led by the United Nations kept their focus on providing humanitarian relief and that was the only path through which the local organizations worked at the time, labelling the definition of civil society, first and foremost, as humanitarian and relief organizations. This misconception between the work of a civil society and the role of humanitarian organizations is still widely present in the Kurdistan Region today.

From 1996 to 2003, while the civil society efforts in the Kurdistan Region were of mostly humanitarian nature, the organizations began to grow, as representatives of the non-governmental sector contributed to infrastructure projects, the reconstruction of villages, water and sanitation projects as well as conducting health awareness campaigns, literacy courses, slowly expanding to raising awareness for causes such as women's rights and child protection.

However, the concepts of democracy and political participation were not on the agenda of the organizations until the collapse of the Ba'ath regime in April 2003. Soon after, Iraq and the Kurdistan Region experienced a boom in registered civil society organizations. The civil society began educating voters, monitoring elections, actively participating in drafting the new constitution, and so on. Civil society organizations began

to address ways to build bridges of communication between people and their representatives in the elected local and national councils. They also began raising awareness for the importance of education and became involved in skills development, capacity building strategies, and advocating for the rights of women, youth, and children.

Nevertheless, four main reasons obliged the organizations to steer again towards relief and humanitarian assistance:

- The fiscal crisis in the KRI, mainly because Baghdad suspended sending the share of Kurdistan Region's budget.²
- The ISIS attacks on Iraq, the KRI, and Syria, and the displacement of 1.8 million IDPs and refugees in search of a safe haven in Kurdistan.
- The fall in global oil prices which led to a huge deficit in the budget of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).
- Mismanagement of resources and serious administrative weaknesses.

Kurdish Youth

In August 2010, the UN Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit stated that "Iraq is one of the world's largest countries in terms of the number of youth as people under the age of 19 make approximately half of the total population."³

Youth is internationally recognized as being between the ages of 15 and 25. Due to conflicts and wars greatly depriving young people of a normal youth and development, the organizations in Iraq and the KRI regulated youth to be recognized until the age of 35. As the actual birth of civil society work was in 1991, this, more or less, coincides with the actual birth of the KRI's young generation. Those who were born before 1991 have a memory of civil society as being humanitarian and relief-orientated, while those born after 1991 view civil society as the key player focusing on political and development work. The younger generation therefore expects civil society to play a significant role in these processes.

The older generation knew little about the meaning of citizenship; their individual rights were limited. Such a striking difference offered the younger generation a great opportunity to effectively foster the establish-

² The KRI is constitutionally entitled to 17 percent of Iraq's annual budget revenues.

³ From a pamphlet disseminated in a UNDP meeting in 2011 in Erbil.

ment of civil society organizations and to advocate for their rights and concerns as well as the concerns of the society as a whole. However, the majority of the youth opted to waiting for others—such as the government and the international and local organizations—to act on their behalf. The younger generation is forgetting that they are part of the challenges and hence they should be part of the solution as well.

Programs and Support for the Youth

Organizations operating in the youth sector can be divided into two main types:

1. *Youth and Student Associations Affiliated with Political Parties:* Their interests are focused on political gain. These associations are representatives of their respective political parties and they receive all or most of their funds from their political parties.

These organizations seek to respond to the challenges of the young people by providing services and facilities to build their skills through free lectures, workshops, learning materials, school field trips, student halls, etc. However, as their ultimate goal is of political nature, they are limited in their outreach. No matter how broad their reach is, they never reach society as a whole.

2. *Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs):* They are interested primarily in the youth development sector. Some of the organizations are registered as non-governmental organizations targeting only young people and there are others who are working in different fields targeting various sectors, including the youth. Within this spectrum, there are also NGOs that are connected to certain parties or are carrying the ideologies of a certain political party. However, these NGOs are more independent. They are typically funded by international organizations. This segment of NGOs is what I would like to focus on in the following lines.

The international organizations are one of the largest supporters of civil society in Iraq and the KRI and have created various programs for local NGOs. The general trend of the post-2003 phase was to develop youth capacities in order to make them active segments in society. However, a lack of analysis of the situation on the ground and an unclear vision of how best to support the democratic development of Iraq in the post-2003 deteriorating security situation were the main reasons why many activities failed to address the problems adequately. Moreover, the international

organizations that were present were looking for grants from other larger organizations or funding bodies, which is why these projects were working on the surface of the issues without diving deeper into the issues.

The programs and projects focused on the following aspects:

- *Raising Awareness Programs:* Various issues related to democratic governing, including electoral education and civic participation, and rather specific issues related to the youth, such as the problem of unemployment and political engagement of the youth.
- *Empowerment and Capacity Building Programs:* Focused on how to transform information into action and how to motivate the young people to act based on what they learned. These programs further included election monitoring, training on how to facilitate dialogues of multiple topics, diverse leadership skills, and other community activities.
- *Peace Building Programs:* Many activities were launched to involve young people in the process of peace-building in order to spread the spirit of tolerance mainly among children and youth.
- *Advocacy Campaigns:* The campaigns focused on mobilizing the youth to advocate for youth concerns on multiple levels from the local and regional communities to the countrywide level.
- *Communication with Decision-Makers:* These are specific programs which have gained more attention recently. They are created to emphasize on the young people in decision-making at different levels and to establish communication between the youth and the decision-makers. The programs motivate young people to take initiatives to communicate with decision makers and convey their concerns and cooperate to find effective solutions.

Some Achievements

Civil society in Iraq and in the Kurdistan Region is one of the best ways to build a healthy and stable and democratic society. Despite a lack of experience, the NGOs in Iraq and Kurdistan have made major achievements for the youth, some of which are presented below.

- *Reducing the Age of Parliamentary Entry:* A campaign advocated by a group of organizations in the KRI succeeded to reduce the age of the members of parliament from a minimum of 30 to 25 years of age. This is a clear incentive for increased youth activism.

- *Prevention of Smoking in Public Places:* Another campaign was started by youth groups and managed to attract several parliamentarians, mobilized public opinion, and collected signatures in support of smoking bans in public places. They attended, formed, and proposed a draft law and successfully convinced parliamentarians to pass the law of smoking bans in public places.
- *Organizing Demonstrations to Demand Rights:* Several organizations introduced a new and important cultural value: the right to organize peaceful demonstrations to defend the rights of young people, among others.
- *Building a Civilized Young Generation:* The organizations have also engaged in projects to train the youth on how to transform the acquired knowledge into skill development and capacity building. This issue is of great importance as the education curriculum in general focuses only on transferring of information without much training or practical skills.
- *Openness to Other Cultures:* After being completely cut off from the outside world during the Ba'ath party reign, the organizations took a strong lead in commencing communication and exposing the local youth to other cultures and societies. They provide many opportunities for youth to visit and learn about other communities and engage with them. This openness helped them to realize the importance of communication with people from other cultures, learn lessons, and be inspired by the experiences of others in building their own societies.
- *Activating Youth Political Participation:* One of the most important efforts of the organizations was to integrate their participation in community development especially in the elections and communication with the decision makers in response to youth aspirations. Organizations have implemented many projects in this regard and have been present in multiple forms to respond to this important need.
- *Pressure on the Government to Respond to Youth Reality:* The organizations are communicating with decision-makers to respond to the needs of the youth. One of the most important achievements is the government's decision to allocate funds for youth-care through supporting small projects to combat unemployment. The government has also allocated sufficient funds for small development projects to

be adopted by the young people. It also included providing advance loans for marriage or constructing houses.

The Most Considerable Challenges

Despite the many critical improvements made, there are also a number of challenges. Below are some examples:

- *Short Term Programs:* The process of building human capacity that can successfully respond to the challenges at hand is a long-term process which requires multiple programs to create access to information for people, provide the required practical experience, and equip them with the necessary skills to enter the workforce. Unfortunately, the programs, especially in the models we have seen so far, are usually short term projects. The process of capacity building and capacity development requires much more time.
- *Lack of programs:* These programs are usually based on previous experiences from other countries. The local organizations submit the project, seeking funds on a continued basis, but they are forced to move to the next stage of the program without actually measuring the results. The programs lose their effectiveness if they are constructed according to predetermined plans, without studying the conditions of the people on the ground. This brings the risk of lacking credibility of the local organizations and failure in fulfilling their promises.
- *Investment in organizations and unqualified individuals:* The large amount of funding has created competition among the organizations. The weakness or absence of evaluations in the selection process and lack of measuring the impact on those who participated further affected various organizations' status and reputation. This led to wasting a lot of efforts and money without having a real impact.
- *Youth's lack of confidence in civil society:* Unfortunately, there have been many negative reactions from the youth about these organizations and their role. There are those who accuse the organizations of corruption and fraud.
- *The weakness of competence of organizations:* It is true that there are organizations that are interested in youth affairs, but the problem is that they focus not only on the youth, but also on the interests of their donors. Thus, although the organizations' mission statements

and internal bylaws suggest that they have clear vision and expertise, in practice this is not always the case. Such gaps were visible in projects mainly for orphan care, school development projects, and projects addressing the issue of clean water.

Recommendations

Here, I would like to provide some recommendations on how to strengthen communication between young people and civil society organizations, and on how to make the role of organizations more effective in youth development.

- Programs should be designed based on the reality on the ground, not on some predetermined criteria. This could be done by increasing cooperation and coordination between the Ministry of Youth and Culture of the Kurdistan Regional Government and the international and local organizations interested in youth in order to design and implement programs responding to the youth's actual needs and concerns.
- More programs could be established on activating the role of youth in volunteer work in local communities.
- More programs are needed to prepare youth for the private sector, finding job opportunities, and entrepreneurship.
- Universities should become more focused on the real living concerns of society, teaching students business skills, capacity building, and providing internships in the private sector.
- Increase the number of programs focused on cross-cultural communication between the youth in Kurdistan Region and those of other countries—in the surrounding countries as well as in the greater global community—in order to benefit from each other's experiences, widen their horizons and strengthen communication with the outside world.
- Programs to develop young people's self-confidence and life skills.
- Open channels of dialogue and effective communication between young people and the community leaders including political, intellectual, cultural, literary, and education leaders.
- Programs to develop the national spirit and create a unified national identity for the youth.

- Involve young people in the process of community building and realize that they are part of the challenge and they must be part of the solution as well. This can be done by supporting research projects and studies for young people.

Conclusion

Despite the political, social, cultural and economic challenges in the Kurdistan Region, civil society organizations still have an important opportunity to further develop the society. Civil society is an important pillar in building a stronger democracy as well.

But, this requires courageous and constant efforts by the NGOs to closely work with and understand the society in general and the youth in particular and involve them in the programs and projects. Moreover, necessary monitoring and evaluation should be done for the conducted projects in order to find the impact and design strategies and future programs accordingly (i.e., design the programs based on the needs not the other way around).

Additionally, more efforts should be made to shift the focus from merely humanitarian and relief aid to capacity-building, following the ancient saying, “*give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.*” This can only come through projects that include all members of society, mainly the youth, in order to become involved in community works, including volunteer work, and to feel that they are part of the solutions, not merely the problems.

In order to achieve the above and build a strong, stable, democratic and prosperous society, regular and effective communication and coordination is required not only among civil society NGOs, but also between the NGOs, the government, and the private sector, as they are the three pillars of society that complement each other and should go in harmony with one another.