

REGIONAL PROGRAMME

GULF STATES

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08 May 2017

Empowering Kuwait's CSOs through Enhanced Networks

A WORKSHOP SERIES SEEKS TO STRENGTHEN THE CIVIL SOCIETY SECTOR IN KUWAIT BY FOSTERING THEMATIC NETWORKS

Kuwait is in many ways exceptional as a country with a relatively well-developed civil society compared with its peers in the Gulf region. Nevertheless, the country's sector is plagued by fragmentation. Still, civil society organisations (CSOs) working in the same or similar fields lack awareness of each other's activities. Thus, they fall short of tapping into tremendous synergies. Unlocking this potential could bolster the effectiveness and legitimacy of the civil society of Kuwait.

Among the Gulf States, Kuwait is considered not only the country with the most dynamic political culture, exemplified by its active National Assembly and a history of social dialogue, but is also well-known for the strong civil society it has nurtured. The CSO sector in the country spans a wide range of religious charities and well-established societies. In addition, a body of over 110 active non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on a diverse field of subject areas spanning arts and culture, environment, women's and youth empowerment, and many others has been mapped by a joint research project between the en.v Initiative, a Kuwaiti NGO fostering social development and civic engagement, and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS). The catalogue is an important indicator of both the sheer size of the civil society sector in Kuwait and the wide breadth of issue areas it covers today.

Nonetheless, CSOs face multiple challenges. On the one hand, the regulatory framework governing the sector in Kuwait is considered

inadequate, as certain organisations experience troubles securing appropriate licenses while others have opted to operate as non-profit businesses instead. Regulatory updates addressing some of these challenges are currently in planning in the Emirate and should assure an adequate fundament is provided for effective and legitimate CSO work in Kuwait. On the other side, some of the obstacles the civil society is facing today are born from within the CSO sector itself: A fragmented civil society landscape in Kuwait leads to a situation where redundant civic initiatives work alongside each other in the same issue areas but largely unaware of their separated and thus less effective efforts. Also many internal processes, such as operations and financing, could be further professionalised, addressing amongst others a lack of transparency that follows from them.

Fostering exchange and cooperation to overcome the CSO sector's challenges

The experience with well-developed civil societies in other countries in the Middle East and North Africa has shown that an important cornerstone of an effective and legitimate civil society are strongly institutionalised networks and platforms which enable NGOs to coordinate, collaborate, and exchange amongst each other. These networks exist only sparsely and informally in Kuwait and could be considerably expanded.

In doing so, CSOs would tap into tremendous potential synergies and make a leap to professionalise internal processes. Success

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and impact of civil society initiatives could be increased considerably by strengthening issue-based coordination between CSOs pursuing the same social objectives. After all, a common utilisation of resources, financial and human, as well as an exchange of information fosters the efficiency and effectiveness of CSO work, especially where it strives to tackle similar civic, environmental, and social issues. CSO networks could also function as channels of transmission to disseminate best practices that enhance transparency. Thus, strong civil society networks would enable CSOs to better act as agents of civic interests.

Planting the seeds for thematic networks

Against the backdrop of these shortcomings but also the great potential of the civil society sector in Kuwait, the kick-off workshop of the “Promoting & Advocating for Civic Sector Enhancement” (PACE) project, jointly organised by en.v and the KAS Regional Programme Gulf States, brought together 21 representatives from 16 CSOs based in Kuwait. During two days from 6 to 7 May 2017, the workshop aimed at achieving three overall goals that would create the basis for issue-based CSO networks: First, it was designed to help participants identify shared passions between them and overlapping interests between their organisations. Second, it sought to set a foundation for participants’ understanding of the benefits of collaboration and different network models. Lastly, it aimed at creating working groups based on shared goals, in which participants would develop action plans to initiate common activities.

The first day of the workshop was dedicated to create awareness and identify common ground with each other, setting the foundation to recognize the benefits of collaboration. To this end, Karolína Miková, director of Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia (PDCS), an NGO with an expertise in network-building, and Ninnar Al Qames, community service manager at LOYAC Kuwait, a youth development organisation, started with an introductory presentation, which familiarised the participants with different network theories and their respective bene-

fits and disadvantages. The rest of the first day engaged participating representatives of Kuwaiti CSOs in different discussion groups and activities, designed to help them not only getting to know each other but to establish a basis of trust. Jointly, the participating organisation created a poster wall introducing their work, expectations, and potential areas of overlap with each other.

The second workshop-day focused on creating working groups based on shared objectives or common areas of engagement and developing action plans to initiate joint activities. In addition, a range of group exercises illustrated first-hand the importance of successful collaboration but also the necessary toolkit to overcome inherent challenges of group coordination. To illustrate, one of the activities, for instance, asked participating CSOs to reach consensus within merely one and a half hours to what end they would utilise a fixed budget provided by the trainers, en.v, and KAS.

A starting point of joint CSO activities

In total, the two-day training workshop on thematic network-building for civil society organisations marked an important starting point for cooperation amongst Kuwaiti CSOs. It brought together actors that were previously not aware of each other or had only sporadically collaborated before.

This changed considerably subsequent to the event: During the course of the workshop 18 of the participants formed a WhatsApp group, which is actively used as an instrument of coordination. As a first example of successful cooperation amongst CSOs after the workshop, the participating organisations used the budget of 97 KWD (270 EUR) offered to them during the aforementioned workshop activity to implement an aid project for Kuwaiti families in need. All 16 NGOs signed a cooperation agreement and gathered to distribute food packages for 37 families during Ramadan. Furthermore, the CSOs produced a short promotional video under the hashtag #CSOclubQ8 explaining their experience from the workshop and presenting the joint

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cooperative aid project they had successfully carried out.

To institutionalise the network, a database of active NGOs in Kuwait was also created subsequent to the workshop. The participating groups' contacts, objectives and social media accounts collected during the event as well as further research on the civil society of Kuwait fed into an online directory on en.v's website that contains over 110 organisations today. The CSO directory serves as cornerstone to increase the visibility of non-profit actors in Kuwait and therefore creates a point of contact for other interested organisations to build networks beyond the workshop series.

The workshop marks the first event of the

PACE project en.v and the KAS Regional Programme Gulf States are set to jointly continue throughout 2017 and the following years. In the long-run the project aims to create a national CSO network in Kuwait that enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of the civil society of the Emirate. By establishing linkages and awareness as well as by promoting active cooperation between non-profit groups, the PACE project allows CSOs to pool their capacities and contribute more effectively to civic, environmental, and social improvements in Kuwait. By fostering intra-sectoral knowledge sharing, it will also further increase professionalism and transparency of civil society organisations and thus enable CSOs to become more accountable and responsible actors in their country.



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