

## The Arab Regional Office: Discussion paper for 2014 – 2017 strategy

The following document compiles summaries of the four main programs of the Arab Regional Office with emphasis on fields and concepts at this stage of thinking and consultation. Additional program areas represented in the one pager of thematic priorities (Youth, Higher Education) were not possible to include at this stage of planning. Therefore, the document focuses on: Rights & Governance, Women's Rights & Gender Development, Media & Information, and Arts & Culture

### Rights & Governance

In order to enhance the prospects for democratic transition in Egypt and Tunisia, the Rights and Governance Program focuses on preserving the revolutionary momentum amongst the general public and fostering effective civil society interventions to introduce and enforce checks and balances in governing frameworks as an integral part to consolidation of the rule of law and democratic accountability and protection of human rights. The program consists of three sub areas; Human Rights, Good Governance and Public Accountability; and Economic Policy, Development, Transparency and Equitable Growth.

#### A. Human Rights:

**A.1 The field:** In the face of authoritarian regimes, pressure on civil society, and lack of political will for reforms, the ARO traditionally maintained a concentrated effort to identify and support progressive leaders in the struggle for human rights. Identified individuals and their organizations were supported to sustain their resilience in the face of repression. ARO support aimed to achieve more effective engagement by more sustainable civil society organizations to address human rights violations perpetrated by state actors through documentation, reporting, advocacy and legal aid. In the post revolutions context, transitional justice, discrimination and personal rights are gaining renewed importance to address past grievances and the rise of Islamist governments.

In light of the changing context in the Arab region, our definition of the actors in the field is now broader than NGOs and future engagement aims to expand reach and relationships to include trade and labor unions, judges and bar associations, government, and national human rights institutions. The tools deployed will also be expanded and diversified over the strategy period.

The primary areas of commitment:

1. *Human Rights – Access to Justice, Legal Empowerment and Minority rights.* Common amongst the work of more than ten grantees across the region is defending the rights of minorities, migrant workers, refugees, and other indigent groups. This area of work reflects a commitment to minority rights, non-discrimination and countering xenophobia through use of legal advocacy, community empowerment, and advocacy as well as reshaping the debate around citizenship and constitutional identities.
2. *Human Rights – Transitional Justice.* The ARO is relying on local partners to further the transitional justice agenda in close collaboration with the ICTJ as a key strategic partner for the ARO in this area.
3. *Human Rights – Advocacy including with regional and International institutions.* In the absence of political will at home (or continued occupation in the case of Palestine) external pressure and naming and shaming tactics were effective in pushing back against oppression as well as safeguarding the space for civil society activism to counter threats to freedom of association. This included support to and development of regional platforms (EMHRN and Cairo Institute's Geneva office) as well as the capacity of individual organizations to engage in advocacy (Adalah, EIPR, A-Haq and others). In the post revolutions context, the need for and relevance of effective national level advocacy posed a

challenge to an unequipped civil society most accustomed to naming and shaming. Capacity building, technical assistance and general support are provided by the ARO.

4. *Human Rights in Palestine and Israel.* ARO engagement to promote human rights in Palestine and Israel is extensive and addresses a unique set of issues arising from the continued occupation of Palestinian Territories on the one hand and discrimination faced by Palestinian Citizens of Israel on the other. Grantees utilize a diverse set of strategies including litigation, national and international advocacy as well as documentation and reporting.

## **A.2 Concepts/ Initiatives:**

1. *Arab regional mechanisms and norms.* The effort spearheaded by the ARO over the past two years to build civil society interest and engagement around the League of Arab States (LAS) is now culminating in unprecedented level of coordination and engagement from civil society, including steps towards adoption of a joint long term strategy to affect change and reforms at the LAS.
2. *Statelessness and state of minorities project.* Conceptualized and developed in partnership with OSJI and implemented by Tilburg University, this research project seeks to engage in a comparative review of nationality laws in the Arab region and analysis of discriminatory trends and vulnerabilities. As the research is finalized in 2013, advocacy plans will be discussed and local partnerships pursued to address identified issues and patterns. We will also assess the potential of developing this into an annual review of the state of minorities as a partial barometer of social attitudes and conceptions of national identity vs. constitutional identity.
3. *Public Interest Lawyering.* The concept of Public Interest Lawyering does not exist in the Arabic region and language. Noticing the unutilized potential of many organizations – the ARO set out to increase exposure to other experiences within the region, including through a partnership with PILnet to develop a regional program aimed at adoption of a shared definition and development of a community of practice around public interest lawyering.
4. *Cooperatives and Legal Empowerment of the Poor.* Together with OSJI we identified opportunities to pilot LEP programming in Egypt through three local partners (ECESR, CEWLA, and SLAHR.) A reformulation of this area around development and food security along with legal empowerment is sought through focus on agricultural cooperatives.
5. *Project Engage.* This project was conceptualized through an ARO – OSI-DC collaboration and consultation process to set up a unique platform for Palestinian and Human Rights voices to effectively engage in and target the U.S. Both offices continue to be closely involved in the implementation and evolution of the project.

## **B. Good Governance and Public Accountability:**

**B.1 The field:** Promoting rule of law, good governance, and public/democratic accountability had limited potential for institutional impact pre-revolutions. The more serious civil society organizations did not engage on the issue and bilateral donors dominated the development of projects with little impact.

1. *Monitoring, reporting, and pursuing accountability.* The ARO recognized the lack of avenues for institutional changes but sought to strengthen the capacity of civil society groups to proactively engage with the legal systems as litigants and as observers/commentators. Civil society oversight and reporting is key to identifying deficiencies and needed reforms. A partnership with Avocats Sans Frontiers (ASF) in Tunisia is focused on this aspect.
2. *Legal reforms and technical assistance.* From constitution making to other policy and legislative processes, input from civil society and technical assistance to governments is key to ensuring the emerging legal frameworks safeguard human rights. This is pursued through strategic partnership

with the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) and the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ).

## **B.2 Concepts:**

1. *The Think Tanks and Policy formulation project.* Partially drawing on an ongoing knowledge production mapping project of George Mason University, the project will examine the existing patterns of policy formulation from inception to adoption and identify more successful models for informing policy debates in the still shaping systems and support the development of such models. In particular, support to university based research centers, fellowships and other targeted interventions will be assessed and piloted in this cross cutting ARO initiative.
2. *The constitutional institutions.* As constitutions are adopted in the region, ARO will focus on implementation of the constitutions and constitutionally mandated institutions in particular - from national centers for human rights to constitutional courts and transitional justice mechanisms, the ARO will aim to position OSF as provider of technical assistance and support in the development of related institutions. A first pilot in Morocco - where a specific opportunity exists – would contribute to developing this role for OSF and set a model for other countries to consider.
3. *Local Governance and decentralization.* The ARO intends to explore prospects for engagement on the local governance level and informing debates over decentralization as well as citizen participation in governance.

## **C. Economic policy, Development, Transparency, and Equitable Growth:**

**C.1 The field:** This is a new priority area for the ARO that is proposed to group existing transparency related engagement with new areas of key importance – development, economic policies, and equitable growth. There is huge demand and high expectations for economic reforms and fighting corruption.

1. *Budget work, budget transparency and IFI transparency.* Through a number of partnerships with international organizations we sought to build the capacity and interest of civil society actors in advocating for budget transparency as well as transparency of IFIs operating in the region. The International Budget Partnership (IBP) and the Bank Information Center (BIC) are the two primary partners.
2. *Economic policy, economic development and equitable growth.* Success in the formulation of successful economic policies and addressing issues of unemployment, inequities in development and associated corruption and nepotism are key factors that will make or break the revolutions.
3. *Transparency and Accountability of Corporations – including consumer protection.* Corruption is prevalent in the Arab World and high level corruption is often involving ruling elites. In the post revolution moment and through a bottom up as well as a policy oriented approach, the ARO will aim to achieve greater accountability for corporations and businesses starting from a consumer protection angle in parallel to fostering debates around corporate accountability, human rights, and corporate social responsibility.

## **D. Principal Collaborations:**

The R&G program collaborates with OSJI on LEP in Egypt, Clinical Legal Education in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine; legal aid reform in Jordan, statelessness research project, and other issues. This is in addition to collaboration with the human rights initiative on LGBT rights, and the International Migration Initiative on migrant workers in Lebanon and the Gulf.

## Women's Rights and Gender Development Program

### **Context:**

The status of women in the Arab region continues to be threatened in light of recent political developments. The region is plagued with political instability which has exacerbated with the recent wave of Arab revolutions. The state of conflict is a devastating factor that restricts opportunities for women's advancement. With the exception of the Gulf countries, economic underdevelopment and poverty prevail, resulting in limited opportunities for women in education, health care and employment. Women's participation in the labor force, estimated at 28 percent, is the lowest in the world.

With the outbreak of Arab uprisings and the ensuing rocky transitions, women's rights have been compromised. The increasing strength of Islamists and their assumption of power in Egypt and Tunisia added to emergence of other more conservative groups such as the Salafists have led to a visible regression in women's rights and continuous attempts to push them back to the private sphere. Women were excluded from decision making bodies in Egypt after the revolution, and in Tunisia, they found themselves in a position where instead of fighting to further improve their situation, they have to struggle to preserve the rights and gains they have achieved over the past decades.

**The Field:** Women's rights organizations in the region have flourished over the past two decades and worked rigorously to empower women and improve their realities. The level of knowledge and expertise and organization varies from one country to the other. Thousands of newly emerging initiatives and organizations are trying to play a role in the making of new realities in the region. With the current regression of the situation of women in the region, the future doesn't look promising and there is a need for intensive efforts by local, regional and international actors to guarantee that women will enjoy their rights as full citizens in their countries whether these countries are politically stagnant or going through transition.

**Partners:** Key players in promoting women's rights are spread across the region. ARO's prominent partners include The Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC) and BZU Institute of Women's Studies in Palestine, Women against Violence (WAV) and Kayan in Israel, Women and Memory Forum, Centre for Egyptian Women Legal Aid (CEWLA) and Nazra in Egypt, Centre for Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) and the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) in Tunisia and many others. ARO will continue to work with innovative ideas that feed into its strategy while opening the doors for new partnerships. The program supports these organizations through direct grants, support for research, re-granting work and facilitating networking with relevant organizations in the region and beyond.

ARO's partners are leading actors within their fields nationally and key players at the Arab regional level. They have extensive experience and have established good professional reputations and good practices where lessons could be drawn and adopted in the context of other organizations and/or other countries. Collaborations with these organizations will continue in 2014 through core support, project specific support and exploration of new regional programs to capitalize on their collective expertise and outreach. ARO partners are supported by like-minded funders and other diversified set of donors. The value of ARO funds lies in the flexibility ARO adopts and the deep understanding of the needs of the organizations. In addition, ARO maintains close involvement in the conceptualization and development of project ideas and in monitoring progress and participating in finding solutions for challenges facing implementation.

The Program will continue to collaborate internally with other ARO portfolios, and with OSF International women's program in relation to common countries of engagement, Justice Initiative in relation to protection of women in conflict countries, Rights initiative concerning LGBT rights and

disability rights projects, Scholarship and Fellowship Programs in relation to developing the field of women's studies and IMI regarding migrant and domestic workers. ARO will explore possibilities of collaboration with other programs such as Higher Education Support Program and the Youth Initiative when relevant.

The Program aims to support the field through provision of grants that enable organizations to continue their ongoing programs addressing violence against women and women's empowerment. The support also involves initiatives that strengthen Arab regional cooperation and coordination which has proved to be among the most effective approaches in advancing women's rights in the region. ARO's support is also geared toward addressing newly emerging challenges related to the transition. The program will continue to support better collaboration between women's rights and human rights organizations for better integration of a gender perspective in dealing with human rights violations and better knowledge and utilization of international human rights tools by women's rights activists.

***Main Strategic Priorities for 2014:***

- *Combat violence and discrimination against women*
- *Promote protection of women in conflict countries*
- *Enhance participation of women in all stages of transition*

**Program Concepts and Initiatives:**

- Conceptualization of a regional project on protection of women in conflict countries with the first phase under implementation in Palestine
- Regional coordination for enhanced women's role in democratic transition. This includes a regional project to combat sexual violence which has witnessed a drastic rise during and after the uprisings
- Developing and implementing a comprehensive capacity building program to address knowledge and skills gaps in the work of women's rights organizations
- Gender mainstreaming at the level of ARO's work through provision of advice to other ARO programs on how to incorporate a gender sensitive approach in their grant-making

**Expected Changes:**

1. *On Protection in conflict countries:* Initial stages of project to start in countries of conflict in the region beyond Palestine (Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria, Libya, Yemen and possibly Syria) based on lessons' learnt from the Palestinian experience.
2. *On Transition:* Women's concerns and demands are addressed during transition and women play a greater role in the political process
3. *On Capacity building:* A program that meets the pressing needs in knowledge and skills is devised and implemented by partner organizations and \or by ARO directly
4. *On Gender mainstreaming:* This will strengthen impact of ARO's work in the various thematic programs on women

The main comparative advantage the program enjoys is the extensive expertise of the thematic and geographic areas of focus, the trust that it has built with the partners and the flexibility and good understanding of the dynamics of the women's rights field in the region.

Our opponents are both repressive governmental forces that keep pushing women down by depriving them of their rights and insisting to control and oppress women through restrictive policies and legislation in addition to conservative religious forces especially those who have just assumed power in various transition countries in the region.

**Risks:**

1. Newly elected Islamist governments continue to suppress women's rights by enforcing Shariaa laws and regulations based on conservative interpretations
2. Possibilities of a complete breakdown of law and order in countries like Egypt may lead to chaos and disorder hampering the status of women to a great extent
3. The possibility of breakout of new wars in the region involving external players (Israel, Iran, Turkey or others) will lead to further deterioration of women's status.
4. Combined with restrictive NGO law, the chance that the foreign funding case gets back to the forefront in Egypt will add more pressure on organizations that may be faced with increasing pressure to decline grants from OSF. If this happens in Egypt or other countries, it will pose a real threat to OSF work.

**6. Other Significant Collaborations**

The women's rights program will collaborate with other ARO programs, IWP, OSJI, Human Rights Initiative, IMI, Higher Education Support Program, Public Health Program, Scholarship Program, Fellowship Program and others as needed. If the shared framework on population and development is approved, collaboration with many OSF programs will be consolidated and cooperation will be established with UNFPA, other UN agencies and donors. These collaborations bring financial resources as well as additional specialized expertise and networks of partners and players.

### **Media and Information Program**

The work of the Media and Information program of the Arab Regional Office consists of four specialized fields, each of which are addressed in turn below: Quality media content production; Social Innovation Through Media and Technology, Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Speech, and Access to Information

**A. Quality Media Content Production**

*Fields and Key Actors:* In the area of content, ARO's work encompasses three sub areas. The first involves fostering the presence of leading independent news outlets in closed media spaces. ARO has supported "anchor" news outlets that are standard setters in their respective countries for the production of quality independent news and opinion, operating often at the community level. Key partners targeted for support in this sector include Ammanet/Radio al-Balad in Jordan; Watan TV and Palestine News Network in Palestine; Sahafet Welad al Balad in Egypt; Deng Radio in Iraq; Yemen Times Radio in Yemen; Lakome in Morocco; and Shabab Libya FM; and Nawaat in Tunisia. Opportunities for support to emerging media players in Syria and Libya will be explored.

The second sub area is quality skills building and long form journalism production through investigative journalism training and reporting. The office will provide continued support for the region's leading investigative journalism network, Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ), which works with a number of ARO's direct assistance grantees mentioned above. Other key partners for whom support is envisioned are Public Service Broadcasting Initiative in Egypt which produces investigative content for broadcast media and has become a trend setter for long form, investigative journalism in Egyptian television. Core funding is proposed additionally to support emergent training centers for journalistic skills building in transitional countries, where media sectors are reforming in some cases from the ground up and professional skills development is most urgently in demand.

*Related Concepts:*

- **Towards Financial Sustainability for Independent Media Operators.** The proposed concept will seek to address challenges of financial sustainability and for independent media operators in the Arab region. The goal is to increase income generation and reduce donor dependence of independent news operators through business development and mentoring and the sharing of comparative global experience at the micro level, and by supporting an enabling business climate through the production of sectoral research and data at the macro level.
- **Broadcasting Reform.** The proposed concept aims to mainstream the right and practice of independents to broadcast, while also positioning the reform of state broadcasters toward a public service mission as a key media reform issue for government, civil society, and international donors. Goals would be placing broadcast reform on government agendas and realization of structural reforms. Target countries being considered are Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt.

## B. Social Innovation Through Media and Technology

### *The Field and Key Partners:*

The field is best described in terms of digital spaces which include collectives of digital activists and technologists who are producing online content, utilizing technology for advocacy; and providing civil society with tools to empower their work. Key partners that factor into support for the upcoming strategy period include Tunisia's **Nawaat.org**, **7iber.org** in Jordan; **Arab Digital Expression Foundation**, **Arab Techies**, **the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information** in Egypt; and **Al-Bawsala** in Tunisia. Each of these groups serves either as key news gathering and debate platforms for digital activists or as community spaces for developing digital advocacy, advocacy tools, and technical assistance to civil society groups.

## C. Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Speech

*The Field and Key Actors:* ARO has helped to spawn much of the Arab region's freedom of expression movement. Together with OSF Media Program it has seeded and helped to strengthen the leading CSOs that have been at the frontlines in defending assaults on press freedom and freedom of expression through provision of legal defense, research and advocacy, and media policy work. Key ARO partners that are proposed for continued support during the upcoming strategy period are: **Arabic Network for Human Rights Information** and the **Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression** in Egypt; **Tunis Center for Press Freedom** and the **Commission for Reform of Media and Communications** in Tunisia; **Maharat** in Lebanon, **MADA** in Palestine, and **I'lam** in Israel.

ARO support for its partners in the field will emphasize two main approaches that seek to address main challenges for partner CSOs. The first, at the programmatic level, seeks to develop research and advocacy that will feed into policy debates on media reform. The second is at the institutional level and will focus on strengthening governance structures, internal management, and fundraising ability while also working to improve media and communications for the benefit of advocacy work.

### *Related Concepts:*

- **Media Policy Reform.** The proposed concept seeks to favorably impact local policy debates on media reform through the production of local research and knowledge and advocacy. Government, groups and civil society actors require knowledge and expertise to help formulate debates and to advocate for sound regulatory environments. The concept will utilize grant making, scholarships, and advocacy around media reform policies while seeking to establish permanent research hubs or think tanks at the local level.

- **Eliminating Criminal Defamation.** The proposed concept will develop a multi-country, multi-stakeholder initiative to develop a campaign and policy initiative to reform criminal defamation statutes in the region.
- **Combatting the Use of technology for Surveillance** (exploratory and under discussion with OSF Media Program and OSF Information Program)

#### **D. Access to Information.**

Access to information legislation and other legal guarantees that enshrine the public's right to know strengthen the role of media as a watchdog and also promote government transparency and accountability in a broader sense.

*The Field and Key Actors:* Key partners identified for support during the coming strategy period include Al-Quds Center for Political Studies in Jordan, Support for Information Technology and Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression in Egypt; Maharat in Lebanon; and Touensa in Tunisia. General support for the coming period will emphasize the following: 1.) support for the adoption of FOI laws; 2.) formulating work to promote demand around ARO cross-cutting themes such as budget transparency, food security, and migrant workers' rights. Goals will include adoption of FOI legislation, increased citizen demand for information, and targeted deliverables from associated ARO concepts.

### **Arts & Culture**

**The Field:** The independent nonprofit arts and culture field in the Arab region emerged with force in the late nineties offering new knowledge and an alternative space for personal and community development traditionally controlled by the state's cultural and security bureaucracies. New voices began to emerge with an orientation towards social, civic and political issues and the breaking down of taboos. This period saw the development of a limited number of active regional service organizations that provide small grants, services and networking as well as presenting innovative performance and exhibitions to new audiences hungry for fresh ideas. Groups such as the Lebanese Plastic Arts Association, the Arab Image Collective and the Young Arab Theater Fund appeared as new platforms and developing small independent nonprofit spaces to present new voices and act as free places for congregation and debate.

Today artists, cultural operators and intellectuals are on the frontlines of the political uprisings in the Arab region and have contributed to the growing struggle for freedom, independence and engagement by broad segments of the population especially youth. The sector is positioned within civil society as a challenge and as an alternative to authoritarian, restrictive and insular state policies and more traditional and safe forms of artistic production. Artists and arts organizations have figured prominently in their engagement in the public sphere in multiple aspects and dimensions of the current uprisings, demonstrated by the role of artists to represent, mobilize, document and participate in the broad social mobilization underway. The current period of instability and transition presents almost unprecedented opportunities and demands for the open, critical and creative space that the arts and culture fields provide.

Grantees and Partners: Key trusted organizations that would help shape this strategy include The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC), Al Mawred Al-Thaqafy (Mawred), The Young Arab Theatre Fund (YATF), ArteEast and others. AFAC, Mawred and YATF are the key regional service and grant-making organizations in the arts and culture sector in the Arab region. ArteEast, Mawred and YATF are the most mature, knowledgeable and experienced presenters and disseminators of Arab arts and culture working regionally as well as in North America and Europe. Together they serve thousands of artists and reach important audiences including both mainstream and marginalized groups.



Support to these organizations in 2014 is envisaged through direct grants that support the field. Collaborations with them may entail the exploration of new areas of work, assessing unforeseen and emerging needs, learning and contributing to the donor landscape, exploring new boundaries in resource development and management, reflecting on and advancing the capacities and professional development of the sector, as well as identifying possible opportunities and knowledge that might enhance our other regional work.

#### **4. Program Concepts: Democratizing Access to Arts and an Initiative on Culture Policy**

Over the course of the four coming years, our strategy will pursue two distinct goals, one organized around mechanisms, platforms and spaces for dissemination, presentation, and engagement; the second goal supports cultural policy and reform initiatives and will improve professionalism in the field.

**A.** Advance production, improve dissemination and increase engagement in arts and culture particularly through activating independent spaces.

##### Outreach, Dissemination, and Development of existing and new arts and culture spaces:

- This work would support arts and cultural spaces where inspiration, learning, exchange and debate can take place especially in environments and locations where such spaces are rare or nonexistent, benefiting young and mid-career artists and their audiences. Partnerships and investments may also be made to private and creative sector entrepreneurs if they are able to contribute to novel diffusion platforms. Strategic partners include key grantees (YATF, AFAC, Mawred, ArteEast and others,) like-minded donors and foundations, creative venture entrepreneurs, web-based and IT entities and educational institutions.
- Help artists and cultural producers have the tools, resources and mobility to make their work available to wider audiences and new constituencies; through new mechanisms and platforms (including digital) to distribute films and music in the region and beyond. Develop collaborations/residencies between artists, photographers, filmmakers with our rights-based partners and other activists;
- If successful, contemporary artistic production will improve in quality, diversity and in reaching previously inaccessible audiences. More arts and culture places are animated and increasingly supported by their communities and constituents as measured in the increase and diversity of media coverage of works and programs, and increase in the number in audiences.

**B.** Enhance the creative sector's knowledge, professionalization and engagement in cultural policy reform and financial sustainability.

##### Cultural Policy and Reform:

Improve policy research, analysis and advocacy on matters including budget transparency, institutional, organizational and legislative reforms.

Arab partners would provide policy advice to governments and legislative bodies. Successful reform of the public sector's cultural infrastructure would also help in our first goal to improve diffusion and participation in culture by broader number of citizens. This area of work in cultural policy and reform is little explored. We and our partners would be leading the way in at this time of reform. At a further degree of intensity we would explore the establishment of a master's degree program in cultural policy and management at a regional university.

Financial Sustainability:

Support key organizations to develop internal as well as the field's capacities to strive for a healthy mix of revenue streams, resource mobilization and financial sustainability. Facilitate programs for the training and exchange of new leadership and a new cadre of resource mobilizers, fund raisers and development experts from the region.

**Risks and Challenges:** Work on reform can be challenging for foreign donors given the reoccurring issues around foreign aid. Also, reform of culture policies and increased public access may entail new constraints. Possible future opponents may include right-leaning, conservative and or religious political groups, movements and or governments.

6. Other Significant collaborations (partial and potential list)

Information Program (both in ARO and globally), Open Society Fellows and Scholarships Program, Documentary Photography Program, Africa Program and other interested regions; Youth Initiatives, SEDF, Think Tank Fund.