

Improving Foreign Support to Tunisia's Civil Society

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SUMMARY

Since the 2011 uprising, “civil society” is at the heart of cooperation and development strategies of the main international donors in Tunisia. The often stated objective is to reinforce the role of civil society to promote human rights and democratic reforms, as well as to assist civil society to grow and become stronger as part of a broader effort to promote democracy.

To concretise their support, these donors usually fund projects, which can be considered an aid delivery method known as “project-approach”. But in a political context where the notion of civil society is still blurry, where the role of Tunisian civil society organisations (CSOs) in the democratic process is not yet established, the project-approach as currently practiced is not sustainably contributing to the good realisation of the donors’ stated objective nor does it serve Tunisia’s consolidation of democracy. Therefore, adjustments must be applied to the way development aid is currently delivered to Tunisian CSOs, in order to allow them to go beyond mere project implementation and bring a qualitative contribution to Tunisia nascent democracy.

INTRODUCTION: FOREIGN AID TO TUNISIA AND THE PROJECT-APPROACH

Since 2011, foreign aid to Tunisia has tripled, going from 228 million euros in 2010 to 471 million euros in 2012, before reaching 790 million euros in 2014.¹ Since 2011, the European Union (EU) alone – the main donor in the country² – has allocated 34 million euros as direct support to civil society organisations operating in Tunisia in the framework of its bilateral cooperation with the country,³ and with the objective to strengthen the CSOs’ role in promoting human rights and democratic reforms. In an attempt to support local civil society organisations,

from 2011 to 2015, 29% of these funds were directly attributed to Tunisian registered non-for-profit organisations – the remaining 71% being granted to European organisations - in the form of grants ranging from 20 000 to 450 000 euros.⁴

In all cases, these grants were attributed to finance the implementation of projects, which can be defined, according to the EU, as “a series of activities aimed at bringing about clearly specified objectives within a defined time period and with a defined budget, which is specific to the project.”⁵

Funding projects is an aid delivery method, known as the project-approach, consisting in financing a stand-alone and self-contained action, with the objective to respond to visible, preferably specific problems for which concrete solutions are sought. It is to be distinguished from core funding, which finances the running costs of an organisation, including salaries and facilities, and not only costs related to a project.⁶ The project-approach is used by most and main donors in the country.

As will be argued in the following, in a context where the notion of civil society is yet not well understood neither by the general public nor by political actors and where the role and participation of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the democratic process is not yet clearly established, this approach is impacting civil society organisations in a way that is not leading to the realisation of the donors’ stated objective.⁷

The project-approach is to be criticized that it (1) challenges CSO’s global political missions, (2) boosts project related skills to the detriment of more structuring skills; and (3) detaches CSO’s from their base and from other organisations. Therefore, recommendations to improve foreign assistance to Tunisian CSOs⁸ will be presented in the conclusion.

1 Data obtained via <http://www.aidflows.org>.

2 The EU grants an average of 399 million euros annually.

3 Total obtained by summing up the available grants envelopes for CSOs as published on EU official website: <https://goo.gl/rhvRNB>.

4 Percentages obtained through data provided by the Financial Transparency System of the European Commission. See http://ec.europa.eu/budget/fts/index_en.htm.

5 See EU Commission: International Cooperation and Development – Project modality, <https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/node/1563>.

6 Core funding refers to financial support that covers basic “core” organisational and administrative costs of an organisation, including salaries of full-time staff, facilities, equipment, communications, and the direct expenses of day-to-day work. See EU Commission: Structured Dialogue, Technical Sheet – Aid Modalities, Core funding/operating grants, 2012, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/tpfis/mwikis/aidco/images/2/21/TF1_-_Core_funding_-_revisited_2.pdf.

7 The research for the paper has been based on numerous encounters and activities with CSOs and donors working in Tunisia. It is also the result of ten years of professional experience working in the aid delivery sector, either with donors’ institutions or with non-for profit organisations.

8 The paper targets non-for-profits organizations registered in Tunisia and receiving international funds. They are designated through the name “Civil Society Organizations” to stress their role and place in post-revolutionary Tunisia’s transforming political system.

1. AN APPROACH CHALLENGING TUNISIAN CSOS MISSIONS

At the core of the project-approach favoured by international donors lay grants for projects. Those grants usually follow a public announcement known as a “call for proposals”, which describe, in published guidelines or terms of references, the objectives and funding priorities, examples of eligible actions, and the available budget for an action. In order to benefit from a grant, an organisation has to present a project description and a project budget listing the expenses and costs directly related to the implementation of an action.

Donors’ evaluation criteria rely, among other criteria but for an important share, on the relevance of the proposed project to the objectives and priorities set in the guidelines of the call. Because of that, call for proposals have a strong capacity to orientate the action of a civil society organisation towards what has been identified in the call as priority needs. Even if the guidelines’ objectives and priorities have been defined through consultation of civil society organisations, the procedures implies that it is not about recognizing and financing initiatives identified and formulated from independent actors but about defining issues, target locations and target groups according to a frame of reference set by a specific call for proposals.

This approach can bring important modifications in the way an organisation functions and constitutes a challenge to the global political mission of a CSO:

- It confiscates the meaning of the action from an organisation: the call for proposals and its related guidelines impose a strict frame for any concrete action and empty from its substance the work that an organisation may have produced, such as constitution of a proper frame of references or own terms, wording, critics or innovation;
- It often pulls CSOs away from their own mission or objectives. In the exercise of responding to a call, many go through the experience of twisting practices, objectives and wording to make them better fit those stated in the donors’ guidelines. When applying to a call, the applicant is forced to translate actions and specific objectives in the donors’ vocabulary.

- The twist in words at the application stage continues throughout the implementation stage and into real practices. Project monitoring and final evaluation are guided by what has been set in the project description at the application and contracting stage and embodied into measurable indicators. Throughout the implementation phase, the grant beneficiary will have to make fit, according to these indicators, real actions into promised ones, pulling the organisation away from pursuing a long term and general political project and bringing it closer to attaining the objective of an isolated and punctual action.
- The project-approach leads organisations to spend time and efforts in defining activity-projects instead of political projects and drives CSOs away from the definition of a vision within which objectives are defined and for which the organisations would need, as a second step, to find best ways of implementation.

The project logic swallows the political vision and mission of a civil society organisation and in a country where CSOs are very much dependant from external funding, they find themselves in a constant research for funds and for projects not always compatible with the mission they had at the beginning of their, often voluntary, social and political engagement.

In recent years, Tunisia has experienced many organisations working, for instance, on a project dealing with local governance before shifting to a project setting libraries in rural schools, or working on school dropout of girls in rural areas before shifting to support social enterprises. These examples are not rare or anecdotic as sectors and themes changes from donors to donors and from call for proposals to call for proposals. It also makes it difficult for an organisation to develop a specialisation, an expertise and a reputation in a given domain and strictly focus on deepening the initial objectives they wanted to pursue.

Beyond implementing development projects, it seems difficult for Tunisian CSOs to precisely define their field of specialisation. Several define themselves as “citizen actions” or “development organisations”, confirming the lack of specialisation and development of an expertise, needed in the current political context. Checking on the on-line platform Jamaity.org, dedicated to Tunisian civil society organisations and counting 2839 registered entities, on a panel of 100 organisations, only ten have chosen just one domain of inter-

vention, 15 have selected four, 13 have selected six and four have even selected nine areas of intervention.

In locations where the number of CSOs is not as dense as in the capital of Tunis, activities can also be defined by its target location and not by a thematic or specific working area. For instance, and without judgement on the quality of the organisation’s work, the Association du Développement et des Etudes Stratégiques de Médenine has as main mission to “promote the development of the region”, according to its online presentation on Jamayti.org and has selected as field of specialisation “economic and social development”, “protection and promotion of national heritage”, “local development” and “art and culture”,⁹ thus blurring its strategic objective.

In addition, as can be seen from this finding, the approach does not facilitate a clear holistic view of the Tunisian civil society sector: who is and does what, and who to contact in case of a need of a technical opinion or contribution, especially in the framework of democratic reforms or when a more systematic dialogue between civil society and public authorities should be established. Moreover, without such a holistic view, a clear evaluation, relevant for Tunisia authorities and donors alike, of whether or not the Tunisian civil society and democracy matures cannot be made.

2. AN APPROACH MULTIPLYING PROJECTS-RELATED SKILLS

Certainly, the project-approach leads to the proliferation of project related profiles and boosts project related skills within Tunisian civil society. On a sample of 100 job announcements published on Jamayti.org, it is noticed that project-related positions represent 91% of the announcements.

This is mostly considered a positive effect in terms of the professionalization of Tunisian CSOs. However, this is done to the detriment of more structuring skills and profiles and is not contributing to the general sustainability of the concerned structures.

In too many cases, the positions of a project manager, project officer, project finance officer, project assistant, project administrative assistant,

project coordinator, monitoring and reporting officer or many else are usually directly paid by project funds and often stops when the funding stops.

Beyond the question of sustainability of these positions, paid and full-time project-related positions exists in a project-funded CSO while very often, other fundamental positions does not, such as managing or executing director of the organisation, communication officer at the organisation’s level or monitoring, evaluation and learning officer at the organisation level. These profiles are much more difficult to cover financially as, if they relate to the general functioning of an organisation, they are not considered as eligible costs in a project budget or are only partially financially covered.

Of course, it is valuable to foster project-related skills, but for the same position and the same skills, the impact is very different if it is oriented towards a specific project than towards an organisation as a whole entity. Take the example of a communication officer: communication on the project is usually heavily done, because most of the time it is required by the donor, however there is a huge unfilled need for Tunisian civil society organisations to communicate on their goal, their role, with their target groups, with their base or with their key stakeholders. Concerning monitoring and evaluation related positions, when they are directed towards a project, they evaluate a project only according to pre-set indicators while at the organisation level, it will allow to have a clear vision on the organisation overall impact and relevance of its associative project, correct actions and include a learning process within the organisation.

The lack in most cases of full-time and paid managing or executive director position within Tunisian non-for-profit organisations is the most problematic aspect. It raises nowadays real questions on the capacity of Tunisian civil society to sustainably bear a vision and contribute to better public policies or better respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Six years after the revolution, founders of the “post-revolution CSOs generation” have almost all withdraw from the leadership positions. Without financial means to recruit and keep an executive or managing director at the head of an organisation, CSOs that receive project-funding operate with hands but without a smart brain. They do implement projects with all the staff and means needed for it, but they often lack an overall management that will keep and advance the initial vision and mission of the organisation, provide operational

⁹ The profile of the organisation can be consulted on <http://jamayti.org/association/association-du-developpement-et-des-etudes-strategiques-de-medenine/>.

leadership and guide the long-term development of the organization.

The role of leadership and management is a question that stays outside the scope of the project-approach and of donors’ strategy as in the project-logic it is considered as an indirect cost that can only be taken in charge partially or on the administrative costs sometimes granted by the donor together with the project-related contribution. Moreover, it is never part of the evaluation criteria when granting a fund for a project. However, it is an aspect that has a direct impact on the efficiency of a project: Without this core position, smart leadership capabilities and a core vision within the organisation clearly defined and easily communicated and transmitted internally and externally, project-related staffs often engage without an idea about their own role and contribution to the organisation’s development. This lack of identification diminishes the impact of their contribution at both the organisation and the project level. The project might also be detached from the organisation core mission, as explained above, which hampers the project sustainable impact.

3. AN APPROACH DETACHING CSOS FROM THEIR BASE AND FROM OTHERS

The competition that calls for proposals and the project-approach create modifies Tunisian civil society organisations’ way to function with others, placing them in a competitive position with each other. The project-approach in particular creates a quasi-grant market with limited funds, and organisations which may cooperate with each other for similar goals finally find themselves competing against each other.¹⁰

The obligation of partnerships, often imposed by donors, is highly inefficient to curb this competitive effect. If it is set on paper, in practice, partnerships are rarely effective: disguised sub-contractors, cheap implementers, or refusing to take in charge cost-share, they are the source of infinite problems that the main grantee has to hide from the donor and deal with to respect its contractual obligations.

¹⁰ Moreover, with wide eligibility criteria such as those applicable to EU grant procedures, a Tunisian CSO is not only in competition with other Tunisian ones but also with international organisations, UN-related or EU based organisation. Under the asymmetric conditions of human, knowledge and financial capacities, this highly competitive atmosphere creates further burden and constrain to Tunisian CSOs.

These partnerships only occur because of the application process and are not envisioned as an operating choice of the applicant, but merely as part of a way to fulfil an eligibility condition or to win additional evaluation points.

Astonishingly, six years after the revolution, Tunisian CSOs have only rarely been able to effectively collaborate or set up operational networks outside of funded projects, diminishing also their capacities to better advocate on the long run.

Because the project-approach has led Tunisian CSOs to be mere project implementers, it has also affected the role non-for-profits can play in the social life.

By limiting their capacities to be critical or innovative concerning the country fragile transformation and its desperate needs, the project-approach has also limited associations’ capacities to relay emerging or disturbing issues or the voice of the unheard.

Emerging or disturbing issues are defined by the donor and receive a support limited in time and in funds. In addition, in the project-logic, donors often seek new topics, new actors, new actions and new issues instead of investing in the sustainability of already successful activities. The long term and consistency that social change needs is therefore challenged and CSOs are dragged towards mere assistance and charitable actions instead of long term and consistent ones.

Thus, instead of relaying demands or needs of donors, or being reduced to mere assistance for implementing an external reform agenda, Tunisian associations as autonomous entities are enrolled in addressing the country’s problems and should be strengthened in their capacities to work properly and full-steam ahead for reforms.

CONCLUSION

If the increase in the number of non-for-profits organisations registered in Tunisia has proved the end of the authoritarian regime, the project-approach pursued by most of international donors has not helped turn this quantitative boost into a qualitative one.

The project-approach has implied changes that are not necessarily contributing to consolidate the role of civil society in democratic reforms. Instead, it limits CSOs in a role of project implementer,

drives them away from a broader political vision, specialisation, and expertise, and disconnects them from other organisations, from their base and from their key stakeholders. Also, it doesn't contribute to strengthen and sustain the organisation on the long term.

RECOMMENDATIONS: FUND ASSOCIATIVE PROJECTS INSTEAD OF ACTIVITY PROJECTS

The main recommendation is to consider the contemporary political, economic and social context of Tunisia and the particular needs of Tunisian CSOs, and to support the overall strategic plan and operations of an organisation instead of its isolated and short-term actions.

As noticed above, this kind of support is often labelled as core funding and opposed to project-funding. But what is important in the core-funding approach is its objective, which is to provide an organisation with funds to allow it to maintain and sharpen a long-term focus on its strategic priorities and results, a space to concentrate, strategize and mature as an organisation.

Without going through heavy and long reform, donors can make space within their existing procedures for this objective and adjust their approach to fund the project at the base of an organisation – associative project - instead of encouraging isolated activity projects. This can be done through:

1. Re-Defining the Notion of “Project”

Projects to be funded should include, in their definition, a clear reference to the mission of the applicant organisation. Therefore, instead of a definition detached from all contexts and self-referring to itself, a donor should define project as: a set of actions, to be implemented within a defined time period and with a defined budget, aimed at bringing about the specific changes envisioned in the applicant's core mission. This way, donors will refine their strategy and clearly target projects that contribute to advance an organisation mission and vision.

2. Adding New Evaluation Criteria

Two evaluation criteria should systematically be taken into account in project selection: (1) relevance of the presented project to the mission of the organisation and (2) strategic focus of the organisation mission.

With these two evaluation criteria, the exercise of applying to a call will frame applicants to present projects consistent with their core mission and will be the occasion to sharpen the focus of the organisation.

Application forms shall therefore be adapted to include information on the long-term mission of the organisation, the organisation's main beneficiaries - and not only the presented project's beneficiaries – and past and planned efforts to advance the stated mission. Questions on leadership and governance should also be included to help evaluate the sustainability of the organisation and its ability to hold a strategic focus.

3. Accepting broader direct costs

Completing recommendation 1 and 2, organisation management related costs should be included in the accepted direct costs of a proposed project. Efficient organisation management has a direct impact on the efficiency of a project. And with a greater place given to the organisation mission in this revisited project-approach, these costs are more directly linked to the funded action.

Moreover, with the stated objective to strengthen the role of civil society organisations to contribute to Tunisia democratic transition, donors cannot leave any longer the question of organisation management outside of their strategy scope.

There is, of course, the possibility to go further with these recommendations and deeper into delivering development aid in a way that is more suited to the current context's needs. But with these adjustments, a number of institutional change processes could be triggered within the organization receiving funds: organisations can grow in stronger ownership, greater transparency, governance and internal control, and a better strategic and executive management; they can enhance and release creativity and innovation, improve their performance and through this improve advocacy and sustainability for the sake of Tunisia's democratisation.

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