Towards a new political imagination for education change:

The role of civil society in Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan

Maha Shuayb, Cathrine Brun, Mai Abu Moghli,
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List of Acronyms

CSO   Civil Society Organisations

IGOs   Inter Governmental Organisations

NGOs   Non-Governmental Organisations

MENA   Middle East and North Africa

MOU   Memorandum of Understanding

PLA   Palestinian Liberation Authority

PNA   Palestinian National Authority

Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, civil society has been considered a more plausible and promising route for bringing about change in a region dominated by stagnation and restricted political movement. The Arab Spring brought limited political change and failed to realise the aspiration of expanding democracy in the region. As a result, attention turned again to civil society with the hope that it can drive change and mitigate the impact of political stalemate and deteriorating economic and social conditions in many Arab countries.

Education is a sector where the number of civil society organisations (CSOs) has significantly increased over the past decades. Despite this growth, there is limited research on education reform in the MENA region, particularly concerning the role civil society plays in policy reform. This study investigates how civil society in Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine engages with education reform and change.

For this study, civil society is defined as an umbrella term that includes organisations largely independent from the state. We excluded organisations affiliated with sectarian or religious groups, as these are historically linked to existing political factions. Only in the case of Jordan we included one religion-affiliated NGO as religious organisations in Jordan do not historically play a major role in education reform. However, we acknowledge that civil society can be entangled with the state: some members have strong ties or even board members who were officials within the ministry or political groups. We also consider the overlap and increasing hybridisation of social movements and civil society.

The study comprised a mapping exercise of CSOs focusing on education in the three selected countries. Following the mapping, a selection of organisations representing various categories was chosen for in-depth case studies. Interviews were conducted with senior leaders from these organisations. In total, 25 in-depth interviews were conducted in Lebanon, 8 in Palestine, and 9 in Jordan. These interviews provided comprehensive

insights into the operations, challenges, and strategies of a diverse range of CSOs in the region.

The mapping documented the history, objectives, membership and approach to change. We grouped the organisations into seven main types of collectives: 1) Service providers who were attempting to support the communities by improving access and quality of education; 2) Developmental NGOs, originating from social movements, which advocated for social justice and systemic change; 3) Rights-based groups or movements which mainly comprised teachers' and parents' unions 4) Professional associations which consisted of members from the same profession and aimed to advance their field, improve skills, and maintain high standards; 5) Religious educational initiatives which were providing access to education in addition to a wide array of services; 6) Royal development and service initiatives which combined development and service provision; 7) Political parties, which focused on education and were among the few civil society groups permitted to operate due to political restrictions. The fifth type operated in both Lebanon and Jordan, whereas the sixth and seventh types were only included in the analysis in Jordan.

Our study focused primarily on the first five types of collectives. Political and religious organisations which are strongly affiliated to the political regime were excluded in the study except in the case of Jordan where we included one organisation affiliated to a religious organisation. The decision to do so was largely because of the lack of CSOs in Jordan due to restrictions by the government.

CSOs were mostly present and active in Lebanon. Conversely, the political regime in Jordan only allowed Royal organisations to be active. As for Palestine, both the occupation and the Palestinian Liberation Authority (PLA) deterred CSOs from seeking to engage with reform and educational change. Lebanon marked a distinct case. Although there has been a large margin for civil society activism to exist since the 1970s, the role of CSOs has significantly shifted towards service provision instead of reform and social justice. Overall, interviews with representatives of these collectives revealed a de-politicised approach taken up by CSOs.

From social movements to service provision

Most of the interviewed CSOs did not have a clear and crystalised view on their approach to change. Only one professional group and one alternative teachers' union demonstrated a clear vision around reforming certain laws or policies. The remainder had broad objectives focused on widening access to education or improving the quality of schooling.

When asked about their engagement with policy change and reform, most CSOs did not appear concerned with influencing or shaping policy, either intentionally or unintentionally. A few of these have intentionally avoided policy engagement due to a lack of trust in the potential for reform, opting instead to establish alternative systems. Others were simply not concerned with policy change, focusing primarily on operational activities and service provision. The growing service-driven role of civil society was observed in all three countries, as structural reform or change in the educational system was handed over to the government and experts. There was a dominant view that policy and structural change in the system are no longer within the remit of civil society. This view reflects the growing depoliticisation of civil society's work and role. As external aid to education in these three countries increased over the past two decades, the role

of civil society has shifted to providing support for the funding agencies as well as the government in implementing some of these projects.

However, professional groups and rights-based groups (unions) continued to push for some structural change albeit specific to their interest and focus. . For example, improving access and quality of education which was a key demand for teachers' unions in Lebanon during the 1970s have all but disappeared from the current discourse. The governments have attempted to undermine the mobilisation of these groups either by oppression or co-optation. In Jordan, these groups were detained. In Lebanon and Palestine they were either dissolved or co-opted.

Apathy towards policy making

There was a prevailing view among CSOs that policy change is beyond their reach. This perception stems from the belief that policymaking takes place behind closed doors and is heavily influenced by donors. These views discouraged many CSOs from engaging in policy advocacy. Moreover, the establishment of national educational systems as part of state-building processes has reinforced the notion that education reform is a state-controlled matter, further diminishing the perceived role of CSOs. As a result, many CSOs chose to focus on service provision rather than policy influence. Under this umbrella, organisations often collaborated with governments to improve access to education, viewing direct policy engagement as unnecessary or unfeasible.

Conversely, some CSOs, particularly those with antagonistic relationships with the government, opted to create alternative educational systems rather than attempting to influence state policies. These organisations often saw the state as an obstacle rather than a partner in achieving educational reform.

Rights-based groups, while interested in policy change, primarily concentrated on job-related demands, such as improving pay and working conditions. This narrow focus has led to a neglect of broader issues such as educational quality and accountability. In Lebanon, for instance, teachers' unions that once advocated for educational equity and equality have rather narrowed down their agendas over the past two decades. Economic hardships faced by many teachers in the region became the priority. To this end, it was difficult for teachers' unions to work towards a more comprehensive educational agenda.

The trends identified in the study highlight the varied and often limited ways in which CSOs perceived and engaged with policy change. The combination of perceived inaccessibility to policymaking, the state-controlled nature of education reform, economic challenges, and the belief that policy advocacy is outside their purview contributed to a lack of focus on structural change among CSOs.

Challenges facing civil society

CSOs in Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine face significant challenges in engaging with policy reform in education due to centralised government control, reliance on donor funding, and perceptions of policy influence being beyond their reach. Governments use education to reinforce political agendas, making systemic reform complex and highly

political. Donor dependency forces CSOs to focus on service provision to secure funding, alienating them from meaningful policy engagement. Education unions prioritise immediate job demands over broader reforms, further limiting their influence. Most CSOs concentrate on practical changes rather than structural reforms, and the short-term focus driven by project-based funding hampers long-term strategic development.

Neoliberal values have significantly shaped civil society's work by promoting market-oriented approaches and emphasising efficiency and measurable outcomes. With reduced state funding, many CSOs now rely heavily on private donors, influencing their agendas and leading to increased professionalization and bureaucratization, often distancing them from grassroots activism. Neoliberalism's focus on individual responsibility has steered CSOs towards initiatives that empower individuals rather than addressing systemic issues. The rise of public-private partnerships has integrated CSOs with business and government entities, sometimes compromising their principles. Globalisation under neoliberalism has fostered transnational networks among CSOs, enhancing their reach but sometimes prioritising international agendas over local needs. As most education reforms in the three countries were funded by donors and aid, CSOs became increasingly involved in the implementation of many of these donor-driven projects. This not only shifted their agendas but by becoming reliant on external funding and project cycles, their advocacy role diminished as well as their reform agendas. It is worth mentioning that most of the NGOs except for unions had paid staff which meant these organisations had to secure salaries and income making them dependent on donors' funding agenda. Moreover, as many of the donor funded projects are for a limited period, CSOs are unable to have a long-term independent plan.

Re-creating a political imagination

Upon sharing these findings with the interviewed CSOs, diverse views were shared. In Lebanon, there was a consensus on the need for recreating a new political imagination for the civil society in the field of education. CSOs in Lebanon acknowledged the shortcomings of the current mode of apparatus. They called for creating a coalition that can adopt a reformative approach to changing and influencing policy and practice. Alternative unions discussed their efforts towards redefining the identity of the unions, shifting from self-interest groups to ones with reformative agendas. Conversely, in Palestine and Jordan, the political realities largely limit the ability to create a space for manoeuvring or influencing the system.

One important space to explore, yet not covered fully in our study, is the role of academic spaces to help provide a much-needed critique for the dominated neoliberal philosophy and mode of apparatus. While we examined the role of two research centres in Lebanon and Jordan, both seemed to be disconnected from any direct engagement with a reform agenda. Yet so far, higher education is currently part of the a-political space as it is either under the grip of the regime as the CSOs or part of the neoliberal way of working. Breaking this cycle to liberatory politics that goes beyond the narrow self-interest is essential for a new politics of education.

1. Introduction

In the mid-1990s, amidst political stagnation in many Arab countries, civil society emerged as a ray of hope for mobility and change in the Arab world (Ibrahim 1998, Yom 2005). This discourse gained momentum in the following years, leading to the development of a flourishing civil society over the next two decades. Interest in civil society in the Arab world also garnered interest from international organisations, including independent charities, intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) and development agencies of various governments, reflected in increased international funding of this sector. The Arab Spring further underscored the role of CSOs, prompting questions concerning their role in igniting social and political movements. At the same time, there has been a growing scepticism regarding their agendas and operational methods (Tamari 1998). A significant number of these organisations, especially NGOs, have opted to concentrate their efforts on education initiatives[1].

Since the creation of nation-states, reforming the educational system has been seen as a matter of national sovereignty. Reforming education has thus been understood to take place behind closed doors and by officials and experts appointed by the government. Despite their exclusion from reform processes, many CSOs and collectives in education have been established in the past 30 years. With the proliferation of civil society in the Arab world, more CSOs in the field of education were also established.

Research Questions

Despite substantial investments in education reforms across most Arab countries (Akkary 2014), the role of civil society in initiating or contributing to these efforts remains largely unexplored. In this study, we focus on CSOs and collectives dedicated to education initiatives. Our main objective is to understand how these organisations engage with policy change, with a specific focus on Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. More specifically, the study examines the following questions:

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1   https://ngoexplorer.org/region/undp/arab-states

1. What forms of mobilisation exist in the field of education in each of the three countries? Who are the groups involved in mobilisation? What themes are the focus of mobilisation?
2. How did the agendas and objectives of CSOs shift over time amidst the changing political and economic contexts?
3. How do CSOs define change? What kind of change do they succeed in achieving?
4. What factors shape the approach of CSOs towards policy change?

CSOs in Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine share some common challenges that impede their ability to drive systemic reforms and hold governments accountable. At the same time, the context in Palestine is quite different as CSOs work under an occupation force and a local authority that collaborate closely with Israel. Jordan on the other hand, operates in an extremely securitised and policed political environment where major restrictions are imposed on civil society movements whose role has been replaced by Royal organisations that perform the charity, aid and development work in the country. Lastly, in Lebanon, while having greater freedom for civil society to mobilise and act, the sectarian power sharing regime makes reform a complex process. In this study, we draw some comparisons amongst these countries. Nonetheless, we are aware of their distinct political contexts.

To investigate the above research questions, we mapped CSOs in the field of education in the three countries and we analysed their history, mission, vision, membership, and activities. A selection of the different types of CSOs were selected. Their leaders were interviewed about their approach to policy change. In this report, we provide an overview of CSOs in the Arab world in general, with a focus on the three selected countries. We present our qualitative methodology, followed by the thematic analysis of the study findings and a concluding section.

Defining Civil Society

There are numerous approaches to defining civil society. The traditional view of civil society posits it as comprising institutions that operate independently from the state. Civil society is often defined comprising all public spaces that are independent of both the state apparatus and the economic market, serving as venues for political participation and discursive interaction. It is a site of political and social action and contestation, characterised by a diverse range of actors with different, sometimes competing, agendas and repertoires of action. However, Doyle (2016) presents a Gramscian perspective on civil society to indicate that more realistically civil society exists in the space *between* personal life (family, friends) and the large-scale bureaucratic structures of the state and production processes. This sphere includes various organisations, associations, clubs, labour unions, religious institutions, and the media. While civil society and social movements are often studied separately (Porta, 2020), in this research, we understand the two as nested and overlapping with increasing hybridisation. To this end, our starting point is to apply 'civil society' as an umbrella concept in this study and as we return to below, develop a more contextualised understanding. There is often believed to be a correlation between democracy, democratic values and civil society with an understanding of the autonomous civil society – autonomous from the state and the market (Altan-Olcay & Icduygu 2012, Doyle 2016). The international donor community in the countries studied, operated on this logic with funding to CSOs believed to promote democracy and development (Doyle

2016). However, as we show below, close connections between elites and civil society, as well as sectarianism and the extension of state control over its citizens by way of various regulations and monitoring mechanisms, limit the autonomy of CSOs. Furthermore, we demonstrate how laws and regulations are used to prosecute activists in attempts to silence peaceful criticism against the authorities (AbiYaghi et al. 2019).

2. A Background on Education CSOs in Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine

Over the past decade, notable policy reforms and changes in the Arab region have been driven by the rise of CSOs. This increase in CSOs has publicised the concept of civil society and sparked interest in using it to address state shortcomings. In education reform, mobilisation generally involve various individuals and groups focusing on enhancing educational quality, accessibility, and relevance. They advocate for increased investment in education, promoting inclusive policies, and ensuring equal opportunities for all. Notably, agendas and objectives in civil society has changed over time. Initially stifled by state and tribal loyalties, CSOs later gained momentum as states failed to meet citizens' needs. To this end, their focus has shifted towards democratisation, good governance, public participation in decision-making, and promoting social and political change through political awareness and collective action.

Nonetheless, when it comes to practice and making effective change, CSOs in the Arab world have been facing significant hurdles. Some of the general barriers hindering the role of CSOs in the Arab world are centred around Eurocentrism, authoritarianism and neoliberalism. These issues are outline below. The discussion is followed by an analysis of the particular contexts of CSOs in the three countries under study, particularly amidst an authoritarian regime in Jordan, settler colonialism in Palestine and sectarianism in Lebanon. Finally, the discussion highlights how these social, economic and political issues play out in practice, particularly when it comes to the role that CSOs play in education reform in the countries understudy.

CSO Challenges amidst Eurocentrism, Authoritarianism, and Neoliberalism

Civil society in the Arab world has gained attention and influence recently, prompting significant scholarly interest. However, there remains various barriers that hinder CSOs from enacting change in the Arab world. First, and foremost, is the issue of eurocentrism.

According to Karajah (2007), the idea of CSOs is heavily influenced by Western and colonial perspectives, which often do not align with the unique historical, cultural, and social contexts of the Arab world. Acknowledging this discrepancy is crucial for addressing how CSOs have come about in this region, what roles they play and what impacts they ought to enact. This conundrum begs the question whether the rise of CSOs in the Arab region truly reflects an internal mobilisation or is rather driven by external influences, such as international funding. Unpacking these underpinnings is important to address the practical implications of CSOs for policy reform. According to Karajah (2007), in order for CSOs to thrive in Arab countries and foster social change, they must be approached with a historical and culturally sensitive framework (Karajah, 2007). This highlights a need to define civil society within the Arab context, considering linguistic and cultural aspects such as active individuals, freedom, independence, volunteerism, transparency, and legal status.

Another main issue that CSOs in the Arab world are faced with is authoritarianism. Historically, the lack of a conducive environment in Arab states has hindered the development of civil society. Cavatorta and Durac (2010) highlight the intricacies of these authoritarian regimes in different Arab countries. Examining the period from the late 1980s to 2005, the authors argue that domestic political and legal conditions have given rise to civil society in the Arab world. Despite this, there has been no significant movement towards democratisation. Authoritarian regimes have managed to maintain control through vague laws, administrative hurdles, and interference by security services. Civil society groups, in response, often rely on patronage networks to navigate these constraints, which had inadvertently been reinforcing authoritarian practices. Relatedly, Hamid (2010) argues that many NGOs in the Arab world are akin to governmentally organised NGOs (GONGOs), limiting their effectiveness. Even in countries where pro-democracy NGOs exist, these continue to face severe legal restrictions, leading to self-censorship and state control, failing to promote regime change. Overall, the role of civil society in democratic transitions has been weak in the Arab world, as compared, for instance, to Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Besides state restrictions on CSOs' autonomy, the complexities of international funding create a significant dilemma in the Arab world. Over the past decade, policy reforms in the region have been influenced by Western funding, particularly from the United States and the European Union, with initiatives like the Middle East Partnership Initiative supporting economic, political, and educational reforms (Hamid 2010). However, international funding for NGOs in education often prioritizes economic, social, and cultural issues over political opposition, limiting broader democratization efforts. Shifting political contexts and fluctuating US influence in the region have further complicated the acceptance of foreign funding, particularly as Western support typically targets non-political initiatives and is shaped by bilateral relations. Despite increased funding after 9/11, significant reforms remain elusive due to government restrictions and the limited scope of such initiatives. While some legal and institutional reforms have occurred, efforts toward democratization and overcoming authoritarian tendencies face persistent challenges (Abdelaziz 2017). Moreover, some Arab CSOs struggle with accepting Western funds due to political sensitivities, further disadvantaging true opposition movements and limiting their effectiveness against well-funded regimes (Hamid 2010).

The Role of CSOs in Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon

Having explored the overarching issues inherent to CSOs in the Arab world, this section delves deeper into the particular problems that hinder the potential effectiveness of CSOs in each of the countries under study. It specifically highlights the authoritarian regime in Jordan, settler colonialism in Palestine and sectarianism in Lebanon.

The Case of Jordan

The development of civil society in Jordan has been intertwined with the country's historical and geopolitical context. Since gaining independence in 1946, Jordan has been ruled by a traditional authoritarian regime, with the monarchy wielding extensive executive powers (Cavatorta & Durac 2010). Throughout the Cold War, Jordan's authoritarianism was overlooked by Western allies, who viewed the monarchy as a valuable ally in the region. However, pressure for political liberalisation mounted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, leading to initial steps towards democratisation under the rule of King Hussein. Reforms included general elections and the lifting of martial law and the ban on political parties (Cavatorta & Durac 2010). These reforms, though initially promising, ultimately faltered, with subsequent elections facing criticism for lack of genuine policy-making influence and electoral irregularities.

One explanation for the stalled democratisation process is the intricate international situation, with Jordan's strategic alliances influencing domestic politics. The signing of a peace agreement with Israel and strengthened ties with the United States shaped Jordan's political landscape, with opposition parties capitalising on popular discontent with these decisions. Additionally, market-oriented reforms that aimed at integrating Jordan into the global economy brought economic growth but also increased inequality and social discontent. The ruling elites prioritised economic and security concerns over democratisation.

Critiques of the authoritarian regime and the limitations of democratisation efforts persist, with CSOs navigating a restrictive legal framework. Despite challenges, Jordanians maintain a degree of freedom of association and expression, contributing to ongoing societal debates. However, the prospects for meaningful democratisation remain uncertain as Jordan's geopolitical and economic realities continue to shape its political landscape. Education has been a focal point for civil society mobilisation and reform efforts in Jordan, reflecting broader societal aspirations for development and progress.

The Case of Palestine

Over the past decade, significant policy reforms and changes have unfolded in Palestine, largely propelled by the NGO sector. Notably, the enactment of 'The Charitable Associations and Community Organisations Law' in 2000, influenced by the Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO), marked a pivotal moment in safeguarding NGO autonomy (Hammami 2000). Moreover, the establishment of the $15 million Palestinian NGO trust fund by the World Bank further bolstered this sector (Hammami 2000). Despite national efforts to regulate NGOs, such as through the creation of a Higher Council of NGOs, the NGO community mobilised to defend their rights in engaging in legal reforms and maintaining autonomy. However, critiques have emerged directed towards these efforts, highlighting concerns such as NGOs living off donor funds without significant impact on human rights and the rule of law. Moreover, the NGO sector faced accusations of being foreign agents and

struggled with challenges in effecting change in peace processes. Additionally, critiques within the Palestinian left regarding structural transformations and lack of democracy have been voiced. Despite these challenges, NGOs have made strides in addressing daily problems and needs of the population, ranging from health and education to employment and social security. Efforts have sparked dialogue and potentially influenced political prospects, though challenges persist in forming links with grassroots constituencies and engaging in broader political democratisation (Hammami 2000).

The Case of Lebanon

The case of Lebanon represents that of a significant influence of sectarian dynamics. Lebanon's political system operates on a sectarian basis, with key roles designated to specific religious sects. Similarly, its civil society operates within a unique political framework characterised by sectarian power-sharing. Established through the Lebanese National Covenant of 1943, the political system divides power among the 19 officially recognised religious sects, which has led to a fragile stability. The consociational system aimed to prevent conflict post-Lebanese civil war. However, it led to weaknesses in national institutions and identity due to sectarian allegiances overshadowing national sentiment.

The weakness of Lebanon's political system stems from sectarian power-sharing arrangements, hindering the pursuit of genuine democratic principles (Cavatorta & Durac 2010). While Lebanon is not a classic authoritarian state, its sectarian system creates a delicate balance that limits any group or leader from acquiring excessive power, contributing to a certain degree of liberalism despite the risk of civil conflict. Foreign occupation and indirect control have historically influenced Lebanon's political system, with occupiers hesitant to impose authoritarian rule to maintain the sectarian balance. Therefore, instead of embodying a pathway to democracy, Lebanon's political system is consolidating a status quo where the main sects are content with their influence, hindering the development of a strong democracy amid a volatile international situation (Cavatorta & Durac 2010).

Despite this, Lebanon's civil society is more vibrant and liberal compared to other Arab states, due to the necessity of maintaining sectarian balance. However, significant policy decisions often risk sparking civil conflict. External interventions and influences have further complicated Lebanon's political landscape, frequently threatening its stability and undermining efforts to strengthen democratic institutions. Despite the fragile democracy due to sectarian arrangements, Lebanon displays political vivacity and pluralism uncommon in the region. Foreign occupation and control, along with the absence of ingredients for a robust democracy, contribute to its unique political landscape.

CSOs and Education Reform in the Arab World

Having explored the contextual barriers in each of the three countries under study, the role of CSOs in education reform is discussed. The review demonstrates the various mobilizations enacted by CSOs over the past decades for education reform in the Arab world while highlighting how the authoritarian and neoliberal forces play out in practice.

Over the past decade, the Arab world has experienced three distinct stages of civil

society, particularly focused on education. Initially, civil society groups, including human rights and women's organisations, thrived within authoritarian regimes (Halaseh 2012). They played crucial roles in building a rights-educated generation and advancing gender mainstreaming, which pressured regimes to ratify international treaties on women's rights and improve education access. However, this progress was curtailed as Arab regimes imposed tight regulatory control, introducing intrusive regulations and national legislation that hindered civil society operations, leading to a lack of an enabling legal framework and external obstacles (Abdelaziz 2017).

More recently, international democracy-promoting organisations have worked to expand civil society's role in political life and decision-making. This stage, often termed as NGOisation and closely intertwined with neoliberalisation, saw civil society groups engaging in domestic election observation and civic advocacy, which augmented public participation and government accountability (Halaseh 2012). However, this phase also faced critique for being donor-driven and focused on narrow, technical issues rather than grassroots empowerment, which sometimes led to a disconnect from local needs and priorities (Hamid 2010). Concurrently, Arab youth, marginalised by states and CSOs, have formed self-help groups to voice their demands, influenced by youth-driven revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt (Halaseh 2012). These youth groups, along with CSOs, have been instrumental in driving policy reforms and addressing educational and social challenges in the region.

Moreover, unions in the Arab World, particularly in Lebanon played a role in advocating for education reform particularly during the 1970s. However, their discourse has largely shifted to self-interested agendas. Suffering from oppression and silencing, some unions have been co-opted by the regime and ruling parties while other activists have been detained. Unions have traditionally played a self-restricted role emphasizing the interest of the group often without engaging in the public issues of concern. According to Cohen (1985), this 'self-limiting radicalism' rejects the large-scale transformation model for fear that this may jeopardies their autonomy and independence. As a result, critics claim that unions pursue narrow self-interests (generous salaries and benefits, better working conditions, job security), often at the expense of broader educational interests (Angell 1981, Berube 1988, Nelson, Carlson & Palonsky 1996). They refuse to believe, however, that unions have a broad range of interests, and they fail to acknowledge the constraints unions encounter in the pursuit of their interests.

Yet this view has been challenged by union reformists who argued that teacher unions put aside the mantle of industrial unionism (Kerchner & Koppich 1993, Kerchner & Mitchell 1988, Streshly & DeMitchell 1994) and create a 'balance between teachers' legitimate self-interests and the larger interests of teaching as an occupation and education as an institution' (Kerchner & Caufman 1993, p. 19, emphasis included). However, it would be simplistic to assume that unions should abandon the industrial unionism approach and embrace a professional model without understanding the complex process within a union and how members perceive the role of the unions particularly professional ones such as teachers' unions. The literature related to teacher unionism describes the relationship between the self-interests and broader educational interests of teachers as paradoxical, a problem involving two different sets of interests demanding the union's resources. Teachers' long-term interests include education quality, but the union must continue to allocate a considerable portion of its resources to meet teachers' immediate context-based needs, most of them related to economic welfare and working conditions.
Overall, the literature demonstrates that civil society in the Arab world works towards

education reform. Various mobilisations have advocated for changes to improve educational quality, access, and relevance. These efforts include better educational policies, curriculum reforms, and increased educational opportunities. Overtime, the agendas and objectives of education reform have evolved to address deficiencies and now focus on comprehensive reforms for quality, equity, and relevance. For instance, CSOs engage in activities like forging partnerships with schools, involving local organisations, and advocating for broader societal participation. Through dialogue on educational needs and curriculum development, CSOs nurture democratic citizenship by prioritizing critical thinking and practical skills. However, criticisms abound, including concerns about learning quality and disparities in educational access. Moreover, efforts at educational reform in the Arab world face challenges such as ephemeral reform due to quick turnover of officials, bureaucratic obstacles, and the emergence of disparities in education systems (Akkary 2014). Authoritarian regimes and neoliberal policies pose significant barriers, with top-down control over curriculum and the rise of private education exacerbating inequalities. Overcoming these challenges requires a hybrid approach that combines state involvement with societal partnerships.

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative methodology, involving the mapping of CSOsand conducting case studies through individual interviews with the leadership of selected organisations.

Mapping of NGOs

Using an analytical coding framework, the mapping process examined variables such as the history of the organisations, their aims and objectives, approaches to change, activities, and membership. This mapping excluded INGOs and UN-related groups, focusing solely on local and national entities. We initially did a broad mapping of CSOs involved in education and targeted a smaller section of organisations whose profile indicated an ambition in working '/;for change. The initial analysis of these organisations' activities, influenced by the political contexts of Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan, facilitated the categorisation of these entities.

Categories of Organisations

1. **Service Provider-Developmental**: These NGOs operate on a spectrum from short-term objectives like providing immediate services (e.g., healthcare, education, humanitarian aid, social support) to long-term development goals, such as enhancing community capacities and promoting sustainable growth. While many currently focus on direct service delivery due to ongoing crises, their foundational mission often targets systemic change and sustainable development.

2. **Developmental**: Originating as part of broader social movements, these NGOs advocate for social justice, address systemic issues, and promote community empowerment within a collective effort framework.

3. **Rights-Based Groups or Movements**: These collectives are dedicated to advocating for rights of teachers or students and include teachers' unions (some inactive as

they have been either dissolved or coopted by the state or ruling political parties), alternative teachers' syndicates (independent from the political parties) and as well as parents' associations.

4. **Professional Associations**: Comprising individuals from the same profession, these organizations aim to advance their field and uphold high professional standards. They focus on enhancing professional skills, status, and working conditions rather than pursuing broader social change.

5. **Royal Development and Service Initiatives**: Predominantly found in Jordan, these initiatives focus on both development and service provision.

6. **Religious Educational Initiatives**: Common in Jordan and Lebanon, these organizations provide educational services. The study briefly covered these in Jordan only, where political restrictions limit the number of active CSOs.

7. **Political Parties**: Similar to religious educational initiatives, these were included in the study only in Jordan, where they represent some of the few civil society groups allowed to operate and focus on education.

Case Studies and Interviews

Following the mapping, a selection of organisations representing the various categories was made for in-depth case studies. Interviews were conducted with senior leaders from these organisations. In total, 27 in-depth interviews were conducted in Lebanon in 25 different organisations, 8 interviews/organisations in Palestine, and 9 in Jordan. These interviews provided comprehensive insights into the operations, challenges, and strategies of a diverse range of CSOs in the region.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using abductive coding methods. The analysis yielded comprehensive thematic insights into the landscape of educational civil society initiatives in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan. These discoveries were collaboratively reviewed and debated within the group, culminating in a definitive set of primary themes that emerged from the interview data as presented in the findings section.

It is noteworthy that researchers in Jordan and Palestine encountered challenges during the data collection period, which appear to mirror the prevailing conditions of CSOs amidst an authoritarian regime. In Palestine, it was challenging to secure an interview with the ministry. However, in Jordan, the researcher encountered outright refusals from some CSOs to conduct interviews, covert refusals through prolonged delays in scheduling interviews for over three months, and constant excuses of being too busy or failing to respond, all of which resulted in these interviews not being conducted. This could be due to their hesitation in contributing to a topic related to policy making in a way or another.
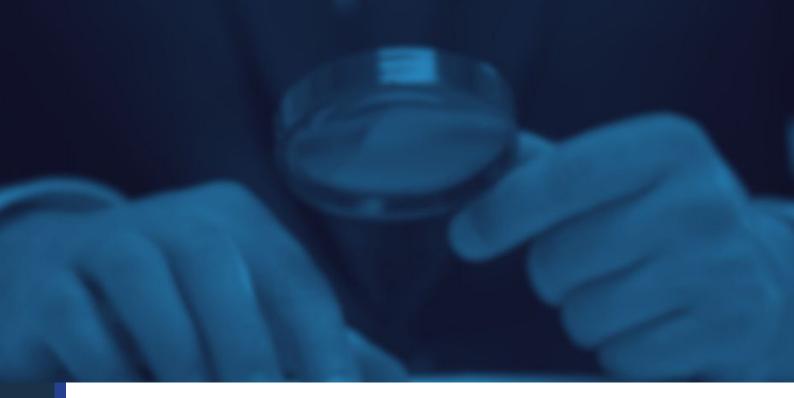
Finally, the preliminary findings of the study were shared with the interviewed CSOs. During these discussions, the findings were deliberated, and suggestions were made on how best to respond to the insights gained from the study.

Table 1: Type or organisations and number of interviews

Interviewed CSOs	Number
Jordan	
Royal initiative organisations/development and service	2
Rights-based movement	2
Religious educational institutions (service)	1
Development community collectives	2
Palestine	
Service-development (NGOs)	4
Professional association (research centres)	1
Rights-based movement	1
Philanthropy	2
Lebanon	
Service-development	7
Service	5
Right-based movements	8
Professional associations	2
Development	3

Research Ethics

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Lebanese American University (LAU.STF.MS6.8/Aug/2022). Further, all researchers have obtained a certificate from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), a research ethics and compliance training program. Participants were asked to carefully read and sign consent forms. Participation was on a voluntarily basis. Their names were anonymised to protect their identities . Moreover, all the generated data related to the study was processed, and securely stored in a password-protected storage repository, located on the organisation's internal network system, and only accessible to members of the CLS working on the project.

4. Findings

This section provides an overview of the main findings from the interviews. The different types of CSOs in the field of education are introduced. This is followed by a thematic analysis of the interviews, such as the understanding of CSO leads of theories of change, successful change, and policy reform, as well as the relationship of CSOs with the state and research centres and the challenges they face when engaging with policy reform.

Types of CSOs in the Field of Education

The mapping of CSOs in the three countries revealed a wide variety of organizations and groups. This mapping covered some of the main NGOs, identified through online searches and by consulting an online database on civil society. Additionally, our 15 years of experience as researchers in the field of education has provided us with a good understanding of the active CSOs. It is important to note that this list does not represent all CSOs active in the field of education but includes some of the prominent ones. We have attempted to group these organisations based on their mission and approach to change.

Overall, the mapping reflects the political context of each country, with Lebanon having the largest number of CSOs and Jordan the least. In Palestine, the occupation and the Palestinian Liberation Authority (PLA), which is seen as an authority complicit with the occupation, have severely limited the establishment and mobilisation of organisations, even for educational purposes.

The mapping of CSOs in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan illustrates the distinct political contexts of each country. Lebanon, with its relatively larger margin of democracy, has the longest and most active history of civil society compared to Palestine, which is under occupation, and Jordan, which operates under a heavily policed state. This political environment in Lebanon has allowed for a more vibrant civil society, marked by a long history of labour movements and political organizations. In contrast, the

more restrictive environments in Palestine and Jordan have resulted in fewer NGOs being established.

Table 2: Type of organisations per country

Jordan
Service-development
Royal initiative organisations/development and service
Religious educational institutions (service)
Political parties
Palestine
Service-development (NGOs)
Professional association (research centre)
Rights-based movement
Philanthropy
Lebanon
Rights-based movements
Service
Right-based movement
Professional Association
Development

Historically, CSOs in Lebanon played significant roles as social movements, especially during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. However, by the 2000s, CSOs in all three countries began to converge towards primarily providing services, reflecting a shift away from social movements.

Educational service-focused CSOs are the most prevalent type across these countries. Many were established during the 1990s and 2000s, aiming to improve access to and the quality of education through various programs. These organisations often employed administrative and operational teams to deliver their services. Additionally, some also had developmental educational objectives, such as capacity building for teachers or raising societal awareness. In Jordan, royal NGOs represented the largest of these organisations.

Lebanon also had CSOs with broader social developmental objectives, established both during the 1970s and 80s as well as more recently. These organisations often focused on advocacy, raising awareness, and capacity building in education. Some of these well-established organisations have gained significant influence, being invited to participate in policy changes.

Rights-based groups are another common type of CSOs present in all three countries. Lebanon has had an active teachers' movement since the 1970s, while similar organisations in Palestine only emerged after the establishment of the PLO in 1994, and in Jordan as late as 2011. Jordan, in particular, had fewer CSOs aside from royal, religious, and politically initiated ones, which primarily focused on charitable educational work.

The mapping showed that in all three countries, most CSOs were both service providers and involved in development. While teachers' unions were historically active in Lebanon they were largely co-opted by the regime. Alternative unions are beginning to emerge. In Jordan, many such organisations have been silenced, suspended or faced arrests in recent years, contributing to a particularly restrictive environment for civil society.

In Jordan, stringent regulations make registering an NGO or a private non-profit organisation difficult. Consequently, royal NGOs have played a leading role in social and service activities. Both in Lebanon and Palestine, there have been a few attempts to set up professional associations for different subjects, yet these remain a few. All three countries also have educational institutions affiliated with political or religious groups, but these were excluded from the mapping as they do not fit the definition of civil society. It is worth noting that besides teachers' unions, only two of all the surveyed CSOs in the three countries had a membership option. These two were professional associations with one of them having a selective membership.

Overall, the mapping reveals a prevailing tendency to view CSOs primarily as instruments for addressing service deficiencies and filling gaps left by the state, rather than as catalysts for social movements. This trend, indicative of the neoliberalisation of CSOs, is marked by the depoliticisation of community collectives, a reliance on external funding, and a market-driven focus that diminishes efforts for systemic change. This dependence on external funding compromises their autonomy, prioritising accountability to donors over the communities they serve, and fosters professionalisation and bureaucratisation, which can alienate grassroots movements. Furthermore, this neoliberal shift fragments collective action by promoting individualised solutions, thereby undermining the potential for broader societal transformation and reducing CSOs' ability to effect meaningful, long-term social change.

Perceptions towards Theories of Change

Interviews with members of CSOs revealed a lack of clear and well-defined approaches to change among many organizations. However, by examining their definitions of success and approaches to change, we identified several main theories of change that have evolved over time. The most common approach involved incremental improvements, either by enhancing access to or the quality of education, aiming to improve conditions for disadvantaged groups, or by changing perceptions and opinions through advocacy. Many of these organisations did not engage directly with policy reform or target policymakers. In some cases, they interacted with policymakers primarily as implementers of interventions or strategies rather than as influencers of policy.

Unions, on the other hand, focused on changing laws to promote teachers' rights, directly targeting policymakers. They viewed teachers as the main agents of change capable of influencing policy.

One organisation employed a variety of strategies to drive both policy and practice change. By building educators' capacity, signing Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) with policy actors, and training their members, they aimed to build momentum for policy change.

Overall, we observed a lack of a clear vision for a theory of change among many CSOs. This

can be attributed to several factors. Reliance on funding constrained many organisations, leading to an unclear theory of change. Scepticism and a loss of faith in their ability to influence policy played another role. For example, some respondents believed that CSOs are not responsible for or capable of changing policies, highlighting how their identity as community mobilisers have been influenced by neoliberal and market driven understandings of the role of civil society, while others perceived donors and international organisations as the primary shapers of policy. One organisation argued for the need to build an alternative parallel system to the governmental one due to the inability to achieve reform.

In Palestine, the occupation has been recognized as the primary barrier to implementing policy reform efforts. The PLA is viewed with scepticism, leading to a reluctance among CSOs to engage in collaboration or policy influence. Despite this general reluctance, one prominent CSO with substantial financial resources has taken an active role in working with the PLA-run Ministry. This organisation has made significant contributions, particularly around teacher training, demonstrating a notable exception to the overall trend of non-engagement among CSOs.

Understanding Successful Change

When asked to provide examples of successful change, participants offered a variety of responses. Unions primarily cited their ability to change laws as a significant achievement. Those involved in providing education services often mentioned signing MOUs with the Ministry or a UN agency as indicators of success. Others highlighted the reach of their services and work, while some considered changing attitudes and perceptions as key measures of success. Establishing networks and fostering good relationships were also mentioned as examples of success. Additionally, one organisation identified the production of impactful knowledge as a notable accomplishment.

These definitions of success indicate a reluctance or inability to engage directly with policy influence. Some organisations explicitly stated that influencing policy is not their role which underscores the pervasive neoliberal view of CSOs as service providers rather than agents of systemic change. This perspective leads to success being measured in terms of project outcomes and alignment with international agendas or priorities, rather than broader educational reform.

Furthermore, the narrow scope of some organisations' objectives reflects a lack of engagement with the education system, limiting their potential impact. In more challenging contexts, such as under occupation or authoritarian regimes, organizations may feel hopeless about achieving systemic reform due to pervasive corruption and repression, reducing reform to a distant aspiration.

Unions, while attempting to change laws, often focus on rights rather than comprehensive educational reform, as many teachers view unions primarily as rights-based organisations. Efforts to shift this perception are acknowledged as long and arduous processes, indicating a significant challenge in broadening the scope of union influence to encompass broader educational reform.

Overall, these findings highlight a critical need for CSOs to reassess their roles and strategies to more effectively engage with policy and systemic change. The deep-rooted

neoliberal orientation limits their potential impact, and without a shift towards more holistic and transformative approaches, their ability to effect meaningful, long-term change remains constrained.

Approach to Policy Change

When asked about their perceptions and thoughts on policy change, CSOs exhibited several notable trends. There was a prevailing view that policy change is beyond the reach of CSOs, as it often occurs behind closed doors and is largely influenced by donors. This perception has discouraged many CSOs from even attempting to influence policy.

The establishment of national educational systems as part of state-building processes has reinforced the belief that education reform is a state-controlled matter, beyond the influence of CSOs. Some organisations seemed untroubled by their lack of policy influence and instead focused their efforts on providing services, often collaborating with governments to widen access to education. Conversely, other CSOs, particularly those with a more antagonistic relationship with the government, preferred to create alternative educational systems rather than attempting to influence state policies.

Rights-based groups, while still interested in policy change, have primarily focused their efforts on job-related demands, often neglecting broader issues such as quality and accountability in education. This trend has become more pronounced over the past 30 years particularly in Lebanon. In Lebanon, teachers' unions, which have a history dating back to the 1970s, once vigorously advocated for equity and equality in education. However, over the past two decades, their agenda has narrowed significantly.

One of the leaders of a newly established alternative teachers' union has emphasised her efforts to broaden the union's focus to include the quality of education, framing teachers' rights within this larger context. Despite these efforts, the worsening economic conditions faced by many teachers in the region made this shift challenging. The economic hardships exacerbate the difficulty of redirecting the unions' priorities toward a more comprehensive agenda that includes educational quality alongside teachers' rights.

Additionally, there was a perspective that policy change should be the responsibility of specialists and experts, not CSOs, further limiting their involvement in advocating for policy reforms.

These trends highlight the varied and often limited ways in which CSOs perceive and engage with the process of policy change and potentially explain the lack of policy focus and attempt to push for structural change by most CSOs.

Relationship with the State

Our findings on the interplay between CSOs and the government across Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine reveal four main trends: 1) Clientelist Government Tie, 2) Contentious Government Relations; 3) Evasive Government Engagement and 4) long-term arm-length influence. Lebanon and Jordan have a more diverse engagement compared to Palestine's case where the majority of CSOs except a few large ones disengaged from the ministry of education.

Clientelist government ties

Some CSOs maintain a clientelist relationship with the government, offering services that help them survive through government and donor support. For a few CSOs, signing Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with government agencies, key donors, and UN agencies is considered a success. This strategy helps them influence policies and expand their outreach. Additionally, some service-providing CSOs strategically place senior civil servants on their boards of trustees, facilitating close ties with officials and extending their reach.

Contentious government relations

In contrast, CSOs such as unions and rights-based groups, which resist co-option by the political regime, often have antagonistic relationships with officials. Several instances of leadership arrests by authorities have been recorded. These CSOs are frequently excluded and suppressed through intimidation policies by security services and are often left out of policy or strategy-making meetings.

Evasive government engagement

Several CSOs are sceptical of policymakers and actively avoid engaging with them. These organisations prefer to create alternative systems and focus on their target groups without attempting to change policies or interact with officials.

Long-term arm-length influence

Professional associations aiming to influence policy adopt less direct relationships with policymakers. Their engagement often depends on policy brokers within ministries who can either foster or hinder these relationships. Although systematic engagement is lacking, these CSOs occasionally have closer relationships and are invited to participate in policymaking, depending on the attitudes of policy actors towards professional groups.

Overall, CSOs did not appear to have a clear or well-developed strategy for influencing policy. Their engagement with policymakers, if it existed, was primarily to facilitate their immediate work rather than to systematically influence policy. For many, this engagement was a haphazard process.

Challenges Upon Engagement with Policy Reform

As previously discussed, the vast majority of CSOs in the field of education avoid engaging directly with policy change and reform. This section examines some of the key challenges and factors behind this reluctance.

Government Control

Education reform is often a centralized process, closely tied to state sovereignty and seen as a means for economic and political prosperity. In Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine, this is especially true, with governments using education to reinforce their political grip. In Lebanon, education is viewed as a tool for nation-building, particularly after the 16-year civil war. The consociational political system complicates power sharing and makes systemic reform difficult and highly political. In Jordan, most CSOs face restrictions on

their work, with royal NGOs dominating the landscape. In Palestine, both the Israeli occupation and the PLA discourage civil society engagement in education reform.

Reliance on Donor Funding

All three countries heavily rely on donor funding for educational reform, which alienates CSOs from the policy-making process. Those CSOs that wish to engage are often reduced to service providers, focusing on maintaining good relationships with policymakers to secure project funding. This clientelist approach limits their ability to influence policy meaningfully.

Perception of Policy Influence

Shaping education policy is often seen as a distant and unattainable goal, reserved for policymakers and experts. Only a few professional groups believe they can engage with policy, reinforcing the perception that CSOs are not equipped to influence systemic change.

Dominance of Job Demands for Rights-Based Groups

Education unions, historically persecuted and oppressed, prioritise improving pay and working conditions due to the poor status of teachers in these countries. This focus on job demands shifts attention away from advocating for the quality of education; a trend that is globally observed. As a result, unions are often constrained to addressing immediate employment issues rather than broader educational reforms.

Overlooked Structural Reforms

Most CSOs concentrate on service provision or advocating for practical changes rather than addressing structural barriers within the educational systems of Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. Few NGOs work on legal changes or improving transparency and integrity. Only one professional group and a few rights-based groups actively advocate for structural reforms.

Dependency on Funding

Except for unions, most CSOs run management and operations teams that require funding to sustain. This reliance on donor funding shifts their focus to project-based activities, fulfilling specific targets set by donors. Consequently, CSOs often move from one project to another, limiting their ability to develop an independent agenda and a long-term strategy.

Taken altogether, these challenges highlight the complex environment in which CSOs operate and the significant barriers they face in engaging with policy reform. Addressing these issues will require a concerted effort to reduce dependency on external funding, shift perceptions of policy influence, and focus on structural reforms to enhance the overall impact of CSOs in the education sector.

Relationship between CSOs and Research Centres

Our findings show varying relationships between CSOs and research centres. CSOs tend to use research for different purposes in different countries. An integrative and cooperative relationship was evident mainly in Jordan where researchers are seen as objective experts who collaborate with CSOs to identify educational problems and develop solutions. This might involve conducting research before forming an advocacy position, publishing

findings to gain support, and even co-creating programs to improve education. Few similar cases were recorded in Lebanon where, mainly, rights-based movements would consult with research institutions for advocacy purposes. On the other hand, a disruptive relationship was reflected by many interviewees across the three countries. Although interviewees highlighted the importance of research for identifying educational issues and influencing policy decisions, collaboration between CSOs and research centres is not widespread; especially that some organisations raised a common concern across the countries around the perceived disconnect of academic research from real-world needs. For example, some organisations question the applicability of theses and dissertations, while some others find them to be repetitive. Another issue was raised around the narrow focus of research topics to funders' requirements. This has led some academic institutions to generate research that resembles NGO reporting or evaluation. Hence, across the three countries, only a basic level of interaction between CSO and research institution was observed comprising the sharing of information and documents. To this end, the influence of research-based knowledge on policymaking is minimal in the three countries.

5. Conclusions

CSOs in Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine share common challenges that impede their ability to drive systemic reforms and hold governments accountable. While these organisations play vital roles in service provision, they often struggle to function as effective pressure groups due to authoritarian tendencies, the pervasiveness of neoliberal economic policies, and the elite character of many NGOs and initiatives, which heavily rely on external funding and aid. This reliance, coupled with an internalised depoliticisation of their work and the absence of a unified long-term agenda, limits their capacity for sustained, critical engagement and weakens their collective impact. Overcoming these challenges will require addressing issues such as authoritarianism, dependence on external funding, depoliticisation, and the lack of a unified agenda to strengthen civil society's ability to bring about broader changes and systemic reforms.

The analysis of CSOs working on education in Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan reveals the profound impact of their distinct political contexts on their formation and operations. Lebanon's relatively democratic environment has fostered a more vibrant and active civil society, in stark contrast to the restrictive conditions in Palestine, under occupation, and Jordan, under tight state control. This political backdrop has significantly influenced the types and functions of CSOs in each country, with Lebanon hosting the most dynamic and diverse array, while Palestine and Jordan lag behind due to severe political and regulatory constraints.

Historically, Lebanese CSOs have played pivotal roles in social movements, but over time, there has been a notable shift across all three countries towards service provision, reflecting a broader global trend influenced by neoliberal values influencing changing core aims in education from a national political project towards an education system set to produce economically active subjects (citizens) for the benefit of the state's economic development. The shifts led to increased professionalisation and bureaucratisation within CSOs, often distancing them from grassroots activism and limiting their potential to drive systemic change. Educational service-focused CSOs are prevalent, yet their impact

is often constrained by their dependency on external funding and the need to align with donor priorities, which can detract from their original missions and autonomy.

Rights-based organisations, including teachers' unions, have faced significant challenges, particularly in Jordan and Palestine, where authoritarian tendencies and occupation-related obstacles have hindered their development and effectiveness. While Lebanon has a longer history of labour movements, recent years have seen a co-opting of unions by the regime, with new alternative unions beginning to emerge. The restrictive environments in Jordan and Palestine have led to fewer and more constrained CSOs, with many avoiding direct policy engagement due to perceived futility and risks.

The transformation of CSOs into service providers rather than agents of systemic change has led to a depoliticisation of civil society work, a reliance on market-oriented approaches, and an emphasis on efficiency and measurable outcomes. Consequently, CSOs have often prioritised service delivery over advocacy, limiting their capacity to address root causes and achieve long-term social transformation.

Neoliberal values have significantly shaped civil society's work by promoting market-oriented approaches and emphasising efficiency and measurable outcomes. With reduced state funding, many CSOs now rely heavily on private donors, which can influence their agendas. This shift has led to increased professionalisation and bureaucratisation, often distancing CSOs from grassroots activism. Neoliberalism's focus on individual responsibility has steered CSOs towards initiatives that empower individuals rather than addressing systemic issues. Additionally, the rise of public-private partnerships has integrated CSOs with business and government entities, sometimes at the cost of compromising their principles. Globalisation under neoliberalism has fostered transnational networks among CSOs, enhancing their reach but sometimes prioritising international agendas over local needs. The advocacy landscape has also changed, with CSOs engaging more in policy dialogue and lobbying, often aligning with dominant policies and powers to gain influence. However, advocacy is not a prevalent sphere of engagement as there is a noticeable trend towards service provision rather than advocacy, which can depoliticise civil society's role by focusing on alleviating symptoms rather than addressing root causes.

Civil society in all three cases are negotiating the spaces available to them, as shown, these spaces are perhaps distinguished by a larger margin in Lebanon than in Palestine and Jordan. Thus, to some extent the various relationships with authorities shape CSO's strategising and manoeuvring which take different forms by different organisations and in different contexts. However, a common denominator in the strategising of CSOs is the tendency to take a pragmatic approach and to operate what is considered to be within the parameters of the acceptable in order to justify and ensure existence, which in some cases is rewarded by an invitation to work with the authorities. This pragmatism – and opportunism – comes at the cost of a broader political imagination about the purpose of education and the ability to work for systemic change in the education system. Finally, it seems to have limited the potential for creating coalitions and collaborative approached among CSO in education.

To overcome these challenges, CSOs must reassess their roles and strategies, striving to balance service provision with advocacy and systemic change efforts. Addressing issues such as authoritarianism, dependence on external funding, and the lack of a unified agenda will be crucial in strengthening civil society's ability to drive meaningful reforms.

In this context, the analysis also shows that there is a case for further research into international aid and its role in shaping civil society and social movements. By reclaiming their autonomy and fostering more holistic and transformative approaches, CSOs can enhance their collective impact and contribute more effectively to societal progress in Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan. To this end, the validation workshops and discussions with CSOs as part of this project, showed the genuine interest and need in building structures for a more collective approach within the CSO sector. A closer collaboration and alignment with research institutions was also a need expressed by many CSOs. The main and overall recommendation that emerges from the present analysis is the urgent need to understand better and develop the potential for CSOs to come together on a common platform. This platform can potentially be built as a collective effort between CSOs and researchers in order to facilitate systemic change based on participatory processes and critical knowledge generation.

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