Exporting 'active citizenship': Foreign support for citizenship education in the Arab world

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Abstract

What explains the rise in support for active citizenship programs in the Arab region? How has active citizenship been envisioned and taught with support by foreign states? How do participants understand the usefulness and impact of such programs? In this paper, we examine the contexts in which citizenship programs that embody the political aspirations of foreign states, are implemented. Embedded in local political realities, participants in these programs routinely question the efficacy and applicability of training modules focused on active citizenship and civic engagement. We argue that the proliferation of active citizenship programs for civil society organizations in practice serves to both bolster state legitimacy and discourage community leaders and activists from expressing political dissent. By submerging conflicting values, practices, and perspectives while encouraging civic participation based on conformity rather than dissent, active citizenship programs risk fostering a depoliticized civil society that is detached from the local political context.

Keywords: civic education, active citizenship, civil society, Arab Spring, Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

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Introduction

Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) there has been, especially since the uprisings in 2011, an increase in funding and support for active citizenship capacity building programs. As a tool for democracy promotion through foreign aid, mainly from the United States and Europe, such programs focus on building the capacity of local civil society across the region by transferring knowledge and skills on active citizenship. These programs seek to train civil society activists and other potential leaders on topics such as participation, civic engagement, leadership, and democracy. This article explores how the content of active citizenship programs that target activists compares to activists' perceptions regarding the challenges in their local contexts. In doing so, we focus on three main questions: What explains the rise in support for active citizenship programs in the MENA region? How has active citizenship been envisioned and taught with the support of foreign states? To what extent are these programs of relevance to those participating in them?

We argue that it is crucial to examine the local contexts in which citizenship programs are implemented to transfer certain norms and tools designed by foreign donor agencies. This article sets out to provide such a contextual analysis based on a sample of programs that aimed to teach active citizenship and civic engagement in Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, and Tunisia in the period that followed the 2011 Arab uprisings, also dubbed the 'Arab Spring'. While these countries have distinct political systems and diverse histories of civil society engagement, they experience strikingly similar donor approaches to training civil society actors and the content used in programs on active citizenship across the region is remarkably comparable.

Although active citizenship programs are rather popular in the MENA region and attract large numbers of activists, when confronted by local political realities, activists in these programs routinely question the efficacy and applicability of training modules. Their own critical assessment of active citizenship education, we suggest, calls into question the extent to

which the promotion of citizenship ideals can effectively contribute to enhancing the political agency of citizens in the MENA region. Instead, current active citizenship programs seem to depoliticize civil society in the region through the introduction of technocratic language and by encouraging participation through formal political systems that do not exist, or do not function, in the countries of the MENA region.

Empirical analysis of our data shows that these programs, inspired by experiences from the Arab Spring, are largely normative and mostly ill-suited to the region. Across the Arab region the promotion of both civil society and the geopolitical interests of donor countries have frequently been viewed as interconnected (Yom, 2005). Our findings add three central points to this observation. First, these citizenship programs ignore the role of important local organizations and institutions, including religious and faith-based structures. These actors are not considered to be part of an imagined and aspirational civil society that could enable 'civic-driven change' (Biekart and Fowler, 2012, Fowler and Biekart 2013). Second, the programs largely teach liberal-democratic values and tools and draw mainly on examples from the US and Europe. Third, regional political structures and processes diverge from the content taught in such programs, which is largely based on the neo-liberalization of citizenship approach that takes civic participation based on conformity to existing structures and practices as a starting point. This approach ultimately clash with the realization that political structures in the MENA region are quite different from the models the programs are based on. Questions regarding the responsibility of citizens versus the power of the state arise and call for a broader understanding of how citizens and states interact in the region.

This paper is divided into five sections. In the first section we will present the broader field of active citizenship literature in which the analysis is positioned. The second section describes our methods. The third section provides a background on active citizenship discourse and practice in the MENA region. The fourth section is an examination of civic education

programs in this region in which we discuss the main logic behind these programs and the assessment of participants in an attempt to uncover why these programs fail. Finally, we conclude with a summary of our findings and argue that donor-supported active citizenship education programs in the MENA region depoliticize and demobilize activists and local civil society. As such, there is a need to localize and politicize civic education programs.

Theorizing active citizenship and civic education

The citizen's role has occupied political philosophers since the origins of Greek and Roman philosophy (Harte and Lane, 2013). Within political philosophy, citizenship has often been thought of as either a matter of rights and duties (the 'passive', liberal conception) or as a question of civic virtue and participation (the active, republican conception). Perspectives on active citizenship, or 'citizenship-as-desirable-activity' (Kymlicka and Norman, 1994, p. 353) understand the extent and quality of one's citizenship to be a function of one's participation in a particular political community. Such participation is understood to be dependent on the right civic values, and the state is seen to play a central role in promoting participation in civic and political matters.

In the literature on active citizenship, which heavily draws on research in liberal democracies in the US and Europe, two contradictory perspectives can be identified. One strand of literature focuses on the 'neo-liberalization of citizenship' (Kennelly 2011, Mustafa 2015, Soysal 2012) and studies active citizenship policies as governing tool. This strand argues that such policies encourage civic participation that is based on *conformity* to existing structures and practices. Another strand (Baban and Rygiel 2014, Isin 2009, Staeheli 2008) discusses active citizenship practices in terms of their emancipating action and transformative power.

This literature studies the ways in which citizens claim their rights and in a range of ways challenge the status-quo, understanding active citizenship as expressing and practicing *dissent*.

One important tool through which the state promotes active citizenship is civic or citizenship education[1], which is part of the curriculum in many neo-liberal societies but also plays a central role in foreign support for the development of democratic political culture in new or potential democracies. We draw on Schulz et al (2009) to define civic or citizenship education to include: 1) knowledge of civic concepts, systems and processes of civic life; 2) skills of civic participation; 3) a sense of belonging, values and ethics. Foreign support for the development and implementation of adult civic education programs can be used to influence civil and political participation in states that are considered developing democracies (Finkel, 2002). The United States and several European governments have devoted considerable resources to civic education over the past decades as part of their larger efforts to provide democracy assistance and strengthen civil society in emerging democracies around the world (Carothers, 1997; Diamond, 1995; Quigley, 1997).

Civic education is seen as a means to influence political awareness and participation and can be a hands-on approach that a government – as well as international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and institutions – uses to directly influence the knowledge, norms and values of citizens (Finkel, 2002, 2003; Slomczynski and Shabad, 1998; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). The idea is that there is a positive correlation between political knowledge, civic engagement and a healthy democracy: having knowledge about political issues leads citizens to participate and act within their communities, and this citizen participation leads to better functioning democracies, much in line with republican understandings of citizenship as 'desired activity'. As Kovalchuk and Rapoport (2018) have

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[1] We use these terms interchangeably in the text. While attempts have been made to clearly distinguish the two (see e.g. Faour and Muasher 2011), in practice they are used interchangeably and refer to different content in disparate national contexts (see e.g. Kerr 2000, Osler and Starkey 2005).

argued, however, common conceptions of active citizenship and civic education may not be relevant in contexts beyond Europe and the United States. As such, it is crucial to explore how the content of active citizenship support to civil society actors in the MENA region compares to local realities. We will first introduce the methods we have used to conduct this study.

Methods

The data from which this article is derived comes from insights received from participants in a sample of non-formal education programs to promote active citizenship. The data is derived from experiences of participants with nine donor-supported civil-society programs that were implemented between 2010 and 2015 in Tunisia, Libya, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Iraq. We argue that a comparison between these selected countries provides us with important new insights because of relevant similarities and differences between them. On the one hand, comparative research on civil society in the MENA region is important (Altan-Olcay and Icduygu 2012), and a growing body of literature has explored civil society in the MENA region comparatively by focusing on its capacity to challenge political systems. Yet existing literature lacks empirical insight on the role of active citizenship education in the experiences of civil society actors. On the other hand, the political system and history in these countries is different and includes: countries that experienced an uprising in 2011 with varying outcomes (Tunisia and Libya); countries that did not experience a mass uprising but that had waves of civil society mobilization (Iraq and Lebanon); and countries that have had stable longstanding political systems and where civil society's role is rather limited (Kuwait). This variation allows for an interesting comparison of the impact of foreign support for citizenship education to civil society actors.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted with approximately 250 activists (of which roughly 60 percent were male and 40 female) who had taken part in a sample of these

programs. In each of the five countries, participants were invited to a focus group after training workshops to discuss their experiences and to assess the content of the program. Follow-up interviews were done with selected participants who had attended more than one workshop and who expressed interest to share their insights. One of the authors also uses her reflections from extensive participatory observation and practitioner experience during all nine of these programs.[2] The language and contents of the manuals that were provided to participants in these trainings were also reviewed. Program documents and modules were studied to provide thematical insights on the norms such programs were aiming to transmit and the methods by which they did so. The findings do not include the specific organizations running or funding these programs so as to maintain their anonymity as well as that of the research participants.

The programs selected for this study, listed in Table 1, were either explicitly presented as active citizenship programs or included core modules on active citizenship. They focused on citizens' formal participation in local governance, elections, political dialogue, and national development through active citizenship as a vehicle for mobilization. They stressed citizens had the duty and responsibility to take part in the political processes governing their countries. Based on insights from the literature and on our data, we define active citizenship programs as educational initiatives that aim to instill the concepts and skills of participation within a political system or a community with the aim of improving that system or community. The conceptual underpinning of active citizenship is therefore linked to an action-oriented effort by citizens to exhibit leadership, to express agency, and to collaborate to address a shared concern through collective action. In the region, active citizenship programs typically include modules on civic engagement, voter education, social cohesion, social entrepreneurship, women's rights and youth participation.

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[2] Footnote removed for purpose of blind review.

	Title	Country	Target Group	Year
P1	Civic Participation in Local Governance	Lebanon	Civil society activists in rural areas	2010
P2	Leadership and Civic Engagement	Lebanon	Lebanese NGO staff	2011
P3	Outreach, Communication Development	Lebanon	NGO staff in rural areas	2011
P4	Civic Participation in Elections	Tunisia	Activists	2011
P5	Volunteerism and Civic Engagement	Kuwait	Youth activists and students	2012
P6	Active Citizenship	Libya	Civil society activists	2012
P7	Gender and Civic Engagement	Libya	NGO staff	2013
P8	Leadership and Social Entrepreneurship	Iraq	NGO staff	2013
P9	Social Cohesion and Active Participation	Lebanon	Local stakeholders and Syrian refugees	2014

Table 1: Overview of Studied Programs

The data was analyzed using a content analysis approach which sought to derive categories from the respondents and their experiences (Hsiu-fang and Shannon, 2005). Our findings are based on the qualitative analysis of our full dataset, whereas we present a select number of quotations from research participants to illustrate the broader insights gained from that analysis.

The context of support for active citizenship in the MENA region: too much participation, too little dissent

The political systems across the MENA remain far from democratic. Tunisia, as the main exception, has made considerable progress towards democratic reforms in its constitution and legal reforms towards gender equality. The Tunisian developments aside, political systems in the region are moving towards greater institutionalization of non-democratic practices when it comes to political competition, freedom of assembly, and freedom of expression (Rutzen, 2015). Donors have continued to fund local civil society organizations to carry out a range democratization programs. One of the core areas of focus for such programs has been to build the capacity of local activists. The advent of capacity building programs was accompanied by a series of training workshops or short courses teaching civil society actors why and how they should participate in public life. Although the contexts within which activists operate in Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, Kuwait and Iraq differ considerably, donor-funded programs have tended to adopt strikingly similar approaches to the pedagogy of active citizenship. This section identifies three contextual dimensions that help explain our analysis of active citizenship programming in the MENA region.

The first dimension is the state of the civil society organizations that are often the main partners and targeted participants in programs on active citizenship. The second aspect is the political shaping of opportunities for, and challenges to, active citizenship in the region. The third aspect is the role of foreign donors in promoting active citizenship and promoting issues related to democratic participation through civic engagement in the region. We argue, based on insights from participants in this study, that these programs focus too much on participation and too little on dissent and social mobilization.

Civil society in the Arab region is a form of political organization and mobilization around which activists can wrap their issues and priorities. In contexts where political parties are either of a sectarian or hard ideological orientation, or where political parties are utterly lacking, civil society organizations have historically provided a platform for citizen

engagement across the region (Ibrahim, 1998). However, even though civil society organizations are numerous and span a wide typology of associations, their role in political reform has been rather dismal as experiences in Lebanon and Libya have shown (Geha, 2016). We conceptualize Arab civil society as an arena for political participation that has been ridden with normative expectations about its ability to influence change. Normative logics supporting civil society in the Arab region usually refer to a certain form of mobilization that is civic oriented and formally organized. This NGOization trend of civil society in the region coincided with the rise of donor-funded programs for democracy promotion (Carapico, 2002; Yom, 2005). Civil society was an arena to mobilize citizens and to demand democratic reforms. But this view has received wide criticism starting mainly in the 1990s when scholars contended that authoritarian regimes were becoming too robust and concluded that civil society in the region was rather hopeless (Diamond, 2010). Scholars grew skeptical about civil society as a vehicle for democracy and instead claimed that the Arab region exhibited exceptionalism that was incompatible with civil society (Heydemann, 2007).

Just as the normative reasoning had carried with it great financial support for civil society, its demise as a framework for building the capacity of activists decreased such support. Instead, there was a rise in government-supported NGOs that operated side by side with non-democratic governments in places like Jordan, Morocco, Lebanon, and Syria. In effect, the support for building the capacity of activists had not translated into mass public support for democracy in the region and the assumption that capacity building could create a new cadre of political actors had faded. There was also significant skepticism surrounding the fact that NGOs supported by foreign donors had failed to rally national support for key reforms that could bring about democratization in the region (Dalacoura, 2005).

However, following the mass uprisings that swept the region in 2011, foreign support for local civil society actors regained momentum. This 'second wave' of capacity building

programs was shaped by a hopeful narrative of the Arab Spring about the role of civil society and the individual citizen in actively contributing toward political transformation. Mass protests demanding regime change and better governance in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria ushered in renewed interest in civil society and civic participation. This revival of interest in civil society, as explained by Pace and Cavatorta (2012), focused on new actors and activists that were not necessarily part of formal organizations, but who were often part of informal, leaderless networks and youth movements. Citizens who were previously treated like subjects by dictators and monarchs in the region suddenly gained the right to vote, freedom of assembly, and freedom of expression. As soon as the street protests subsided, myriad civil society organizations were formed in places like Tunisia and Libya to work on issues of governance and on capacity building among activists.

The toppling of regimes in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt expanded the boundaries of civil society, going beyond traditional liberal NGOs to include religious organizations, loosely organized networks, bloggers, youth movements and neighborhood groups, none of which had been perceived as potential targets and beneficiaries of foreign funding in the past (Challand, 2011). These newly recognized forms of activism brought back an interest in active citizenship and was also coupled with efforts by international agencies including the EU, USAID and UNDP to fund organizations that sought to empower citizens at the local level.

The precarious aftermath, or aftermaths, of the Arab Spring did not deter foreign donors from seeking to support and build the capacity of activists in the region. The turmoil that followed in places like Yemen, Libya, and Syria however had a negative effect on support for civil society as a space for citizen mobilization. After 2011, foreign donors began adopting an approach that had inherently competing objectives. On the one hand, there is still great support for civil society programs that focus on active citizenship. On the other hand, foreign donors have clearly supported the stabilization of political systems and political leaders in countries

like Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, and Morocco. Political regimes in this country are far from participatory and in supporting civil society, donors encourage activists to be engaged in a system that is not responsive to their demands. Whereas support for civil society through capacity building before 2011 focused on civil society as a vehicle for democratic reform, after 2011 the focus was on active citizenship that can provide legitimacy through participation of citizens based on conformity to existing structures and practices rather than their dissent. Instead of transforming political systems or lobbying for reform, active citizenship after 2011 was about enhancing the ability of citizens to participate in systems far from democratic. This explicit support for political systems in the countries in this study creates discrepancies between the stated objectives of support for civil society, namely to promote accountability and good governance, and the reality of maintaining support for political systems that are non-democratic, or partially democratic, in the region.

Support for civil society after 2011 was not based on the premise that civil society can create lasting political change and instead appears to be based on the assumption that civil society can support or compliment the work of the state. Empirical evidence from places like Libya has shown that, while civil society can mobilize and train citizens, actors within civil society have little bearing on the outcomes of political transition (Geha and Volpi, 2016). In Tunisia, on the other hand, donors adopted an agenda for funding civil society to counter the rise of Salafist movements and to ensure that citizens actively participated in the transition towards a new constitution and two rounds of elections (Deane, 2013). Support for active citizenship targeting residents of non-democratic countries and countries in conflict such as Syria, Yemen and Bahrain after 2011, in effect encouraged the legitimization of non-democracies and the co-optation of activists rather than fostering dissent or confrontation with non-democratic institutions. Instead, funding for active citizenship and civil society exists to empower activists to participate in political processes, which legitimize and stabilize existing

regimes (Mustapha, 2012). Contrary to the hope that Durac (2013) and others expressed for civil society's capacity to challenge existing power-structures, the post-2011 donor strategy appears to be focusing on making civil society complacent in non-democracies by training individuals on notions of active citizenship.

Empirical insights on active citizenship programs in the MENA region

This section presents insights on donor-funded active citizenship programs in the region. First, we present the main assumptions and rationales of programs and second, we analyze participants' experiences within these programs. The selected programs were all funded by foreign donors, specifically targeted civil society activists, and were implemented by local NGOs using a format of workshops or trainings. Analysis of program documents and data from focus groups reveals three types of inter-related rationales shaping programs on civic education.

The rationale of participation

The overarching rationale in foreign-funded active citizenship programs is that active participation of citizens in politics is a desirable and needed activity. It follows also that it is the responsibility of citizens to participate in creating change within their communities, the programs often overlook the responsibility of the state. Training manuals use language that emphasizes the importance of civic participation to a healthy system of governance and to solving shared problems. This presumes that, first, a clear process of citizen participation exists and, second, that participation can be geared towards collective problem solving. The rationale of participation places the responsibility to undertake political change on the individual citizen. "They keep telling us that we need to do more, we need to build alliances, we need to

participate, and sometimes I barely even have time to feed my kids and watch the news," explained one Lebanese participant.[3] One Iraqi participant attending social entrepreneurship trainings relayed their disappointment in the following way: "These workshops stress that we have to identify and solve our own community problems and that we must be innovative in doing so. Why doesn't the donor teach local councils to do this? Why does it have to be our own responsibility?"[4]

Participating in the political process is described as both a duty and a right for citizens. "These trainers think we are in Switzerland, as if we can walk up to the local council with a proposal for change and they would listen to us," explained one Iraqi participant.[5] In reality, these notions of participation often clash with chaotic political processes and inaccessible politicians in the local context. "We live in a country where the parliament does not convene for months and sometimes years, and yet we keep being trained to participate and to vote and to monitor the performance of our parliamentarians," explained one Lebanese participant.[6] Training programs are full of ideas on how participation can make citizens more influential with little or no regard to the political context or the political system.

The logic of participation is also "In a power-sharing system like ours, leaders meet and agree off the record. In these workshops we learn how to participate in organizing town-hall meetings or lobbying our parliamentarians, but this is not where the real politics takes place," explained one Lebanese participant.[7] The focus on citizen participation in solving community problems in such training manuals hardly questions the validity of participation in a non-democratic governance system, one that people do not recognize as legitimate. "We are trained on voting skills, choosing candidates based on a program, and knowing our rights as voters.

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[3] Female staff member of a local community organization, focus group with author, Beirut, 13 March 2014
[4] Female staff member from a women's rights NGO in Iraq, focus group in Erbil, 22 February 2013
[5] Male staff member from a women's rights NGO in Iraq, focus group in Erbil, 22 February 2013
[6] Male staff member at an NGO, focus group with author, Beirut, 10 June 2014
[7] Female activist from an NGO working on citizenship in Lebanon, focus group in Beirut, 10 May 2014

But what if the electoral process is not democratic, isn't it better in this case not to participate in it?" explained one Kuwaiti participant.[8]

The rationale of skill building

The second overarching rationale is that the problems of governance in MENA countries are due to the fact that Arab citizens do not have the appropriate skill set to practice active citizenship, and thus the situation can only be improved through skill building. The idea here is that foreign or local consultants can identify and devise a clear and transferable set of skills relevant to various local contexts in order to build the skills of activists on how to be better citizens. In addition to the neo-colonialist mindset of important experiences and skills imported from foreign contexts, a content analysis of these skills and training objectives reveals great similarity in the language used regardless of the context. Activists in Iraq and Tunisia for example are presumed to lack, and need, the same skills despite facing two very different political realities and systems. Such skills typically include public speaking, the ability to build coalitions, dialogue, outreach and strategic planning skills. Regardless whether the activists operate in post-conflict or in divided communities, donors continue to 'train' and develop identical skills of active citizenship among activists.

"The technical parts of these workshops are useful, for example strategic planning I can use in my organization, but the rest is really irrelevant, this is not how things are done in my country," explained one Tunisian participant.[9] According to one Kuwaiti participant, "workshops on volunteering to strengthen our citizenship skills assume that if we engage others in a shared concern, then the authorities will be responsive to our needs, while this really is not the case at all! To contribute to change in Kuwait we need to start with the authorities first, not

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[8] Female activist from a Kuwaiti charity organization, focus group in Kuwait City, 15 February 2012
[9] Male activist who trains on voter education in Tunisia, Tunis, 23 September 2011

with citizens themselves."[10] In the case of Lebanon, a commitment to a non-sectarian rhetoric, which these workshops emphasize, may in fact weaken the outreach ability of activists. "We are seen as irrelevant to our communities because we preach skills that do not apply to the way politics occurs in the daily lives of citizens," explained one Lebanese participant.[11]

The logic of skill-building presumes that the existing political processes are fair and that with the right skills citizens can influence change. As with the case of the rationale of participation, this notion of a lack of skills places responsibility on the individual citizen who needs to gain skills in order to better take part in the community. According to one Lebanese activist "We thought at the NGO where I worked that more funding and more trainings would make us more effective, but in reality we were very far from the real needs and priorities of citizens."[12] Without a proper understanding of the context of participation, the skills promoted in active citizenship programs are seen by activists as disconnected from the reality of how politics is shaped in these countries. "They make it seem like it is our fault, that we are not participating well enough, but really the problems are so much bigger than us. How can we participate in a corrupt and violent context?" asked one Libyan participant.[13]

The rationale that the right skills can be taught in active citizenship programs places great emphasis on formal networks, formal ties and formal institutions. The programs teach activists how to advocate for an issue and build alliances to promote that issue within a presumed formal and well known process and through dealing with formal institutions. Rights and responsibilities are based on a formal legal framework embedded in international law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But politics in the region relies heavily on informal networks and personal ties. "We can learn to be exemplary activists for many years but until our politicians reach a consensus (informally), nothing will change," explained one Lebanese

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[10] Male blogger, focus group in Kuwait City, 15 February 2012
[11] Male activist from a coalition of NGOs, focus group in Beirut, 12 May 2014
[12] Male NGO staff member, focus group in Beirut, 12 May 2014
[13] Female activist from a network for constitutional dialogue in Libya, focus group in Tripoli, 10 June 2013

activist.[14] The skills that the workshops focused on were also considered as too technical to fit the local contexts. "I have attended a dozen workshops on public policy making and advocacy, but in my country there really is no clear public policy process," explained an Iraqi participant.[15] Another Iraqi participant complained that "these workshops teach us to participate actively in a system that is crumbling and in a context of daily suicide bombs. While I like to attend, when I go back home I feel so small and so helpless in the face of our reality."[16]

The rationale of specialized knowledge

The rationale of specialized knowledge is an overarching factor in how active citizenship programs are designed. Donors assume that the MENA region needs specialized knowledge that can be imported from non-MENA case studies and literature. The understanding is that this specialized knowledge can be transferred through trainings and workshops where participants spend a series of eight-hour days acquiring new concepts and tools to help them learn about civic participation. The cases referred to in these workshops largely draw on experiences from Europe and the US, with some references to countries in Eastern Europe as they transitioned from communism to liberal democracy. A review of references from this sample showed that over 90% of the sources were in English and there were very few Arabic works and Arab scholars cited. The paucity of Arabic sources shows that the basis of the knowledge in these programs is rooted in a liberal democratic notion of citizenship. One Libyan participant stated that: "Gender equality, for example, is a great idea to learn about, but none of the trainers ever used a case study from Libya."[17] There was a consensus among participants in this study that specialized knowledge, concepts and definitions, contributed to a certain

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[14] Male from an group protesting the postponement of parliamentary elections, focus group in Beirut, 30 September 2013
[15] Male staff member from a women's rights NGO in Iraq, focus group in Erbil, 15 April 2013
[16] Female staff member from a women's rights NGO in Iraq, focus group in Erbil, 22 February 2013
[17] Male activist from NGO working on constitutional dialogue in Libya, focus group in Tripoli, 10 June 2013

power dynamic in these workshops. Participants contended that there was an assumption that the trainer and the academics cited in the material "knew more" than the locals. The dynamic of trainer and trainee is perpetuated by the sequence of specialized trainings that participants need to undergo in order to become proficient in topics such as policy-making, advocacy, and problem solving.

The logic of specialized knowledge is problematic as it is disconnected from knowledge of local realities. One Lebanese trainer stated that "this entire workshop is designed as though we were living on Mars, none of the examples really relate to my village."[18] The tendency to teach active citizenship through the lens of a normative-secular-type civil society renders the values taught incompatible with political structures within the region. "When we do stakeholder analysis, and I have attended tens of such workshops, we list religious authorities among stakeholders but we really do not know how to address them," explained one Tunisian participant.[19] Specialized knowledge based on a pre-designed list of learning outcomes is typical in such workshops. "None of the authors cited are Arab, and none of the experiences are Arab. Learning UN terminologies is only helpful in the NGO world, meaning it is important if I want to continue working in this field, but outside this field nobody knows what we are talking about," explained one Iraqi participant.[20]

Offering specialized knowledge to selected participants transforms the experience of learning into a market-place of tools and ideas. Donors have developed a form of sequential certification process where individuals get recognized for attending certain workshops and learning new concepts. Further evidence that activists have acquired specialized knowledge helps them gain access to more funds and exposure. "The most I ever use these manuals is when my NGO is applying for grants and we want to show that we understand what the donor

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[18] Female NGO staff member working on local governance, focus group in Beirut, 20 July 2011
[19] Female NGO staff member, attending a course in Beirut, focus group in Beirut, 20 July 2011
[20] Male NGO staff member, attending a course in Beirut, focus group in Beirut, 20 July 2011

wants. Other than that, I never really read the material or look back on these modules," explained one Lebanese participant.[21] The idea that only selected activists can become specialized and empowered is disempowering to collective action and potentially harmful to local experiences and existing knowledge at the local level.

Participants' assessments of active citizenship programs

Juxtaposed to rationales regarding the design of these programs, participants and trainers who took part in the focus groups identified three main limitations that they face in pursuing active engagement in political life in the countries included in this study. These three limitations are not intended as a comprehensive assessment of the broader political contexts that activists experience, contexts that include violence, oppressive legal environments, and limited access to sustainable financing. Rather, these three types of limitations were identified by research participants and constitute realities that clash with the rationales of donor-funded active citizenship programs. They pertain specifically to the boundaries activists operate within when trying to apply the skills and concepts of Western-funded and donor designed active citizenship programs. In a sense, the limitations are also a form of gap analysis identified throughout the focus group discussions as indicators of a disconnection between what active citizenship programs offer and the realities activists face in their local context.

Activists in all the focus groups cited firstly that limited access to information was one of the challenges they faced in trying to apply active citizenship strategies. Access to information was cited here not only in terms of information related to specific sectors and policies, but also in terms of information about how the political process plays out in their home countries. Participants explained that constitutional deadlines, electoral frameworks, and

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[21] Female NGO staff member, focus group in Beirut, 20 July 2011

written rules are often violated in their countries. In order for them to have any influence over policy reforms, activists would need information on how such reforms were being carried out by politicians. Participants stated that politics was conducted in a secretive manner, often with no clear information provided and no way for activists to be able to join high level conversations. Concerns around information also related to the activists' lack of trust in government-published research on population, gender inequalities, corruption or fiscal policies. Participants contended that with limited access to such information and limited knowledge of the processes of decision making, they could not really be active and influential citizens. In the view of the interviewees, no amount of specialized knowledge and skill-building could help them in overcoming the challenges posed by their lack of access to information and the informal settings of decision-making, especially in countries like Kuwait with its constitutional monarchy and in Lebanon's power-sharing system.

The second cited theme in focus groups was that the countries included in this study lacked a fair judicial system. The courts were perceived either as partisan or unreliable. The notion that increased active citizenship could lead to more responsive public institutions and national parliaments was considered incorrect in contexts without a legal framework to holds politicians accountable. Instead, participants explained that their participation in the process often legitimizes the political system through voting or through the activist's formal recognition of state entities that escape judicial scrutiny. As the research took part during the Arab uprisings, many questioned the validity of active citizenship if it did not lead to mass public pressure for politicians to respond to demands for reform. That increased civic engagement could improve governance or result in more responsive governance was considered highly doubtful. Instead, participants leaned towards agreeing that their participation in the community assisted them build networks and sometimes allowed them to offer direct help on

specific issues, but such help did not mean that their overall system of governance was improving.

The third type of limitation that activists cited in focus groups was that they felt they had questionable credibility with the public. Those activists able to attend donor-funded workshops are often based in urban NGOs and work with upper middle class volunteers and interns. Participants recognized that they had limited outreach to unions, religious charities, political parties, and grassroots community influencers. The more trained activists had become, the more they felt that specialized knowledge was disconnecting them from the local terminologies that people understand and that root the activists in the local context. Libyan activists, for example, repeatedly shared that local imams, business leaders, and armed revolutionaries had more credibility among citizens than a specialized NGO trainer. One of the major, repeated sentiments was that they operated in circles where everyone knows each other and that they often preach to the same crowds. Outside the NGO sphere they had limited credibility and could not rally enough support to create a movement beyond the lifespan of the donor-funded project. This professionalization of active citizenship was limiting in that activists could speak out less about contentious issues such as sectarianism, for example, and instead had to focus more on an issue-based narrative favored within the NGO sphere of, for example, cleaning local roads or fixing lighting in their districts. Thus, training programs depoliticized social and political causes and highlighted activism only in the context of the ideals of civic engagement and volunteerism.

Conclusion: Localizing and politicizing active citizenship

This article has sought to explain the rise of active citizenship programs and how such programs have been envisioned and taught, with the support of foreign states, to civil society activists in the MENA region. The research is based on empirical insights from approximately 250

participants in such programs, as well as extensive participant observation and document analysis. All the selected programs had a focus on the importance of citizen participation in one's community and political system in common, and are based on a conformity approach. How do participants understand the usefulness and impact of such programs within the context of the MENA region? We explored this question in light of conceptualizations of active citizenship that understand the extent and quality of one's citizenship to be a function of one's participation in a particular political community. Two distinct strands of literature can be discerned: one focusing on active citizenship discourse and policy as governing citizens to participate in ways that are conforming to existing structures, and the other studying the emancipatory potential of active citizenship practices that are inspired by citizen dissent and critical challenging of structures in place.

In the MENA region, funding for active citizenship and civic education follows a pattern of support for Arab civil society that is influenced by the ebb and flow of democratic promotion in the region. As a site of political mobilization, support for civil society in the region first emerged as a normative notion that activists could indeed, if supported, be agents of democracy. Following the Arab Spring and its dubious outcomes, civil society became more of an agent for the promotion of Western interests in terms of regional stability. Civic education programs encourage activists to participate civically in formal processes that are meaningless in the region, thus implicitly supporting existing political systems.

We argue that proliferation of active citizenship programs among civil society organizations as in fact served both to bolster legitimacy of local political systems and to discourage activists from expressing political dissent or apathy. More often than not active citizenship training has focused on citizens through civil society participating actively in the political processes and institutions of their countries, regardless whether those institutions and processes are fair or representative. Our research contends that active citizenship programs are

in effect encouraging only tokenistic civic participation and engagement in the region. By being ill-fitted to the needs of the region active citizenship programs have depoliticized civil society and instead encouraged citizens to partake in political processes that may be antagonistic to notions of reform, equality, freedom and fair representation.

We build our arguments on finding three rationales of promoting civic education that are disconnected from local challenges. First, by focusing on the rationale of participating in a system, donors overlook the role of states in solving societal problems and programs place responsibility on activists. These activists however often have no access to information or to decision-making spheres that would enable them to properly solve such problems. Second, by promoting the rationale that Arab activists need to be trained in certain skills that enable them to influence their political context, donor-funded programs often overlook the absence of functioning formal states structures that citizens are able to influence through activism. Third, by perpetuating a rationale of a Western-inspired specialized knowledge that needs to be transferred to local activists, donor-funded programs ignore local experiences and historical norms of how to solve problems and improve politics within the local context.

As such, we argue that there is a need to localize and politicize civic education and active citizenship programs in the MENA region. The countries covered in this study continue to face precarious realities and tumultuous political processes that marginalize the role of citizens. Without a clear political agenda shaped by local norms and local needs, active citizenship programs are at risk of remaining disempowering and harmful to local mobilization efforts. The language of dissent, confrontation, and movements ought to be inspired by, and included within, a broader approach not only to impart knowledge and skills, but to truly empower leadership that can mobilize and overcome the limitations that activists have identified in this research.

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