

Strengthening freedom of association laws and government-civil society relations in Jordan

As part of the [INSPIRES project](#), Flexible Response Funds (FRFs) are designed to provide USAID missions and partners with easily accessible and flexible support in the form of technical assistance and subgrants to local organizations that can help address urgent and emerging threats to civic space.

In **Jordan**, ICNL collaborated with local partners Lawyers Without Borders (LWB) and Al-Hayat Center for Civil Society Development to conduct work originally designed to improve the draft law on societies and ultimately expanded to strengthen engagement between civil society and government on a range of issues. This was done through two key activities:

- Technical assistance to ensure draft laws meet international standards of protecting freedom of association, and;
- Subgrants to partners to undertake research and advocacy on issues related to civic freedoms.

Support was provided over the course of 13 months from July 2021 – July 2022.

In this summary brief, we share learnings and lessons from key informant interviews and document reviews for these activities.

Outputs and Outcomes

The FRF activities in Jordan were designed to produce several key outputs, including the development of a report regarding international standards for association and societies laws and meetings as well as focus group discussions to collect opinions on the draft laws. However, because the government halted discussions related to the new law on societies, ICNL and partner organizations adapted their planned activities to

focus more broadly on civic freedom legislation in Jordan as well as improving the relationship between civil society and the government.

Evidence from key informant interviews as well as documentation from partners suggest that the FRF activities contributed to several key outputs and outcomes:

Provided guidance on how the law of societies could be strengthened. While the government of Jordan has currently ceased discussion related to the draft law, partner Lawyers Without Borders was able to work with ICNL to complete its report on how the draft law would need to be amended to align with international standards for freedom of association. This guidance will be an important resource for Jordanian civil society to engage with government officials when debates over the new law are ultimately resumed.

Improved understanding and foundation for a better relationship between civil society and government. One significant roadblock to civil society's past efforts to improve civic freedoms in Jordan has been the tense relationship between civil society and government actors in the country. As part of the FRF activities, Al-Hayat led meetings with a range of stakeholders to better understand the root causes of this dynamic, and they ultimately found that many in the Jordanian government mistrust civil society in part because they do not understand the concept of civil society in Jordan. Government stakeholders suggested that they see civil society as "a tool that should implement only projects" that should be subject to government oversight. By understanding the underlying reasons that government has been distrustful of civil society, informants noted that local organizations and activists are now better placed to address these

misconceptions and ultimately move towards better partnerships.



"Through our local partner, we broke the ice between local civil society and the Parliament. We put everything on the table, and now they can discuss it publicly and can point out what is wrong with civil society directly. Based on that, we can have a national plan to empower civil society in general and enhance the relationship between civil society and Parliament. And we can work more on increasing civil society participation because I hope that, at some point, they will see civil society as a supportive partner, not just a partner."

- Key informant interview, October 2022



Evidence of Parliamentarians improving views of civil society.

All informants interviewed cited that the most significant result of the FRF activities was the active and visible change in perspective demonstrated by the Head of Parliament in Jordan. Prior to ICNL's and partners' activities in the country, the Head of Parliament had been a vocal opponent of civil society in the country; however, after engaging with ICNL and Al-Hayat about their research, he expressed that he shifted his viewpoint about civil society and in fact provided more positive and nuanced commentary on the role of civil society in a conference organized as part of the FRF in front of international, government, and civil society stakeholders. This change was noted by informants to be a critical win for civil society's ability to work effectively in Jordan.

Helping and Challenging Factors. Key informants were asked about factors perceived to help or hinder this work. Understanding these factors can help support the implementation of future activities.

Helping factors include:

- **Reputation and reach of partners:** The wide reach and influence of local partners helped to secure input from stakeholders, including government representatives.

- **Flexibility in the design:** Informants appreciated that they were able to adapt the FRF activities when the discussions shifted away from the law on societies.
- **Government champions:** While some government officials showed opposition to civil society, Al-Hayat was able to identify some stakeholders who wanted to be "heroes to civil society."
- **Political timing:** One informant noted that it was easier to conduct activities because of the high level of political reform happening in the country at this time.

Hindering factors include:

- **Intra-government conflicts:** Informants noted that some high-profile conflicts between government actors hindered the progress of their work to improve the overall view of civil society by government.
- **Changing government priorities:** The shift in the priority laws that the Jordanian government were discussing made it difficult to plan activities.
- **Need to engage civil society outside of the capital:** Partners highlighted that engaging civil society outside of Amman remained a challenge, especially during COVID, but that it is critical to advancing the views of civil society.

For more information about this FRF, please contact: info@inspiresconsortium.org.



"The speaker was the Head of the Parliament in Jordan, and the funny thing was that he was totally against civil society in general, so he used to say that CS had hidden agendas and that there is no real impact on beneficiaries. During and after the conference, he started to change his language from 'all civil society' to 'some civil society.' So, this is a huge success for civil society in Jordan."

- Key informant interview, October 2022

