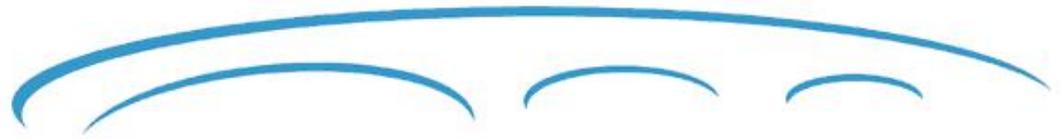


BRIDGING THE GULF



Foundation for Human Security in the Middle East

BRIDGING THE GULF FOUNDATION

Autumn 'school' on civil society building
and
human rights promotion,
October 5th- 8th 2009
The Hague
The Netherlands



In the frame of its capacity building activities Bridging the Gulf foundation organised its yearly autumn school. The school was held in the Hague in the Netherlands on October 5th-8th, the 2009. This ‘school’, a study meeting, on civil society building and human rights promotion was the first in its genre, designed to foster the interaction of participants with each other, strengthening network forming but also building their capacities in the field of civil society empowerment. The meeting was not primarily a scholarly, academic event, but intended to provide knowledge and ideas that are useful to persons involved or interested in civil society building and human rights promotion in the Gulf region on an inclusive and constructive manner.

The program started by analyzing the situation of civil society in GCC countries (session held by Paul Aarts, including the Civicus Civil Society Index tool). Possibilities and limitations of the Internet were discussed as a tool for civil society and opinion-forming in Arab speaking countries. Furthermore, participants were introduced to the experiences of Dutch NGOs involved in capacity building of civil society organizations (Oxfam/Novib, Ikv/Pax Christi, Hivos, Free Voice, NHC). They were also introduced to Dutch institutions dealing with protection and promotion of human rights: official bodies that operate independently from the government (the National Ombudsman and the Rapporteur on Trafficking) and private entities that work on the field of human rights awareness raising and education (Amnesty International and Movies that Matter).



Finally the program included a session at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs focusing on international mechanisms to promote human rights. These are both multilateral (in particular United Nations) and bilateral mechanisms (through the European Union as well as specifically Dutch relations with the Gulf region).

The autumn school was attended by nearly 12 activists and human rights defenders coming from different countries in the GCC area. The program was as follows:

Autumn school: introduction

I. The concept of civil society, how is it conceived in social science, how can it be applied to the Arab countries and particularly to the Gulf region

1. The concept of civil society: introduction by Paul Aarts

Definition

Myths about civil society: illusions and disillusion about the concept of civil society

Characterization of civil society in the Middle East: “toothpick trying to attack a tank”

External factors: imposed democracy will not work

Feedback from the participants: hope or disillusion?

2. Civicus indicators of the state of civil society (Civil Society Index), introduction of the model, it's main dimensions and their meaning

Application of the Civil Society Index to the Gulf region: a difficult yet not impossible task

Discussion among the participants: an inconvenient truth

Conclusion: who is really interested in citizen participation and democracy in the Middle East

II. Building capacities: the need for communication, sharing experiences, protection and security.

Internet and filtering in the Middle East region: opinion-forming in Arab speaking countries on the internet (blogosphere), possibilities and limitations.

The use of online social media Global Voices Online

III. Networking and sharing of experiences.

1. Regional networks: the Arab reform initiative.

2. Dutch institutions dealing with protection and promotion of human rights

The Role of the National Ombudsman in the Netherlands

The Dutch National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings

3. Inspiring experiences from Dutch civil society NGOs

Oxfam's vision and approach of civil society

The Inter-Church Council (IKV/ Pax Christi)

The Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation (Hivos)

The Netherlands Helsinki Committee (NHC)

Free Voice struggling for independent and multiform media

Amnesty International on human rights education

Movies that Matter

IV. Interactive session at the Dutch ministry of foreign affairs

1. International mechanisms to promote human rights: possibilities for NGOs to interact

Universal Periodic Review

The use of international mechanisms by Gulf civil society

2. Bilateral mechanisms

The position of the Human Rights Ambassador

Strengthening the National Human Rights Protection System

The Civil Society Development Unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Feedback from the participants

Conclusions: placing civil society strengthening and democracy at the centre of Dutch GCC-relations

**For the full report, please contact Bridging the Gulf foundation at:
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