

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN OMAN*

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Oman's Journey toward a Vibrant Civil Society

The Sultanate of Oman started its transition to a lively civil society in 1970 with the launch of the Omani Women Association (OWA), which was the first official non-governmental organization (NGO) in the region (Al Hasani 2015). This was an effort in larger modernization initiatives by the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who brought about modernization that comprised universal education and the ending of slavery. In 1971 and 1978, the OWA was registered and developed into a state organization, respectively, showing the government's support for the NGOs, which are in accordance with the national development orientation. Several NGOs have risen in Oman over the years, such as the Oman Charitable Organization (OCO), which was established in 1996 and has been influential in humanitarian activities and other development initiatives (Ogen 2023). Such organizations have played key roles in education, women's empowerment, and even in times of disasters, making them part of the social and economic growth of the country.

Regulations and Frameworks Governing NGOs and Civil Society IS0501 II332561

The framework regulating Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations in the Sultanate of Oman is comprehensive and has provisions on transparency, accountability, and contribution to the country's agenda.

The main legal regulation concerning the registration, functioning, and regulation of NGOs is contained in the Royal Decree No. 14/2000.



According to this decree, NGOs are required to be registered with the Ministry of Social Development, which monitors and supervises their operations, financing, and compliance with statutory provisions (United Nations 2019). Besides the Royal Decree No. 14/2000 that sets out the registration and operation of NGOs, the Royal Decree No. 74/2000 reinforces the governance infrastructure by reiterating the state supervisory role over the civil society operation. These regulations, although requiring adherence to national priorities, should also correlate with international standards, especially those of transparency and foreign funding. In order to make the Omani NGOs more credible and functional, the adoption of global best practices in governance might help increase the scope of their operation as well as enrich their collaboration with international organizations. Such integration would enable a more active and responsive civil society in Oman that is better placed to respond to local and international issues.

According to the Arab NGO Directory, in 2016, there were 48 registered Omani NGOs active in sectors including education, health, environment, and development. Furthermore, more than sixty women's associations are legally recognized by the Oman Ministry of Social Development (Talei 2021). Moreover, the NGO Explorer database lists 66 UK-based NGOs in Oman; however, they are not operating as local NGOs of Oman. The Ministry of Social Development has a significant influence in overseeing NGOs, as those organizations must submit their annual reports and audits to the Ministry to prove that they meet the set standards of good governance. The civil society groups or NGOs that fail to adhere to these standards always face suspension. Additionally, the NGOs' activities in Oman are governed by the local legislation; the organizations also ought to meet international standards, especially if they cooperate with international partners. This assists in monitoring foreign funding and relations or partnerships with the Government of Oman. The cooperation of Oman Charitable Organization with UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) reflects the concerns and regulations on both the international and national levels (UNICEF 2024).

Non-governmental organizations operating in Oman are also subject to certain restrictions intended to protect national interests and cultural integrity (Oman 2024). In a manner that upholds stability and unity in the nation, any political lobbying and/or any activities that the Government deems to disrupt the authority of the state are banned.

However, this restriction has been a point of concern from some international actors because it constrains the ability of civil society to engage in other areas (Amnesty international 2023).

Another key aspect of Oman's regulation is the issue of financial transparency. Although there is no general rule of capping all donation limits, they have limitations in certain circumstances. For example, Oman's legal requirements for crowdfunding state that the total amount an individual investor can invest in a funding cannot exceed OMR 3,000 (approx. 6500 EUR), and the total for all investors within twelve months cannot be more than RO 20,000 (SASLO 2025).



The State Audit Institution (SAI) investigates various entities, such as NGOs, to make sure that the mentioned entities have strong financials. According to SAI's report, in 2022, it was engaged in 181 audit tasks, which led to the preparation of 147 reports comprising 1,591 observations (Times of Oman 2023). Such audits included the government units and authorities, investments, and companies that fall under the jurisdiction of SAI.

The Government also collaborates with NGOs through funding and capacity enhancement programs that are aimed at enhancing the operations of the NGOs. For example, in the fiscal year 2021, the Ministry provided OMR 3 million (approx. 6,500,000 EUR) for supporting Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), with more than fifty organizations benefiting from funds towards their development projects (Jawad et al. 2018). This financial support is supported by capacity building initiatives that focus on improving organizational capacities; for example, the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry has offered training in strategic planning and financial management workshops.

The strong regulatory framework brings certain obstacles; on the one hand, the rules guarantee compliance with national interests and accountability. As for potential negative consequences, the demands of registration and reporting can be a problem for small organizations: this will be an obstacle to expanding operations. Also limiting is political advocacy that hinders civil society's ability to address the structural concerns affecting society. However, as it has been highlighted, Oman's regulations give a systematic framework conducive to the rightful operation of both NGOs and civil society in the context of the nation's socio-political setting.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society in Oman

Oman has witnessed incredible social and economic development within the last few decades, formally recognizing the concept of NGOs and civil society. These entities in Oman can be traced with some certainty to the beginning period in the early 1970's especially pegged on the growth of the modern renaissance in line with the leadership of Sultan Qaboos Bin Said (Hunt–Phillips 2017). In this period, the Government began implementing policies in social development and community participation, thus leading to the definition of the development of a structured civil society to meet various social needs, including education, healthcare, environmental conservation, and many more cultural needs. According to this understanding, NGOs in Oman are characterized as legally incorporated and independent organizations that aim to act in the interests of certain segments of society on issues of social, economic, and environmental reforms and development (Al Kharusi 2022). While civil society is more diverse, encompassing a range of groups and associations that operate outside the state's structures, including community organizations, professional associations, and informal networks encourage collective action and social partnership (Arapovics 2018).



Both are involved in the advancement of society, NGOs are involved with set plans and projects with society, civil society involves the basic and core level of society (Al Kharusi 2022). The purpose of this paper is to analyze the functioning and development of NGOs and civil society in Oman with an emphasis on sustainable practices in community services while discussing their prospects in the region.

Comparison with Other Countries

Omani NGOs and civil society actors differ from their Western counterparts in their cultural roots and cooperation with the government. As in traditional Western culture, civil society prescribes liberties concerning authority, which was Kant's idea of public reason and moral agency (Keane 2009). Writers such as Walter Lipmann and Ralf Dahrendorf also stressed the role of a vibrant civil society in the stabilization and promotion of power as well as the active civil discourse (Keane 2009; Blomberg 2012). In the same way, Karl Popper's "open society" and Jurgen Habermas's "public sphere" (Rakuita 2014) posit that civil society should monitor the governments to enhance the rightful democratisation.

Civil societies in Oman are less confrontational and operate as cooperatives in this case. The Ministry of Social Development oversees the operations of NGOs to promote accountability through measures such as the Royal Decree 74/2000 (WHO 2016). This cooperative framework stands in sharp contrast to the idea forwarded by John Keane that Western civil societies are pluralist arenas of struggle for competing interests (Keane 2009). As discussed by Al Kharusi and Atweh (2008) state of Oman ensures the participation of the public in civil activity but also supervises them, hence becoming a structured model of civil society. The need for regular audits and approvals by the Ministry of Social Development ensures proper accountability. For example, due to strict adherence to these guidelines, the Oman Cancer Association enjoys high donor trust as opposed to more flexible systems observed in some developing countries where corruption erodes trust.

Another thing that sets Oman apart from other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries is the focus on the public and involving them in different processes. Under the cloak of these NGOs, the governmental influence continues to impose constraints on grassroots activity (Nasseef 2015). The empirical studies and theoretical insights also explain the exceptional model of civil society in Oman. In contrast to Western civil societies, the Omani civil society is based on cooperation and alignment with state objectives rather than on contestation. Nasseef suggests that the Omani NGOs exist in a strictly regulated environment that holds them accountable but encourages the population to participate (Nasseef 2015). In theory, this follows the Gramscian (1971) notion of the "hegemonic consent", in which the institutions of civil society pursue social order and national development objectives in collaboration with the state (Mazzeri 2020).



Such a system can be more stable and effective in meeting the needs of society. In contrast, the Environment Society of Oman (ESO) involves locals in conservation initiatives like those for sea turtles in Ras Al Jinz (Al Busaidi 2018). These campaigns engage residents and students in environmental matters, hence creating ownership of the campaigns. It also bears characteristics of the modern state and, at the same time, incorporates the traditional social relations. While Western civil societies use social media and online forums to mobilize people and advocate for specific campaigns (Hadji 2016), in Oman, tribal structures and majlis or council meetings are effectively used to garner support and put into practice initiatives (Al Subhi 2016). This has been an important way of addressing goals like conflict transformation and distribution of disaster relief items, as was witnessed by the Oman Charitable Organization during Cyclone Gonu in 2007 (Santayana 2017).

These efforts incorporated tribal leaders' feedback to guarantee that the affected communities were receiving a fair share of assistance. It is also important to state that, compared to countries with more liberalized civil society sectors, such as South Africa or the United Kingdom, Omani NGOs can be considered rather young. But this allows for a more conscious and deliberate process of development. The Omani Women Association has been another organization that has empowered Omani women through culturally appropriate interventions, including literacy and micro enterprise for women in villages (Al Subhi 2016). This can be contrasted with South Africa, where hardliner feminism often clashes with tradition (Beall et al. 2005), yet Oman strikes a clean medium between liberalization and tradition.

Another area of focus and strength of Omani NGOs is international cooperation. Among them is the Oman Charitable Organization (OCO), which has partnered with the UN for international disaster response programs whereby local knowledge is integrated with global experience. According to Bano (2008), in Pakistan, overdependency on donor funds compromises the capacity and sustainability of NGOs, as such organizations tend to align with donor priorities instead of the needs of communities. On the other hand, Omani partnerships like that of the Oman Charitable Organization in partnership with UNICEF focus on capacity enhancement and linking the international support with the country's development agenda, hence a higher percentage of ownership to enhance the sustainability of development interventions (Al-Tubi 2014). For instance, the OCO-UNICEF partnership to enhance educational facilities and infrastructure for children learning in rural areas represents how global funds are utilized to augment domestic priorities and initiatives (Al-Tubi 2014). Omani NGOs and civil society present a state-partnered developmental civil society model that is chronicled by state partnership, culture, regulation, and selective international linkages. Transparency is entrenched in Royal Decree 14/2000, which compels NGOs to register, submit audits, declare sources of funding, and is supervised by the Ministry of Social Development (United Nations 2019). This is done systematically through activities such as majlis forums, tribal engagements, and engaging the opinion of local leaders like the Environment Society of Oman and the Oman Charitable Organization (Al Busaidi 2018).



The system is built around legal responsibility, indigenous people's involvement, and smart foreign partnerships, which differ from confrontational Western civil society models: instead of opposing the state, the Omani civil society reinforces state initiatives for development.

Main Social Issues Addressed

Poverty Alleviation and Social Welfare

Dar Al Atta'a is significantly involved in providing solutions to poverty in Oman. Some of them include the offering of monthly cash assistance, food hampers, and scholarships via the Family Welfare Program of the organization. In 2020, Dar Al Atta'a celebrated World Food Day by distributing more than 100 boxes of food items among people in need (Times of Oman 2022). The Oman Charitable Organization (OCO) supplements this by concentrating on disaster response, including cyclone Shaheen that struck the country in 2021 and delivered housing in Al Batinah and reconstructed other vital infrastructures (Al-Tubi 2014).

Healthcare

The emphasis is also on different healthcare activities, especially within the framework of reaching out to the disadvantaged. The Oman Cancer Association (OCA) effectively fills the voids as a cancer awareness and early detection organisation. Even in the rural areas it serves, its 'Mobile Mammography Unit' provides free breast cancer screening. Over 5,000 women in rural areas have benefited from this service, and the number of late-stage cancer diagnoses has decreased (Nelson et al. 2009). The Association for the Welfare of Handicapped Children serves children from the ages of 6 to 14 through a comprehensive program of education, health, physical, and academic services (Association 2017).

Youth Engagement and Unemployment

According to Arapovic (2018), community development develops the people's ability through community groups, organisations, and networks to become active members of society. Injaz Oman and Outward Bound Oman focus on youth issues and eradicating unemployment among young people. The entrepreneurship workshops, the financial literacy training, and the job-shadowing programs provided by Injaz Oman have impacted over 10,000 students, preparing them for Oman's diverse economy as it stands today (Tumati 2024).



According to Mateer et al. Outward Bound Oman engages in leadership development training using outdoor approaches, which includes the acquisition of soft skills and team building that are relevant to the needs of the private sector (Mateer et al. 2023).

Environmental Conservation

The Environment Society of Oman (ESO) manages projects like The Arabian Oryx Conservation Project and protecting sea turtles in Ras Al Jinz (Al Raei–Yousef 2006). These include programs conducted together with the Sultan Qaboos University that incorporate scientific research and community programs. Moreover, ESO has helped in raising awareness and the creation of over 1000 conservation clubs in Jordanian schools, helping students to understand environmental issues (Al Raei–Yousef 2006).

Broader Issues Facing Oman

Oman is experiencing serious structural issues, such as the high rate of youth unemployment and water scarcity, which affect its Vision 2040 goals (Al Haziati et al. 2024). Unemployment rates are still high, especially among the youth, and the nation still faces water shortages in spite of the efforts to diversify the economy. In 2024, Oman delivered 449 million cubic meters of water and lost 177 million cubic meters, which underlines the inefficiency of the water sector (Ricardo 2025). Furthermore, Al Shibli notes that the country intends to decrease the contribution of its oil sector to its GDP, which was 16 percent in 2030 to 84 percent in 2040, and raise the contribution of the non-oil sector to 91.6 percent in 2040 (Al Shibli 2025).

Economic Diversification

The over-dependence on revenues from oil exports remains another difficult factor when it comes to Oman's economic sustainability. Given that oil has exceeded 60% of the nation's GDP in recent years, changes in international oil prices pose significant risks to the economy (Al-Sarihi 2020). According to Hakro and Pandow, efforts like the 'Tanfeedh' strategic program seek to reduce the overdependence on the oil sector through the development of non-oil sectors like tourism, manufacturing base, and renewable energy (Hakro–Pandow 2019). However, the growth rate is still low, and, for instance, the non-oil sector constituted only a quarter of the GDP (Al-Sarihi 2020).



Youth Unemployment

The rate of unemployment is also high, particularly among the youthful generation, as more than half the population of Oman is between 25 to 49 years (Islam 2020). The Government has tried to establish job openings, but youth unemployment stands high at 8%, due to the lack of employable skills and constraints on private sector development (Islam 2020). While initiatives such as the Injaz Oman aim to teach youth entrepreneurial capabilities, sustainable solutions involve adjustments to education and employment systems.

Water Shortages and Climate Change

Lack of water is a severe issue in Oman as it is considered one of the driest countries in the region, if not the entire world. The availability of renewable water resources per capita is nearly 500 cubic meters per year, while almost 40% of the total area of Oman is affected by salinity (Bhambare et al. 2018). Climate change also worsens this problem through increased temperatures and reduced precipitation, which has an impact on agriculture and the environment. Measures suggested in the Government's National Climate Change Strategy include efficient use of water and developing renewable energy projects (Bhambare et al. 2018); however, implementation difficulties still exist.

Urbanization and Infrastructure Strain

Housing challenges in Oman have been compounded by the increasing expansion of the city population, especially in the regions of Muscat and Salalah (Reform 2012). The size of the urban populace has stretched the availability of houses to the population, traffic jams and demand for public facilities. Sustainable urban development is among the Oman Vision 2040 goals (Aggarwal et al. 2024); however, the Government faces challenges in addressing these proactively, including inadequate funding and slow implementation of plans.

Social Inequality

The structure and character of economic growth do not contribute to the elimination of social inequality; they remain a significant problem, especially in terms of the division between the urban and rural populations (Islam–Al-Hadhrami, 2022). It is common to find remote areas experiencing deficiencies in healthcare, education, and infrastructure as compared to the urban areas (Arapovics 2018). However,

such non-governmental organizations as Dar Al Atta'a and the Oman Charitable Organization help to reduce these gaps, but, nevertheless, inequality persists and is one of the main obstacles to the balanced development of the country.

Country Programs and Corporate Support

Non-governmental organisations and the civil society in Oman primarily engage in implementing programmes that are set at the national level to respond to various social, environmental, and economic factors. These programs are usually sponsored by establishments under their corporate social responsibility (CSR) commitment. For instance, the biodiversity conservation program of the Environment Society of Oman (ESO) has been involved in the conservation of wildlife and habitat, particularly in the areas of Arabian Oryx and green turtles (Al Raei–Yousef, 2006). Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) has been particularly supporting these initiatives through the provision of ample financial and technical support towards sustainable conservation measures.

Another significant program is the “Empowerment Initiative”, which aims at offering job literacy training and micro credit programs to less privileged women through Dar Al Atta'a. The “Empowerment Initiative”, organized by Dar Al Atta'a, allows the illiterate women who are in low job opportunities to access job literacy and micro credit facilities that would help support themselves. Dar Al Atta'a ‘Back to School’ has notably enjoyed Bank Muscat's support, and this program supports students from poor families (Times of Oman, 2021). This partnership has empowered more than a thousand women, making it possible for them to start their businesses and be financially stable.

In the healthcare sector, the Oman Cancer Association's (OCA) Mobile Mammography Unit program is funded by Oman LNG's CSR fund.

The company has provided Oscar med-techs and funded the operating expenses, which have allowed the program to extend to different regions and examine thousands of women for signs of early breast cancer (Times of Oman 2021). Through this initiative, more than 5,000 women were examined in 2022, and the number of patients diagnosed in the late stages decreased markedly.

The education sector has also recorded successful partnerships. The “School Improvement Program” that is implemented by the Ministry of Education through partnerships with NGOs, including Injaz Oman, is funded by corporate entities like Shell Oman. Nxplorer is currently an educational program carried out by the Shell International company. Major emphases of the program are to help students employ thinking tools to generate effective and creative solutions in three of the sustainable development goals, energy, water, and food (Hemdan et al. 2022).

In addition to supporting community development and the engagement of youths, it plays a vital role in initiatives such as employment, housing, and car



rental services. Omantel has sponsored Outward Bound Oman by benefiting more than 679 Omani youth through 46 courses (Ranjan 2023). This program also reflects national policy goals of decreasing youth unemployment by providing trainees with competencies relevant to existing employment opportunities.

Lastly, the Oman Charitable Organization (OCO) collaborates with business organizations like OQ group in the fundraising activities aimed at assisting disaster victims and the reconstruction of their houses. After Cyclone Shaheen in 2021, the OQ Group has donated QAR 1 million (approx. 250,000 EUR) to rebuild homes and provide economic normalcy in the devastated regions, thus establishing the importance of CSR in facing national calamities (Ibrahim 2021). These examples emphasize the significance of the corporate sector in reinforcing the impact and accessibility of NGO-led programs in cultivating sustainable development in Oman.

Innovations and Technology

Oman has adopted modern strategies to incorporate Oman Vision 2040, especially regarding Artificial Intelligence and technology. An example is the application of AI in the healthcare sector, where the Ministry of Health in Oman has partnered with the Oman Cancer Association.

Self-diagnostic applications based on artificial intelligence have been integrated into breast cancer screening procedures, enhancing initial diagnosis rates (Oman Observer 2019). These tools are able to analyze the images of mammography in a more efficient and accurate manner, thus preventing delays in diagnosing the illness and subsequently increasing the efficiency of the treatment procedures.

Within the sphere of education, the Ministry of Education signed an agreement on cooperation with Microsoft for enhancing the digital transformation processes. This synergy aims at enhancing teachers' technology integration for delivering effective learning outcomes and preparing learners for existing and future careers. It involves training to adopt new processes with AI platforms for instructional delivery and student differentiated learning experiences based on interest within STEM domains (Microsoft 2020).

Environmental conservation measures also employ artificial intelligence technology. Currently, the Environment Society of Oman has adopted AI-enabled drones for monitoring wildlife such as the endangered Arabian Oryx species. Aside from drone technology, another method that is applied in Oman is the conservation measures put in place to preserve the Arabian Oryx. Located in Al Wusta Governorate, the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary, covering an area of 2,824 square kilometers, serves an important function in the protection of the species and the availability of the proper experimental environment for the study of wildlife behavior. Besides Arabian Oryx, other animals that can be found at the sanctuary are the Arabian gazelle, sand gazelle, and Nubian ibex (Oman Observer 2024).



The new Arabian Oryx birth in the wild area shows that it is one of the best conservation successes due to its ability to survive in the natural setting for several decades after it was protected and studied.

Similarly, Muscat Municipality has implemented AI-based traffic management systems to alleviate congestion and enhance road safety. These systems monitor real-time traffic flow and optimize signal timings, improving efficiency for daily commuters. Additionally, the municipality has introduced smart parking sensors in areas like Al Khuwair and Ghubra to enhance parking management (Muscat Daily 2024). These vehicle imaging sensors, operational in designated paid public parking areas, aim to improve efficiency and user convenience.

Conclusion

Civil society organizations in Oman are crucial partners in supporting sustainable community service delivery and confronting the emerging needs of the nation. Thanks to their targeted approach towards fighting poverty, supporting healthcare, engaging the youthful population, and protecting the planet, these organizations have proved to be rather tenacious and resourceful. Corporate backing and policies also enhance them, establishing a supportive environment that resonates with Oman Vision 2040 (Al Sinani et al. 2021). These methods, especially the use of AI and other sophisticated technologies, portray Oman as a country embracing technological progress in the advancement of its development initiatives. These innovations make work more efficient, manage resources effectively, and promote the integration of different groups in different fields. Through both the adherence to cultural norms and incorporation of modernity, Oman presents a balanced model of development. Consequently, challenges like diversification of the economy, water management, and urban management will continue to define the relevance of NGOs and civil society in the country. This is why they are not only important to fill gaps in public services, but also to help empower and grow communities in the Sultanate of Oman as it strives for the ability to be stronger and more inclusive.

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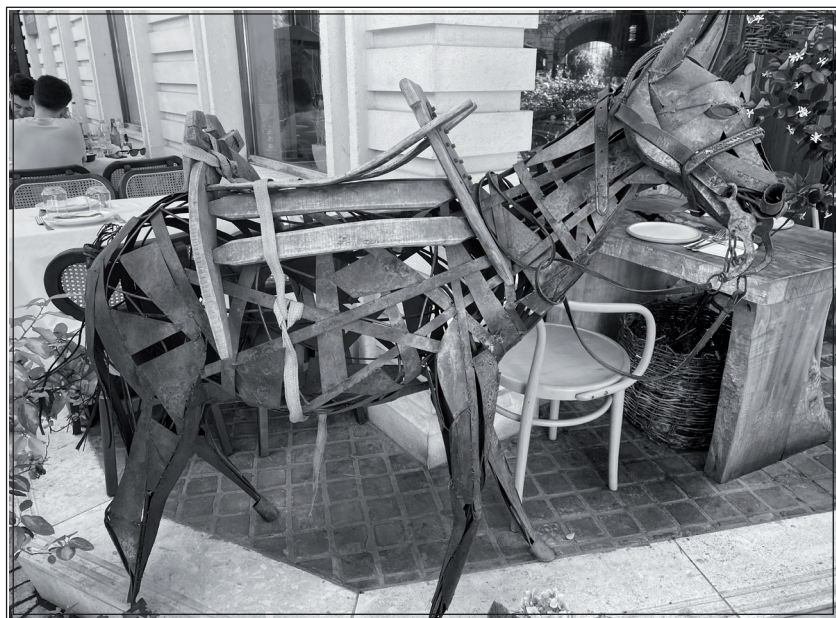
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