



مؤسسة الأصفري
The Asfari Foundation

IMPACT REPORT

Funding for Innovation
through Challenging Times

2019-22

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Cover Photo:

Mariam Ziadé | Codi Tech

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The Asfari Foundation is a UK-based grant-making charity set up by Ayman and Sawsan Asfari in 2006. It makes grants that strengthen organisations with a focus on youth (entrepreneurship, education system improvement, and higher education provision), and civil society (governance, citizenship, media, feminism and gender) in Lebanon, Palestine (including support for Palestinians residing in Israel), and the UK. Through its grant-making programmes it aims to support a resilient civil society infrastructure; to provide innovative support to the youth tackling pressing social challenges; and to empower partners to transform their organisations, increase their impact, and strengthen learning and collaboration through community-led, localised knowledge-sharing.

A STATEMENT FROM OUR FOUNDERS



Since undergoing a Strategic Review in 2018, the Foundation has shifted its support away from project-based funding towards longer-term investment with an emphasis on supporting organisational sustainability and innovation. Since then it has refined elements of this strategy in order to take into consideration social, political, and economic developments in the Middle East, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic, and has embraced the opportunities afforded by innovative technology and new techniques in learning and knowledge-sharing in order to take the Foundation's work to scale.

Our strategy, based on supporting the organisational development of our partners in the region, is centred on the belief that increased donor investment leads in turn to increased robustness, innovation, sustainability and impact. We believe that the solution to the crises faced by the region in the long term is a strong and resilient civil society, and we are confident that by adopting this approach, over time, power will shift towards local organisations in the Levant.



Despite the turbulence and the many challenges faced by the Levantine region and its severe, protracted crises, we have – and will continue to – celebrate and invest in the region's vibrant and dynamic civil society, as we believe this will be the catalyst to organising communities and bringing about lasting change in the region. We hope the stories in this report will serve as inspiring examples of how innovative grant-making and well-targeted support for civil society and youth can create lasting impact in our region.



–Ayman and Sawsan Asfari



PORTFOLIO BY LOCATION

PALESTINE AND PALESTINIANS

The Foundation supports Palestinian education and civil society organisations working with Palestinians in its target countries and supports the Palestinian community in Israel through reputable partnerships focusing on education, youth leadership and enterprise.

JORDAN

In 2022, the Foundation's YLEAP programme expanded its eligibility criteria to include Jordanian organisations.

UNITED KINGDOM

The Foundation supports organisations working with young entrepreneurs in the UK, partners with UK-based think tanks and research organisations, and supports some British INGOs working with young Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese people in the Arab region.

LEBANON

The Foundation contributes to the resilience of civil society organisations working with Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian communities in Lebanon.

SYRIA AND SYRIANS

The Foundation gives grants to organisations that support Syrians based in neighbouring countries and in the global diaspora, focusing on current needs as well as those of Syria's future.

ADAPTING TO CHANGE IN A CHALLENGING CONTEXT

The Middle East is a region beset by many specific challenges. Protracted conflict and political instability, economic hardship and hyperinflation, energy, water and food shortages and deteriorating infrastructure all contribute to making it a particularly hostile operating environment for civil society. For those providing funding to the region, challenges around vetting, due diligence and the transfer of funds represent additional obstacles. Many of our partners have reported high staff turnover due to key personnel leaving the region to seek safety and better opportunities abroad. Diversification of funding sources and the sustainability of operations remain a challenge in all the countries in which the Asfari Foundation operates, with many funders dropping Syrian organisations in particular from their portfolio due to donor fatigue or challenges around due diligence and changes in policies. Fluctuating funding cycles also mean instability for civil society organisations (CSOs) working in an already unstable context.

In Lebanon, the financial crisis has been acute following the gradual collapse of the banking sector since October 2019, exacerbating existing challenges posed by sectarianism, a weak state and the influx of refugees. A fuel crisis throughout 2021 resulted in a significant strain on all aspects of daily life. The combination of currency deterioration and household food essentials being imported meant that prices have risen and risen, resulting in hyperinflation.

A chronic shortage of medications and medical equipment has also posed an extreme challenge to a population facing a significant drainage of its health sector. In Turkey, the crisis with the Turkish Lira caused huge inflation and a reduction in purchasing power, and the often hostile operating environment in the country poses a further challenge to many Syrian CSOs operating there. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza continue to face huge obstacles as the Israeli occupation continues, and young Palestinian citizens of Israel face more barriers to education and employment than the average Israeli citizen.

This context was made even more challenging by the Covid-19 pandemic, at which point the Asfari Foundation worked swiftly to review its strategies of support. Our number one priority was the safety and wellbeing of our partner organisations and their teams, and helping them adapt to the “new normal”. Ensuring the success of our partners became more important than ever, but we understood that with changing times come changing needs.

In addition, across the MENA region progress on achieving gender equality remains slow. The challenges referenced above (conflict, economic and political instability), as well as the persistence of patriarchal societal norms, continue to severely restrict the ability of women and girls to access their rights and achieve equity.

With this in mind, and in the spirit of collaboration and openness, we worked with our partners to increase their resilience, adapt their activities, adjust their expenditure and implementation timelines, and invest in new infrastructure and capabilities. In particular, we worked hard to identify new and innovative uses of technology, launching our Digital Transformation Grants programme to ensure our partners were ready to respond to the new context on as strong a footing as possible. We are proud of the way we responded with new solutions, with an emphasis on collaboration and

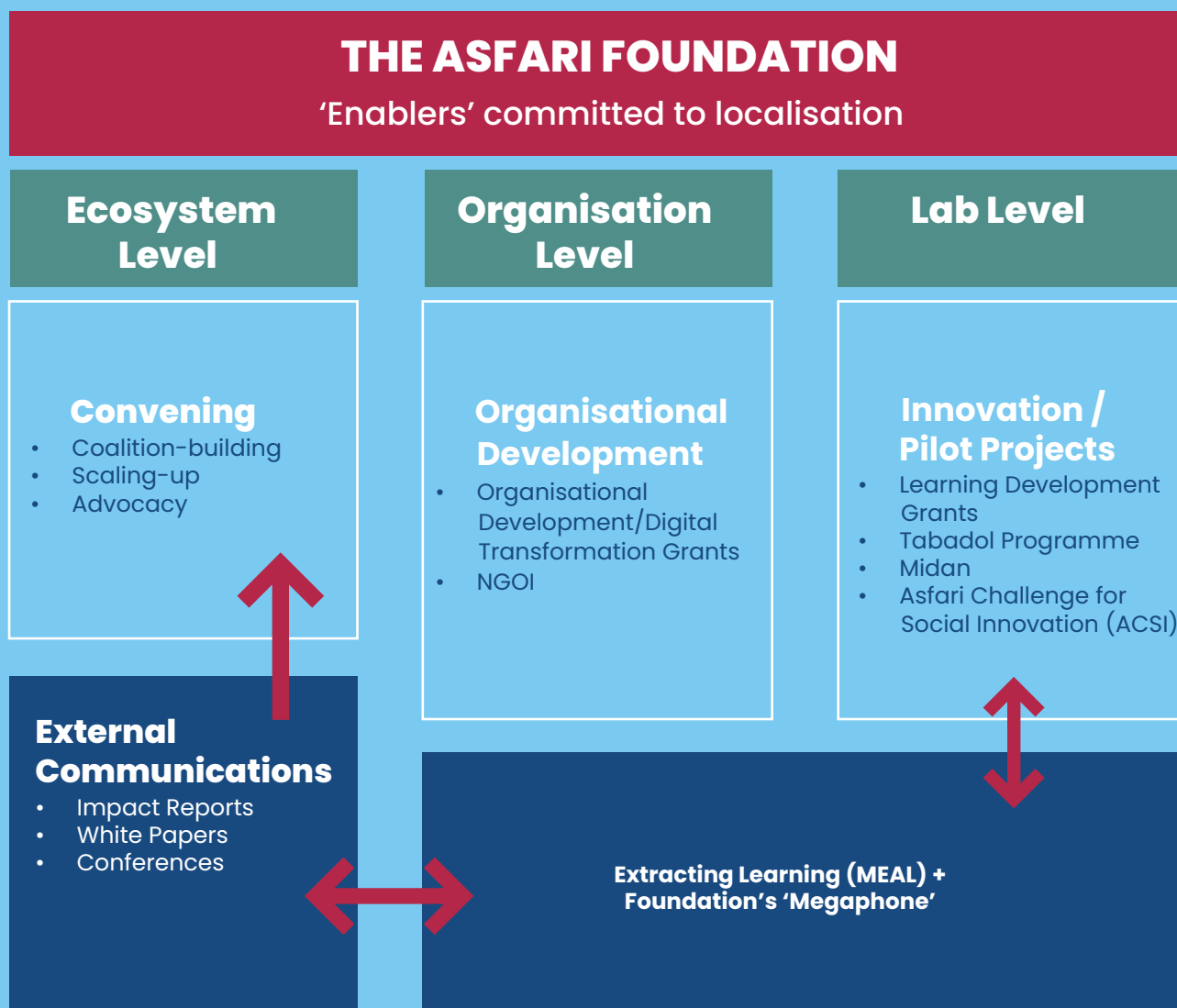
WHAT WE DO

We support the activities of our partner organisations at a local level, making grants through our two main thematic programmes: Youth Learning, Entrepreneurship & Innovation, and Civil Society, which focus on organisational development, innovation, and knowledge-sharing. At the regional level the Foundation develops strategic partnerships with influential academic and policy centres such as the American University of Beirut and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. We also actively pursue partnerships with INGOs (including the International Rescue Committee) and other Foundations (such as the Ford Foundation) to deliver co-investment in areas of shared common interest, enabling the Foundation to take its impact to scale. The Foundation uses the evidence of its impact and that of its partners to advocate for localisation, collaboration, experimentation with innovative approaches to grant-making and partnerships, and the important role family foundations can play in helping to drive positive change in the Middle East.

knowledge-sharing across our network, amplifying the expertise of our partners on the ground right across our ecosystem. At the heart of our response was our deep concern for the wellbeing – and sustainability – of our partners, and our deep-seated conviction that the solution to all the challenges faced by the region is to invest in the local capacity of civil society, to be responsive to the needs of the grassroots and to ensure that, ultimately, the solution comes from them. Our investment continues to be in a strong and resilient civil society, and we truly believe that as a small family foundation we are leading the way in this respect.

OUR APPROACH

Following a strategic review of the Foundation's work in 2018, the Foundation sought to place a clear emphasis on support for organisational development and longer-term funding. Seeking to add value to partners and potential partners at every stage of the grant process, we celebrate the importance of organisational development at every stage, even bringing it into our own practice by way of piloting new types of grant and intervention. Increasingly, we seek to move towards a more catalytic form of philanthropy, committed to enabling a robust, impactful, and diverse civil society in the Middle East, at the Ecosystem level, the Organisation level, and via innovation – what we refer to as the Lab level. The Foundation also seeks to promote localisation by offering long term, flexible funding and capacity building to its partners, awarding grants of up to £75,000 per year for up to three years.



INNOVATION

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Foundation’s strategy is the emphasis it places on innovation. Given the limited funding given to local civil society organisations (with the international community increasingly focusing on Covid-19, climate change and other security issues), the Foundation has been encouraging local organisations to think about innovative activities that can sustain their impact independently from donors. Supporting innovation and entrepreneurship in the Levant is vital, as the ecosystem around this is growing, with actors united in their desire to improve the situation in the region and find solutions

to the many economic, social, and environmental problems in the region, making use of technology, innovation, entrepreneurship, and knowledge-sharing. Entrepreneurs are driving innovation forward, yet they are faced with many challenges. Typically, they are unable to leave their existing jobs in order to experiment with new, often risky enterprises. Working in partnerships in the region, the Asfari Foundation offers them a safe and supportive space in which to experiment, learn, mentor and be mentored, ultimately benefitting a much wider community.

YOUTH LEARNING, ENTREPRENEURSHIP & INNOVATION PROGRAMME

The Asfari Foundation's Youth Empowerment Programme was originally set up in 2006 to support young people in their transition towards independent adulthood and engaged citizenship through access to formal and informal education opportunities, also helping them to find employment. Since 2019 however, and in response to changes in the MENA region and in the world of work, the programme has undergone a shift in strategy, evolving to become the Youth Learning, Entrepreneurship & Innovation Programme, which offers funding and wider support to organisations working with young entrepreneurs, from ideation to impact investment. The Foundation supports the development of innovative learning solutions that supplement traditional education and respond to the demands of the world of work, strengthening existing entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems and encouraging collaborations between actors to help achieve impact at scale. It seeks to promote the identification of innovative solutions to social problems, connecting young people in the Levant to global markets and promoting knowledge-sharing.

Through this programme, we aim to build a committed community dedicated to social and economic change in the Levant, guided by evidence and experience and led by young people. Since 2019 the Foundation has invested in partner organisations supporting aspiring entrepreneurs responding to a wide range

of social issues, including inclusive quality education, employment, gender justice, and environmental sustainability. Grants have also enabled young people to bridge their academic aspirations with the needs of the world of work, and offered women in the West Bank, as well as youth in Gaza and Lebanon, specialised training to join the technology sector.

In 2022 the Asfari Foundation launched a programme called Tabadol, a new "Innovation in Sustainability" programme which aims to support aspiring entrepreneurs and civil society organisations to work together and think innovatively about sustainable business models and help them strengthen their impact, innovation, sustainability and robustness.

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The Asfari Foundation's support of our Impact Fund, the digitalisation of our work, and the internal systems at Alfanar has given us the opportunity to innovate. We believe the Fund will be one of the first funds of its type launched in the Arab world.

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-Alfanar

Working with Makesense, the Asfari Foundation is working to help aspiring entrepreneurs and civil society organisations find creative solutions to sustain the transformational change they are leading in their communities in Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Syria.

In 2022, Tabadol's Fellowship programme supported 10 social entrepreneurs to work with 10 CSOs with the goal of identifying innovative solutions to collectively tackle local issues in an entrepreneurial and sustainable way. The Tabadol Creathon aims to create momentum, generate new ideas and fund new solutions that improve the sustainability and impact of CSOs in its target countries. The Tabadol Collaborator scheme was launched in 2022, as an accelerator programme dedicated to boosting the entrepreneurial skills of CSOs in the region to enhance their sustainability, from framing the challenge to conceptualising solutions.



The innovative nature of Tabadol extends beyond the project itself, however. The Foundation was keen to develop a grant-making process that is more innovative, adding value to the organisations and communities it supports through the Tabadol grant application process itself.

Photo credit: www.jusoor.ngo

The Foundation will continually monitor the success of the Tabadol scheme, looking to learn whether it can serve as a new model for grant-making that both meets the Foundation's strategic objectives and adds value to applicants along the way, hopefully serving as a catalyst in the field of localisation and innovative grant-making.

The Asfari Challenge for Social Innovation (ACSI), an accelerator programme and online platform for teams based in Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and the Syrian diaspora, is an example of the way in which the Foundation encourages the creation of new solutions led by the region's youth. It represents an opportunity for budding social enterprises to receive all the support they need in ideation or prototype stages. The scheme is a four-month virtual accelerator during which 10-13 selected early and prototype teams receive intense training and mentorship support, financial support of up to £6500, and connections to other supporters and opportunities to maximise the impact of their initiatives. ACSI is unique in that it is an online programme running regionally across the Levant. Working with Bloom, which supports individuals, enterprises and accelerators to boost their impact and growth, the Foundation sought to break down barriers to entry (with previous entrepreneurship programmes typically focused on capital cities and other major urban areas), offering online support to all, including home-bound women, people with disabilities, and people based more rurally. Adaptive solutions such as this became all the more important during the Covid-19 pandemic.



Photo credit: Asmaa Elkhaldi for Gaza Sky Geeks, Mercy Corps

The Ayman and Sawsan Asfari Institute Building
(Photo Credit: Hasan Nisr, AUB)

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The Asfari Institute is a space where academia and activism converge and where knowledge and the production of knowledge is informed by emerging and vibrant civil society whose activism is based on relevant knowledge, a commitment to inclusivity, to rights and to equality.

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-Lina Abou-Habib,
Director, Asfari Institute

CIVIL SOCIETY

The Foundation's Civil Society programme seeks to develop a vibrant, resilient and empowered civil society infrastructure that can hold those in power accountable and advocate for positive change in the Middle East region and beyond. Between 2012 and 2018, the programme focused on supporting the short-term programmatic and core needs of small, local CSOs in the region, primarily in the fields of governance, citizenship and the media. Since 2018, however, the programme has evolved to focus on longer-term funding for core costs and organisational development, therefore supporting organisations to invest in their capacity, strengthen their resilience and sustainability, increase their impact, and widen their reach. Looking beyond grant-making, the Civil Society programme seeks to connect diverse actors from across the region and more widely, investing in learning and knowledge-sharing across these networks to empower local CSOs to lead change in the region.

The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut (AUB) represents the Foundation's most significant investment, and over the years has become a well-recognised regional centre with civil society expertise, providing research, convening and education for the entire region. Bridging the gap between academia and activism, it offers our civil society partners and others relevant learning and networking opportunities. The Foundation has been investing in the Institute in Beirut since 2012, and the team was delighted to attend the official opening of a new "Ayman and Sawsan Asfari Institute Building", including classrooms, a state-of-the-art conference hall, and a podcast and filming studio, in September 2022. The Institute will serve as a hub for the growing ecosystem of civil society in Lebanon and the wider MENA region.

INNOVATION THROUGH DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

In 2021, the Foundation launched its Digital Transformation Grants (DTG) programme, offering partners the chance to enhance their digital presence and delivery, and enabling them to grow their impact and sustainability. The programme supports access to quality digital learning, mentoring and financial support to implement meaningful change through small, one-off grants. Although the term carries different implications for different organisations, to the Foundation, “digital transformation” represents a cultural shift, marking an organisation’s journey towards a stronger presence and delivery online, streamlined programme delivery, and stronger, more efficient processes and systems. The global shift towards digital transformation was accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant need for lockdowns and social distancing, but we believe it will also be crucial in the long term to supporting the agility, resilience and impact of civil society. The Foundation offered a further round of Digital Transformation Grants in 2022.



Photo credit: Mariam Ziadé | Codi Tech

RECYCLE LEBANON – A DTG CASE STUDY

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Support from the Asfari Foundation via its Digital Transformation Grant was invaluable, enabling us to grow from a high impact grassroots NGO to a scalable, sustainable organisation. Our success from the DTG formalised our operations, digital presence and sustainability models, also helping us deepen our partnerships.

–Recycle Lebanon

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Recycle Lebanon is a trailblazing Lebanese NGO advocating for system change towards regenerative and circular development. It operates through four main programmes: a circular economy platform known as Regenerate Hub, which seeks to strengthen nature-based solutions; an EcoSouk, the first zero-waste shop in the Middle East with access to local, traditional, refillable, unpackaged, bulk and toxic-free products; TerraPods, a bio-design makerspace, art residency and agroecology farm in Baskinta, Lebanon; and Dive Into Action, a policy and empowerment programme with zero waste clean ups, balaplastic (plastic free) transitions, food waste events and native planting initiatives.

Recycle Lebanon received a £7,000 Digital Transformation Grant (DTG) from the Asfari Foundation in 2021 for its circular economy platform Regenerate Hub. The grant allowed the organisation the opportunity to strengthen its internal and external practices and scale up its operations. It enabled it to identify digital data-oriented income generating features on its platform, develop its digital outreach communications strategy, and hire six sector experts and two consultants. It also helped develop the organisation's HR procedures, data privacy policy and data training modules. The second grant ever received by Recycle Lebanon, the DTG had a significant and substantial impact on its growth.

Learn more about Recycle Lebanon at: <https://recyclelebanon.org/>

OUR APPROACH TO KNOWLEDGE-SHARING

The Foundation places a strong emphasis on knowledge-sharing and seeks to leverage data from its peers, partners and wider practitioner and research communities. It works to present best practices to stakeholders across regional and global networks, helping to shape global understanding of the challenges of the region, and to share innovative solutions and approaches. The Foundation has invested in the development of an online learning platform “Midan: A Knowledge Hub for Civil Society” to offer formal and informal e-learning in the Foundation’s key thematic areas, in Arabic, to increase accessibility and relevance.

The Foundation also launched a number of “Learning Development” grants, supporting local grassroots civil society organisations to invest in their own development and to produce content that can be shared with the growing community on Midan. In 2021, while partners were still operating out of lockdown, the Foundation also began offering a programme of online learning webinars specifically tailored to development practitioners and organisations in the MENA region, which proved popular and received positive feedback. These went on to become a regular feature in 2022.

Knowledge-sharing and convening through in-person events is also key to the Foundation’s vision, and we were pleased to bring together our Syrian civil society partners in Berlin in May 2022 for several days of networking and knowledge exchange.

BEYOND GRANT -MAKING

Across all of our programmes, Asfari Foundation support extends beyond solely the financial: once accepted as grantees, partners become part of the Asfari Foundation’s ecosystem of local, regional and global actors, and are encouraged to connect with peer organisations, academic institutions and think-tanks. We recognise that local CSOs in the region have built up a wealth of experience and expertise, and offer opportunities for them to collate and share their knowledge with others in our network, connecting the local to the regional and global, and positioning local CSOs as leaders of meaningful and lasting change.



Asfari Foundation Berlin Conference, May 2022

ENAB BALADI – CASE STUDY

Enab Baladi is an independent Syrian media organisation founded in 2011. It offers 24-hour news coverage via its multilingual interactive websites, and publishes a weekly newspaper covering Syrian political and social affairs. Syrian media organisations face huge challenges, including the worsening security situation for journalists inside Syria and fluctuating international support for independent journalism.

Faced with these challenges, the Syrian independent media sector faces an existential threat, with only a handful of media outlets still operating of the 300 or so media outlets established in Syria in 2011–12. Over the past decade, Enab Baladi has grown from a small, amateur-run weekly newspaper to one of the main sources of news and information for millions of Syrians.

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Asfari Foundation funding contributed to giving a sense of stability because of the length of the grant (three years), which meant a more predictable budget. This enabled Enab Baladi to think strategically about the coming years and how to advance its work while overcoming challenges and keeping the organisation running.

-Enab Baladi

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Between 2019 and 2021 the Asfari Foundation provided core funding to Enab Baladi for its key personnel. This enabled the organisation to continue operating during the Covid-19 pandemic, helping it to focus on its primary purpose, namely, producing informative reports about and for Syrians.

Learn more about

Enab Baladi at: <https://english.enabbaladi.net>

SYRIAN CENTER FOR LEGAL STUDIES AND RESEARCH – CASE STUDY

The Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research (SCLSR) is an independent, non-governmental and non-profit rights-based organisation which aims to disseminate and establish principles of human rights for the Syrian people and to rebuild the legal structure of the Syrian state through the publication of research and legal studies. It provides support and legal assistance to victims of violations, and works to hold human rights violators accountable by processing and submitting files to competent jurisdictions, at the same time building the capacity of Syrian jurists.

Between 2019 and 2021, the Asfari Foundation supported the SCLSR with critical core funding, enabling the Center to rework its organisational structure and improve its digital capabilities at a crucial time in its development. It was able to expand its digital existence and outreach through the creation of an e-learning platform. The grant secured salaries for the Center's core team and enabled it to expand its scope, resulting in the publication of six studies, five short films, four articles and 20 position statements. It also allowed for important new collaborations, enabling SCLSR to train more than 60 participants over an extended period, and supporting the advocacy team to hold 25 meetings raising awareness

about the situation in Syria and advocating for the rights of Syrians in EU countries. Support from the Asfari Foundation allowed the Center to approach new donors and successfully negotiate additional funding. As a result of the Center's new policies and clear procedures, one donor offered to increase its funding threefold.

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Support from the Asfari Foundation enabled us to establish a structure and develop a strategy and systematic plan of action for the centre. Asfari Foundation funding also gave us the opportunity to find additional similar sources of funding.

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–Anwar al Bunni,
Syrian Center For Legal
Studies and Research

Learn more about the SCLSR at: https://sl-center.org/language/en/home_eng

SPEARHEADING CHANGE THROUGH ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT – NGOI

We believe in – and celebrate – the resilience of the civil society sector in the Middle East, which continues to grow at an incredible pace. However, we recognise the extent of the challenges this sector faces. Small CSOs working in a difficult context have limited capacity to invest in their overall organisational development, including systematising their procedures, policies and structures. We saw a clear need for a credible body offering solutions to the many operational challenges encountered by these organisations, which would be able to provide technical support and much-needed mentoring and coaching.

With this in mind, the Asfari Foundation partnered with the Non-Governmental Organizations Initiative (NGOI) scheme, based out of the Global Health Initiative (GHI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) to pilot a programme of organisational development and capacity building support for our Organisational Development grant partners in 2020/2021.

Following the success of this pilot, the Foundation actively sought out other organisations to partner with on the initiative and take it to scale. The Foundation was delighted to be joined in fulfilling this ambition by the Ford Foundation, who have provided significant further investment to support the expansion of NGOI's approach beyond Lebanon and to the wider MENA region. This is now being implemented through a flagship programme called 'The Alliance for Arab Civil Society Development (AACSD)'. Co-founded by NGOI, the Asfari Foundation and the Ford Foundation, the programme is bringing together a network of partners and stakeholders that share our deep commitment to the strengthening of civil society organisations operating throughout the Arab world. By investing in piloting new solutions to the specific challenges our civil society partners face, and then actively seeking collaboration and partnership with other organisations to take those solutions to scale, the Asfari Foundation adds value for its partners and increases its impact.

FONDATION DIANE – CASE STUDY

Fondation Diane is a Lebanese organisation set up to educate citizens about their responsibilities towards Lebanon's environment, and to support creative young minds who are committed to making change via sustainable development.

As an Asfari Foundation partner, Fondation Diane was eligible to work towards the NGOI certification, working its way through the various stages of the programme. Progressing through the NGOI programme offered the organisation much needed clarity on how to organise its workflow, and encouraged it to work closely with each of its departments to implement change with buy-in from the wider team, ultimately helping it to streamline its work and prioritise fundraising efforts. The resultant overhaul of its systems, policies and procedures has transformed the organisation and helped with visibility and credibility when applying for other grants.

Separately from NGOI, the Asfari Foundation has also supported Fondation Diane's organisational development, enabling the launch of a new and improved website and support for its communications team more generally. This support has enabled the organisation to host several events, support its green entrepreneurs, and strengthen the ecosystem in which it operates.

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We would definitely recommend participation in NGOI for MENA civil society organisations and will continue working with NGOI going forward and try to attain our Platinum certificate.

– Fondation Diane

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Learn more about Fondation Diane at:
<https://www.fondation-diane.org>



A STATEMENT FROM OUR CEO



I am delighted to have joined the Asfari Foundation at such an exciting time and as it seeks to build on its existing legacy to develop a new strategy working towards its vision for a stronger, more interconnected civil society in the region. Going forward, we will continue to engage with our partners, and are grateful to all of them for their expertise and insight as we work together to bring about meaningful change.



-Muna Abbas
CEO, Asfari Foundation
(2022 -present)



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