



Empowering Local Government Institutions in the MENA Region MDF4 Workshop

Workshop Proceedings

Beirut, January 22nd-23rd, 2002

The workshop, which gathered researchers, academics, NGOs, elected officials and private actors in an effort to build knowledge, exchange experience and draw practical strategies to affect policies at the local level, recognized that decentralization and local government empowerment are the order of the day in the MENA region.

The workshop focused on some of the current attempts at promoting and enhancing local government and on initiatives at the municipal level, drawing on specific experiences from different countries of the region in an effort to offer a platform for regional co-operation.

The sessions highlighted exemplary cases of municipal innovations presented by elected officials, to reflect on the lessons learned, the possible replication of institutional innovations, and the importance of institution building, municipal leadership, and citizen participation for successful and efficient local government. The debates concentrated on countries where, constitutionally and effectively, local power structures have had a significant measure of autonomy and control over activities, resources, and expenditures within their jurisdiction, and have been periodically accountable to their constituencies through relatively fair elections. On that basis, the workshop included cases and participants from Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan, Iran, Palestine, Egypt and Turkey.

Demand in the region for decentralization is growing both for its developmental function and for its role in democratization. Decentralization relies on the need for the states of the region to make a strategic political choice in moving on agendas of institutional and administrative reforms and empowering societal and local actors to contribute to social and economic development and have a larger voice in public choices and policies.

After a brief introduction to issue pertaining to decentralization and its relation to democratization processes, participation, efficiency, and regional development, the workshop's first day opened on with a session the Constitutional, Legal and Administrative Framework of Local Governments in the MENA Region: A Comparative Analysis, followed by a second session on Elected Local Councilors in the MENA Region: a Preliminary Social Profile.

Within what many participants considered a mainly political and institutional framework, emphasis was placed on the mechanisms of decision-making at the local level, the effects of decentralization schemes on those mechanisms, and the extent to which democracy was enhanced through the delegation of power to local authorities. Governments in the Arab world were considered rather reluctant to hand over or even delegate their power to local entities. Some participants noted that the so-called process of decentralization was actually a deconcentration of central power through non-elected officials. This absence of representation, though framed by an apparent localization process, does not appear to contribute effectively to democratization and representation.

Through the analysis of elected officials' profiles, it was found that even the later reproduce the "patronage" scheme of the central government structure; those elites mostly either belong to powerful families or certain specific social and financial circles.

Moreover, some participants even challenged the casual relationship between decentralization and democracy; and many argued that the efficiency and success of decentralization depended on very complex factors pertaining to the type of central authorities in power, the institutional independence of local governments, the extent of financial independence, and the frequency at which local elections were held. According to some participants, the practice of elections could be considered somehow a “school of democracy,” where civil society would learn to exercise its rights and participate in the decisionmaking process.

In the workshop, development practitioners and planners from the MENA region focused on the internal capacity of local governments and the power of municipalities to mobilize energies and resources for future growth. The workshop also included a series of sessions exploring facets of decentralization and the role played by municipal and local governance in community development. According to some participating experts, decentralization, as a policy orientation involving political, administrative and fiscal structural changes could significantly affect the institutional framework and the critical determinants of development within a country.

Exchanges on decentralization experiences and prevailing challenges in development involved taking a closer look at the state and internal capacity of local governments. Participants also devoted a session to Fiscal Decentralization and the Limitations of Local Government, discussing the ability of power structures to effectively deal with legal, administrative and fiscal frameworks, procedures and control mechanisms governing relationships with the central state. One paper noted the lack of independent, local fiscal power in Egypt, noting that it is a subordinate network system so that there is little room for maneuvering in terms of expenditure management assignments. This limits the fiscal autonomy in local communities.

Another paper stressed that reform of local fiscality must be based on synchronizing social, economic and political data and that the state must define the competency of the locality and then allocate fiscal resources based on that determination. A paper analyzing growth amongst MENA states noted that although the region has huge oil revenues, excluding remittances from abroad, the performance of this region according to development experts is one of the poorest when compared to other geographical areas.

Decentralization appeared to be more complex than simply devolving power from central governments to local authorities, said many participants. A paper on the experience of local authorities in Sudan analyzed three decentralization schemes by the Sudanese government over the last 30 years, the most recent in 1991. Noting that the current plan is unique and highly ambitious, the paper pointed out that in its modern history, Sudan has not witnessed an absolutely centralized state, but it cannot argue that its administrative system has been decentralized as all the administrative experiences of modern Sudan are characterized by delegation of authority and not devolution of power.

Several local elected officials spoke about their own experiences, challenges and best practices. Palestinian municipality officials, for example, testified to the intense municipal development achieved paradoxically during the Pre-Oslo period, when local officials had some relative autonomy in the decision-making process and an experienced administrative

and technical staff. In spite of some tightening of their prerogatives under the Palestinian Authority, when they became appointed by (and consequently dependent on) the newly created ministry of local government, Palestinian participants confirmed the possibility of municipal work and development under very difficult conditions, and mentioned areas and mechanisms left for local initiatives.

Several interventions highlighted the growing influence of local elites, their social profiles, their relation to central power structures, and their willingness and ability to collaborate with groups of citizens, local civil society organizations, and other voluntary groups to further the goals of local development and community empowerment. Many questioned the capacity of these local elites to remain committed, rightly pointing out that most of them come, as in the case of Lebanon, from powerful local families and clans, and that the devolution of more power to them could result in an increased dependence of their constituencies on a clientelistic relationship.

Other interventions highlighted the missing link between local and national elections, arguing that there was no significant migration of locally elected officials towards regional and national positions, and hence no cumulative process in the democratization of the exercise of power. This would limit the impact of political involvement and party membership at the local level and could lead to the re-assertion of the central government power through a co-optation network.

The workshop concluded that

- Decentralization relates very much to the process of reform and renewal of the state functions and roles in the world and in the MENA region, in the context of globalization, increased privatization, emerging civil societies and the new division of labor between the national and the local. Some participants concluded by stressing the need to focus on the necessary comparative analysis with other successful practices of local governments, both from the Arab region and Europe.
- Modes of decentralization are of course specific to countries, national legacies, and territorial configuration. It is not necessary to promote a uniform model of decentralization. Creative modalities have to be developed including forms of asymmetric decentralization, gradual decentralization and modular decentralization.
- Decentralization strategies in the region should balance between revenue sharing schemes and rigorous financial management, and between increased local autonomies and the necessary allocation of national resources to redress uneven development.

Participants reaffirmed the important role of central power in carrying out coherent national policies and sustainable development strategies, agreeing on the limitations of local authorities at this strategic level. They recognized that local governments neither have the scope of knowledge nor the tools to conduct large-scale development.

Participants warned that significant development in processes of decentralization and de-concentration should not be automatically associated with some globalization trends and

lead necessarily to privatization of the provision of public goods and services. Different forms of decentralization should be explored and adapted to local conditions. Many participants insisted on the rich and diverse historical legacy in the MENA region, and on the need to adapt institutional reforms to local contexts and needs through consensus-building.

The LCPS, in a bid to continue the workshop's valuable exchanges, will promote the establishment of a Mediterranean Local Government Policy Network to further the collaboration between elected local officials, the policy research community, and civil society organizations in the Mediterranean region.