

Reflections on Best Practices in Governance in ESCWA Countries
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Introduction

This paper builds on a literature review I undertook during the fall of 2001, covering the experiences and efforts of national governments in the South West Asian region (Middle East and the Gulf states) in fostering “good governance²,” especially in the way it relates to the empowerment of local authorities. The paper seeks to present some of the main findings of this review by describing the efforts deployed by national governments in the region at empowering local authorities and fostering appropriate decentralization measures.

The paper is divided in two sections. The first section presents some of the main trends in the region. The second provides a few critical reflections on these trends and on the goal of “empowering local government institutions” in ESCWA countries.

I. TRENDS IN THE ESCWA REGION

I.1. *Commitments and Applications to “good governance” in ESCWA countries*

Over the last decade, all national governments in the ESCWA region have repeatedly expressed their verbal and written commitments to the goal of “empowering local authorities.” They have also pledged to meet this goal by strengthening the role of these authorities through decentralization measures and by developing the necessary framework for the creation of partnerships with civil society actors and the private sector. These commitments have been repeated in international forums³, where, since the mid-1990s, good governance (of which decentralization and the empowerment of local authorities are essential elements) has become a primary developmental goal and a pre-requisite for sustainable development.⁴

The progress reports submitted by a number of ESCWA countries for the UN-Habitat (Istanbul +5) meeting attest clearly of these countries’ acceptance and adoption of the decentralization principles. For example, the Bahrain country report describes Bahrain’s recognition of the interrelatedness of economics and democracy, and its commitments to political liberalization (Bahrain Country Report 2000). Egypt has also expressed its “commitment to achieving a participatory, consultative, egalitarian, just, and transparent model of governance that would allow for a sustainable urban and regional development

¹ Sections of this paper appeared earlier in a paper submitted by the author to ESCWA in Fall 2001 (Economic and Social Commission in Western Asia).

² The notion of governance entered the World Bank reports as early as 1989, as an explanation of the failure of structural adjustment policies in African States. Since then, the Bank has developed a “good governance” model which describes how institutional structures should operate for facilitating development. The notion includes decentralization of authority and the creation of partnerships with civil society as pre-requisites (Fritschak 1996). Since the mid-1990s, the notion of “good governance” has become a pillar of the World Bank’s, USAID, and the UN discourses whereby it was seen as a pre-requisite of sustainable development (see, for example, UNDP 1997, World Bank 1994, 1998, ESCWA 2002).

³ These principles were laid out in the *Rabat Summit* (1995), adopted in the *Habitat Agenda* (1996), and reiterated in the *Manama Summit* (2000) and the *Istanbul + 5 Meeting* (2001). During the Manama Summit, held in preparation for the Habitat second meeting, national governments committed to learning from lessons listed in the the Best Practice Database highlighted by UNCHS and to seeking to encourage and replicate them (Manama Summit 2000). More recently, all ESCWA states affirmed their commitment to participate in the “good governance” campaign that was recently launched by ESCWA during this year.

⁴ See footnote no. 1.

process” (Egypt Country Report, 2000). Similar paragraphs appear in all other country reports, with explicit recognitions for the two principles of decentralization and participation.

Several of the ESCWA states have also been able to bring proof of their commitments, having instituted local elections, undertaken them in the case of Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, or in the process of creating decentralized authorities. Many countries have also renewed their municipal legislation, adopted new regulations that could strengthen the role of local authorities, or invested in strengthening their capacities and improving their technical and human capacities.

In the Gulf States, where the process of decentralization is slowed down by the centralized and non-diversified nature of the economies (Karl 1999), several steps were taken ahead. Thus, the Bahraini government instituted a decentralized structure, the *muhafaza*, in 1996, and was in the process of organizing municipal elections (scheduled 2001) (Bahrain Country Report 2000). Other Gulf countries, such as the UAE and Qatar, have also invested substantial efforts over the last two decades in developing the institutional capacity of their municipalities in both technical and managerial aspects (ESCWA 2000a, Best Practice Database 2001). Finally, the Yemeni State’s commitment to strengthening the role and capacities of local authorities also materialized in the adoption of a new law, the Local Authority Law (passed in September 2000) that stipulates the necessity for the free election of local authority representatives, in order to increase transparency and accountability (although these goals are listed as difficult) and hence move towards decentralization. The Yemeni government has also held local council elections in February 2001 (Yemen Country Report 2000).

Outside of the Gulf States, many countries have renewed their municipal legislation as well. Iraq offers a good example with the 1995 Local Popular Councils Law, which lists a wide array of tasks to be moved under the jurisdiction of local councils. Other regulations have, since then, also enhanced the capacity of Iraqi municipalities for self-financing, increased their responsibilities for social services provision and their ability to form new partnerships (e.g. state-municipalities partnerships or local communities-municipalities partnerships) and allowed them to play a more important role in the rehabilitation of human settlements (Iraq Country Report 2000). Other examples include Egypt where Law 145 adopted by the state in 1989 introduced a number of fiscal measures allowing local authorities (in consultation with local communities) to plan and implement infrastructure projects and disburse savings over a number of years to fund community based projects, such as recycling, waste management, and urban upgrading projects. Another example is Lebanon where the reconciliation Taef agreements (1990) that marked the end of its civil war (1975-1990) reiterated the old commitment for decentralized administrative authority, seeing this process as essential for fostering public participation and improving services and socio-economic conditions (Favier 1991). In that vein, the Lebanese state took in the early 1990s a number of steps towards reinvigorating municipal authorities, including the institution of a Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and the creation of over 80 new municipalities in new agglomerations.

However, and despite national variations, the application of enthusiastic verbal commitments and legal changes has remained slow everywhere and most decision making power, especially in terms of resource distribution, remains very centralized. Indeed, far from a real devolution of power⁵, the ESCWA region is going through a mixed de-concentration/ delegation process

⁵ The decentralization literature recognizes three levels at which decentralization can occur, depending on the level of authority released by central authorities. The lowest level is referred to as “de-concentration,” which indicates in general the transfer of responsibility and workload from central agencies and ministries to their field units, and involves some level of discretion for local units without however questioning their subordination to central ones. A higher level of decentralization is “delegation,” in which functions are shifted from the central government to semi-autonomous public authorities and corporations who are granted the authority of planning and implementation. The highest level of decentralization is “devolution,” which requires effective transfer of decision-

in which most administrative, financial, and political decisions still happen at the top (ESCWA 2000a, 2000b, Manfield 1996). In its basic definition, decentralization reflects “a government’s willingness to transfer responsibilities, controls, and activities and allow lower-level organizations and institutions to take over these activities partially and/or completely” (Mayfield 1996: 209). It entails “the transfer of responsibility for planning, management and resource raising and allocation from the central government to local bodies (Faguet, J.P. 1997, *quoted in* ESCWA 2000a: 2). It also entails systemic (political and economic), political (state legitimacy and authority, civil society participation), and administrative dimensions (efficiency and accountability). In the ESCWA region, however, decentralization has been restricted to the administrative aspects of governance (when it has happened) rather than its political or financial one, a trend not unfamiliar in other countries in the South. All in all, while decentralization has sometimes meant a shift in terms of the responsibility and workloads local authorities face, it has not been accompanied by the necessary changes in power (ESCWA 2000). The notable exceptions to these are large municipalities with influential mayors, such as in Amman, where the mayor is in reality a political appointee and not an elected representative. So, if they are weak on papers, municipalities fair even worse in reality, whereby their few rights are often bypassed in the practices of Central State authorities.

The shift in responsibility without power has created a situation in which, with very few exceptions, municipalities are overwhelmed by their daily responsibilities and have little capacity or resources to act on them. This is exacerbated by weak technical capacities and institutional know-how, a recurrent complaint in most reports on the state of decentralization in the country (Synthesis of ESCWA Country Report 2000, ESCWA 2000a). Furthermore, local authorities have been far from challenging existing structures, both in terms of the *ways of doing things* (e.g. clientelism) or the types of projects they have undertaken. In terms of projects, local authorities have leaned towards specific *types of technical projects*, such as housing and poverty alleviation (see overall achievement in Country National Reports 2000 and its Synthesis 2000), and *replicated much of the systemic social problems* such as gender inequality rather than addressed them. As for their ability to challenge existing structures, it is clear that even when they were elected, municipal boards mostly rallied constituencies on sectarian, tribal, regional, and/or religious basis, and when they won, it was often the outcome of political clientelistic structures (Favier 2001). It is also mostly through their political and social networks that they can survive. Indeed, a mayor is more likely to accomplish a project because he is able to call an influential politician to facilitate his work than because he has filed in the proper paperwork and followed institutional steps. In that context, the often-listed favorable contribution of decentralization, that is its ability to foster better political representation and hence citizen participation and empowerment, is a remote likelihood (arguments reviewed in ESCWA 2000a, Mayfield 1996, Tandler 1997). In fact, municipalities in the ESCWA region are far from being models of democracy and inclusiveness and they are also far from being representative of the constituency they represent⁶ (Bahout 1997). Even where mayors and their councils were elected, their election isn’t different from other elections in Arab states, the process of which has been well documented (Kamrava 1998, Salame 1994). The absence of representation is especially striking for women, among whom very few actually occupy political positions. Less than 1% or 14 women were, for example, elected in the 1998 Lebanese municipal council elections. Among them, only 3 hold the position of Mayor (el-Helou 1999). This is also the case for only one woman Mayor all over Jordan. In other political positions, the situation is not better. 2% of the 1992 Egyptian elected parliament are women, and 5.7% of the Palestinian National Council (1998).

making power and authority to local governments that have the power to secure resources and perform their functions relatively independently from central agencies’ interventions (ESCWA 2000a, Mayfield 1996).

⁶ The case of the Lebanese municipalities and their ability to represent communities has been well reported on (see Favier 2001, Bahout 1997). For instance, the Choueifat Municipality counts today some 200,000 residents of which 10,000 only are voters. Of the 200,000 residents, half live in the informal settlement of Hay el Sellom and are not even recognized by the municipality (personal research).

I. 2. *Best Practice Database*

In order to illustrate the above trends, I will use the UNCHS *Best Practice Database*, a tool of successful cases developed by the UN to identify successful practices in development around the world.⁷ The cases listed in the Best Practice Database are not an exhaustive survey of the successful cases of the region and they are often identified according to in-built biases in selection mechanisms (such as the presence of international actors who are easily recognizable to international agencies such as the UN). However, the frequency and distribution of the type of projects can be an acceptable indicator to highlight trends of performance in the area, which is the goal of this paper.

The first observation of the ESCWA cases listed in the *Best Practice Database* shows that while some of these projects are promising and unusual in their scope, with solid efforts at institutionalization (this is especially the case in the Gaza Municipality projects, in Ismailiyyah Egypt, and in the UAE), most tend to fall in line with the usual patterns of projects observed in Arab States [see Annex 1, Table 3 and 4]. Hence, most of these projects were undertaken/initiated by central states agencies as their main instigators (e.g. Central Government Cabinets, Ministries of local Administration, Governates, the General Organization for Physical Planning, etc.). The projects also tend to tackle technical issues rather than social/institutional tasks: most projects revolve around issues in disaster management, production and consumption patterns, urban and regional planning, technology, and land use management, while very few actually tackle governance, which is considered political, or gender, perhaps because of its cultural sensitivity.

The database contains a very limited number of “good governance success stories” outlined in the ESCWA region, indicating perhaps that countries in the region have been slower in implementing such measures vis-à-vis other goals. Only 7 out of the 262 listed cases of good governance projects around the world are in the ESCWA region, a percentage of total cases much lower than other areas of achievement [see Table 3 in Annex 1 for more details], whereby barely 10% of the projects of the area even accounted for this parameter in their design or implementation. These projects are located in Egypt [2], Qatar [1], the West Bank and Gaza Strip [2], Saudi Arabia [1], and Iraq [1]⁸ (See Table 2). Out of the seven projects listed for good governance, four were initiated directly by central government institutions; only two were conducted by municipalities, and only one was undertaken by a non-state institution. Few of these projects could enlist partnership with the private sector as in the case of Saudi Arabia. A few more countries have their local authorities listed for remarkable projects: the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, and Iraq have projects in which local authorities have played an important role (see Table 1). Finally, an important observation to make is that in general, local government and other civil society institutions play an important role essentially in war-stricken countries such as in the West Bank (e.g. Nablus) and the Gaza Strip (Gaza Municipality), Lebanon (Ghobeiri, Baakline), and more recently Iraq (Baghdad). \

⁷ The Best Practices Program was established in 1997 as a helpful tool to make use of information and networking in support of the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. It is a global network of government agencies, local authorities and their associations, professional and academic institutions and grassroots organizations dedicated to the identification and exchange of successful solutions for sustainable development. BLP partners are specialized in such areas as housing and urban development, urban governance, environmental planning and management, architecture and urban design, economic development, social inclusion, crime prevention, poverty reduction, women, youth, cultural heritage, municipal finance and management, infrastructure and social services. The database lists over 1100 successful development cases in these areas with narratives explaining how they were achieved (Source: Best Practice Database 2001).

⁸ The projects are: the *Strategic Regional Information Network and Rehabilitation & Upgrading Of The Manshiet Nasser Informal Settlement in Egypt*, *New Communities In Changing Palestinian Urban Society* and *The Gaza Municipality Model: Upgrading Administrative And Management Systems* in West Bank and Gaza Strip, *A Nation-Wide GIS For Improved Planning* in Qatar, *Improving Living Environments For The Low Income Households* in Saudi Arabia, and the *Baghdad Neighborhood Rehabilitation: Learning to Work Together* in Iraq.

Country	Municipality	Project	Municipality Role
Palestine	Municipality of Gaza City	Gaza Municipal Model: Upgrading Administrative and Management Systems Capacity Building in Urban Planning and G.I.S for Gaza Strip Municipalities	Municipal institutional building; Municipality is initiator/ main partner. Municipality training in GIS, Institutional building; Municipality is initiator/ main partner.
	Municipality of Hebron, West Bank	Rehabilitation of Hebron Old City – Palestine	Upgrading and regeneration of old city core; Municipality supported the initiative and allocated employees to participate.
	Municipality of Nablus, West Bank	Improving the Urban Environment in the City of Nablus	Relocation of industries in industrial estate and improvement of city core environment. Municipality as local partner, initiated and followed-up with partners.
Lebanon	Municipality of Ghobeiri	Municipal Actions for Urban Poverty Reduction	Improvements of living conditions in low-income area. Municipality main partner, played active role.
	Municipality of Beit-Mery	The House of Environment and Sustainable Development in Mount-Lebanon	Promoting environmental awareness Municipality provided political support to the project and space for hosting environmental NGOs.
	Municipality of Beirut	The Development and Reconstruction of the City Center of Beirut	Reconstruction of the heart of the city of Beirut; Municipality listed but has not played a central role.
Egypt	Nuweiba Municipality	HEMAYA Community Development Association: Sustainable Tourism	Environmental preservation/ protection in South Sinai, Municipality as partner in project,
	Nasriya Municipality	Nasriya Upgrading Project	Upgrading of an informal fringe area in Aswan. Municipality in not a partner, some of its members were placed on committee board.
Jordan	Greater Municipality of Amman	Manara Housing - Site and Service Sub-projects	Site and service (low-income housing) project; Municipality establishment a special unit that followed up on project. (Not listed as Partner.)
	Greater Municipality of Amman	East Wehdat Upgrading Project	Upgrading of East Wehdat Camp; Municipality not listed as partner; took over the site responsibility after project completion.
	Greater Municipality of Amman	Rehabilitation of the Old Disposal Site in Marka as a Green Park	Rehabilitation of the old disposal site in Marka and establishment of a local community development center in a poor, polluted suburb of Amman. Municipality as partner and main actor.
	Municipality of Aqaba	Planning and Participatory Strategies to Sustainable Development	Creation of partnerships, introduction of innovative institutional models for improving environment. Municipality included among partners.
Syria	Municipality of Aleppo	Infrastructure Upgrading in the Old City of Aleppo	Upgrading of city core, participatory measures, Municipality is Partner and a main actor/ initiator.
UAE	Municipality of Dubai	Integrated Urban Management	Development of institutional framework (regulations, partnerships,) and projects all fostering sustainability. Municipality is the main initiator of the project.
	Municipality of Dubai	Al Qusais Green Village Project	Environment conscious model village with community-oriented waste management; Municipality as partner providing support.
	Municipality of Dubai	ECO Plastic Industries	Recycling project, Municipality not a partner, provides support.
Saudi-Arabia	Several	Improving Living Environments for the Low Income Households	Provision of affordable housing. Municipality not a partner; it insured the distribution of housing units after completion.
Iraq	Municipality of Baghdad	Baghdad Neighborhood Rehabilitation	Upgrading of neighborhood living environment, infrastructure and services through participation. Municipality is a central partner in the project.

Table 1: *Municipalities Listed in Best Practices Database*

	Project	Country	Sponsor	Partners	Project Type	Elements
1	Strategic Regional Information Network	Egypt	Central government cabinet	Ministry of local administration and governorates; Ministry of agriculture	Urban Governance Urban and Regional Planning	Installation of a geographical information network for urban and rural communities all over the country. Complete structure of administration system techniques for urban development management and urban upgrading and renewal.
2	Rehabilitation/ Upgrading of Manshiet Nasser	Egypt	General organization for physical planning Ministry of housing Central agency of Urbanization, (CAU)–MHUUC.)	Governorate of Cairo City (GOC), Division of Housing Central Government GTZ, International Agency (Multilateral)	Poverty Eradication Urban Governance	Slum upgrading, settlement relocation, and affordable housing construction (70,000 housing units). Methods include participatory socio-economic survey, mechanisms of dialogue with local inhabitants in both planning and management phases and attempts at institutionalized participatory urban management.
3	New Communities in Changing Palestinian Urban Society	Palestine	Palestinian Housing Council (PHC); private non-profit company	None.	Housing Urban Governance Civic Engagement and Cultural Vitality	Creation of the PHC, a private, non-profit company that could carry the responsibility of building housing projects. Building 1600 affordable housing units in twenty communities for low and middle-income families for an estimated US\$ 36 millions cost.
4	Gaza Municipal Model: Upgrading Administrative and Management Systems	Palestine	Municipal Authority, Local state institution	European Union; International Bank; Al-Ta'awon Institution USAID; Fredtech Ebert; PNA; Islamic University	Urban and Regional Planning Land Use Management Urban Governance	Institutional building of the municipality, creation of departments, sections, and job description
5	Nation-wide GIS for improved planning	Qatar	Center for GIS, (Central Government); Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Agriculture, (Central Government).		Technology, Tools and Methods; Use of Information in Decision Making; Urban Governance	Creation of the National GIS Steering Committee and the Center for GIS (CGIS). Implementation of a comprehensive and integrated nationwide GIS system: Maintenance of an on-line and up-to-date high resolution digital topographic database with common national standards on data, software and hardware. Facilitating inter-agency coordination.
6	Improving living environments for low-income hh	Saudi Arabia	Central State institutions, Several Ministries	Private Sector (e.g. ARAMCO), Municipalities	Infrastructure, Housing Urban Governance	Providing land grants and easy long term and free of interest housing loans. Giving loans to contractors to build affordable housing.
7	Baghdad Neighborhood Rehabilitation	Iraq	UNCHS	Baghdad Municipality, local authority Cooperatives of Al Shu'la City and Saddam City	Environmental Management Infrastructure, Communications, Transportation Urban Governance	Upgrading of neighborhood living environment, infrastructure and services through participatory approach.

Table 2: *Best Practices in Good Governance*

II. TREND ANALYSIS

This section compiles a set of reflections about the above outlined trends. But first, let us note that the negative trends of “bleak picture” that was sketched cannot be surprising, even if a wishful thinking makes us want to see otherwise. Indeed, it is important to remember that decentralization is not a new idea in the region. To the contrary, most countries in the ESCWA region have had structures of regional/ sub-regional authority for decades, generally recognized as the *muhafazas*, and many have also some lower level authorities in addition, such as the *Qada’a*, and/or municipalities in some cases. Municipalities are also a relatively old institution in the region, introduced by the Ottoman *tanzimat* reform in the XIXth century, and by the mandate countries in the 1920s (e.g. 1864 for Lebanon, 1930s in Egypt) (Favier 2001). The importance of fostering good municipal/ decentralized authorities is not foreign either to the commitments of ESCWA region countries, whereby state institutions in Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq had invested in such institutions since their independence. The existence of local authorities has not, however, prevented all states in the region to develop a long tradition of centralization, which the now-trendy notion of decentralization provides an opportunity to question. All in all, it seems that rather than being a revolutionary innovative concept in governance, decentralization is in many countries (especially the non-GCC countries) an old commitment that hasn’t materialized.

The points I will raise are organized around three types of questions: (i) Why are some municipalities successful? (ii) Why are states committing to decentralization? (iii) How can we analyze critically the concept of “decentralization” used by international organizations? Rather than a set of explanatory conclusions, the points raised below should be read like hypothesis delineating potential future research directions to be investigated in order to explain how/why decentralization or the empowerment of local authorities has been slow in Arab States at large, and how they can approach the problem of empowerment differently.

II. 1. *Why are some municipalities successful?*

The fact that successful local authorities are often those located in troubled areas is an important observation to be investigated. One can read in it the presence of mobilized civil society (in general, popular mobilization is correlated with threat) at a time when central state authorities are weakened and thus forced to leave the space for this mobilization to occur. That successful local authorities are those who have experienced or still experience a phase of central state weakening means that their success could well be the outcome of an experience developed *outside* and *despite* state authorities and brought in to state institutions rather than an indication of successful decentralization policies.

Let us first look at those successful cases. Several academic papers have documented the strengthening of the civil associative life in Kuwait at the aftermath of the country’s occupation by Iraq and during the Gulf war (1989-1990). At the time, it was traditional Koweiti civil associations that rose to organize resistance and provide services to the communities in the absence of state authorities and the government that had fled the country (Ghabra 1991, Hicks and al-Najjar 1995, Crystal and al-Shayegi 1998). This is also the case in Lebanon, in Palestine, and more recently in Iraq, the three countries whose local authorities are the most mentioned for the region in the Best Practice Database. In the Lebanese case (with which I am more familiar), two of the most often cited successful municipalities (Ghobeiri and Baaqline) are run by members of former so-called “civil authorities” in the war. The Ghobeiri mayor, Hajj Abu Said Khansa, was a founding member of Hizb’ Allah and an active member of one of its NGO affiliates, Jihad al Bina’a, among whose responsibilities were water provision, garbage collection, and sewer maintenance for the southern suburbs of Beirut (where the Ghobeiri municipality is located) during the last 6 years of the civil war (Harb el Kak 1996, 2001; Fawaz 2000). When he ran for mayor of the area, Khansa had already established popularity in the southern suburbs and benefited from strong social

networks and previous working experience. In his post as mayor, he continues to build on his prior networks and cooperates essentially with the Hizb'Allah NGOs where he had worked. His success as a mayor, which has been widely celebrated (e.g. Best Practice Database 2001) cannot be seen outside of this experience. The Baakline mayor is another case in point, with a substantial experience built during the civil war, running the area of Baakline for the PSP (the Progressive Socialist Party), the then Druze militia in the region (in Favier 2001). The Palestinian municipalities provide yet another example of successful local mobilization whose experience was built outside state authorities. Indeed, municipalities in Palestine pre-date the creation of the Palestinian National Authority and operated independently between the 1967-1993 period as local managerial authorities. Their authority and experience relies essentially on old tribal and family links, local experiences, and other channels of legitimacy that predate the state authorities (e.g. Nablus). It is important to mention that in the three above countries, the "return to the normal" by the re-strengthening of central state authorities has often meant the weakening of these local authorities, or at least the imposition of stringer conditions on their operations rather than their empowerment. Hence, the return of the Kuwaiti government to power after the Gulf war has led to a large dismantlement of local NGOs and other civil society mobilization (Crystal J. and A. al-Shayegi 1998, Hicks, N. and G. al-Najjar 1995). Similarly, the introduction of the NPA structures in Palestine has created numerous challenges for local community organizations (Sullivan 1997 and 1995). And in Lebanon, it is not infrequent to hear a mayor complain that the largest impediment to his council's work "is the State!"

Two early conclusions can be taken out of these trends. The first is the need for more research, following the work done by Harb el-Kak on the municipality of Ghobeiri (Harb el-Kak 2001), in which trajectories of successful mayors and municipal councils are studied and the reasons for their success clarified. The second concerns the directions to look in for identifying local success cases. This task requires first a redefinition of the "local" and a commitment to look in new directions for identifying success and spaces of empowerment, rather than accepting municipalities as the de-facto institutions to be analyzed. If it is true that most of the successful mayors have built their experience elsewhere and are bringing it into the state, then an empowerment of local authorities should perhaps begin outside state authorities as well, by identifying those successful efforts and fostering the conditions that lead to their strengthening. In the Lebanese case where the years of civil war were marked by substantial popular mobilization and self-reliance for the provision of services (e.g. building committees to organize water distribution, electric generation, etc.), it would have been essential to capitalize on the developed capacities and know-how. This is not to re-hash the usual pro-NGO or anti-state rhetoric, which has been far from helpful in empowering the local in the past decades, but to encourage a fresher look at what the local can mean and the means to encourage it. Clearly, neither the Ghobeiri mayor nor the Nablus mayor's experiences stem from a World Bank sponsored state program of decentralization. So we should be looking at what is worth bringing in and strengthening and at ways of empowering/helping successful cases of local authorities to survive.

II.2 *Why are the states committing to decentralization, even if verbally?*

If centralized state authorities as so reluctant to relinquish authority to the local, then why have they provided so many commitments to these goals and why do they accept to engage in decentralization practices?

Several explanations can be proposed. First, the willingness of the states to rally international donor's agendas of decentralization can be related to the direct pressure and loan conditioning placed by international organizations such as the World Bank, USAID, or the United Nations to influence this direction. The same way the late 1970s saw a pressure for regularizing informal settlements, the 1990s has been a decade of "good governance" par excellence, and decentralization policies are a main pillar of this governance model. One only needs to look

at the proliferation of this literature coming out of the above three listed organizations and the number of workshops, meetings, summits (e.g. Habitat) organized around them to understand the scale of the pressure placed on states to comply. This pressure becomes even more powerful when university and research centers, (often attracted by the prospects of funding coming from these institutions,) also take up the same goals and hence begin to influence policy from within.

Another important explanation for the willingness of the states to adopt decentralization policies could be related to the need of these states to apply other requirements, such as the reduction of budget expenses related to the adoption of structural adjustments measures⁹, and hence cut on their own expenses by shifting the burden of providing social services (especially after the Gulf crisis, the return of migrant workers from the Gulf, and the reduction of oil prices) and managing ever-growing cities (with huge environmental problems) to local authorities. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that the introduction of decentralization policies in the recent history of the ESCWA countries coincides directly with the countries' adoption of structural adjustments (e.g. Yemen, Jordan). Growing pressures on the states of the region by international donors and lenders as well as budgetary deficits have forced them, as of the 1980s, to review some of their responsibilities as service providers (an important role in these states where the "big brother" role of the state is an important part of its identity) and these states have tried to comply to their new role without questioning their power. This in essence is what partnerships and decentralization could have meant in the ESCWA region: an opportunity for many states to shift workload off their central authorities and ministries and reduce the amount of services provided by the state, keeping nonetheless the maximum amounts of power they could retain (ESCWA 2000).

Within this pattern, decentralization policies could have negative effects and even weaken rather than strengthen local state authorities that are placed in the forefront of the state's inability (or unwillingness) to provide social services. On the one hand, municipalities and other local bodies are vulnerable vis-à-vis state regulations and international donors. State regulations hold them now responsible for the provision of a wide array of services while they restrict their activities tightly. (For example, in Lebanon, any decision, including hiring new personnel, has to go through several institutional bodies for approval and takes several months, if it happens.) On the other hand, municipalities are also vulnerable in front of local communities, which they rarely represent, and who now blame them for their inability to provide services. Not only does this make local authorities weak partners in fostering participatory inclusive policies, but it also increases their dependency on the central authorities. The above listed successful projects are a good testimony to the effect; in general only when funded and supported by international donors were NGOs and local authorities successful. In general, successful mayors benefited from wide political networks that they use in conducting their work. The community's role, if acknowledged, remained secondary. In short, nowhere has decentralization been able to question the basic premises of the *state-society relations* in the region, a relationship that remains characterized by a sharp imbalance of power.

A third reason for states to adopt decentralization measures is globalization, or more specifically, the prospect of pushing their capital cities to the rank of "global cities" that can attract capital and raise themselves to the global financial sphere. Several urban theorists have linked the growing pressure for decentralization to the target of states to push their capital city to the global scene (Sassen 1998, Castells 1996, Porter et al. 1996). They have described a

⁹ A close look at the origins of the concept of governance in the World Bank literature reveals that "poor governance" was first put forth as an explanation for the failure of structural adjustment policies and that the notion of "good governance" with its "decentralization" component was developed as a remedy to this failure (Frischtak et al. 1996, Leftwich 1993, Majdalani 2002, World Bank 1994, 1996, 1997a, 1997b). Today, good governance measures are often one component of structural adjustments.

new development process, which seeks to enhance the separation of cities from their hinterland and the concentration of power and resources in these cities instead of the earlier commitments to “regional” or “equitable” development. The reconstruction of Beirut in the post-war era (almost exclusively focused on a new airport, a new down-town, and a major highway linking the two), but also the development policies of the Jordanian Kingdom that are solidly centralized around specific neighborhoods of Amman can hardly be explained outside of this vision. In that context, decentralization offers the states the opportunity to channel resources and efforts in specific places that serve their vision of development, and they hence favor decentralization only in as much as it allows them to do so.

II.3 A few thoughts about the concept of “decentralization” and “good governance” themselves.

Like all imported developmental concepts, the theoretical notions of “empowerment of local authorities,” “good governance,” and their corollaries in decentralization, partnership, accountable and transparent management, and others carry a wide array of implicit and explicit assumptions. Often, these assumptions are important built-in prerequisites for their implementation that cannot be taken for granted when the concepts are introduced in different environments. When they are not addressed, these assumptions act as silent barriers for any change, particularly when goals, like decentralization, require structural transformations. Building on various academic critiques to the notion of good governance as developed especially by the World Bank (and adopted by other international bodies), this section highlights some of these assumptions in order to raise questions about the applicability but also the desirability of the model of good governance. Many of the points raised below are brought in a very broad and unspecific context and further research has to be made to highlight their exact implications at both national and regional levels.

On the Applicability of the Notion of Good Governance

One important pre-requisite in the concept of good governance is the environment of political pluralism and inclusiveness to which the success of the model of good governance is evidently tied in the West. This assumption however clearly conflicts with old traditions of political centralization and the weak practice of political pluralism in the ESCWA region that make up the norm in the area, even in the most liberal countries of the region (Kamrava 1998, Salame 1994).

True, a number of countries have shown democratic advances in the past decades, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen (Kamrava 1998,). This is also true for some of the GCC countries, such as Kuwait, which re-instituted its elected assembly, halted since the mid-eighties, two years after the Gulf war (Crystal et al 1998, Hicks et al 1995) or Bahrain and Qatar that have committed to the institution of elected assemblies in the near future (see country reports). However, all in all, the moves have been timid, and the Arab political landscape continues to suffer from very serious problems such as the rule of the few, exclusion, and other issues despite the verbal commitments of its rulers (Kamrava 1998, Karl 1999, Wiktorowicz 1999).

To date, the overall picture clearly reflects a restricted role for civil society and a highly centralized state authority, rooted in centralized planning traditions. Hence, while a number of countries have instituted multi-party systems and to some extent, a level of liberties that classify them as “democracies” (e.g. Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority, Yemen), they, along with others, still accumulate non-democratic practices and institutions (Ben Nefissa 2000, Kamrava 1998). Everywhere, state-civil society relations are tense, with recurrent breakdowns such as in Jordan after the second Palestinian *Intifada*, or Lebanon where alarming crack-down on civil liberties have been observed in the last two years (Amnesty International Reports, also see Salame, G 1994, Korany et al, 1998, Norton ed. 1995).

As a result, concepts such as partnership or decentralization, which entail high levels of devolution of authority and equal power relations among actors, remain a challenging policy option in the existing situation. Even more striking is the inapplicability of the central role ascribed to free press and civil society in monitoring state activities for insuring state accountability. Examples of press restrictions, regular crackdowns on periodicals and daily papers and other forms of close monitoring and control are all evidence to the inapplicability of this vision (Wiktorowicz 1999).

Another set of problematic assumptions in the discussed models of “good governance” is the similarity of types of state structures and social realities that are, in reality, very dissimilar between Higher and Lower Income Countries and among the latter. Indeed, models of administration management, built on the separation of politics and the administration, were developed in Western countries after massive processes of homogenization and nationalization to the populations had occurred (Fox 1999, Hobsbawn 1993). These policies entailed at times the complete eradication of social groups (e.g. the Huguenot in France, Jews in Poland, Hopi, Navaho, Iroquois in North America) and the destruction of many linguistic and cultural differences (Scott 1999, Fox 1999). Social realities in Lower Income Countries are however different and little homogeneity exists among various social groups whose belonging or not to one nation is often the result of a colonials’ administrator’s whim or a colonizing countries’ interests rather than an actual identity (Fox 1999). Developing hence a normative “good governance” model (based on the Western experience) ignores the reality of the states in lower income countries in their different political and social conditions. It actually proposes a very superficial understanding of these states, and imposes restrictions on them that are not derived from the reality of their ethnic divisions (Theobald 1999). And, if we see today a level of similarity across experiences of governance in Lower Income Countries, they are the outcome of the pressure they are subjected to in order to conform to the governance model proposed to them rather than a natural convergence (Common 1997, Minogue 1997).

Several scholars have argued that the model of “good governance,” with its prescriptions, assumes that there is one “inevitable” and “global” movement towards a single model of public management and that these assumptions contradict the experiences and empirical recollections documented in Lower Income Countries (Dunleavy and Hood 1994, Kiley 1998, Minogue 1997, Rahnema 1997). These scholars have also argued that far from being a universal objective model, the proposed “good governance” model is clearly engrained in assumptions like Lipset’s “good society,” with its in-built Western biases, and its deep roots in Western practices and experiences in administration (Leftwich 1993, Moore 1993, Rajagopal 1998). It is therefore only “a pretense of political neutrality” that carries “strong exercises of Western power” in the models of institutions and the conceptions of power and law that are initiated (Rajagopal 1998). A number of scholars have even described this model as the outcome of “Anglo-Saxon triumphalism” that limits capital markets, corporate successes, company governance, and market regulations to the forms common to the US (Hirst 1997, Moore 1993). Others have highlighted how certain assumptions in the model, especially the faith in the power of a legal system and the legal process, are “not even ‘Western’ or ‘Anglo-American,’ but peculiarly American – and at odds with a great deal of evidence from many parts of the World” (Moore 1993: 45).

For other scholars, the homogenization of the model of governance is rooted in the way it conceptualizes the problems it proposes to resolve. What emerges from the issue is mostly the poverty in which “governance” and all its corollaries are conceptualized, despite the prolific literature on the topic (Williams 1999). Instead, the definitions proposed assume a specific understanding of law, of “public interest,” of models of administration and public opinion, and a separation of the private and public realms in a strictly Western form (Williams 1999: 506). In addition, the adopted definitions are built on an economic model and carry many assumptions about the motivations of individuals (e.g. profit maximizers, atomized

individuals, etc.). They fail to account for the political aspects attached to this definition, the context, the reference points, the character of politics and the legitimacy of government, the types of political orders, stability, the limits and sources of political power, and the forms and types of political organizations that are all relevant to the definition of governance (Williams 1999: 509). Despite the recognition of the distinctiveness, uniqueness, and unreplicability of the Western experience, “this experience continues to provide the model of the ‘modern’ state to which pre-modern and less developed must aspire” (Theobald 1999:492). More specifically, Theobald critiques the description of non-western states as “patrimonial¹⁰,” to which corruption is inscribed, and which can only be “corrected” through an identification to the rational-legal (Modern Western) state with a modern administration, one captured by Weber’s ideal bureaucracy. Little recognition is given, hence, to the actual performance of these states or to the political and social stability achieved through these patrimonial links. Instead, a unique version of the state that is acceptable is one tied to the unique experience of the West. To some of these scholars, the version of the state presented by the “good governance model” doesn’t even represent the reality of administrative operations in the West. Indeed, the emphasis on formal/rational-legal aspects of governance structures in developed countries ignores the centrality of social networks and other arbitrary, exclusive criteria that occur in these systems as well (e.g. Graduates of Harvard University in the US or again the Ecole Polytechnique de Paris in France (Theobald 1999: 496/7, also see Bourdieu 1970). While differences in the levels and competence of these bureaucracies are obvious, Theobald argues, “the methodological procedure involved in comparing these states to ideal type states is fraud” (Theobald 1999: 497).

On the Desirability of the Application of Good Governance

Given the above critique, it is not surprising that scholars not only question whether “good governance” is inapplicable, but also venture to question the desirability of its application. An important point is that by assuming that it is actually possible or for that matter desirable to replicate this model of good governance around the World, irrespective of local social, political, and cultural considerations, practitioners not only propose an unattainable form for many countries, but they also limit these countries’ options, adopting a single form of capitalism instead of the multitude of forms that can develop. “It damages the prospects of long run economic evolution, imposing an institutional monoculture” (Hirst 1999: 225).

Furthermore, some have argued, these models constitute a destructive threat to plurality and local institutions of Lower Income Countries. Indeed, that the type of social homogenizations that have happened in Europe as a pre-requisite for these models’ success is far from being an acceptable option today and policy papers debating the rights of minorities and their protection abound. Simultaneously, and perhaps more alarming, governance model are often blind to local institutions which they seek to replace systematically by modern institutions and hence destroy often generate harm to these institutions (Rajagopal 1998). The importance of experiences developed outside state structures in fostering good local governance practices has been developed above and policies that could lead to the destruction of such familial or social channels can be counterproductive to the same goals that they are fostering. Finally, while these models tend to emphasize certain aspects of the countries that they describe, they also leave behind (and hence harm and destroy) other aspects of governance that they ignore (Theobald 1999). The only obtainable results are the further entrenchment of existing power structures, strengthening ruling groups in their positions, and exacerbating the levels of corruption.

¹⁰ Patrimonialism is associated with blurred public/ private boundaries, it is a concept originally associated with Weber’s writings.

Conclusion

To conclude a review of the ESCWA region's achievements in empowering local authorities is likely to be a "very sobering" experience. Despite a few scattered good practices celebrated by the proponents of good governance in the region (e.g. the Gaza Municipality), all ESCWA countries are far from having reached any institutionalization of these practices and success stories remain, by and far, scattered incidents rather than the norm. In fact, many of the pillars of the concept of good local governance (and good governance), such as the transparency and accountability of ruling structures, cannot even be addressed given the lack of achievements. Neither are matters of political representation, channels for voicing concerns, nor open free elections. To the contrary, old traditions of political centralization and the absence of political pluralism in the area remain the norm everywhere, even among the most liberal countries of the region. As a result, concepts currently promoted by international donors among others, such as partnership and decentralization, which entail high levels of devolution of authority and equal power relations among actors, provide little potentials for application in the existing situation.

The enthusiasm that ideas like decentralization and transparency have encountered in Arab States is however not surprising. The appeal that such opportunities for liberalization can offer are far from being negligible. However, this should not prevent us from approaching these notions with precaution. Often, political and social actors who have been exposed to the shortcomings of the institutional frameworks where they operate could offer a simultaneously more well bounded and open-ended Agenda, which encourages existing positive initiatives for change rather than direct them. Hence, one cannot but emphasize the importance and need for more research that allows us to understand better the existing planning frameworks of the countries at hand and the existing socio-cultural structures in order to develop planning solutions and goals that move away from blueprint notions to a process-oriented approach more adapted to existing contexts. Otherwise, it is the whole idea of empowering local institutions that is in threat of becoming just another wave of policies on a funder's agenda that will vanish with other notions that have preceded it.

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