CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION AS A TOOL FOR FORMULATING SOCIAL POLICY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Summary

This paper seeks to emphasize that civil society participation is a participatory process whereby consensus-building, open dialogue and the promotion of an active participation are all key ingredients to spur the transformation that can result in long-term sustainable development. Given the importance of forming consensus, there is a strong need to create and build the capacity of those within a community to forge their own development strategies and to have an active debate regarding the central tenets. This issue is especially relevant in the age of globalization, which provides new challenges for sustainable development. Globalization offers new opportunities, albeit within the framework of open, participatory and transparent processes that are essential for long-term growth.

I. THE LINK BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL POLICY

A. INTRODUCTION

In the past decades, ESCWA member countries have been implementing social policies based on sectoral issues that are directly related to various line ministries. Most priorities have focused on urban or highly populated regions, while neglecting other, less developed or remote areas where development is needed most.

While some ESCWA member countries are applying the local community development approach to develop marginalized areas by assigning temporary committees for such tasks, good practices that can be applied elsewhere are not well documented. Moreover, conventional public service delivery systems, whether sectoral or local, are not sufficiently rapid, flexible, accountable or innovative. There are cases where the public sector has proved ineffective in providing basic services owing to institutional collapse, unresponsive governance, unaccountable resource use or ineffective management. In these troubled settings, direct community support through civil society organizations can provide the foundation for reconstituting public sector arrangements for service provision based on the principles of good governance and sound management.

On the other hand, using this new approach can enable the Government to channel assistance, including funding and capacity-building investments, directly to communities in order to increase empowerment, improve responsiveness to citizen demands and priorities, accelerate service delivery, and improve the quality of life of poor and marginalized social groups. It can equally be used to respond to short-term demands for urgent assistance to communities in conflict-stricken areas, for post-conflict reconstruction or resettlement schemes, or in such crises as natural disasters that require a large-scale, rapid and multifaceted response. This approach emphasizes the primacy of civil society as the source of demand for public services. By building the capacity of communities and civil society organizations to organize the expression of their demand and to contribute to their development, this approach often results in the prioritization of investments and services that are more locally appropriate than those of supply-driven public sector systems.

An integrated participatory approach to social development, involves organizing interventions around such local territorial units as districts, municipalities or communes. It builds on strengthening existing organizations and capacities within the local space defined by local government boundaries to develop more
integrated institutional arrangements and processes.\footnote{1} Community-based organizations, local governments, and decentralized sectoral agencies, as well as such private organizations as NGOs and firms become more coherently linked in supporting empowerment, governance and service provision. Such an approach that links local organizations through their respective roles and relationships at local government and community levels promises to improve coordination, synergy, efficiency and responsiveness in the local development processes.

With regard to social policy, there is no universal definition; rather, its function depends on the stage of development of the country or region under consideration. Generally, social policy deals with equity in the distribution of gains, and pains associated with macroeconomic growth. For the ESCWA region, social policy is mainly concerned with the prevalence of poverty and polarization in income distribution; the persistently high rates of unemployment and underemployment; increases in the cost of living vis-à-vis income for the majority of population; deteriorating living conditions; and issues related to corruption, lack of democracy and participation in decision-making for poor communities.

B. LIMITATIONS OF FORMULATING SOCIAL POLICIES IN THE ESCWA REGION

One of the bottlenecks associated with social policies in the ESCWA region is the lack of an integrated social vision. Social policies are largely formulated and implemented without due reference to a comprehensive and strategic development framework. Moreover, social policies in the region have tended to be limited to human welfare and social protection programmes whereby citizens are merely recipients or beneficiaries of such programmes, rather than active participants.

Such an approach towards social policy has been translated into highly centralized and rigid policy formulation processes with little coordination and orientation vis-à-vis development goals. In many ESCWA member countries, this state of affairs is clearly reflected in the following: (a) excessively large central administrations; (b) lack or limited autonomy of local authorities in terms of identifying and providing basic social services; (c) poor allocation of resources and coordination among ministries and public bodies involved in the planning process of social policies; (d) poor allocations given to non-urban and remote areas; and (e) adoption of economic policies without clear consideration of their social impacts and consequences, especially in remote areas.

This lack of integration is especially reflected in the institutional framework and in the delivery mechanisms of social services that leads to duplications of tasks and responsibilities among governmental agencies, waste of financial resources, poor targeting of beneficiaries, low efficiency and overlapping of jurisdictions.\footnote{2}

Social policy is a by-product of a public policy process determined by ideology, political orientations and the broader institutional environment within which political choices are made and implemented. Given that open and democratic political environments are endowed with multiple political and institutional channels that encourage public participation, such environments tend to be significantly more responsive towards the needs of the people at the centre of development.

Equally, a political system that considers accountability and the rule of law as intrinsic values of a public policy can provide further institutional mechanisms that are conducive to a more responsive public administration. The political environment in the region, particularly instabilities caused by the Israeli occupation of Arab territories, the occupation of Iraq by coalition forces and the emergence of Islamic extremist groups, has had a profoundly destabilizing effect on the overall capacity of the Government to

\footnote{1} According to the World Bank, the local level is the lowest level that permits integration of the different logics by which the Government, society and economy are organized. These include the spatial logics of public service and infrastructure hierarchies, governance, social capital and economic geography. S. de Silva, “Communities taking the lead: A handbook on direct financing of community subprojects” (the World Bank, 2005).

\footnote{2} Ibid.
improve the social state of affairs, thereby impeding the emergence of the institutions of good governance in many parts of the region.

Furthermore, economic globalization can contribute to the circumstances of social confusion. Countries that become less competitive in the globalized world can experience political tension and religious fundamentalism owing to their political marginalization. In the ESCWA region, few countries have been able to resist the increasing globalization over the past two decades, which has resulted in growing social polarization.

Additionally, people whose lives have been disrupted by rapid economic transformation have become especially susceptible to extremist ideologies. When traditional norms, social patterns and identities are threatened, people become ripe for conversion to new radical ideologies based on religious or conservative feelings. Ideologies that are derived from Islamic principles are especially powerful given that religion covers all aspects of life for traditional people in Arab societies and that it can give meaning, counsel and justification for dissention. As a result, this political instability continues to divert limited resources away from essential social programmes to military and security apparatuses with detrimental consequences for the scope and quality of social programmes aimed at promoting human development goals.

For this reason, specific efforts must be devoted to clarify the role of the various actors involved in defining and implementing social policy, as well as the tools required to implement them in a reasonable period of time. In this respect, the role of the State as a regulator of social activities needs to be reinforced, while its role as a direct provider of social services must be reviewed circumspectly in the light of the availability of such services in the private sector and civil society. Equally, the role of the different stakeholders needs to be strengthened considerably.

C. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE SUPPORT OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AS A CORNERSTONE FOR FORMULATING SOCIAL POLICY

By definition, community development is a process whereby the local community improves its capacity to use social capital and its participation in the development process. Consequently, it is a process that gives local communities control of decisions and resources as well as power to exert influence over Government for service delivery. Ultimately, such a process can pave the way for the empowerment of marginalized communities, the reduction of poverty and the achievement of other goals of social development. As such, this approach follows the bottom-up approach whereby the demands of local communities are translated into policies for their development.

The participatory process involves creating a network of organizations and mechanisms that promote collective action at the local level. Such a network implies the existence of its own structure of authority and bureaucratic process that, in some cases, can result in parallel structures of power with the State, and can generate some of the institutional failures it was supposed to overcome. Such a process is often the result of a difficult tradeoff between the failure of the State to deliver adequate and effective public goods and services, and the need to devise independent mechanisms that are more participatory, efficient and faster than available public services. Moreover, the civil society participatory process leads to a broader and more contextualized understanding of local problems, including unemployment and poverty, by emphasizing dimensions that go beyond income or other quantifiable indicators to identify their roots.

Despite methodological problems that still need to be addressed, available data and impact evaluation of ongoing projects in the ESCWA region show that, in most cases, the participatory approach of civil

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3 For example, oil wealth has transformed some societies in the region from tribal to high-tech.

4 Social capital is commonly defined as the ability of individuals to build bonds within their own group and create bridges that link them with other groups on the assumption that such networks are a source of strength to improve current social conditions and economic opportunities. Social capital also includes bonding ties that connects family members, neighbours, and groups sharing a common identity. For more details, see F. Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (Penguin Books, 1995).
society organizations has had positive impacts on the capacity of poor and marginalized communities to create networks for collective actions.\(^5\) In the informal sector, for example, a more integrated approach to local development could empower local people by increasing opportunities to invest in, produce and sell goods and services, thereby increasing their capabilities to profit from these opportunities. Reducing regulatory barriers and providing such targeted support as microfinance services and technical assistance to household and very small-scale producers and traders can help to extend the benefits of local economic development to the poor and other marginalized social groups. Such a process can result in increasing the responsiveness and accountability of public sector decision-making, and in reducing corruption and other rent-seeking behaviour that often suffocate private initiatives.

D. LIMITATIONS OF THE USE OF THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH THROUGH CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION TO IMPLEMENT SOCIAL POLICIES

As mentioned above, this paper deals with the hypothesis that civil society participation with community development needs to be the main viable and innovative framework for formulating integrated social policy in terms of improving the level of access to and quality of public service in the ESCWA region. On the implementation side, however, the absence of accurate data severely limits any reliable evaluation that could endorse community development as an effective and sustainable means for providing public services, rather than the prevailing centralized administrative methods. Perhaps more importantly, qualitative evidence shows that enhanced success and sustainability of the community development process depend crucially on an enabling institutional environment.

Additionally, development projects and processes do not occur in vacuum. Rather, they require a specific context based on both formal and informal structures of authority. Development projects have generally encountered significant problems in terms of sustainability without a clear understanding of the targeted community or an active desire to involve existing public-sector institutions.

Despite these empirical shortcomings, a number of general points and observations can be highlighted as follows:

(a) Social infrastructure facilities constructed with participatory methods and community involvement tend to be comparatively effective in improving access to public services;

(b) A higher level of decentralized authority and civil society involvement in the daily operation of public facilities represent a greater incentive for public participation and greater accountability, and community management of such social infrastructures. Such an approach can lead to more efficient use of available resources;

(c) Small infrastructure projects, as opposed to larger and more technically complex ones, performed markedly better in communities where the concerned civil society was able to make informed decisions concerning the type of system and the level of service they require. By contrast, projects that were constructed without community participation and supervision and where project management was not accountable to the community tended to be poorly constructed by private contractors. This is a crucial element of the rationale of community development, namely, that local or indigenous knowledge must be incorporated into the decision-making process concerning productive infrastructure;

(d) Community development projects have the potential of becoming more sustainable than top-down initiatives if they are provided with a minimum albeit continuous institutional support, particularly for value-added inputs and training.\(^6\) This underscores a positive linkage between participation, continuous involvement of public institutions and increased potential for sustainability;

\(^5\) This evaluation is based on periodic reports on the implemented ESCWA community development projects/activities that are submitted to relevant donors.

\(^6\) Such support can come from line ministries.
(e) Cultural and social heterogeneity in the community can have adverse impacts on the expected project outcomes, whereby a higher level of social homogeneity can facilitate the formation of social capital and be conducive to collective action. One of the aims of civil society participation is to develop capacity for collective action, and such capacity is often more pressing in those communities with greater social diversities and where internal divisions and even conflicts are widespread;

While more research and impact evaluations need to be undertaken regarding the rates of and reasons for success, community development projects in the ESCWA region where civil society participation was active have to date achieved positive development outcomes and have met some of their stated goals and expectations. However, as highlighted above, the potential of community development methods have often been constrained by the following two factors: (a) problematic connections between civil society development projects and prevailing public sector institutions, which result either from relations of power within the targeted community or from an arcane set of rules, procedures and organizations; and (b) a lack of technical and organizational capacity at the local community and municipal levels, particularly in rural areas.

For these reasons, there is a strong need to institutionalize community development methods for integrated social policy while concurrently tackling some of the common civil society organizations’ limitations. This can be achieved by carefully promoting decentralization, fostering good governance reform, and strengthening the levels of human resources and human capital.

E. REQUIREMENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

A. INTRODUCTION

Empowering communities in the context of local development requires increasing the chances and quality of their opportunities to participate in local governance and local service delivery. The capability to participate depends on more than individual resource endowments and correlates directly with social capital and trust that enables people to act collectively. With the opening of the economies to globalization, adequate linkages between poverty reduction and a rights-based approach to development are needed in order to ensure that the underprivileged segments of society have greater access to jobs and other opportunities.

Stakeholders outside Governments, particularly civil society organizations that include representatives of the poor, women’s NGOs, rural communities and groups that are out of favour with the State, have always played limited roles in decision-making and related public policy dialogue. Government consultation with such groups can contribute to a better understanding of their social problems, causes and solutions and, consequently, can result in the inclusion of more pro-poor social policy. For example, advocates of community support approaches focus on participatory processes and building capacities, especially social capital within the community. They call for providing resources and technical assistance at the community level to enable people to address their needs. Direct community support also promises to improve the performance of local governments by enabling communities to better express their demand and hold local governments accountable. Community support programmes can build community capacity through collective problem-solving and collective action.

Empowerment depends strongly on the standing of individuals, voluntary associations and communities in relation to national constitutions and laws. Opportunities for local action are influenced by political and civic rights and by the property rights regime under which local actors operate. Moreover, norms grounded in culture and local values promote or constrain the opportunities available to women, children, poor people, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups to participate and influence local development processes. While empowerment efforts at the local level alone is not enough to overcome these broader constraints, the support of local national leadership is required to change discriminatory attitudes and provide a stable foundation for equitable empowerment.

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8 Ibid., p. 6.
Local governance that corresponds to the variety of civil society institutions whereby people organize to act collectively is conditioned by prevailing laws and traditional social practices. National legislation provides the framework that legitimizes such forms of local collective decision-making as voluntary associations, community organizations and local governments. Moreover, legislation grants local organizations the legal standing, rights and relations to the State that are fundamental to effective local governance processes. Broad societal norms, including the propensity for unity, the acceptance of social hierarchy, and relations to authority and leadership, also influence the quality of local governance.9

Local service provision, on the other hand, depends on a variety of exogenous factors. While national policies set standards for public services and define the institutional arrangements through which they are provided, including the roles of communities, local governments, sectoral agencies, NGOs and private firms, national Governments and NGOs that are funded externally provide access to many resources supporting local service provision. Both formal and informal institutions that affect the functioning of the private sector can also influence the availability and quality of public services. Moreover, while “community” implies a homogenous lot, in most cases it comprises different groups with varying capacities, power and networks. Any discussion revolving around social capital and collective action within a given community must first recognize the conceptual and practical limitations of these terms.

In some countries of the ESCWA region, poor governance compromises all development efforts through corruption, the capture of public organizations and resources by powerful elites, and the exercise of Government authority without accountability. In others, public organizations perform poorly as a result of inadequate systems and under-trained, under-equipped, poorly supervised and weakly-motivated personnel. Where public sector dysfunction is pervasive, national institutions can constitute a disabling environment for local development. In these cases and in the short term, a viable local development process depends on measures aimed at promoting greater empowerment and at improving local governance and local service provision, rather than basing it on the broader institutional context. With regard to the long term, effective and sustainable promotion of local development requires a favourable enabling environment for local actors.

This section discusses the main elements that enable the community development approach to take root and benefit the societies under consideration, while being used as a tool for more effective planning for formulating social policy. These elements can be classified as follows: (a) role of the enabling environment for the participation of local communities in the decision-making process; (b) role of the civil society in raising awareness among the population aimed at identifying and meeting their basic needs; (c) role of central Governments in terms of encouraging and financing the above; and (d) role of social capital among the rural communities that can guarantee positive change.

B. ROLE OF THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Local development requires an institutional environment that is favourable to local initiative. Both the formal institutions of governance and the informal institutions of the wider society and economy can contribute to this enabling environment through the rules, norms and resource endowments that support (or constrain) actions and accountability by local people and organizations.10 An enabling environment can be fostered in most contexts by disseminating information and fostering a dialogue between the local population and the Government.

Information sharing is a key component of the participatory process that can be used throughout the planning, implementation and monitoring stages of local community development strategies. Specifically, sharing information allows transparency in governance, accountability in public actions and expenditure, and

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9 For more details on the requirements for good governance, refer to the websites of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank on governance and local development.

10 The enabling environment for local development includes such formal institutions as laws, policies and organizational systems; in addition to such informal institutions as values, norms and social practices that support empowerment, governance and service delivery at the local level.
meaningful consultations for policy implementation. On the other hand, decentralization empowers local communities to reciprocate dynamically and be responsive for their needs and ensure that they are accountable to their actions. Types of decentralization include political, administrative and fiscal decentralization. Local governments are generally more responsive where these three forms exist as they are complementary to each other and are important for creating an enabling environment for community development.

At the political level, the rationale for decentralization is that it allows for the increased participation of citizens and their elected public representatives in the decision-making process of the central Government. From this perspective, decentralization enhances Government accountability and transparency through a system of power sharing that is in line with good governance. Indeed, decentralization is one of the most important means of implementing and exercising checks and balances within a society. It serves to create civic space, which in turn provides the opportunity for the emergence of opposition political groups and, in many cases, of proactive civil society organizations. Operating independently from Government control, such organizations can play pivotal roles in holding the State accountable to its citizens.11

Empirical evidence reveals that these accountability flows pose a particular challenge for most developing countries, including those in the ESCWA region. In most cases, this can be attributed to the inertia of over-centralized systems against change, or to the capacity of powerful elite and political forces at both central and local levels that override any accountability mechanisms. The decentralization process can suffer an irrevocable consequence.

Social development requires strong institutions aimed at supporting inclusion, cohesion and accountability; while capacities that sustain development include people’s knowledge and skills, social capital, organizational capacity and the institutional environment for good governance.12 The enabling environment for local community development framework needs to provide a conceptual basis for strengthening institutions and capacities for empowerment, governance and service provision at the local level, thereby contributing to increased human, social and economic development. In order to obtain maximum results and increase efficiency and responsiveness, local citizens need to be engaged in oversight bodies and NGOs must be encouraged to enhance local capacities through partnership arrangements. In this respect, Government recognition of community-based institutions within a country’s governance system is critical to the way communities are linked to the public sector as a legitimate venue for the expression of demand, for resource management and for collective action.

C. ROLE OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY

The importance of the role played by civil society organizations in designing, monitoring and ensuring the success of implementing social policy cannot be overstated. In a vibrant civil society, such organizations counterbalance the power of Government and can become part of a system of checks and balances. On the other hand, unregulated civil organizations have the potential to cause harm to the society as a whole. Societal values, norms, institutions and capacities are also important contributors to the enabling environment for local development. Empowerment is greatly facilitated in societies where principles of equity and social justice are widely accepted. Local development depends on an understanding within the broader society that governance and development are not merely the responsibilities of the Government, rather that these require the active participation of individuals, communities and voluntary associations. An equitable local development requires the inclusion of marginalized social groups as contributors to governance and service provision.13

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11 UNDP and the Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), “Responding to citizens’ needs: local governance and social services for all” (2000).


13 Individuals who act as agents of local development, including community members and leaders, association officeholders, staff of NGOs, local government officials, civil servants and entrepreneurs, require better knowledge and skills to be fully effective. Local organizations need people who are capable of planning, managing and monitoring public initiatives; and of designing and
NGOs are commonly contracted to deliver capacity-building services, mostly to communities, but also to local governments. Capacity-building at the community level involves helping them to conduct participatory needs assessments; to identify, prioritize and plan projects; to organize democratically-elected community development committees; and to manage funded sub-projects. For those projects where funds are directly transferred down to the community level, NGOs also help communities learn to manage and account for project funds and to lead social mobilization campaigns in the targeted communities. NGOs have played an important role in projects serving the disabled and ethnic minority communities by serving as an outreach mechanism to the targeted beneficiaries. In some cases, they were contracted to provide monitoring and supervisory services to ensure that funded sub-projects received ongoing oversight.

All these competencies require training to increase the capacities of participants in community development. Capacity enhancement goes well beyond technical and professional training. Local development requires more effective collaboration between the public sector and NGOs, more responsive and legitimate forms of social capital, better performing organizations, and individuals who are more capable of working together to solve problems.

In ESCWA member countries, the absence of rule of law and the lack of transparency both weaken the economy and undermine the participatory process. In some countries, while there are rules designed to ensure fair treatment for all, the rich and powerful have special access to political power and use that influence to obtain special favours and exemptions from those rules. Moreover, there is a strong tendency to resist change or to sustain the status quo from both the higher and local authorities. In such circumstances, a strong civil society that uses checks and balances on abuses of power is an important element in curtailting such undemocratic behaviour. In Lebanon, for example, the main obstacles to transparency in social expenditures and their monitoring are the fragmentation of social expenses that are scattered among the various ministries and public entities. Another obstacle is the poor itemization of expenditures in the State budget where the categorization by nature is not adapted to the functions and tasks performed by each ministry and, furthermore, where the geographical location of spending is not specified.

Consequently, civil service reform must be accorded one of the highest priorities. A meaningful reform requires fundamental, bold and creative change, which only political institutions that are secure in public support could be capable of undertaking. Given the prevailing public attitudes with regard to Government bureaucracies, genuine reform can gather wide support. The needs, objectives and means need to be explained publicly to the communities in a credible manner in order to mobilize a national consensus in this regard. The objectives are to build a lean civil service without unnecessary redundancies, clean of corruption, efficient in managing public affairs, oriented to service and problem-solving rather than to bureaucratic control and complications, and respectful of citizens and responsive to their needs.

D. ROLE OF CENTRAL GOVERNMENTS

As mentioned above, local governance requires an institutional environment that is favourable to local initiatives. The onus is on Governments to enhance such enabling environment by formulating laws, policies and procedures that make national governance more supportive to local development. Such laws must clarify the rights of individuals for equitable access to opportunities; and strengthen the legal standing of voluntary associations in governance and service delivery. Moreover, Governments need to foster a vibrant civil society by creating initiatives aimed at promoting democratic norms and civic institutions that support the two pillars of good governance, namely, inclusiveness and accountability; and at promoting such societal values as equity, social justice and local responsibility. Naturally, this is in addition to providing financial and technical support in order to assist local communities in developing decentralized development projects.

implementing the improvements to infrastructure, public service delivery, productive activities and commerce demanded by communities and households.

Moreover, the participation of local communities in decision-making can be enhanced by creating opportunities for community members and their representatives to engage in dialogue with Government officials, including politicians, administrators and technicians, aimed at identifying, prioritizing and resolving local problems. Such effective participatory approach requires processes of consultation among the planning, decision-making and accountability elements of local governance. While many local planning processes are internally well organized, they remain marginalized by weak connections to the central Government that is authorized to make decisions and manage resources.  

Local government approaches demand a reorientation of public finance and sectoral policy to accommodating intergovernmental relations. They also require organizations in the central Government to interact with multiple local government units often mediated by such regional-scale governance institutions as provinces and states. If direct community support approaches are to achieve coverage in all parts of the national territory, the public sector needs the capacity to interact with communities organized as units of decision-making and action. The public sector has to be prepared to build community capacity, process community requests for funding and support, and monitor community use of resources and achievement of results in this multitude of dispersed small-scale units. According to the World Bank, even well-funded and well-managed national fund agencies with years of operational experience are rarely able to satisfy this level of demand. As a result, when direct community support programmes move towards universal coverage, they often opt to work through local governments as intermediaries between their specialized agencies and their large population.

E. ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

Community organizations and other voluntary associations are instruments for local people to engage in participatory planning and oversight of public decision-making, in service delivery, and in other local governance processes. They provide venues for collective mobilization to solve specific problems through such direct action as infrastructure improvement or maintenance, community-based regulation of natural resource use, and cost-sharing for social or economic support services that are not provided by the public sector. However, the capability of people to participate in local governance and local service delivery is not only determined by such resource endowments as money and skills, but also by the social capital that provides the basis for collective action aimed at addressing common concerns. Within that context, the capacity to organize, decide collectively, mobilize resources, communicate through representatives with external organizations, and ensure compliance with mutually agreed decisions requires relationships of trust and leadership among the concerned group members.

Social capital that supports trust, leadership and legitimacy is a key factor for local development and represents an important dimension of capacity enhancement. Social capital underpins community-based development initiatives to improve the quality of governance at the local level. Investments in social capital that strengthen both voluntary associations and informal institutions of collective action are fundamental to promoting a local development process that balances governmental and non-governmental initiatives.

Legitimating various forms of social capital in the political and social marketplace creates a favourable environment for the local initiative required for dynamic local development. Governments, religious leaders, organizations, NGOs and scholars can all contribute to an environment that broadly recognizes the

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15 Ibid. Chapter six of that paper underscores the bureaucratic routines and the cumbersome administrative procedures in Lebanon that create bottlenecks and represent hurdles in the adoption of the bottom-up approach to formulating social policy.

16 National coverage is a requirement of any institutionalized feature of a country’s governance and service delivery system. When some communities operate in a direct community support mode and others operate under a different mode, this is a clear indicator that direct community support remains a project modality and has not been fully institutionalized as an organizing principle for governance and public management.


18 Ibid.
importance of the social networks through which people meet many of their needs. As such, the recognition of informal institutions is an important basis for developing their capacities in order to assume a greater role in community and public affairs. Widespread acceptance within civil society of such principles as the transparency and accountability of public organizations also enforces the norms and rules governing the behaviour of public officials.

According to the Noble Prize economist, J. Stiglitz, open, transparent and participatory processes play an important role in preserving social capital. Participation can help create a sense of community, a sine qua non for a higher level of social capital. Consequently, when individuals believe that they have meaningful participation in the decisions that are affecting them, they will be more willing to accept change than when they feel that the changes are imposed on them by the Government. This is especially relevant for the most disadvantaged groups.

F. CONCLUSIONS

In terms of implementing national social policy, Governments in the ESCWA region have followed a partial and sectoral approach, which constitutes a set of often uncoordinated programmes implemented by a variety of institutions. There is a lack of a comprehensive, integrated social vision at the national level that leads to shortcomings in the fulfilment of the needs and expectations of people at the community level, especially in areas away from the urban centres. This situation that has persisted over the past two decades has led to a waste of human and financial resources, the exacerbation of poverty and unemployment, and the creation of an environment of social tension that threatens the well-being of societies as a whole.

Currently, the challenge lies in transforming social policy into a series of coordinated actions intended to widen the participation of people in the development process, especially those marginalized and away from the centres of power. Empowerment and participation are becoming the prominent themes in the development agenda of most ESCWA member countries. Within that context, the local community development approach adopted by ESCWA can be forwarded as a main tool for including the marginalized and rural communities in the decision-making process through participation in mechanisms used in the formulation and evaluation of the social policy process. The experiences of past and current community development projects implemented in the ESCWA region have demonstrated that the potential of this approach for improving social policy formulation, especially at the micro level, depends on a set of enabling conditions, among which are the broad institutional environment and the level of human resources.

Development requires a change in mindset and, in particular, an acceptance of change. This is especially relevant in an era of globalization where change is the main catalyst for development. Participation, on the other hand, is necessary for a fully effective and society-wide development transformation. Moreover, recent research has provided evidence for this point at the grassroots level, thereby demonstrating the benefits of participation in local community development projects. In addition to bringing to the community relevant information that central Governments are not necessarily aware of, such participation brings with it commitment, which translates into greater efforts.

Participatory decentralization could represent the political and institutional space where the methodologies of community development are institutionalized, and provide the necessary enabling environment for communities to empower themselves and participate in the development process. Moreover, it can provide a framework within which social policy is identified and implemented in a more integrated manner. However, while decentralization can remove some of the distortions in the institutional and bureaucratic process of social service delivery, it cannot alone bring about effective social policy, which depends on a broader set of enabling conditions.

20 Ibid., pp. 163-182.
Similarly, while community development can improve the quality and the level of integration of social services by providing a reference framework for wider and deeper public participation, it cannot reach its full developmental potential unless a clear political vision is articulated into a long-term development strategy that encompasses both social and economic policies.

Qualitative evidence shows that enhanced success and sustainability of the community development process depend crucially on an enabling institutional environment. Indeed, community development projects and processes do not occur in a vacuum; rather they require a specific context constructed from both formal and informal structures of authority, and out of the prevailing rules and mechanisms of social and cultural control. Without a clear understanding of the targeted community or an active desire to involve existing public sector institutions, community development projects have generally encountered significant problems in terms of sustainability. Among the most important general conclusions that can be drawn from the above is that a participatory process that unfolds in ways that takes into account existing cultural and social contexts, and that includes the prevailing institutional environment is likely to be more successful and more sustainable than other forms of development assistance.

Adopting a more integrated approach to community development is not a simple task. In order to integrate effectively local development processes and to promote systematically greater empowerment and more effective service provision at the local level, several significant challenges are likely to be confronted, including the following:

(a) Changing the attitudes and practices in both public and private sectors organizations to adapt to new values of equity, responsiveness, transparency, accountability and responsibility;

(b) Surmounting institutional boundaries that separate sectoral, local government and community-based actors and organizations owing to divergent interests and values (according to political, religious or even ethnic affiliation);

(c) Managing complex processes involving organizational actors at both governmental and non-governmental levels;

(d) Realigning relations of power to favour local actors rather than national actors, and to favour communities and civil society rather than public officials.