

The State of Local Democracy in the Arab World A Challenging Assessment in a Sensitive Environment

*By Ayman Ayoub
Project Coordinator*

I. Introduction

For over two decades, from the start of the so called new wave of democratization, many voices in the Arab World continued to demand tangible steps towards democratic reforms in the region. However, governments across the Arab countries continue to argue that the special culture, conditions and values of Arab societies make it impossible to simply *import* what is called the “western model” of democracy and adopt it. Nevertheless, this does not mean any systematic stand against democracy, as long as it is genuinely in line with and respectful for the local culture and values.

Despite the many attempts, reform initiatives remain very timid and narrow in their scope and achievements. The demand for ideas to build a somewhat tailored democratic model did not materialize in any serious efforts to search for specific constitutional and institutional setups to arrive at the desired outcomes. Notwithstanding this fact, some countries were able to make some progress in this regard, by adopting relatively remarkable political openness and some democratic reforms that led to the conduct of competitive elections at different levels of governance. This is the case, among others, in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Yemen, for which reason these four countries were chosen by idea to conduct an assessment of the state of local democracy.

At the same time, the Arab World has been for many years one of the focus geographic areas of IDEA, where it had a number of important and successful interventions and projects. In addition, the assessment of the State of Democracy is one of IDEA’s thematic areas of work that underlay its concept of “democracy from within” and its approach in “supporting democracy worldwide”. Thus, the synergy between IDEA’s concepts, approach and focal geographic areas of interest and the Arab World needs and search for an appropriate methodology to assess the conditions and shortfalls related to democracy building, in order to identify and adopt democratic reforms that lead to improvements in democratic governance are clear.

Based on the above, IDEA took the initiative to develop a project, and secure funding for it, to assess the state of democracy at the local level in the 4 selected countries. The purpose of the project is, thus, to increase the open and frank assessment of democratic action at the local level; to develop policy reform agendas on local governance and on the decentralization in participating

countries; and to influence those responsible for decision-making at the national level so that they adopt the reform agenda (and make the relevant changes).

The implementation of the project has so far given evidence of its effectiveness in achieving the expected results and filling in the gap identified in the selected countries. Such gap refers to the need to identify strengths and weaknesses in local democracy, a level considered to be the basic one in governance, and somehow the less sensitive when it comes to adopting and applying changes and reform from a political view point. Indeed, in all four countries, and despite the many challenges, mainly related to engaging in a new and untested methodology in these societies based on self-assessment, it is possible to observe that the local partners and their teams have been able to interact with all relevant stakeholders and social segments, and to conduct an in-depth analysis of the various aspects of democratic life covered in the assessment methodology. As a result, all four national reports coincide in pin-pointing the major obstacles that are hampering the proper development of local democracy and the implementation of efficient and effective decentralization policies. In addition, the clear interest and support shown so far by decision makers at the highest levels in the four countries is another indicator that the project managed to capitalize on synergies and respond to the local needs.

II. The project

The State of Local Democracy (SoLD) in the Arab World is an IDEA Project funded by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), and implemented in four Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Yemen). The project consists of the assessment of the state of local democracy in 4 selected municipalities (or equivalent) in each country (5 in the case of Egypt).

The project is implemented based on the SoLD assessment methodology developed by IDEA to be a locally driven qualitative process for municipal officers, administrators, collaborators (NGOs) and civil leaders to incorporate self-assessments of democratic life in their cities in an independent and impartial manner. Its timeframe extends over an 18 month period beginning in March 2008.

The assessment process was implemented in partnership with a local partner organization in each country, selected by IDEA among the most consolidated and experienced local civil society organizations. These are:

- **Egypt:** The Parliamentary Think Tank Centre (PTT).
- **Jordan:** New Jordan Research Centre (UJRC).
- **Morocco:** Moroccan Association for Solidarity and Development (AMSED).
- **Yemen:** The Human Rights Information and Training Centre (HRTIC).

Target municipalities in each case were identified based on agreed criteria, based on IDEA's methodology, to ensure the selection of a representative sample taking into account geographic as well as development conditions diversity within each country. Assessment activities in each municipality were implemented by a local team of 5 experts (6 in some cases), which composition ensures a gender balance as well as diversity of backgrounds and expertise. The selected teams included, in all cases, at least one member that is a practitioner of local administration (whether as a member of an elected local authority or a local administrator).

Once the IDEA Assessment Guide and other assessment and training material were translated into Arabic and adapted to the local context, the selected local teams received a 3 day training course tailored to each country and implemented by IDEA.

Assessment activities were conducted by the local teams, always under the leadership of the local partner organization and following the guidance of IDEA's project coordinator, over a period of 4 months. This extended period turned out to be a critical element for the success of the initiative, as it allowed the evaluators to look into the local conditions and practices in a different way, and make in-depth analysis of facts. In addition, it also enabled the implementation of an inclusive assessment process that engaged all targeted and interested local stakeholders and actors, including local authorities, whether elected or otherwise, political parties, civil society, academics, citizens, as well as all social groups and local communities.

Each local/municipal team then produced a local report on the SoLD in their locality, which all together served as the basis for the production of a National Report for each country. However, and in order to ensure the involvement of other stakeholders at the national level, in an attempt to secure a more effective impact of the process on related national policies and reform agenda, such national reports were not to become final before they were presented and discussed in a national conference that was organized in each one of the 4 countries.

Consequently, a national conference was organized in each country, where representatives of all potential actors took active part in the discussions. Participants included in all cases representatives of the national executive and legislature, local authorities, political parties, civil society, academics, donors and other interested parties. As a result, a final national report was produced for each country, incorporating the views and recommendations that were made during the national conference.

III. Applying IDEA's Methodology in the Arab World

IDEA's project to assess the State of Local Democracy in the Arab World, and the applying of IDEA's methodology in this part of the world is the very first initiative of this type in the region. In fact, there have never been any previous experiences of self-assessment of democracy at any level in any Arab country, including the 4 countries that participate in this project. This and other factors meant that the initiative would face a number of challenges, but would also be able to make remarkable achievements.

1. Challenges

The fact that all participating countries lacked any previous experience in the area of democracy assessment in itself constituted the biggest challenge that the project was facing from its outset. This meant, among other things, that local partners needed to acquire the relevant appropriate skills to implement project activities in a meaningful manner and in line with the proposed methodology. It also meant that efforts were needed to ensure buy-in and agreement by local authorities and decision makers, for them to accept the very idea of and potential benefits of the assessment exercise. This is especially important in an environment where democracy is still in the making, and where democratic institutions and practices continue to need much efforts and measures to be consolidated and operate in a sustainable manner.

The very approach of self-assessment was another big challenge in this case. Most of the countries in the region continue to argue that democracy must be adopted in a way that is in line with and respectful for the local/national values, culture, traditions and specific social structures and conditions. Nevertheless, they have not been able to identify the best and most suitable measures and solutions to put this argument into practice and make tangible progress towards consolidating their own democracy. Furthermore, in a somewhat contradictory approach, countries in the region would be, more or less, open to externally driven assessment and evaluation processes, while not being able to accept and sense the potential benefits of insiders/national views expressed through self-assessment processes. Therefore, it was at all times stressed during the conceptualization and implementation of this project that the real challenge underlying the correct and successful completion of activities would precisely be to present stakeholders with IDEA's concept of "*democracy from within*" and convince them that the self-assessment methodology is the best way and a critical element to materialize such concept.

In addition, the successful implementation of the project faced other country specific challenges, including but not limited to, the lack of structural and fundamental data and sources of information on many aspects; or the reluctance of local authorities and/or officials to facilitate such data or discuss

matters considered to be highly sensitive in the local political culture and practices; or the national authorities' (including ruling parties and security bodies) lack of understanding of the real purposes and objectives of the assessment process.

2. Achievements

Despite the many and important challenges and constraints described above, IDEA managed, together with its local partner organizations, to make progress and complete all project activities at the national level successfully.

The high levels of acceptance and confidence that IDEA, as an intergovernmental organization generates among local/national partners and stakeholders made it much easier to overcome most of the challenges associated with such an initiative in such a sensitive environment. Therefore, decision makers and relevant actors were able to understand IDEA's approach and concept of nationally/locally driven democratic process, leading to expressions of support and acceptance of the self-assessment methodology applied at the local level. In addition, most if not all stakeholders also appreciated the fact that the project focuses on the local level, as a good starting and entry point to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the emergent democratic process in their countries, in order to identify genuine solutions, locally owned, to enhance democratic institutions and practices from within and in an appropriate manner, this is from the base to the top.

At the end of the field assessment work, all local teams were able to produce their local reports, and the local partner organization was then able to produce a national report. Remarkably, all national reports attracted the attention and interest of a good number of national stakeholders and decision makers who actively participated in the discussion held on the report at each national conference. In all cases, the national conference counted with the patronage and active participation of a high national personality, such as the Minister of Local Government in Jordan, or the Speaker of the Shoura Council in Yemen. In addition, local and national media, including TV, Radio, press and electronic outlets provided all project activities with good and extensive coverage in the 4 countries.

IV. Lessons learnt and the way a Head

Adopting the right approach, while being sensible to local values and traditions, and building upon the good reputation that IDEA enjoys in the region, constitute the most important lesson to be learnt from this initiative. In fact, by adapting the methodology to the local contexts and ensuring full understanding and buy-in of the concepts and approaches that underlay the assessment process, the project ensures higher levels of effectiveness of its results. In addition, the funding of all project activities through a credible donor that generates respect and acceptance in the region constitutes another factor of success and effectiveness. In all cases,

there have been voices demanding the extension of IDEA's assessment methodology to other parts of the countries involved, as well as to other levels of governance.

Following the publication of the 4 national reports, it is envisaged to produce a regional report that will attempt to estimate the state of local democracy in the Arab World, based on the outcomes of the 4 national case studies. This report will then be presented and discussed at a regional conference that aims at gathering representatives of relevant stakeholders from all countries in the region. The objective is to present IDEA's methodology and explore possibilities of extending it to other countries, but also other levels, within the region, based on a factual and close example where it has been successfully implemented. The final and overall objective continues to be the contribution to consolidate sustainable democracy from within.

(For further information, please contact Ayman Ayoub, project Coordinator, at a.ayoub@idea.int).