

Local Democracy Assessment in Jordan

On March 11, 2009, Al Urdun Al Jadid Research Centre (UJRC), together with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), convened a National Conference to discuss the national report that UJRC had prepared on the State of Local Democracy in Jordan. This report was based on field research that was conducted in four selected municipalities: Mafraq, Maan, Jarash, and Rusaiifa (Zarqa governorate).

The conference was held under the patronage of the Minister of Municipal Affairs, and was attended by seven mayors. It provided a unique opportunity to discuss the outcomes of the national report and the four case studies on the chosen municipalities. The feedback derived from the Minister, the mayors, and the 120 participants, was highly beneficial for verifying the content of the national report, in addition to finalising the conclusions and recommendations of the research.

The outcomes of the national report and the conference deliberations could be summarised in the following:

- Jordan is one of the most urbanised countries in the third world. Its urban population comprises 83% of the total population. This was the outcome of several factors; outbreak of wars in the region, internal and external migration that was concentrated in the large cities, the large size of the public sector, and the integration of the Jordanian economy in the global economy.
- The current Municipalities Law places a major obstacle to developing local democracy. The electoral system deprives residents of the capital from electing their mayor and half the members of their municipal council. Council members are chosen by nomination in Aqaba and Petra. Elections are run under the entire supervision of the Government, which forbids any form of independent observation. The system lacks sufficient guarantees for the freedom and integrity of elections.
- Despite the ever-growing numbers of civil society organisations in many cities and towns in Jordan, their role is still largely concentrated in the capital and a few big cities, and is very negligible in the outskirts. There is still no existing relationship between the municipal councils and these CSOs, as there is still not enough awareness of the importance of cooperation and partnership among municipal councils with civil society organisations.
- The above also applies for the relationship between the private sector and municipal councils. Business associations, such as the Chambers of Industry and Commerce, play a minor role in municipalities outside the capital and the large cities. On a different level, most Jordanian companies lack having social policies; very few of them pursue some sort of social responsibility towards their local communities.
- Despite possessing several similarities with other Jordanian cities, the four selected cities have low records on their standards of living: they have high dependency ratios, low income levels, higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy, and lower life expectancy compared to the national average.

- The four cities are connected to the capital more than they are to their rural surroundings. Developmental projects in those governorates have not impacted their wider sphere, and have not raised the social productivity of the labour force.
- The four municipalities have not succeeded in developing into local governance authorities. They still play a service-provider role, rather than a developmental role. The real power and authority of local governance still lies within the governors, who are employees at the Ministry of Interior. This implies that the system of local governance is highly centralised.
- The four municipalities enjoy very little, if any, public space. There are no public facilities or infrastructure that allows for an open space for communities. Moreover, legislations prohibit holding public gatherings without acquiring prior permission from the local executive (the governor). In addition, the weak financial resources and the high debt of the municipalities constitute an additional factor that prevents municipalities from conducting cultural or social functions.

The national report came out with a list of recommendations, as follows:

First: in the short run:

- Municipalities need to adopt mechanisms for self-evaluation and assessment. They need to utilise the expertise of local experts and universities in order to develop standards for good local governance. They need to construct infrastructure for public space, and to develop their own updated websites.

Second: in the medium run:

- Develop municipal election laws and systems to conform to international practices of transparent and credible elections. Mayors and members of municipal councils should be directly elected by the public everywhere, including Amman, Aqaba and Petra. Elections should be conducted under the supervision of an independent entity.
- Enhance the developmental role of the municipalities. Build the capacities of human resources at these municipal councils, through exchanging staff and expertise with universities and think tanks.
- Cities need to be more integrated with their rural outskirts through establishing complementary forms of cooperation. Need to construct an updated database on local governance institutions in Jordan. Also need to develop a strategic vision and long-term planning for municipalities, which will attract investment projects. Municipalities should be given incentives based on their realising of their economic, social and developmental goals.
- Reconsider the decision of the compulsory merging of municipalities. Formulation of municipal councils should be on the basis of democracy and objectivity.

Third: in the long run:

- Take benefit of the ongoing political climate in Jordan which supports administrative decentralisation and the division of Jordan into regions. This enhances the independence of municipalities and promotes their developmental role as the endorsed authority for local policies.

- Strengthen sustainable local development policies, and instil good urban governance policies that are based on administrative decentralisation, transparency, accountability, good performance, and gender balance.
- Establish principles for societal partnerships between the private sector and civil society. Each city needs to develop its own culture and identity that conforms to its social characteristics and history. Need to assess the needs of civil society, and to devise a strategic plan that strengthens civil society and builds its capacities.