



Decentralize Conflict Areas in Middle East and North Africa

on 16 January, 2008 00:49:00 | 105 times read

Yossef Ben-Meir

It may initially seem a paradox that national-level governments are strengthened when they decentralize decision-making power by giving local communities control over, or at least a decisive voice in, matters relating to their own development. One naturally assumes that a country's autonomy is strengthened the more power is concentrated at the national level.

However, in reality, when national governments assist initiatives that enable a community to determine and implement its priority development projects (in job creation, education, health, environment, etc.), they create in the process diverse administrative partnerships at all domestic levels. Everyone benefits. Local organizations and communities are desirous of maintaining these partnerships at the national level because government support helps satisfy their specific needs and better enables the people to shape the institutions that govern them. Central governments also benefit because by creating overall goals that encourage inter-regional balance and competition, they can foster better performance, positively affect areas far from the national capital, and enhance the central government's legitimacy. The diverse benefits of decentralized development enable it to generate what is particularly needed to help resolve the complex regional conflicts involving, for example, Iraq, the Palestinians, and the Western Sahara.

There is a wealth of examples of decentralizing initiatives with national support from all over the world and in history. As early as 1956, the Administrative Committee of the United Nations stated that a major function of national governments is to unite with the efforts of the people and improve the conditions of local communities. In both mixed economies and socialist societies in Asia, for example, rural institutions became more effective promoters of development because of support from higher levels of government. In Brazil, the process of decentralization and the local participation it encourages allowed citizens to be directly involved with municipal fiscal planning that in turn enhanced transparency and responsiveness of social services. Joint forestry programs in India, organized by local organizations, met with government encouragement, which led to the central government's enhanced legitimacy.

The organization of the United States is also based on the same idea, that is, the principle of federalism or decentralization. The system of federalism is central to the U.S. Constitution, which imposes limits on the national government by giving local and state governments substantive independent powers.

"Participatory development" has become the term used to refer to community planning methods that create decentralization. These methods involve the participation of "facilitators" who organize local community-wide meetings at which participants plan their own development projects. Teachers, government extensionists in the ministries of agriculture, health, education, and so forth, community workers from NGOs, personnel from international public and private groups, and local community members can all be effective facilitators. Once trained, facilitators bring local people together to assess their social and environmental conditions and determine and implement development projects in areas most important to them – such as in job creation, education, and health, among others.

In the case of the Palestinians, their economic structure is extremely dependent on Israel. This dependency makes Israeli-Palestinian relations increasingly bitter and volatile while perpetuating the extreme economic underdevelopment of the Palestinian people. What the Palestinians immediately need are relief and opportunities for livelihood achieved through fostering a self-reliance that restructures their economy, decreases its vulnerabilities to external influences, and enhances regional stability.

Decentralization, it was found, advances local and national self-reliance, which, in turn, is associated with increases in independence from external control, self-help, and self-governance. Palestinian communities will increase their power and the influence of indigenous institutions and of the civil society. Significant democratic foundations will be established, and internal political processes will be more responsive and accountable. Decentralization vests control at the community level and can consequently more quickly generate life-sustaining development projects, which also cost less.

This development approach could work best in some areas where aspects of partnership may be possible with Hamas, since the majority of Hamas' activities are already in community services. The impacts of working together wherever possible with even perceived enemies can in time affect overall relations between larger groups and even between societies.

In Iraq, the sectarian conflict is placing the central government in jeopardy, with the country breaking apart or a loose federal arrangement seemingly the most likely

outcome. The creation of development programs as outlined here offers a third possible outcome, which is Iraq's central government can increase its chances of survival and utility by supporting reconstruction programs that are driven in their design, implementation, and evaluation by local communities.

Decentralization can readily incorporate local reconciliation processes, which in turn can significantly influence decisions made at the regional and national levels. Another advantage of participatory projects is that they are dispersed, small in scale, and thus are not as strategic of targets as the more visible and foreign-conceived reconstruction projects insurgents typically sabotage. In addition, ample evidence from Iraq itself strongly suggests people do not destroy reconstruction projects that they determine and then manage themselves.

It is impossible to justify in developmental terms the extreme involvement of foreign companies in the reconstruction of Iraq. The opponents of peace, in a context where communities receive the real benefits from their participation in development, may have been dealt with internally by the Iraqi people themselves, and in ways that allowed for the continued benefits of the larger majority. This is why the United States should immediately follow through on the Iraq Study Group's suggestion to allocate \$5 billion for reconstruction, and direct these funds toward assisting local people to come together, plan, and implement projects that meet their self-determined socio-economic and environmental needs. No other approach is now on the table that can enable Iraqis to feel more vested in their surroundings and future, further the reconciliation, development, and political tracks, and provide the national government with legitimacy and purpose (and perhaps save it) through giving this type of projects its full and active support.

As a final example, last April, the Moroccan government submitted to the United Nations Security Council an "autonomy within Moroccan sovereignty" proposal for a resolution to the 32 year old Western Saharan conflict. The proposal catalyzed intensive negotiations among the parties (including Morocco and the Polisario, with Algeria and Mauritania invited to observe) under the auspices of the United Nations.

Considering Morocco's position to enable the maximum possible autonomy for Western Sahara within the context of its existence within Moroccan sovereignty, it should broadly assist the coming together of Western Sahara's local people so they can plan and implement their priority development projects. This will create greater autonomy for the Saharan region, bring desperately needed relief and opportunity to the approximate 160,000 Sahrawi refugees, and forge mutually beneficial relationships and institutional connections with Morocco. If the process goes forward, new trust and partnerships among the parties could help to more clearly define the form of regional autonomy within a broader sovereignty that Morocco proposes.

Morocco's broad support of decentralization of development in the Western Sahara would affect the results of a referendum in Western Sahara that helps to decide its future (that is, if the parties agree to the terms upon which a referendum were to take place). Individuals and organizations that support projects created by communities in the process advance their public diplomacy too. Pursuing the projects communities wanted – that met their self-described needs – wins hearts and minds and will influence who wins the "war of ideas." It is this kind of action that should form the basis of United States public diplomacy in the Arab-Muslim world.

Yossef Ben-Meir teaches sociology at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. He is also President of the High Atlas Foundation – a nonprofit organization that assists rural development in Morocco. He can be reached at ben-meir@mailcity.com

 **Comments (0 posted)**