



People Powered Change

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NEW YORK - As the Iraqi people move toward reestablishing their government, their decisions about how to divide power bet Baghdad and outlying regions, and their subsequent progress in substantiating that balance, will be both important and difficult to achieve. Facing this challenge, they would be well advised to look closely at a family of powerful and proven methods for engaging parties in a community in dialogue. After setting development goals and devising plans for achieving them, the residents work cooperatively to implement the plans.

The power of these methods, known collectively as "participatory development," (PD) lies in their ability to create win-win opportunities in which all stakeholders can claim ownership of the goals, plans, and results. Rural Moroccan communities in the High Atlas Mountains provide a good case in point.

In the winter and spring of 2003, communities in the Tifnoute Valley of the High Atlas Mountains, south of Marrakech, jointly engaged in PD activities with direct relevance to their long-term survival. With their long list of stresses and challenges, those communities provide a worthy context for evaluating the approach.

The Berber villages in the region are among Morocco's poorest, with high rates of illiteracy and joblessness. Furthermore, contaminated drinking water is a major cause of infant mortality. The villagers' dependence on fuel wood for cooking and on goats and animals (goat, sheep, and cattle) as their main source of income has contributed to massive deforestation and erosion.

The Tifnoute people also grow wheat and corn on terraces along the mountainsides using traditional methods. Over recent decades, however, population growth coupled with degradation of the land has forced most households to supplement their harvest with purchases of these staples. The transition to cash crops, such as cherry and apple trees, which began about ten years ago, was advanced significantly through the villagers' work with participatory development.

Another factor affecting the fate of the Tifnoute communities is their neighbor, giant Toubkal National Park, Morocco's oldest (and largest (over 40,000 hectares (99,000 acres)) protected area. The area inside the park, which includes the tallest peak in Africa (Mount Toubkal at 4,163 meters (13,654 feet)), is also the villagers' summer pastureland. Therefore, local people are concerned about the effect protection regulations will have on their livelihoods.

Fortunately, High Atlas Regional Management of Waters and Forests employs three facilitators trained through a grant from the World Bank in the techniques of participatory resource appraisal, one of the methods in the PD family. Toubkal's facilitators have engaged people of the Tifnoute and neighboring communities in constructive dialogue about the use and development of the shared resource base. The goal of such efforts is to reach agreements between communities and park management that support local people choosing and engaging in new forms of income-generating activities (such as fruit farming) in exchange for their accommodation of nature-protection measures (such as closing an area to grazing). The new income reduces community dependence on the neighboring park area, which in turn helps to conserve the natural resources.

Just as most rural communities across Morocco, the Tifnoute identified potable water, irrigation, and tree planting as top priorities, along with school construction and women's cooperatives often rounding out the top five. Communities benefited from many projects in these areas through the national and international partnerships formed by the park management for the purpose of directing resources to local communities. Also, the implementation of projects that responded to the needs of local people, as expressed and identified through constructive dialogue during a series of meetings, helped to build trust between the park management and the people. Successful partnerships based on participatory development processes encourage transparency and the creation of local associations (core civil-society institutions) as people manage projects and create new ones.

The Tifnoute and other similar experiences provide an important lesson that can help the Iraqis decide what kind of federalism they want and how power will be dispersed between the central national authority and regional power centers. Secular Shiites in Iraq are now seriously considering following the model of the Kurds in the north, who have established an independent parliament, ministries, and a regional military force. The bitter history of ethnic relations in Iraq makes it understandable why more and more

Shiites are opting for this kind of relationship. Most religious Shiites, on the other hand, prefer a strong centralized authority because it is consistent with the universal Islamic rule that will be instituted by the Mahdi, the legendary, end-time imam.

In principle, federalist democracy involves dispersion of power toward localities and involving all social groups in decision making. Participatory democracy is often viewed as promoting federalist democracy because it is based on inclusion and has been shown to strengthen the capacities of local communities to manage their own development. Also, participatory development projects respect the self-defined interests of those involved in the process, which affirms local identities and strengthens federalism.

At the same time, however, PD experiences from around the world also suggest that central governments can play a positive and important role in supporting community development. In fact, communities engaged in PD processes may form relationships with central authorities that can be characterized as "having their cake and eating it too"; that is, development based on the will of local communities and supported by regional and national governments. Federalism standing on this kind of relationship is a model that could help guide the Iraqi people through the challenging constitutional issues they face.

U.S. policymakers should remember that American support of locally designed projects generates enormous public goodwill and constitutes an excellent form of public diplomacy. Participatory development projects are far less expensive than typical aid projects because of their reliance on local capacities and know-how and the contributions (often in the form of labor) that local communities and partners provide. Also, community-designed development engenders feelings of trust and respect for the organizations, agencies, and providers of financial assistance that have made such an experience possible.

The United States would be wise to consider carefully the way that participatory development can promote socioeconomic and political development that would profoundly benefit the Muslim World and advance its own fundamental interests. In Iraq, the issues are urgent and the stakes are particularly high. The United States should now decide to support the application of participatory development throughout the country as an important step toward achieving a federalist democratic state in the Middle East.

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