

“Participatory decentralized development” has proved to be a successful strategy for fighting poverty and strengthening communities throughout the world. This essay argues that it also strengthens central governments and promotes reconciliation and stability, and it could be used to facilitate solutions to the conflicts in Palestine, Iraq, and the Western Sahara.- Ed.

National Sovereignty through Decentralization: A Community-Level Approach to Development, Reconciliation, and Stability in Conflict Areas in the Middle East and North Africa

by 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[1] control over, or at least a decisive voice in, matters relating to their own development.[2] After all, how can national sovereignty be reinforced when planning and managing of development programs are assumed by the very communities these programs affect? One naturally assumes that a country’s autonomy is strengthened the more power is concentrated at the national level.

In reality, however, 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 promotes the satisfaction of their specific needs and better enables people to shape the institutions that govern them.[3] Central governments also benefit because by creating overall targets that encourage inter-regional balance and competition, they can foster better performance,[4] positively affect areas far from the national capital,[5] and enhance the central government’s legitimacy.[6]

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.[7] The committee was stating what has since become a basic tenet of rural development initiatives in developing countries, which is that they nearly always involve decentralizing at least some decision-making functions. As it turns out, the more such initiatives encourage the overall national plan, the greater the possibility of their receiving domestic support.[8]

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.[9] In Brazil, the decentralizing process 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.[10] Joint forestry programs in India, organized by local organizations, met with government encouragement, which led to the central government's enhanced legitimacy.[11]

In sum, as Manfred Max-Neef has observed regarding wealth creation: "Processes which nurture diversity and increase social participation and control over the environment are decisive in the articulation of projects to expand national autonomy and distribute the fruits of economic development more equitably." [12]

The organization of the United States is 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 and independent powers. One example of how this worked early in the history of the United States is found in the national government's ceding to the states the power to make their own laws regarding the institution of slavery, which permitted political cooperation between the North and South. Their cooperation in turn helped to form a single country and permitted economic growth based on regional specialization to occur.[13] This example underscores how decentralization may function as a potential means of conflict resolution by providing autonomy and self-reliance to subregions, which can then have a stabilizing effect both regionally and nationally.[14] But decentralization may also be a cause for conflict if it is used to enable secessionist movements.

This essay explains why decentralization of development, if well negotiated and strategically implemented to aid the neediest populations in Palestine, Iraq, and the Western Sahara, will create the essential conditions for ending rather than encouraging these regional conflicts.

"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. To become facilitators they must, however, be trained. "Experiential" pedagogies have been shown to provide the most effective training. 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. "Participatory" planning activities, assisted by facilitators, occur during meetings. The planning sessions are interactive and draw out information from community members so they can make informed decisions about their own development.

This decentralizing development approach evolved during the 1970s as a pragmatic response to the evaluations of development interventions from around the world over decades prior, which began to point to the same conclusion: that

local community control and ownership of development projects (from design to evaluation, and in partnership with public and private organizations) is the primary condition for sustainable project success.

Decentralization, it was found, advances local and national self-reliance,[15] which is, in turn, associated with increases in independence from external control, self-help, and self-governance. Benefits of self-reliance include the ability to withstand manipulation due to increased trade dependency[16] (particularly important for the Palestinians) and to have increased military defense capability,[17] or making attacks on population centers more difficult [18] (which is central to the U.S. strategy in Iraq). But achieving national self-reliance requires human development, which is achieved locally through 1) improved decision-making by community members that takes into consideration external or macro factors; and 2) the use of local know-how to meet basic human needs.[19] Partnerships make possible self-reliance and should be mutually beneficial and diverse, as well as both vertical and horizontal among administrative tiers where information sharing occurs and important development decisions are made jointly.

Indeed, the more that communities are in control and benefits are generated from achieving their own ideas for social change — and governments assist the process — the stronger the *raison d'être* for national-level governments, whose autonomy is enhanced (along with that of the local level).

Issues of national sovereignty are the very reason for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the continuing warfare in Iraq, and the conflict in the Western Sahara involving Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania. The following discussion explains how and why participatory decentralization — largely because of its wide-ranging positive effects, including on national sovereignty — is especially suited to help resolve regional conflicts.

1. Palestinian occupied territories

The Palestinian people are overwhelmed by issues of survival and concerns about meeting basic human needs under extremely dire conditions. Ravaged by poverty, declining health, environmental devastation, and personal and national suffering that now spans generations, two-thirds of the Palestinian population depends on humanitarian aid to survive. The Palestinian economic structure is extremely dependent on Israel. Approximately 75 percent of all imports to the West Bank and Gaza are from Israel, and 95 percent of all exports from the two Palestinian territories go to Israel.[20] In the West Bank and Gaza, imports account for roughly 80 percent of the GDP. In fact, economic power is considerably derived not from local industry but from the exclusive right to sell imported goods from Israel. This dependency makes Israeli-Palestinian relations much more bitter and volatile while perpetuating the severe 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 the economy, decreases its vulnerabilities to external influences, and enhances regional stability.

The way I suggest is through participatory decentralization, whose ultimate

justification is found, as previously stated, in innumerable examples from around the world (including in Palestine itself) of a vast range of new community projects that have furthered economic development while simultaneously providing social services and encouraging the achievement of other local and national goals. Local people know best what they need and what is viable in their specific surroundings, and it is their participation that enables projects to be adapted to realities (even severe realities) and therefore to have the best chance for continuity and success. The participatory decentralized approach vests control at the community level and can consequently more quickly generate life-sustaining development projects, which also cost less.

The implementation of this strategy on a broad scale in Palestinian occupied territories involves the training of thousands of facilitators and funding of the community-determined projects to the approximate level of at least \$1 billion. Considering that since 2003 aid to the Palestinians has not increased from Arab countries and the price of oil has more than tripled,[21] this financial support is certainly possible.

Additionally, implementation does not have to wait for a final status agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. Actually, when the decentralization process gains momentum in the Palestinian areas, it could assist the political process with Israel, in part because of the less intense emotionally-charged climate created through de facto cooperation. Decentralizing development decision-making to local Palestinian communities will increase the 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.

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 even with perceived enemies can in time affect overall relations between larger groups and between societies. Islamists should be given the opportunity to join collective initiatives. Jeroen Gunning at the University of Wales noted in his 2004 study that change is possible in core areas of Hamas' ideology.[22] The international community, and particularly the United States, should find ways to work with Hamas in creating projects that yield real benefits for individuals and their communities. It is not too late to follow through on Professor Shibley Telhami's insight: "Hamas, in fact, could provide a place for testing whether careful engagement [by the United States] leads to moderation." [23]

2. Saving Iraq

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. This characterization of the situation in Iraq is similar to what Senator Joseph Biden and Leslie Gelb have described, most recently writing in the *Washington Post*. [24]

I think that the creation of development programs as outlined here offers a third

possible outcome: 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. Participatory decentralization with support from the national government will create a frame of reference for local communities and provinces to find a way to connect to the central government that may be acceptable even in the long term because it fulfills their needs. A national oil agreement could be found and prove effective and sustainable if it is in support of the participatory approach to decentralization and development.

Decentralization processes also can promote local reconciliation, which in turn can influence decisions made at the regional and national levels. Reconciliation and development are really, in fact, a single process: Reconciliation dialogue that takes place at the local level can, once trust is built, naturally lead to that group planning joint development projects for their local area. Also, reconciliation and development require facilitators because they catalyze and help maintain inclusive processes, which is another reason their training and support are essential. The State Department's Provisional Reconstruction Teams can play an important role in coordinating the transference of the needed facilitation skills.

Another advantage of participatory projects is that they are dispersed, small in scale, and so would not be such strategic 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. [25] Unfortunately, this outcome, typical of development cases across the globe, has not informed the approach of the majority of Iraqi reconstruction projects funded thus far by the United States.

It is impossible to justify in developmental terms the extreme involvement of foreign companies in the reconstruction of Iraq. There are a plethora of development evaluations, including from the World Bank and USAID, as well as countless other government and non-government groups worldwide, which explain what began to be understood approximately 60 years ago[26]: that lasting and successful development and reconstruction projects must include local participation and control. A United Nations evaluation of their earlier reconstruction experiences in Iraq from 1991 to 2002 underscored that Iraqis themselves "can implement any reconstruction project with little or no onsite help from foreign contractors." [27]

The extreme level of Iraq's reconstruction administered through foreign contracts and teams destroyed a historic opportunity for the Iraqi people while deepening the dismal perception of the United States in the region and world. Even considering the legitimate questions that surround the implementation and purpose of the war, a genuine decentralization of development strategy implemented at the outset would have brought reconciliation and local reconstruction to a point where the current sectarian war, death and severe injuries, dislocation of millions of people, and extremely troubling regional instability may well have been avoided. 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. Instead, the reconstruction failure created an insurmountable disincentive for so many, putting the burden of confronting the opposition much more on the United States.

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 monies toward assisting local people to come together, plan, and implement projects that meet their self-determined socio-economic and environmental needs. If the facilitation training is well and strategically administered, and the funds are available to implement the community-designed projects, then 10 million Iraqis can attain critical and *measurable* support. 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.

3. Western Sahara, Morocco, and Public Diplomacy

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. The third round of negotiations is scheduled to begin in January 2008 in New York.



Considering Morocco's policy 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 Saharan local people to plan and implement their priority development projects. This will create greater autonomy for the Saharan region, bring desperately needed relief and opportunity to the approximately 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 would take place). Individuals and organizations that support projects created by communities in the process advance their public diplomacy too.

I first discovered this as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco in the mid-1990s when assisting a community fruit tree project. An elderly local man, observing the distribution and planting of the trees, responded with happy tears because of

the opportunities he knew they would bring. For the participating communities, the projects and efforts of Volunteers not only affect their attitude toward the central government but toward the United States. Pursuing the projects communities wanted – that met their self-described needs – wins hearts and minds and will influence who wins the “war of ideas.” Morocco doing the same in the Western Sahara will generate a similar effect, and will create new and lasting productive ties.

It will be interesting to see in this context just how the implementation of the new Millennium Challenge Account accord between the United States and Morocco, which grants to Morocco almost \$700 million in development assistance over the next five years, nearly \$300 million of which is for fruit trees and irrigation projects, impacts the image of the United States in that country. The way in which it does will reflect on the way MCA is administered and its level of commitment, shown by actions, to people’s participation. As stated by former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Richard Holbrooke: “Actions speak louder than words – and public diplomacy that appears to be mere window dressing for the projection of power is unlikely to succeed.”[28] Public trust is generated towards enablers of achieving community and self determination. It is this kind of action that should form the basis of United States public diplomacy in the Arab-Muslim world.

I believe there are many U.S. officials, who are or were in the current administration, who are very sympathetic to this kind of international development and public diplomacy approach. Former Ambassador to Morocco Margaret Tutwiler explained in her confirmation hearing prior to her tenure as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy that planting a tree in this context has enormous public diplomacy value.[29] When she was ambassador, I observed her to do her best in supporting such local initiatives. Her successor in Morocco, Thomas Riley, has made important efforts in supporting community initiatives, and established an “Empowerment Fund” to advance that goal.

There are fine examples from all over the world, and they are accelerating in number. However, the shift in the United States foreign aid paradigm needs to be systemic, strategic, and redirected to local communities if it is to have a measurable impact on these Middle East and North African regional conflicts and on the perception of the United States in this area of the world and beyond.

Conclusion

Thus, the United States should more broadly direct its international assistance toward participatory decentralized projects. By doing so, it will advance primary economic, social, and democratic goals, and rebuild the U.S. image in the world. There is a caveat: the programs have to be successful, and to succeed, they should specifically support: 1) training people strategically placed to bring community members together for development planning meetings, and 2) implementing projects that are designed as a result of the meetings.

Participatory decentralized development helps build national sovereignty by empowering local communities to manage their own development. The institutions and people of a country identify more closely with the national level

when it functions as a contributor to local fulfillment. Conditions in the Middle East and North Africa, and of course elsewhere around the world, warrant the broad expansion of participation in development, not simply to achieve the potential of millions of people in terrible need, but to further the existential interests of national governments themselves.

Globalization is challenging and redefining the role of national governments. By supporting decentralizing programs, they help to ensure their own relevance and survival, while preserving and strengthening their bonds to the interior. In game theory, this is a win-win situation.★

End Notes

1 “Community” as defined here is a geographic area where over time members live and interact, develop social relationships, and create institutions that reflect their interests and identities. This definition and the following definition of “development” are mine and based on literature reviews.

2 “Development” is a process that considers in its planning economic, social, political, and environmental factors and seeks to generate benefits in these areas for all or the majority of the people affected, though emphasizing the poor and marginalized.

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