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Home > Vol 27, No 1 (2016) > Ben-Meir

Moroccan Decentralization – Challenges to Genuine Implementation

Yossef Ben-Meir*

The Moroccan decentralization initiative bears great promise to achieve human development goals that are truly 'of the people'. As turmoil engulfs so much of the MENA region, the Moroccan model stands out as a potential means of empowering and engaging citizens in peaceful, productive action to shape their futures. Through decentralization, local communities select and carry out to completion projects that will deliver the vital benefits in health, education, business creation and other areas of life they deem important. Furthermore, the Moroccan design is truly exceptional in that it rallies both national and regional level support to implement the determined schemes.

I have long been – and remain unabashedly – an admirer and supporter of Moroccan decentralization. Perhaps because of this, I am, too, acutely aware that the challenge to its realization to national scale may well be vast enough to ensure that implementation will be a multi-decades undertaking. I should like to offer some current examples of the gap between the theory and the reality, followed by some recommendations as to how to overcome the significant barriers remaining in order to achieve genuine, functioning and systemic decentralization.

Decentralization as a state of mind

Firstly, with regard to Moroccan public administrative culture, the habit of many decades of deferring to Morocco's capital, Rabat, remains extremely difficult to overcome, even with the existence of decentralized structures. Provincial and regional directors oversee human service delivery or the protection of the environment over huge areas of the Kingdom. However, sometimes they cannot bring themselves to make an autonomous decision regarding a hectare or two of land, or the provision of authorization to expand an existing service within their jurisdiction, without asking their agency head in Rabat for approval – a clear recipe for dysfunction.

For example, the region of Marrakesh has the authority to make a decision regarding the expansion of the number of beds in a rural high school dormitory. Waiting for the stamp of approval from Rabat may well result in beds remaining unfilled for the duration of a full school year, while rural youth are turned away.

Similar delays in implementation might be avoided by agricultural extension centers, which should already have the power (together with their regional supervisors) to decide for themselves whether or not to build a fruit tree nursery to serve neighboring communities. In the north and south of Morocco, protectors of the forest and natural life may determine the most appropriate form of community engagement and implement it with immediate effect, without having to sit on their hands waiting for an answer from Rabat.

Decentralization, then, is as much a state of mind as an official directive. Even when laws and policies confer decision-making ability on regions, provinces and municipalities, it is still down to subnational officials to exercise their newly acquired ability. Otherwise, with Rabat still effectively holding sway in the official consciousness, precious time passes and opportunities for vital progress remain forlorn hopes.

Communities and their leaders

Secondly, and in common with other advocates of decentralization, I have maintained that power ought to be transferred as close to the people as possible, which in Morocco means to the municipal level. The creation by municipalities of community development plans based on people's participation is the law of the land and can serve as a vital cornerstone to a viable decentralized system. The Kingdom's most recent municipal elections, in September 2015, were framed so as to remind voters of the importance of choosing their local leaders in the context of decentralization and of the

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greater grassroots decision-making authority thus implied. As a result, in many municipalities, new and young leadership stepped forward; however in others, entrenched powers remained.

In amongst all of this lies a serious dual concern: to whom – and at what speed - is authority being transferred? First-hand experience in working closely with local leaders in different parts of the country has made me highly sympathetic towards a gradual approach to decentralization.

Hastily-implemented decentralization may and in places will further entrench disappointing local leaders who follow narrow self-interest, and display intransigence in their positions while forsaking the long term benefit of the many, for the immediate, much smaller benefit of the few.

Decentralizing power in this context will most likely result in further social and economic stratification at the community level and greater levels of social control. The cruel truth remains that today, in a large number of rural municipalities, not a single girl attends secondary or high school. Right now, even with provision free of charge of dormitories and public education, a mere ten percent of children in many rural villages and municipalities attend secondary school.

In part this is a travesty of parents' own decision-making. Adding the factor of decentralization, with participatory decision-making practices, into a social context whereby those making the choices routinely engage in entrenched thinking does too little to produce the result intended.

Learning by doing

I personally have been moved many times by the deep-seated desire of local leaders to implement truly popular, communal participation. However, they simply do not know how. What can be done on this level? The answer is to ensure the opportunity of learning by doing. Members of municipal councils, associations, and cooperatives need to experience community-based applications of participatory planning methodology and assessments of local needs. There are fine examples of such experiential learning taking place in the Kingdom, including in the municipalities of Ait Taleb, Boujdour, Ourika, Mohammedia, Tnine Ourika and Toubkal.

Finance matters

That decentralization and participatory methodology are embedded at many levels in key policy documents is in itself immensely commendable. Building a decentralized system, then, requires actualizing progressive policies and employing experiential learning techniques in order to build capacity.

Critically, all of this has to be supported by increased funding, with increased ease of access to the financial support available. Currently the National Initiative for Human Development, which should be the natural vehicle for project finance, remains largely inaccessible to the vast majority of people and their local associations owing to its challenging proposal format, inconsistent timing of calls for proposals and a requirement for local partial funding which is simply impossible for the majority of rural groups.

True decentralization is a Moroccan national priority for which there is a keen sense of urgency, given the accompanying empowerment and human development advancement at stake. However, the funding for projects and training here described must be increased in order for the local partnerships, procedures, and system of decentralization to emerge.

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Refbacs

- There are currently no refbacs.

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