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# Sovereignty Through Decentralization



Yossef Ben-Meir | January 25, 2008

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**The claim that decentralizing decision-making power to local communities can strengthen national governments may seem like a contradiction. After all, the common assumption is that power concentrated at the national level strengthens a country's autonomy. Therefore, how could national sovereignty possibly be reinforced if the responsibilities for planning and managing development programs are distributed among local people?**

When national governments assist initiatives that help communities determine and implement priority development projects – such as job creation, education, health, and environment – they create in the process diverse administrative partnerships at all levels within their country. Consequently, local organizations and communities seek to maintain these partnerships with the national level because they help satisfy their human needs and better enable people to shape the institutions that govern them. Central governments benefit by creating overall targets and inter-regional balance and competition that can foster performance, affect remote areas far from the national capital, and enhance their legitimacy.

This idea is not new. 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 living conditions of local communities. History reveals numerous successful cases of such decentralizing initiatives, most often in developing countries, where rural development initiatives nearly always involve decentralizing at least some decision-making functions. Indeed, the more they complement the overall national plan, the greater chance they have of receiving domestic support.

In both mixed economies and socialist societies in Asia, for example, rural institutions became more effective promoters of development through support from higher levels of governments. Rural development specialist Norman Uphoff and his colleagues describe an example in Sri Lanka of the mutual reinforcement of local to national institutions. The Gal Oya irrigation project in that country developed an organizational structure that began as informal local groups. These groups took the initiative and formed district-level associations, which then led to plans for a national federation, since the irrigation system covers a large area. In this process of building up the organizational tiers, a national model was created to manage major irrigation systems in Sri Lanka. In this model, however, the overall project committee remains at the level of the main canal, and the higher tier associations are created to help respond to their needs within the district, regional, or national tier that they operate.

Uphoff and his colleagues summarize findings from this approach to rural development management: "Small base-level groups, which can improve programs' coherence and motivation while reducing transaction costs and problems of free riding, gain from being joined together in a larger structure. Our comparative study of rural development experience in sixteen Asian countries over a twenty-year period identified this as a key factor for success, in that such a structure of organization combined the



advantages of solidarity with the advantages of scale. Likewise, a quantified analysis of local organization experience found strong evidence that small base-level groups that are linked horizontally and vertically contribute much more to rural development than do larger ones.”

Governments may be reluctant to decentralize development management out of concern that it may enable secessionist movements, and thus become a cause for conflict. However, it is more often the lack of empowerment in decision-making at the sub-regional level that heightens political resistance and the lack of integration into the nation. Governments often fail to realize that the terms of decentralization yield strong sovereign nations. Consider the United States, a nation formed by federalism or decentralization, a central feature of the Constitution that limits the national government in favor of local and state governments. This example underscores decentralization as a potential means of conflict resolution by providing autonomy to sub-regions, which can have a stabilizing effect. This essay explains why decentralization of development, if well negotiated and strategically implemented among the people in most need in Palestine, Iraq, and the Western Sahara, will build essential conditions for ending these regional conflicts.

## The Participatory Development Approach

“Participatory development” refers to community planning activities that create decentralization. The approach involves “facilitators” organizing local community-wide meetings where participants prioritize, design, and implement their own development projects. School teachers, government officials in the ministries of agriculture, health, education, etc., community workers from NGOs, personnel from international public and private groups, and local community members can all be effective facilitators. Their training is essential, and “experiential” pedagogies (i.e., learning by doing) have been shown to provide the most effective training experiences. Facilitators bring people together to assess their social and environmental conditions and determine and implement development projects in areas most important to them, such as job creation, education, health, etc. Participatory planning activities that take place at the meetings are interactive and draw out information from community members in order to help them make informed decisions regarding their development. This decentralizing development approach was developed in the 1970s as a practical response to the evaluations of development interventions from around the world, which agreed 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 advances local and national self-reliance – characteristics associated with increased self-help, self-governance, and independence from external control. Benefits of self-reliance include the ability to withstand manipulation due to an increase in trade dependency (particularly important for Palestinians) and increased military defense capability (which is central to the U.S. strategy in Iraq). Achieving national self-reliance requires human development. This is done locally through improved decision-making by community members that takes into consideration micro and macro factors and the effective use of local human and natural strengths and resources. Partnerships (among government agencies, civil society, and the business community) encourage self-reliance, and should therefore be mutually beneficial and diverse, organized vertically and horizontally among administrative tiers where information sharing takes place and important development decisions are made together. Development projects that emerge from this self-help approach have a 95% repayment rate because communities are able to multiply funds, which in turn leads to a coexistence of social responsibility and self-interest.

Indeed, the more communities assume control and reap benefits generated from achieving their own ideas for social change – with some government assistance – the more the *raison d'être* of national level governments and autonomy are enhanced. One only need consider current conflicts to site prime opportunities for this type of engagement. Disputes over national sovereignty lie at the very heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the continuing war in Iraq, and the conflict in Western Sahara with Morocco. The following explains how and why the broad application of participatory decentralization within these conflict areas is especially suited to help achieve a stable resolution.

## Palestinian occupied territories



The Palestinian people are overwhelmed with matters of survival. Their concerns center around meeting basic human needs under extremely dire conditions characterized by poverty, declining health, environmental devastation, and personal and national suffering spanning generations. Eighty-five percent of the people in Gaza depend on humanitarian aid to survive. Palestinian economic structure is extremely dependent on Israel's: approximately 75% of all imports to the West Bank and Gaza are from Israel, and 95% of all exports from the two Palestinian territories go to Israel. The West Bank and Gaza are highly dependent on imports, which account for roughly 80% of their GDP. In fact, economic power is largely derived not from local industry but from selling imported goods from Israel. This dependency makes Israeli-Palestinian relations bitter and volatile, and perpetuates severe underdevelopment of Palestinian people. Relief and opportunities for livelihoods are what the Palestinians need immediately, to be achieved in a manner that instills self-reliance, restructures the economy, decreases its vulnerabilities to external influences, and enhances regional stability.

Participatory decentralization's ultimate justification is found in cases from around the world (including examples inside Palestine) of a vast range of community-determined and implemented projects that further economic development, the provision of social services, and other goals. Local people know best what they need and what is viable in their surroundings, and their participation is what enables projects to be adapted to realities (including severe realities) and therefore have the best chances for continuity and success. The participatory, decentralized approach vests control at the community level and can also more quickly generate life-sustaining development projects for less money.

The broad-scale implementation of this strategy within Palestinian occupied territories does not have to wait for a final status agreement with Israel. It could involve training thousands of local "participatory" development facilitators, with the funding of community-determined projects up to at least \$500 million, an amount certainly possible considering that the international community recently pledged more than \$7 billion to aid the Palestinian people. Ideally, Palestinian facilitators who are trained in catalyzing and assisting inclusive local community meetings should be chosen from people who already relate to neighborhoods and villages, such as school teachers and personnel from civil society institutions.

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 climate it would create. Decentralizing the development process to local Palestinian people and communities will increase indigenous institutions and civil society. Very significant democratic foundations will be established, and internal political processes will be more responsive and accountable.

This development approach could be an area where aspects of partnership may be possible with Hamas, since the majority of Hamas' activities are already in community services. Benefits would extend to the political arena as well, where the impact of working, where possible, with perceived enemies could over time have a positive effect on relations between opposing groups. Indeed, Jeroen Gunning at the University of Wales noted in his [2004 study](#) that change is possible in core areas of Hamas' ideology – a promising find for such discussions. The international community – particularly the United States – should find ways to work with Hamas to create projects that yield real benefits for individuals and their communities. It is not too late to follow through on Professor Shibley Telhami's [observation](#): "Hamas, in fact, could provide a place for testing whether careful engagement [by the United States] leads to moderation."

## Saving Iraq

In Iraq, the sectarian conflict is putting the central government in jeopardy. The disintegration of the country, or at least a settlement based on a highly decentralized power sharing arrangement, seems among the most likely outcomes. This characterization of the situation in Iraq is similar to what Senator Joseph Biden and Leslie Gelb have [described](#), most recently in the *Washington Post*: "A federal Iraq is a united Iraq but one in which power devolves to regional governments, with a limited central government responsible for common concerns such as protecting borders and distributing oil revenue."

Participatory projects, however, offer a means for reconstruction and further reconciliation, and in so doing help achieve a political settlement. Participatory projects are dispersed, small in scale, and are

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not as strategic a target as the more visible and foreign-conceived reconstruction projects insurgents typically sabotage. In addition, there is [ample evidence](#) from Iraq that people do not destroy reconstruction projects that they determine and manage themselves. Unfortunately, this promising outcome, which has been shared with development cases across the globe, has only recently seemed to influence some reconstruction projects funded by the United States.

In terms of development, it is nearly impossible to justify the extreme involvement of foreign companies in the reconstruction of Iraq. There is a plethora of development evaluations – from the World Bank, USAID, and countless other national and international government and non-government groups – confirming what was first understood 60 years ago: that lasting and successful development and reconstruction projects necessarily involve local participation and control. A [UN evaluation](#) of earlier reconstruction experiences in Iraq from 1991 to 2002 revealed that Iraqis themselves “can implement any reconstruction project with little or no onsite help from foreign contractors.” The sheer volume of Iraq reconstruction projects administered through foreign contracts and teams has destroyed an historic opportunity for the Iraqi people, and made more dismal the perception of the United States in the region and world. This reconstruction failure has created a colossal disincentive for millions of Iraqis, which has in turn placed the onus of confronting the opposition inside Iraq on the United States. It is safe to say that a genuine decentralization of development strategy implemented at the outset would have brought reconciliation and local reconstruction to a point where the current civil war – with its massive casualties, millions of displaced people, and highly troubling regional instability – might have been avoided. Furthermore, had there instead been a context in which communities actually benefited from participation in development, any vocal opposition to peace would have been dealt with by the Iraqis themselves, in a way that allows for the continued benefits for the far majority.

Iraq’s central government will increase its chances of survival and utility by supporting reconstruction programs that are community-driven, in terms of design, implementation, and evaluation. With support from the national government, participatory decentralization will create a frame of reference for local communities and provinces, and demonstrate a way in which to connect with the central government. Consider, for example, the possibility of a national oil agreement, which could be effective and sustainable if constructed with the participatory approach to decentralization and development. Decentralization processes can also promote local reconciliation, affecting regional and national consequences. Reconciliation and development are really, in fact, a single process: reconciliation dialogue that takes place at the local level can lead to the planning of joint development projects. Participatory planning methods include procedures that help further mutual acknowledgement and understanding among the participants (eventually leading to expressions of regret of past actions). This creates the basis for continued dialogue and the use of other participatory procedures that help determine and design new and viable reconstruction projects. Training and support of local facilitators are essential, because reconciliation and development require facilitators to catalyze and help maintain this process. The State Department’s Provisional Reconstruction Teams can play the important role of coordinating the transference of the needed facilitation skills.

The United States should immediately follow through with the [Iraq Study Group’s suggestion](#) to allocate \$5 billion for reconstruction, and direct it towards assisting the coming together of local people to plan and implement projects that meet their self-determined socio-economic and environmental needs. There is likely no other approach that can enable Iraqis to feel more vested in their surroundings and future, further the reconciliation, development and political tracks, and provide legitimacy and purpose for the national government (and perhaps save it) by giving its full and active support.

## **Western Sahara, Morocco, and Public Diplomacy**

In April 2007 the Moroccan government submitted to the UN Security Council an “autonomy within Moroccan sovereignty” [proposal](#) for a resolution to the 30-year-old Western Saharan conflict. The proposal catalyzed intensive negotiations, and the UN is assisting the process. Considering Morocco’s position, its government should broadly assist the coming together of Western Saharan communities where local people plan and implement their priority development projects. This will create greater autonomy for the Saharan region, bring relief and opportunity to the approximate 160,000 Sahrawi refugees, and forge mutually beneficial relationships and institutional connections



with Morocco. If vigorously pursued by Morocco at this time, new trust and partnerships among the parties could help define the form of autonomy and sovereignty.

Morocco's broad support of decentralization of development in the Western Sahara would affect the results of a referendum in Western Sahara to help decide its future. Individuals and organizations in support of community-created projects can also in the process advance their public diplomacy. I first discovered this as a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco in the mid-90s where I assisted a community fruit tree project. A local elderly man observed the distribution and planting of trees and responded with happy tears knowing the opportunities they bring. For those communities, the kinds of projects and efforts of U.S.-based volunteers reflect positively on the United States; and pursuing the projects these communities wanted – i.e., ones that met their self-described needs – won hearts and minds. By doing the same in the Western Sahara, Morocco will help create new and lasting ties between formally opposed groups.

It will be interesting to see how the implementation of the new Millennium Challenge Account accord between the United States and Morocco – which grants Morocco almost \$700 million in development assistance over the next five years, including nearly \$300 million for fruit trees and irrigation projects – will affect the image of the United States in that country. The way in which it does this will reflect MCA's efficiency and level of commitment, as demonstrated by tangible efforts. As [stated](#) by Ambassador 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." Public trust is generated in response to the work of those enabling a community's 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, in either the current administration or past administrations, who are very sympathetic to this kind of international development and public diplomacy approach. Former Ambassador to Morocco Margaret Tutwiler stated in her [confirmation hearing](#) prior to her tenure as Under Secretary of State that planting a tree in this context has enormous public diplomacy value. During her ambassadorship I observed her great efforts to support local initiatives. Her successor in Morocco, Thomas Riley, has also made important strides in supporting community initiatives, establishing the Empowerment Fund to provide on-going support. But the shift in the United States foreign aid paradigm should be much more far reaching, strategic, and redirected to local communities if it is to have a measurable impact on these Middle Eastern and North African regional conflicts – as well as the perception of the United States, in this area of the world and beyond.

Development assistance programs should specifically support: 1) training people to bring community members together for development planning meetings; and 2) implementing the very community projects designed as a result of the training. The principle of community participation is incorporated to varying degrees in the general design of most every U.S. international development assistance program. Over the past 20 years, the paradigm shift in the delivery of international assistance – from top-down to bottom-up – is certainly noticeable. However, what is too often lacking is in the real application and community engagement in a broad, continuous, and genuine way. Projects are still too preconceived by the aid establishment, and "participation" is steered in that direction. Development professionals generally do not do enough of the grassroots, people-to-people living and connecting. Indeed, the aid establishment seems antiquated in comparison to what is ultimately needed to widely achieve what we know works in development. A fundamental change in the U.S. conception and application of foreign aid is necessary for it to significantly affect world poverty and in the process advance its own vital interests.

## **The Nature of Sovereignty**

Jean Jacques Rousseau described sovereignty as the general will in action, which resides in the community as a whole, and not through elected representatives. 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. National sovereignty is thereby reinforced by the integration (practically seen through mutually beneficial partnerships) of institutions that function within that country.

National governments that attempt to resist such internal movements will suffer, as the external forces of globalization challenge and redefine the precise role of national governments, thereby destabilizing their own standing. On the other hand, when national governments support decentralized, empowering development, they help ensure their relevance, survival, and relationship with public and private agencies at all levels. Conditions in the Middle East and North Africa, and of course elsewhere around the world, warrant the broad expansion of participation in development: not only will this strategy tap the potential of communities in dire need, but it will also further the existential interests of national governments.

*Yossef Ben-Meir, a contributor to Foreign Policy In Focus, 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.*

## Sources

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**Name:** Charles Liebling

**Date:** Jan 28, 2008

Participatory decentralization is in many cases a lovely idea, but for it to work the affected populations have to buy into it. I take huge exception to Mr. Ben-Meir's idea that somehow participatory decentralization would be a good idea to solve the problems of the Western Sahara. Mr. Ben-Meir's favorable treatment of Morocco's autonomy proposal for the Western Sahara is perplexing – especially in view of the fact that he must certainly be aware of the writings of a fellow contributor to FPIF, Stephen Zunes, and fellow former-Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco, Jacob Mundy. Both these scholars have written extensively about Morocco's brutal illegal occupation of the Western Sahara and the Kingdom's longstanding and blatant disregard for international law in refusing allow self-determination for the inhabitants of this former colony.

The Western Sahara is quite simply not theirs to decentralize. After Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait I wonder what Mr. Ben-Meir would have thought if Saddam had suggested a far-reaching autonomy plan for Kuwait. That is basically what Morocco's autonomy plan amounts to. Having invaded and occupied the territory, the King wants us to buy into autonomy. The Western Sahara is legally a non-self-governing territory and not one country in the world officially recognizes Morocco's occupation. Whatever the merits of decentralization on paper, what Mr. Ben-Meir is suggesting – decentralization under Moroccan sovereignty – is just not applicable to the Western Sahara.

The United Nations for over thirty years has affirmed and reaffirmed the Western Sahara's right to self-determination through a referendum on independence. Morocco's autonomy proposal is nothing more than another attempt to prevent that referendum from taking place. It is hard to see what Mr. Ben-Meir means when he says that “the proposal catalyzed intensive negotiations.” Anyone who has followed the recent negotiations between the parties in Manhasset NY knows that the only thing that has been catalyzed is a hardening of positions between the parties. The Polisario has held firmly to their position that only a referendum with independence as one of the options will suffice. And Morocco has held firmly in their refusal to allow such a referendum. Shoving autonomy down the throats of the Western Saharans is their idea of participatory decentralization. It won't work.

Similarly, Mr. Ben-Meir's statement that “Morocco's broad support of decentralization of development in the Western Sahara would affect the results of a referendum in Western Sahara to help decide its future,” makes no sense to me. I see no indications that the indigenous Sahrawi have any desire to abandon their quest for independence and Morocco has made it clear that their current idea for a referendum does not include that option. I think the author is saying that maybe the Moroccan's will be able to buy off the Sahrawi. I doubt it.

Mr. Ben-Meir writes, “By doing the same in the Western Sahara [implementing community development], Morocco will help create new and lasting ties between formally opposed groups.” Morocco has already devoted millions of dollars to development projects in the Western Sahara. Unfortunately for the Sahrawi, the bulk of this aid has gone to the benefit of the hundreds of thousands of illegal Moroccan colonizers who now outnumber the local inhabitants. This has already created great animosity between the locals and the colonizers. To think that increasing community development now will CREATE “new and lasting ties” is a delusion.

I feel that Mr. Ben-Meir's attempt to convince us that participatory decentralization should and could work in the Western Sahara is not convincing. His disregard for both international law and the clear desires of the Western Saharans is astounding. But then a quick glance at Mr. Ben-Meir's background gives us a glimpse of where he is coming from. As president of the High

Atlas Foundation, he presides over a group whose Advisory Board includes Andre Azoulay, Advisor to the King of Morocco, Aziz Mekouar, Moroccan ambassador to the US, and Edward Gabriel, former US Ambassador to Morocco and current registered foreign agent of the Moroccan Government. With advice like this, it is no wonder he thinks like he does.

In the final analysis, participatory decentralization as a solution to the Western Sahara debacle is just a smokescreen. Just hold a referendum on independence. That is really all the Western Saharans want. And if they should vote for autonomy within Morocco, that would be the time to talk about using development to heal wounds. However, given that the Polisario has already vehemently rejected Morocco's autonomy approach, I wouldn't be too optimistic about participatory decentralization ever seeing the light of day in the Western Sahara.

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