



Improving participation in decision-making processes

Conference paper by Amine Ghali

Following the 2011 revolution, Tunisia has embarked on a long and uncertain process of transition. While most of the focus of the past years has been on the political transition, a fundamental effort is needed for the much needed and awaited economic transformation.

Tunisian history is characterized by a central decision-making process with little room, or fake, for participation. Citizens – either individually or organized in groups, associations and unions – interested in the public sphere have no space to engage with decision-makers in the discussion and definition of economic and political decisions impacting their lives.

However the past few years have witnessed a number of initiatives aiming at opening these spaces at the local level and occasionally at the top-central levels. Most of these initiatives come from civil society associations supported by international donors and larger international organizations. They range from municipal participatory budget forums to national five-year development plans; and from water management schemes to urban planning. However, these efforts are at the very early stages and their comprehensive assessment is still to come. As of today, the few observations that can be made are:

- Neither of the two sides, decision makers and public (at different structures), is ready for this new relationship of consultation/participation
- Government entities readiness to such participatory approach differs across ministries, departments, levels (central vs. local)
- Most of these consultations / participation are based on a voluntary efforts from the citizens or employees groups and on the goodwill of the government representatives
- There is no legal framework codifying the new relationship between government structures and the public (groups, associations, unions...)
- Government representatives lack the expertise in designing processes responsive to public participation, from the encouragement of participation, to the discussion forums, and from the implementation to the evaluation of the decision taken.

The expertise of the international community (countries, donors, large NGOs...) in managing such participatory decision-making processes would be beneficial to the transformative environment of Tunisia, especially in terms of social cohesion at the time of hard economic reform decisions.

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