



INTRODUCTION

The upheavals that swept the Arab region in 2011 have changed the political landscape of many Arab countries. Demand for dignity, equity, social justice and greater participation in political and socioeconomic decision-making were central themes of those uprisings.

Even though those popular uprisings have developed distinct trajectories in different countries, they were propelled by similar causes: decades of autocratic rule; gross violations of human rights; lack of rule of law and suppression of civil liberties and freedoms; and entrenched development challenges that accumulated over a half century, including persistent poverty and deprivation, high (youth) unemployment, endemic corruption and socioeconomic inequalities.

Arab citizens today realize that the path to democracy is long and fraught with difficulty and presents considerable challenges in the short, medium and long term. The experience of countries in Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia that have undergone similar transformative events has shown that the outcomes of popular uprisings are dependent on a mix of predictable and unpredictable variables. While popular uprisings in some of those countries led to the establishment of vibrant democracies based on the rule of law, in other countries, pervasive corruption and power struggles led to varying degrees of civil strife. Furthermore, like Arab countries today, those countries faced a number of challenges, including the following: engaging diverse populations, particularly traditionally marginalized groups; introducing institutional reform and enhancing accountability; implementing transitional justice; mitigating external political pressure; promoting inclusive growth and social cohesion; and preserving freedom of the press.

“Democracy is achieved ... with the development of Arab societies and the emergence of civil society organizations that transcend traditional, sectarian and ethnic structures....”

Mr. Khaled Ghazal, participant in ESCWA e-seminar on “Participation and Democracy” (June-September 2012)



The most critical challenge was the establishment of participatory mechanisms that sought to build national consensus on key priorities and safeguard the rights of all as equal citizens.

Citizens of Arab countries are acutely aware that people living in democracies tend to enjoy greater individual liberty and dignity and an enhanced quality of life. Moreover, democracies are likely to establish a stable foundation for long-term economic growth and a flourishing intellectual and creative environment. In addition to improving the lives of individual citizens, the spread of democracy enhances regional and global security.

PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRACY: THE INTERLINKAGE

The relationship between participation and democracy is mutually reinforcing: participation is an important driver of democracy and democracy impacts participation and participatory processes. The United Nations General Assembly has reaffirmed that “democracy is a universal value based on the freely expressed will of people to determine their political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives”.¹ Public



PROMOTING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN THE ESCWA REGION

consultations, information-sharing and dynamic participation in the public sphere increase trust in government and foster government legitimacy, transparency and accountability, all of which lead to a strong and sound democratic system.

Democratic principles also foster participation as they provide the proper legislative basis and an enabling environment for citizens to feel empowered and free to make decisions that address their priorities and help improve their lives. Participation is at the heart of the definition and principles of democracy. Civic engagement in decision-making is also a core facet of participation and of functioning democracies. An active and vibrant civil society can improve public policy decisions, promote effective governance by fostering transparency and accountability of governments, improve needs-based development initiatives and increase their effectiveness.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND DEMOCRACY IN THE ESCWA REGION

The recent popular uprisings that gripped the region have given way to the fervent hopes of citizens to step into a new era of social justice and democracy, an era void of despotism, cronyism and corruption. Although institutional reforms and democracy are still developing in some countries, promises are held out for a sustained institutionalized participation and stable democratic modes of governance. Civil society has the potential to lead change and reform in the Arab region, and is being tasked more than ever “to make the State once again democratically accountable to citizens”.²

Civil society in the Arab region has gained greater visibility in the past few decades as it plays a central role in mediating between States and citizens. However, despite great strides in improving citizen engagement in decision-making, institutionalized participation remains elusive with civil society increasingly facing a range of complex challenges. A recent ESCWA study of civil society participation in public policymaking processes has shown a number of challenges facing civil society in Arab countries. Those challenges include lingering political instability and the absence of a conducive political environment for the active participation of civil society, dominant tribalism and conservative values of religious forces that hinder true participation, “weak

political, legal, educational, socioeconomic and cultural reforms”³ and the lack of civil freedoms. The publication highlighted other challenges including a restrictive legislative environment, the lack of long-term vision, and State manipulation of civil society agendas and funding. The absence of qualified and specialized institutional capacity, the lack of coordination between civil society actors and the proliferation of isolated initiatives were also identified as some of the obstacles facing civil society and a barrier to achieving a real breakthrough in influencing the decision-making process.

While no instruments are available to measure participation in Arab countries, possible indicators of citizen engagement (in decision-making at either national or local government) are the numbers of registered civil society organizations (CSOs) in each country. Specifically, ESCWA reported that in 2007 and 2008 there were 38,500 CSOs in Morocco (equal to one organization for every 815 Moroccans), and 27,068 CSOs in Egypt, in comparison with only 66 CSOs in Kuwait and 126 CSOs in the United Arab Emirates,⁴ the majority of which focus their work on philanthropy and welfare. Another indicator of participation is the number of active registered voters. For instance, the proportion of registered voters who cast ballots in the last legislative election held in May 2012 in Algeria was 43 per cent,⁵ whereas it reached 65 per cent in the last presidential election held on 21 February 2012 in Yemen⁶ and 62 per cent in the last national election held in Libya in July 2012.⁷ It should be noted, however, that neither the number of registered CSOs, nor that of registered voters could be relied upon as solid indicators of participation as evidenced by the popular uprisings of 2011.

Genuine citizen participation and stable democracy are crucial, especially in the light of wide popular support for democratic institutions and forms of governance (90 per cent of Iraqis in 2012, 85 per cent of Moroccans in 2006, 83 per cent of Palestinians in 2006, 81 per cent of Lebanese in 2012, 81 per cent of Sudanese in 2012, 74 per cent of Jordanians in 2006, and 63 per cent of Yemenis in 2007).⁸

Despite high expectations of a new wave of democratization and political change, the 2011 Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) democracy index report showed that most Arab countries are still significantly lagging behind in political participation. For instance, Yemen, Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic and Saudi Arabia show very low levels of political participation with respective scores of 4.4, 3.3, 2.2 and 1.1 over 10, while Palestine, Lebanon and Tunisia seem

to be performing better with scores of 7.7, 7.2 and 6.6 respectively. Egypt still needs to deploy more efforts to improve political participation (5.00), civil liberties (3.82) and political pluralism (2.08).⁹

The following table further describes the democratic deficit in Arab countries, which helps to emphasize the urgent need for a well-planned process of democratization.

Figure 1. Democracy Status in the Arab region

Country	Democracy status	Stateness	Political participation	Rule of law	Stability of democratic institutions	Political and social integration
Lebanon	6.2	6.3	6.5	5.8	6.0	6.3
Kuwait	5.0	8.0	4.5	5.3	3.0	4.0
Iraq	4.4	4.5	5.8	4.3	4.5	3.0
Bahrain	4.4	7.8	2.5	4.5	2.0	5.0
Algeria	4.3	7.0	4.3	4.3	2.0	4.0
United Arab Emirates	4.2	8.0	2.5	4.5	2.5	3.3
Qatar	4.1	8.3	3.5	4.0	2.0	2.7
Egypt	4.1	7.0	3.3	3.5	2.0	4.7
Tunisia	3.9	7.8	3.0	3.5	2.0	3.0
Jordan	3.9	6.5	3.8	4.0	2.0	3.3
Morocco	3.9	6.8	3.3	3.5	2.0	4.0
Oman	3.9	8.3	3.0	3.5	2.0	2.7
Yemen	3.7	4.8	3.8	4.0	2.0	4.0
Syrian Arab Republic	3.2	7.0	2.0	2.3	2.0	2.7
Libya	3.1	7.5	1.3	2.8	2.0	2.0
The Sudan	2.9	3.5	3.0	2.5	2.0	3.3
Saudi Arabia	2.8	5.8	1.5	3.3	1.0	2.3

Source: adapted from the 2012 Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) available from <http://www.bti-project.org/atlas/>.

Note: The BTI measurement of democracy status is undertaken through five basic criteria, evaluated on a scale of 0 to 10, and consisting of the following: (1) "Stateness" characterized by monopoly on the use of force, State identity, absence of interference of religious dogmas, and basic administration; (2) "Political participation" consisting of free and fair elections, effective power to govern, rights of association and assembly, and freedom of expression; (3) "Rule of law", encompassing the separation of powers, independent judiciary, prosecution of office abuse; (4) "Stability of democratic institutions" composed of the performance of those institutions and the commitment to democratic institutions; and (5) "Political and social integration" made up of party system, interest groups, approval of democracy, and social capital.



UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY: Concept, Benefits and Challenges

Participatory democracy is the process through which all groups of society have a genuine opportunity to be politically active and the responsibility to significantly contribute to decision-making, particularly on issues that affect their lives.

The key assets of participatory democracy include the following:

- Providing a greater sense of ownership to citizens to take direct responsibility. By developing proper institutional arrangements including consultative bodies for dialogue and negotiation and by increasing the understanding of citizens of issues that affect their lives, citizens will have a greater sense of involvement in all aspects of decision-making which will inevitably boost their sense of social responsibility and lead to decisions that better serve their interests and needs;
- Enhancing governance by improving information flow and upward and downward accountability, and giving civil society the opportunity to influence power-holders;
- Legitimizing and institutionalizing civil society participation in all phases of public policy processes, from the setting of the political agenda to formulating, implementing and evaluating policies;
- Strengthening networks and collaboration between civil society and government on public policy processes;
- Improving the quality and credibility of policies through organized civil society that brings expertise, dialogue and negotiation;
- Furthering dialogue and improving legitimacy and transparency of government decisions;
- Enhancing social inclusion by giving different social groups, such as women, youth, persons with disabilities, ethnic groups, older persons and others, a legitimate right to actively participate and influence decisions that affect them directly.¹⁰

However, the benefits of participatory democracy may be partially offset by challenges that largely depend on the efficiency of its application. Engaging various groups of citizens can be time-consuming, leading to lengthy consultation processes that may generate opposition and significant delays in reaching consensus on

"Drafting a new social contract requires engaging people in a unified vision of the constitution and its key articles. In parallel, social movements, CSOs and political parties should monitor and oppose any decision that may negatively impact citizens and their demand for their rights and for social justice..."

Ms. Iman Zayyad, participant in ESCWA e-seminar on "Participation and Democracy" (June-September 2012)

"No possible transition to democracy, no balanced political life, and no true democracy are possible if women continue to be excluded from political participation..."

Mr. Malek Sghiri, moderator of ESCWA e-seminar on "Participation and Democracy" (June-September 2012)

decisions. Furthermore, the systematic and sustainable application of participatory democracy requires institutional changes such as devolving decision-making functions in order to optimize ownership, which may risk fragmentation and uncertainty.

Furthermore, there is concern about how the poorest of the poor can be engaged in public consultations and how to prevent elites from capturing the benefits of participatory democracy in the absence of institutionalized channels of participation. In fact, the process of choosing which stakeholders to consult may raise concerns about the exclusion of the most vulnerable and marginalized. In addition, the personal interests of some decision makers may undermine their willingness to devolve authority to the public and subsequently risk political gains.

However, such challenges should be weighed against the risk of not engaging citizens in decision-making, including the risk of relapsing into conflicts. The process of participatory democracy requires firm political commitment and organized institutional frameworks. Participatory democracy and dynamic civic engagement can provide the institutional basis for democratic values and a shared vision of a civil State, and can ensure reintegration of once marginalized groups and appease their feeling of alienation. Participatory democracy gives power to people to shape their future and to determine policies that suit them best and hold decision makers accountable to their actions.

REQUIREMENTS OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

To properly apply participatory democracy, governments should consider the following prerequisites:

- Acknowledge the important role of civil society;
- Acknowledge the rights of expression, of assembly and of voting of all groups of society, including minorities, women, and so on;
- Set up forums for dialogue and negotiation between citizens and power-holders through the establishment of proper institutional frameworks such as consultative bodies, participatory processes, and so on, as “civil dialogue is the most appropriate instrument to achieve participatory democracy”,¹¹
- Institutionalize participatory democracy, by either providing a political mandate that legitimizes the practice of participatory democracy and the principle of participation (as enshrined in Article I-46 of the European Constitution) or by integrating participation and the concept of participatory democracy into the administrative, political and institutional structures of public governance;
- Provide the proper institutional mechanisms to enable people to directly participate in decision-making process and influence legislation. For instance, the enforcement of policies of decentralization and the inclusion of civil society organizations in public programmes in Bolivia and the Philippines have contributed to the institutionalization of civic engagement in public governance, specifically at the local government level. The Republic of Korea developed policies concerning ‘participatory and transparent government’ that enhanced civic engagement at different tiers of public governance, particularly in the arena of public accountability. Furthermore, participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, facilitated power-sharing arrangements at the local government level and devolved significant decisions and resources to citizens;¹²

Institutionalizing Participatory Democracy: The Case of European Union

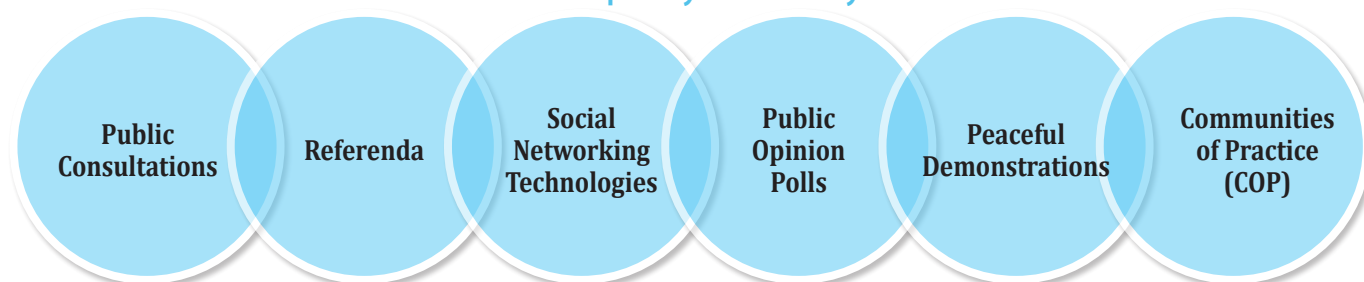
Participatory Democracy has been institutionalized in Article I-46 of the European Constitution which stresses the following principles:

1. Union Institutions shall give citizens the opportunity to publicly exchange their views.
2. Union Institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society and other representative associations.
3. The Commission shall carry out broad consultations with concerned parties in order to ensure that the Union’s actions are coherent and transparent.
4. Groups of no less than one million citizens may invite the Commission to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Constitution.

Source: Sarah Van Dooselaere, op. cit.

- Promote social justice and social equity by strengthening civil liberties and giving the right to all citizens, regardless of their background and specificities, to equally participate in the decision-making process;
- Engage the media in participatory democracy-based initiatives by increasing its role as an advocate for civic engagement in decision-making, as an active partner in development efforts and a communication channel between civil society and the government. By relaxing the legal restrictions imposed on the media, especially in the Arab region, the media will be better positioned to provide citizens with a space for interaction and dialogue on the one hand and to contribute to social change on the other hand;
- Display strong commitment to the principles of transparency, accountability and legitimacy in public governance.

Basic Participatory Democracy Tools



PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN PRACTICE

LESSONS FROM LATIN AMERICA: PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN BRAZIL

In 1989, the Workers Party of Brazil launched a participatory budgeting initiative that engaged a wide range of citizen groups in drawing up municipal budgets. Participatory mechanisms included discussion assemblies on draft budgets and public debates that were divided into five thematic areas with two rounds of plenaries per year on each theme. Citizens put forth their demands and preferences on the city's budget and investment plans through formal and informal deliberations and preparatory meetings. The urgency and importance of those demands were measured according to the need of a particular service and the size of the population. For three months, a Participatory Budgeting Council, composed of 44 citizens, convened weekly two-hour meetings until a final budget proposal was collectively agreed and submitted for ratification.

The success of this process led to its adoption in over 80 cities in Brazil and Latin America which in turn contributed to significant improvements in services and quality of livelihoods. For instance, between 1989 and 1996, households with access to water increased from 80 to 98 per cent in Brazil, households with sewerage system rose from 46 to 85 per cent, school enrolments doubled, 30 kilometers of roads were paved annually and local tax collection increased by nearly 50 per cent, which reflects citizens' satisfaction with public services. Despite some limitations in terms of quality representation of citizens and insufficient time given to the consultation process, Porto Alegre represents a good example of popular mobilization, broad-based negotiations and an "efficient practice of democratic resource management".¹³

LESSONS FROM EUROPE: PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN CROATIA

In 2000, following decades of failed socialism, inefficient one-party rule and a destructive war, Croatia launched a participatory local government initiative that consisted of a three-year programme on upgrading local self-government to build local capacity for participatory-based development planning. This initiative was implemented in three Croatian localities with an identical participatory mechanism, including holding a number of workshops to identify collective problems and engender strategic



development plans, conducting public hearings at an average of three per month in each town to negotiate the proposed plans, building consensus on development priorities and securing the mayors' commitment to implementation. Though the three towns experienced impressive processes of participation, the subsequent implementation rates differed tremendously due to the quality of political leadership and conflicting internal political agendas within the municipalities.¹⁴

LESSONS FROM ASIA: PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

Elected local government in collaboration with State officials used census data to identify all households that had income below the poverty line (BPL), and accordingly distributed a BPL card that made members of such households eligible for a wide array of government assistance, including food, education and free hospitalization. The list of BPL households and the selection of beneficiaries is ratified in village meetings held four times a year. Registered voters monitor and regulate the work of local governments and ratify budgets.

The meetings have been valuable to the government and citizens as it enabled the poorest and most vulnerable groups to provide input into decision-making and hold decision makers accountable. It also helped the government to better reflect the needs of the poor in their work. A programme evaluation by the World Bank in four South Indian States in 2002 revealed that vulnerable groups such as members of disadvantaged castes and tribes, the illiterate and the landless attended in great numbers, freely provided input to discussions and widely benefited from improved access to public services.¹⁵



PROMOTING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN THE ESCWA REGION

THE WORK OF ESCWA IN THE AREAS OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY, DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (2011-2012)

The year 2011 marked a turning point in many Arab countries as citizens rose against their dual exclusion from political and socioeconomic decision-making. Building on its long experience in participatory approaches, the Social Development Division (SDD) of ESCWA implemented a number of activities in 2011-2012 to meet the emerging needs of political transitions, including better governance, social justice and civic participation.¹⁶

MEETINGS AND STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUES

A forum for Arab civil society on operationalizing recommendations for civic engagement in public policy was held in Cairo in 2011 under the title *“Arab Uprisings and Prospects for Renaissance”*, and included youth and civil society associations that took part in uprisings.

The forum was followed by an interdivisional expert group meeting to further examine the requirements for progress of budding transitions. In addition, it addressed the dynamics of the uprisings, modules of change, prospective outcomes and emerging challenges facing participatory democracy and governance during transition.

In November 2011, an interregional seminar was held on *“Participatory Development and Conflict Resolution: Path of Democratic Transition and Social Justice”*. It aimed to identify problems and obstacles emerging from the Arab uprisings and explore the future of the democratic transition in the Arab region by focusing on the relationships between various stakeholders involved in policymaking and identifying their new emerging roles. The forum also examined a number of experiences in transition to democracy and drew key lessons and conclusions.

CAPACITY-BUILDING PROGRAMMES

Building on its participatory-oriented capacity-building programmes, and in response to the 2011 Arab uprisings, SDD devised a new manual on *“Building Capacity for Partnership in Democratic Governance”* that aims to develop good governance competencies among stakeholders involved in the process of democratic

Major conclusions and recommendations of the ESCWA e seminar on “Participation and Democracy”

1. The transition to democracy requires reinventing governance, establishing a new social contract, and building trust and hope.
2. The role of women in the process of change in the Arab region is paramount. No possible transition to democracy, no balanced political life, and no true democracy are possible if women are excluded from political participation.
3. Consensus-building between political and social actors is critical in the transition to democracy and should be supported with a strong political will, national unity, transitional justice and a new social agenda that advances public and individual rights and freedoms.
4. Civil society is a major player in the success of national dialogues. That requires civil society to change and be changed at the same time.
5. Civil Society can be viewed as an arena for the expression of democratic values, and can play a significant role in mobilizing citizens to participate in decision-making and to call for their rights.
6. Democracy, civil liberties and the adoption of a new development agenda are prerequisites for achieving social justice.
7. Youth movements need to be better organized in order to actively engage in the democratic transition process.
8. Fighting corruption, nepotism and cronyism, and ensuring transparency are among the most pressing reforms required in current political transition.

transition. The manual provides organizational and technical knowledge and skills on democratic governance and conflict resolution within the transition to democracy.

The manual was vetted in a subregional workshop (Beirut, 16-19 April 2012) that brought together representatives of government institutions, CSOs, academic and media institutions, United Nations organizations, in addition to leading actors in the field. Participant feedback helped to refine the manual and ensured its applicability and relevance to the transitional phase.

E-SEMINARS: KEY CONCLUSIONS OF "PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRACY"

As part of mainstreaming information and communication technology in development initiatives, ESCWA launched a series of e-seminars in 2010 that culminated in an e-discussion on "Participation and Democracy" hosted on the ESCWA portal for Participatory Development in Western Asia.¹⁷ The e-seminar provided an opportunity to men and women across the region to discuss and debate a number of participatory and democracy-based issues and generate dialogue on the challenges facing the region today. Gathering experts, social practitioners and civil society actors from six Arab countries (namely Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia), the e-discussion presented a rich array of perspectives and provided recommendations on the transition to democracy. The outcomes of the e-seminar were documented in a comprehensive report.

ADVISORY SERVICES

As civil society is one of the main vehicles of effective participation, ESCWA has conceptualized several advisory and technical support services to be

"Does democracy require a cultural revolution in our educational programmes and attitudes to dominant religious doctrines and to concepts such as citizenship, rational, modernity and freedom? Do we need to revolutionize our relationship to the State considering that it is one party to the social contract that is meant to guarantee rights and freedoms... and not a violent agent of oppressions that should be avoided?"

Mr. Malek Sghiri, moderator of the ESCWA e-seminar on "Participation and Democracy" (June-September 2012)

undertaken in selected member countries within the field of participatory democracy, civic engagement and consensus building. Advisory work aims to support and facilitate the involvement of civil society associations and youth groups in national dialogue processes through capacity-building initiatives on leadership skills, citizenship, communication and participatory mechanisms. It also supports decision makers involved in the transitional process.

ENDNOTES

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