

Arab Governance Week

November 26-29, 2012

Post-2015 Regional Consultation Session Report

Lasting for two-and-a-half hours, the Regional Consultation session was mostly attended by representatives of CSOs and UNDP offices in the Arab region, as well as a few representatives from government. This report provides an account of the discussion process – especially amongst participants of one group during the session – as well as the most salient topics that were raised.

Group Discussion Observations

In most of the discussion groups throughout the conference and particularly during the Regional Consultation Session, participants were influenced by their professional backgrounds and tackled the topics from the standpoint of their fields of specialization. This observation was especially noted during one of the group discussions during the Regional Consultation Session, which encompassed representatives from government, CSOs, and UNDP offices.

A major point of contention during the group discussion was the definition of democratic governance, its elements, and the difference between this concept and that of good governance. Whereas the latter has been tackled mostly from the point of view of service delivery, the notion of a "democratic" element needed to be hashed out in greater detail, as participants were divided over the following question: does good governance – with its indicators of participation, responsiveness, accountability, etc – encompass democratic principles or is there a need for a more comprehensive model that includes broader principles of democratic participation and accountability?

Another point of debate centered on the relation between good governance and social accountability. Group members were divided as to whether social accountability can be considered as one of the end goals of good governance practices or whether it is better conceived as one of the parameters for ensuring good governance.

Consensus, however, was not difficult to achieve, with most participants willing to look beyond their professional boundaries and embrace different points of view. In the end, therefore, the group participants agreed that a model of democratic governance is more all-encompassing and appropriate than that of good governance and service delivery, especially in light of the recent events of the Arab Spring. Moreover, consent was obtained on the value of social accountability as a mechanism to ensure governance practices.

As with all group forums, however, it was felt that participants required more time to deliberate on the discussion issues and to reconcile their professional perspectives. In particular, it was observed (during the Regional Consultation Session as well as other groups and discussions throughout the conference) that differences of opinion amongst the participants stemmed from their different interpretations of the basic concepts at hand, with government representatives concentrating on institutional and ministerial coordination, CSO representatives emphasizing the importance of human rights and social accountability, and media representatives calling for transparency and accuracy of information.

Topics of Discussion

The discussions that took place during the working groups and plenary session that followed centered on the following main topics which are detailed below:

The need for democratic governance

Participants defined the most pressing issues in the Arab region to be:

- Lack of a legal and institutional framework that allows for citizen participation in governance decision making and for accountability to the public
- Insufficient and limited institutional framework for good governance and human rights – existing institutions are not responsive and inefficient in address citizens' demands and needs
- Concentration on economic development more than on equity and justice to all segments of society
- Lack of democratic channels for conflict resolution
- Poor service delivery by government entities
- Weakness of CSOs
- Absence of gender sensitive outlook and approach in governance policies

Based on these priority issues, the Arab region is in need of a democratic governance model that not only tackles good governance (with respect to proper service delivery) but emphasizes citizen participation and accountability. A democratic governance model is all the more indispensable in light of the events of the Arab Spring. The elements of that model include:

- Efficiency and effectiveness
- Responsiveness and equality
- Accountability and anti-corruption
- Rule of law and respect for human rights
- Participation and consensus building

A major stumbling block in the Arab region is lack of understanding and consensus on the meaning of governance. Hence, the need for formulation of definitions and messages that can promote the support and acceptance of state actors and ensure political will and endorsement to democratic governance, an approach that is seen by the participants to be primordial given the state of political dissent and instability in the Arab region.

Governance should not be a separate goal but needs to be streamlined into the vision and outputs of other sustainable development goals. Arab states need to agree on a global goal for governance; national and sub-national indicators can be developed in accordance with the conditions of each state. That said, participants also stressed on the importance of defining regional mechanisms for governance, indicating that tools and indicators can be developed with time and experience.

Participants expressed concern over the lack of credibility of data in the Arab region, a factor that may undermine the success of governance measurement efforts. With political powers and interests at play, the international community needs to assess the credibility of data in order that post-2015 goals adequately reflect actual conditions in the Arab region. (This problem, they emphasized, was a shortcoming in the development of the MDGs).

Issues raised by participants during other sessions

- Most of the participants acknowledged the growing demand for and governance assessments and that measurement is feasible. The success of a GA hinges upon a) engaging with audiences who will use the findings and b) following up the process with action steps for reform. Greater effort should be provided to fine tuning governance indicators to render them feasible and applicable.
- The challenge for including governance in post 2015 is how to make it time bound and communicative. Governance notions are less understood to people when compared with standard MDG goals.
- Citizen journalism has been a cornerstone in information supply during the Arab Spring. But how reliable is it compared to professional media? This debate was a point of contention between participants with some calling for greater input of non-traditional media to counter state-controlled information while others doubting the professionalism and objectivity of citizen based information.

Social Accountability

While they recognized the importance of Social Accountability, the group participants debated whether it can be a comprehensive measurement mechanism for governance or whether it is only one of the indicators for assessing governance performance.

An important issue that needs to be addressed during the formulation of the post-2015 agenda is the need to reconcile between international decision making and citizens' rights and needs in the framework of an international social contract. It is imperative that post-2015 goals are responsive to the needs of the people and that their voices are heard. To achieve this, mechanisms should be in place to ensure freedom and accuracy of information, institutional frameworks that take into account citizen participation and combating corruption.

Social Accountability requires social commitment. While the importance of reform at the institutional level cannot be downgraded, social accountability approaches should also take into account the perception of citizens regarding this concept and their roles vis-à-vis family/peer/tribal definitions and circumstances. Simply put: what do citizens perceive their role to be in social accountability and what are the enabling/limiting factors from their social/cultural backgrounds?

Social Accountability mechanisms should take into account the heterogeneous nature of tribal societies, as well as the input of youth.

Issues raised by participants during other sessions

Most of the participants agreed that the term Social Accountability should be defined in accordance with the social and cultural context of the Arab region and in light of the Arab Spring events. Indicators for Social Accountability should also be developed, with some participants emphasizing the need for indicators to be formulated for the region as a whole and not only for individual states. Hand-in-hand with this approach is the need for a legislative framework that endorses social accountability measures and empowers its actors as well as awareness raising activities targeting decision makers, CSOs and the media.

Some presenters concentrated on the need to redefine civil society: as post-revolution events are showing, citizen movements are no longer confined to organized NGOs but include ad hoc formation of activists.

The importance of a human rights based approach

The group participants concurred on the centrality of dignity as a human rights goal. Highlighting its importance as a universal and not a culture specific concept, the participants agreed that a human rights approach should be the guiding mechanism in governance policies. Thus, for example, delivery of services such as health and education should be viewed as rights that achieve and secure the dignity of the Arab citizen. It is primordial that this understanding be integrated into national consciousness.

The main human rights issues highlighted by the group participants include adherence to international principles, eradicating discrimination (especially of women), guaranteeing citizen rights, participation, accountability, and the principle of "do no harm." Participants stressed on the importance of measuring outcomes rather than inputs such as the existence of

institutions, legal frameworks, etc. In other words, indicators should focus on the contribution of all these mechanisms to the promotion of citizens' rights and freedoms.

In particular, integrating rights into the international system should pay attention to:

- Inclusive participation
- International human rights standards and norms
- Accountability
- Discrimination ended
- Do not harm principle – i.e. do not replace one right by adding a new one

Issues raised by participants during other sessions

- Arab states should depend more and more on broader strategic planning that provides a framework for the safeguarding of human rights.
- One of the main challenges of the UPR is that grassroots organizations do not participate in its stages. A question raised by many participants was: How can we spread the notion of the importance of human rights as a necessity in everyday life? Safeguarding human rights does not only involve the establishment of a legal framework but it is a culture that has to be instilled. So far, this topic is mainly the concern of intellectuals. We need to promote political will, such that the UPR national report is discussed internally within the states and between state institutions and not just in Geneva. In addition, most CSOs do not possess adequate capacities to perform their role in social accountability. UPR reports should be simplified in order to reach the grassroots and reduce complicated terminology.
- There was almost unanimity amongst the participants on the need to develop mechanisms for the follow-up of UPR recommendations and ensure that they are implemented by the member state.
- Most participants concurred that there is an estrangement between CSOs and the media, with the former organizations inexperienced at providing simple and intriguing information and the latter distrusting CSOs as state proxies. Moreover, data generated by the two entities is sometimes contradictory.
- Most participants were united over the need for strong parliaments as well as independent judiciaries in the Arab world. These two changes, they emphasized, are crucial for implementing UPR recommendations.