

ARAB STATES

LOCAL AGENDA 21 IN THE ARAB STATES: ATTEMPTS AND CHALLENGES

The last decade has witnessed an upsurge in local environmental actions and initiatives in the Arab States. However a number of barriers mean that the extent to which these local actions have been institutionalised into national or city level planning has been limited.

Local environmental initiatives have boomed in the Arab region for various reasons. The momentum created by the Rio Summit on Sustainable Development in 1992 put environmental issues on the political agenda of many governments in the region. In addition, the interest of international organisations in environmental issues was reflected in the start up of various initiatives and experiences in the early 1990s in cities of the region - for example the Sustainable Cities Programme (SCP) of UN-Habitat and UNEP the Urban Management Programme (UMP) of Habitat, UNDP and the World Bank; Localizing Agenda 21 of UN-Habitat, and the LIFE programme of the EU and UNDP. The number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working on environmental issues and initiatives has also increased considerably in almost all Arab States. Adoption of Structural Adjustment Programmes, and the attached austerity measures, expanded the action space and tolerance for civil society and the private sector involved in local environmental action. Governments gradually encouraged non-public sector actors to contribute resources and exert efforts in improving local environmental conditions.

Such initiatives have helped to improve various elements of the physical environment and have also given rise to new more participatory and inclusive approaches in environmental planning and management. Most of them also achieved success in building capacity of their target beneficiaries, be they local authorities or communities. In many cases, such initiatives mobilised resources from national and international sources, and implemented projects that included positive aspects of gender equality, human development, and increased self reliance of local people. However, hardly any of these initiatives were able to achieve institutional sustainability or to influence the overall organisational modus operandi of environmental planning and management in their respective local governments or cities.

This striking problem can be attributed to the lack of national framework for decentralised environmental management in the Arab States. The deep seated tradition of centralised governance, means that

national governments maintain a tight grip on policy and institutional aspects of local governance. Procedural aspects of planning and management and the corresponding organisational set-ups are not easily changed at the local government level.

Another reason is the preoccupation of national governments with integration into the world economy and attracting direct foreign investment - to the exclusion of other objectives. Many governments still see a trade off between empowering local environmental actions and economic growth. The rising level of unemployment among educated youth in the region ranks job creation and investment equal to national security matters. In the same vein, promoting investment in cleaner production and green industries comes after more pressing priorities of access to adequate and safe water supply, sanitation, health services, housing and food security.

A third reason may be the eroded tradition of public action and civil society activism among citizens. Many leading NGOs in Arab States are linked directly to members of the ruling families, and civil society organisations without such political backing run the risk of being under-resourced, thereby limiting the scope of their activities. The bottom-up approaches of the majority of local environmental initiatives in the region could have been more successful in influencing national level changes had the overall political context of governance been more inclusive and enabling.

Experience suggests that local environmental actions require national level commitment to become sustainable and institutionalised. In this light, there are signs of hope in the region. Morocco's national decentralisation programme should contribute to more bottom up approaches, and Egypt is also about to pass a national decree that may strengthen the organisational status and competence of environmental management units at the local government level. The new NGO laws in Jordan and Yemen empower the legislature, as opposed to the concerned ministry, to annul violating organisations. These are good indicators for positive change towards more inclusive governance at the local government level in the Arab States. The 21st Century might witness further milestones towards institutionalised local environmental action and inclusive local governance in the region.



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