

Executive Summary:

“Mechanisms to Enhance the Role of Local Community and Civil Society Organizations in Contributing to the Formulation of Legislation and Public Policies”

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2025

Community participation in public policy-making and the preparation of legislation is one of the practices that reflects the concept of citizenship as stipulated in the Palestinian Basic Law and the Declaration of Independence. It serves as an important tool for enhancing the capacity of civil society organizations and citizens (taxpayers) to contribute effectively to the management of public life. This participation provides opportunities to improve transparency in public affairs management, strengthens community accountability, promotes inclusivity in the development of government programs to address citizens' needs, and enhances the state's financial efficiency.

Community participation aligns with the commitment of countries to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), outlined in *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. This agenda includes 17 international goals with 169 targets. Among these, SDG 16 is particularly significant as it focuses on developing effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. It emphasizes building institutions that are responsive, transparent, and inclusive. Governments, civil society, and local communities must collaborate to ensure inclusive participation at all times.

Palestinian civil society organizations have historically developed in a manner distinct from those in other societies. They emerged in the absence of a state, national independence, and formal citizenship. These organizations played a pivotal role in serving the Palestinian community and bolstering the resilience of citizens under Israeli occupation. Their activities primarily focused on providing services, relief efforts, and public initiatives to counter the occupation's policies of annexation and marginalization of the Palestinian community and economy. Despite their efforts, they faced numerous restrictions and obstacles imposed by the occupation.

Following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, some of these organizations integrated into the structures of the Authority, while others remained independent, operating outside the framework of official governance. They undertook new roles, such as monitoring the institutions of the Palestinian Authority, promoting professional, democratic, and pluralistic principles, and influencing various Palestinian policies—legislative, economic, and beyond. These organizations found themselves navigating complex relationships: on one hand, complementing or challenging the policies of the Palestinian Authority, and on the other, engaging in conflict and confrontation with the Israeli occupation.

The disruption of the democratic process, caused by political division and the cessation of the Palestinian Legislative Council's work in 2007, followed by its dissolution at the end of 2018, has significantly impacted governance in Palestine. As a result, the Palestinian government has been solely responsible for developing general policies and plans, issuing legislation, and managing the country. This process, however, has often occurred without effective community participation, leading to protests from civil society organizations. In response, the Palestinian Authority has, at times, retracted or repeatedly amended certain legislations, highlighting weaknesses in some legislative texts.

These setbacks underscore the importance of strengthening partnerships with civil society organizations and increasing their contributions to the legislative process, the preparation of general plans, and the formulation of public policies. Such partnerships can assist Palestinian decision-makers in effectively engaging with different sectors of society and making well-informed decisions that ensure integration and collaboration. This approach aims to improve the responsiveness of legislation and public policies to the needs and priorities of various segments of Palestinian society, while enhancing community oversight and accountability in the enactment of laws, legislation, and policies.

To achieve this, it is essential to develop robust methods and approaches for fostering partnerships between the government (public authorities) and civil society organizations. This collaboration should contribute to the production of public policies and legislation that prioritize the public good, safeguard the rights of marginalized communities, and actively involve citizens in the decision-making process.

This paper aims to explore mechanisms to enhance the role of the local community and civil society organizations in contributing to the formulation of legislation and public policies. It highlights the importance of their participation in developing public policies, identifies areas of strength and weakness in their involvement, and proposes mechanisms and recommendations to deepen the impact and role of these organizations in driving legislative and policy changes. Furthermore, it seeks to create an environment that fosters and supports partnerships between the local community, civil society organizations, and government institutions.

The behavior of the 19th government reflects some improvement in consultations on policy formulation and legislative preparation. However, despite the Prime Minister and many ministers emphasizing the importance of partnership with civil society organizations through extensive meetings held between the government, its ministers, and civil society institutions, a clear and consistent approach has been lacking. Over the course of the first eight months, the government did not adopt a formal policy for partnership with civil society organizations, nor did it define the nature and mechanisms of such a partnership through a guiding document.

A "White Paper" that regulates the relationship between the government and civil society organizations could outline methods for contributing to policy formulation, discussing essential draft laws, and establishing rules for social accountability. Such a document would also require the government to explain its actions and ensure that policies align with citizens' needs. Civil society organizations could then be recognized as valuable sources of expertise in their respective fields, as channels of communication with various societal groups, and, at times, as tools to assist the government in providing services to marginalized areas and regions where government services are limited.

At the end of its term, the 18th government concluded the necessity of establishing an institutional process for consultation with civil society institutions. According to the agenda for reform issued by the Council of Ministers on April 15, 2022, this process involves "establishing a

sustainable framework for dialogue with civil society institutions.” Such a framework would allow for updating laws related to their work and require each government department to maintain dialogue with representatives of the sector it oversees.

The success of any government depends on effective communication and community engagement. These elements are essential for clarifying the government's image to citizens while also enabling the government to identify sources of failure and pillars of success. Furthermore, they enhance the government's ability to connect with citizens, respond to their needs, understand their perceptions, and address their concerns. Additionally, communication and engagement stimulate various sectors to foster community partnerships.

The government needs to develop and adopt a partnership policy with civil society organizations by formulating a "White Paper." This document would outline the government's approach to cooperation and partnership, define coordination mechanisms and institutional frameworks for building public policies and discussing legislation, and establish pathways for public oversight and societal accountability regarding the government's performance and areas of work.

Various mechanisms and models for partnership between the government and civil society organizations is also presented. All of these are feasible for activating this partnership in the Palestinian context, pending a decision from the government with the political will to embrace partnership, rather than competition, in serving citizens and improving the management of the political system. At the same time, the government must be prepared to bear the burdens resulting from the difficulties and challenges facing society, the political system, and state institutions.