

## **Initiative on Good Governance for Development (G/D) in the Arab Countries:**

### **Theme 6: Citizens, Civil Society and Public Sector Reform in the Arab Region<sup>1</sup>**

It is now firmly established in the mind-set of many Arab countries that the civil society and the media can be strategic partners in the process of reform. The recent increase in activities conducted by the civil society in a number of Arab countries to safeguard human rights, uphold democratic principles and monitor public policies and government activities is a testimony to the changes that are taking hold in Arab societies. Recently enacted legislations in some countries have given the civil society recognized rights to assemble, to mobilize resources and express themselves within the boundaries of the law. Some have been strong in defending the rights of women and have been successful in resolving problems of citizenship and civil rights for women. A budding process of consultation between governments and civil society organizations augur well for the future and can be a foundation on which an effective public-private partnership can be established. Reform of governance is the responsibility of all the society and cannot be exclusively expected to succeed if it all depends on government policies and actions.

This is true of the media. While the degree of freedom given to the media varies from one Arab country to another, the influence and presence of the government is still paramount. Recent years have witnessed the establishment of free media organizations and political parties enjoy more rights, in some countries more than in others, to question government policies and clamour for accountability. Political parties have their own newspapers and express party views in political, economic and social affairs. The media has successfully uncovered pockets of corruption and exposed corrupt practices through investigative reporting and governments, in many cases, have pursued the corrupt.

Still more needs to be done before the civil society and media organizations could play an effective role in enhancing the reform of public institutions and the apparatus of governance. These organizations recognize that the freedom given to them is still limited and that their own capacity to play the cherished role is equally wanting. Though advanced information technology is offering them new opportunities for access to information and the open skies have made of the world significantly interconnected, their human resources need to be strengthened with new knowledge and skills to meet the challenges of the role the society expects of them. They can build on their newly acquired freedom if they develop their institutional capacity and build strong alliances with government, the private sector and the society at large.

### **Proposed Strategic Policy Issues:**

#### **Civil Society Organizations**

- Institutional capacity development and building strategic partnerships with political parties, State institutions and the public at large.
- Building alliances with the private sector and interested communities and other organizations with similar goals and objectives to reinforce communication with government and gain more recognition through the provision of constructive advice and sharing of experience.
- Playing a bridge role between the society and the government with the particular objective of becoming free popular representatives of the community.
- Mobilizing resources, both human and financial. Carefully selecting the sources from which contributions may be solicited, with due respect to current laws to avoid conflicts with the authorities.
- Developing the capacity of human resources and ensuring high quality of services to the community and setting high standards of integrity with a view to building and maintaining credibility.

**Sample of Possible Questions for Discussion:**

- What are the feasible approaches for building alliances with the private sector and State institutions without jeopardizing the organization's stated mission and objectives?
- How do organizations choose their strategic allies and what sort of coalitions may be built in the framework of the organizations goals and services to be provided to the community?
- How does an organization build its credibility and gain respect as a possible partner in the reform process?
- How does an organization balance its desire to play an effective role as a partner in the reform process within its resource limitations?
- How does an organization balance its cherished independence with contribution offers that may influence its decisions and differently shape its role in the community?
- Should an organization play a reactive or a proactive role in the community? Should it advocate multiple issues or should it specialize in a specific area? Would it be more effective if it specializes in conducting research on issues of interest to a specific community or to the State and disseminate its results as a way of contributing to the reform process?

- Should an organization build coalitions around specific issues with similar organizations, or would it be best if it responds to political and social changes and possibly shift paradigms?

### **Media Organizations:**

Increasing professional capacity to enable the media organization to resist political pressure and to persuade authorities, especially if the organization is publicly owned, to listen to the professionals and follow their advice.

Strengthening the capacity for investigative reporting to play the important role of monitoring shifts and trends in the society and share the views of the public with the authorities.

Upholding professional integrity and objectivity in uncovering cases of corrupt practices and as a way of contributing to the reform process.

Balancing professional independence with the pressures of authorities and the public demands for information, participation and objectivity.

Balancing the need for introducing advanced information technology and other technological advances in equipment and methods of work with available limited resources and current laws on fund raising for media organizations.

Benefiting from the large opportunities of open skies and rapid flow of information to strengthen advocacy, inform the public of successful reform experiences and motivate the authorities to remove obstacles that may impede the implementing of reforms.

### **Sample of possible questions for discussion:**

In the case of publicly or privately owned organizations, how does the organization balance professional freedom and objectivity with the pressures of authorities or the owners?

How does an organization acquire and maintain credibility when possible pressures do not allow a high degree of transparency and objective reporting?

How does a media organization maintain its identity and its flagship products and services in a rapidly changing environment?

How does a media organization become an effective platform for public debate and participation to support the reform process?

How does investigative reporting be an effective instrument to support reform in many areas?

How to play a catalytic role in the reform process and monitor and report on policy impact through evaluative reporting?

How to be in the vanguard of political and social changes through futuristic analysis based on the evaluation of current situations?

How to ensure continuity of organizational existence through resisting forced alliances brought about by a changing political environment?

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<sup>1</sup> *This Framework for Policy Dialogue* includes priority issues gleaned from international experience. This is not an exclusive listing of issues; countries may change or add their own priority issues. The purpose is to serve as a reference point, a guide for policy discussion. Working Groups in Arab countries may find them useful as they embark on the implementation of activities related to the six themes of the G/D Programme. The “Regulatory Reform” has been moved to theme 4 based on a decision taken by the Steering Committee in its first meeting in Madrid in April 2005.