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[Our Policy](#)

[Home](#)

[Main News](#)

[Editorials/Op-Ed](#)

[Magazines](#)

[Back Issues](#)

News

- [International](#)
- [National](#)
- [Lahore](#)
- [Islamabad](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Leisure](#)

Business

- [Market](#)
- [Corporate](#)

ShowBiz

- [Fashion & Film](#)

Comments

- [Editorials/Op-Ed](#)
- [Today's Cartoon](#)

Press Gallery



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Decentralisation in Palestine

Yossef Ben-Meir

Decentralisation has divergent meanings and serves different ideological interests. Generally, however, it seeks greater representation in development initiatives from the popular majority, the local poor, and from political, religious, ethnic, and tribal groups. The purpose of decentralising initiatives is to more effectively satisfy local needs (in poverty alleviation, education, health, environment, etc.) while utilising local resources, such as community labour and the latent capabilities of people. To be successful, then, decentralising programmes build administrative capabilities of local government and private groups, including their capacities to plan development, resolve conflicts, and manage financial and other resources.

In the process, a certain amount of autonomy from political and economic national centres and from global dynamics is created. This is not to suggest that national governments no longer retain important roles to play. National governments retain responsibility for macroeconomic and foreign policies, the national judiciary, and in other vital areas. However, a clear aim of decentralisation is greater self-sufficiency at the micro-regional level, which allows greater flexibility, speed, and efficiency in dealing with matters of development.

Local communities have a stake in maintaining decentralised systems because they are more responsive to them, sensitive to their interests, and equitable in the distribution of resources. Central governments benefit by creating overall targets and inter-regional balance and competition that can foster performance, affecting remote areas far from the national capital, and increasing political stability, national



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unity, and their own legitimacy. Both local community and national self-reliance is therefore strengthened through decentralisation.

The idea of decentralisation is not new. The 1960s and 1970s marks when many countries began decentralisation efforts. There was a shift back to central control by the 1980s, after the oil shocks of the 1970s. In recent years, decentralisation and local participation in development are again in favour.

The paralysing socio-economic conditions facing the Palestinian people suggest prime opportunities for this type of engagement. Eighty-five percent of the people in Gaza depend on humanitarian aid to survive, and per capita income is less than half of what it was in the late 1990s. The Palestinian economic structure is dependent on Israel's: approximately 80 percent (some figures are as high as 90 percent) of all imports to the West Bank and Gaza are from Israel, and more than 90 percent of all exports go to Israel. Palestinian economic dependency on Israel, certainly among the most extreme cases of international dependency in the world, makes their relations bitter and volatile, and perpetuates the severe underdevelopment of the Palestinian people. Relief and opportunities for livelihoods are what the Palestinians need immediately, to be achieved in a manner that instills self-reliance, restructures the economy, decreases its vulnerabilities to external influences, and enhances regional stability.

Perhaps the ultimate justification of decentralised development programmes is found in cases from around the world of projects that further economic development (employment, production, local ownership, rates of growth, and profit) and provide social benefits (education, health, social cohesion, including intergenerational, and dignity). Through community involvement, projects are more quickly implemented for immediate relief than typical development interventions, with small and dispersed costs and shared risk. The efficiency of delivery of goods and services are also increased, and, very importantly, the economic base becomes more diversified which discourages dependency.

The devastating socio-economic reality of the



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Palestinians have unwittingly created one favourable situation that enables the broad implementation of decentralisation: non-government organisations have become very strong and have taken on the role of service providers in the absence of an active government. There are local and multilateral agencies in the occupied territories, such as the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee and the UNDP respectively, who create positive examples of decentralised managed projects. There is a plethora of indigenous development associations (many of whom are Islamic) to potentially partner with and transfer the necessary skills to catalyse and organise community planning meetings, and help implement the projects local Palestinian people determine together. Thousands of Palestinian men and women from all walks of life, beginning with those who already interface with local communities, can be trained in organising and facilitating the necessary community meetings where local people determine their development goals and implement projects to achieve them. An average of two facilitators per rural village or a neighbourhood of a several hundred people is a productive ratio. The Near East Foundation's Centre for Development Services located in Cairo offers a fine model of an institution that provides development training and materials to support decentralised community initiatives.

A funding level for training and projects at \$ 500 million over three years (an amount certainly possible considering that the international community recently pledged more than \$ 7 billion to aid the Palestinian people over the same period) should enable half of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (a population of approximately 3.5 million people) to be significantly socio-economically impacted. The Quartet partners, which include the US, Russia, the European Union (EU), and the UN, under whose auspices the aid was pledged, ought to strongly encourage the leadership of the Palestinians and Israelis (who mediate the delivery and use of foreign aid) to support the implementation of decentralised development in the occupied territories. A collective bottom-up mobilisation of this scale would give rise to explicit democratic political activism, and redefine local to national political equations of power that will increase institutional responsiveness to the public and decrease corruption.

Fortunately, the broad-scale implementation of decentralisation does not have to wait for a final status agreement with Israel. Of course, under occupation and harsh internal conditions make it highly difficult at best to have community meetings with full participation. However, international development experts, Michael Edwards and David Hulme, reflecting on decentralised development state that even under the most authoritarian conditions, "There are opportunities for progressive change." When the decentralisation process gains momentum in the Palestinian areas, it could assist the political process with Israel, in part because of the less intense climate it would create.

This development approach could be an area where common ground may be possible between some Western countries and Hamas, since the majority of Hamas' activities have historically been in providing community services. Sooner or later, in one form or another, the US and others are going to have to deal directly with Hamas, and working with them in decentralised democratic development in Gaza could affect Hamas' current political positions that are untenable with peaceful coexistence with Israel. Indeed, Jeroen Gunning at the University of Wales noted that change is possible in core areas of Hamas' ideology. The Quartet should make every effort to test whether engagement with Hamas on the terms of decentralised development leads to moderation.

The writer is president of the High Atlas Foundation, a non-profit organisation founded by former Peace Corps volunteers and dedicated to community development in Morocco. This article is part of an essay entitled, 'National Sovereignty through Decentralisation: A Community-Level Approach to Conflict Management in Iraq and the Occupied Palestinian Territories', that will be published in the International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy

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