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Social Cohesion in the Arab Region

**Regional Consultations on Promoting Social Cohesion in the
Arab Region**

22-23 June 2014, Amman, *Jordan*

Notes from the Meeting

I. Introduction

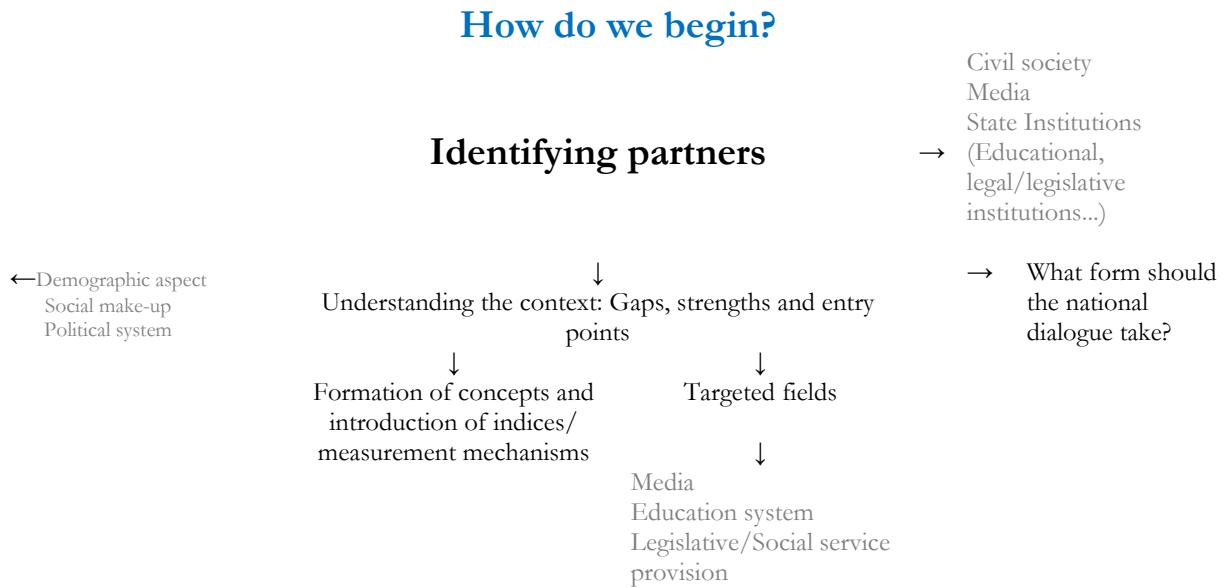
On the 22nd and 23rd of June, The UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS) organized a “Regional Consultations for the Promotion of Social Cohesion in the Arab Region.” The consultation was a first of its kind on the topic in the region, and invited representatives of Arab governments, academics, researchers and activists from 16 Arab countries to help identify challenges, fields of work and potential partners for the social cohesion program the UNDP seeks to develop. Participants agreed on the need to address the increasing social, communal and sectarian fragmentation of Arab societies, targeting social cohesion and its interconnected dimensions.

The consultations took place over six sessions and focused on the following cross-cutting topics:

- Developing functional and local concepts towards clarifying and promoting social cohesion in the region
- Understanding local contexts of belonging, identity and diversity in the region
- The role of legal environments, including constitutions, legislations and the cost of legislations in shaping/ eroding social cohesion
- The impact of political regimes and political cultures on social cohesion, taking into consideration the historical dimension of transformations from nation-states into countries of citizenship, and the political employment of religion

In the closing session, the organisers once again posed the “How do we begin?” question over the participants, in an attempt to agree on a course of action (summarised in TABLE 1) that the UNDP can launch, and further develop depending on future consultations.

TABLE 1



II. Consultation Sessions

The regional consultations took place over six discussion sessions. Below is a summary of the ideas and suggestions put forth by the respective participants:

II.1) Session (1): Understanding Social Cohesion and its Meaning for the Arab region: an Overview of Approaches and Challenges

○ Ayman Al-Sayyad, Journalist, Egypt

- Al-Sayyad argued that the recent events in Iraq reveal the illnesses of the Arab world. These illnesses could be divided into three problems: (1) bringing religion, which is sacred and absolute, into the political arena, which is relative, (2) the generation gap, not in terms of age difference, but in terms of values and thoughts, with a younger Arab generation alienated by an sceptical of “centralized authority,” (3) the question of identity and belonging, to nation, clan, and religious sect.
- Al-Sayyad argued that it is necessary to discuss the “new definitions of identity” and the new elements of belonging. Identity, he argued, is going to be the first intellectual issue over the coming years given the rising number of conflicts, and polarisation. In this vein, he further highlighted that the relationship between authoritarianism and conflicts needs to be considered.

○ Ibrahim Sharqieh, Deputy Director of the Brookings Institute in Doha, Qatar

- Sharqieh discussed the different types of social cohesion highlight the following two: voluntary and compulsory cohesion. The first, he argued, is built on the principle of equal partnership in a social contract in the presence of a state that exercises its functions. Failure of states to exercise their functions, and the absence of equality in opportunities and access to services, he argued, are the two main risks that corrode voluntary social cohesion.
- Sharqieh further discussed the reasons that lead to social cohesion and argued that “the existence of a national goal upon which the members of the community agree” is a founding factor for national dialogue.

- **Hibaaq Othman, Founder and Chief Executive of Karama**

- Othman emphasised the importance of understanding social cohesion as a process rather than a moment in time. She highlighted the importance of linking social cohesion to peace building processes, within states whose institutions carry out their functions, both accountably and transparently. Social cohesion, she argued, is a daily practice, the effect of its absence on the daily lives of individuals must be studied, and youth and women should be assigned roles in social cohesion promotion processes.

- **Zaki Mahshi, Researcher at the Syrian Centre for Policy Research, Syria**

- Mahshi underlined that social cohesion is interrelated to, and should not be isolated from the mechanisms and policies of comprehensive development. He also highlighted that social cohesion is a continuous historical process that aims at transforming the population from a state of “diverse groups in conflict” into a community built on participation, justice and equal opportunities. Mahshi summarised factors that lead to social cohesion into two groups: internal subjective factors, and external factors under the respective political regimes that could either counter or enhance polarization through its management of resources and cultural diversity.
- Mahshi further highlighted that social cohesion in the Arab region relates to the history of colonialism and the way the maps were drawn by colonial powers.

In the discussion, participants emphasised the following:

- How can social cohesion be built in the absence of social peace?
- States built on participation and citizenship state are the way to enhance social cohesion
- Hijacking political space by regimes disrupts citizenship building and the social contract
- Security as a political project does not achieve social cohesion but rather exacerbates clashes.

II.2) **Session (2): The Law and Institutions as Instruments for Social Cohesion: National Experiences**

○ **Elobaid Ahmed Elobaid, Head of the United Nations Human Rights Training and Documentation Centre, OHCHR**

- Elobaid discussed the need for minimum inalienable rights, and the use of religion for a source of legitimacy and state management in some Arab countries in light of their institutional weaknesses and patriarchal abuse of resources. In addition, he emphasised the rise in loyalties towards individual, which leads to further social divisions.
- Elobaid also raised the issue of the sanctity of certain topic such as religion, leaders, and threats to national unity. The latter, he emphasised, is commonly related to majority rule, where minority demands are often seen as a threat to national unity. He further underlined that legislations are ineffective, in the absence of principles of citizenship, equality, and freedom of religion. Equality amongst religious creeds, he argued, is indispensable for social cohesion, especially in the Levant.

○ **Ezzedine Alasbahi, President of the Human Rights Information and Training Center (HRITC), Yemen**

- Alasbahi argued that the current fragmentation and confusion in the political scene is the result of a lack of a bigger political meaning or project. Arab countries have failed in state formation and in national projects, due to the decline in supporting ideological speech. Absence of national projects and state building led to divisions (both sectarian and territorial), and a political speech that is based on fragmentation and sect. Arab countries failed at managing diversity and pluralism, which can only be managed through participation, equal citizenship, and human rights. Respecting diversity and human rights, he emphasized, are the only gateways towards social cohesion.
- He warned against the danger of delegitimizing the legal institutions (parliaments, elections even if pro forma elections... etc), especially since some of these institutions have been practicing their mandate in an illegal manner since their term expired. He highlighted the importance of national dialogue, which he considers the most important issue in Yemen. State building is based on accepting the other, and this needs to be continued by building elected legislative authorities.

○ **Nizar Saghieh, Legal Agenda, Lebanon**

- Saghieh argued that, while concepts of citizenship and equality were present in post Arab uprising discourse, they faced three challenges: freedom of belief, ideology, and the role of Shari'a. On equality, Saghieh warned of the dangers of replacing equality between individuals with equality between sects. He stressed

out the importance of creating new discourse and respecting the rights of dignity of citizen, through the media and the judiciary. He proposed trainings for judges, providing them with protection against reprisal, and legal mechanisms such as affirmative action. He emphasised that law is a broad concept and that Arab countries need genuine apolitical legislative reforms.

II.3) **Session (3): Understanding the Role of Social Fabric and Trust in Social Cohesion**

○ **Musa Shteivi, Director of the Centre for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan**

- Shteivi identified two levels of trust: trust in neighbours, family and religion, and trust in religious institutions and courts. On the communal level, lack of trust is often the result of fear of or ignorance about others in the community. On the institutional level, lack of trust is often due to lack of trust in security institutions and elected bodies, which largely affects the social fabric. Lack of trust in institutions leads to disrespect of law and legal processes, which exacerbates community violence.
- Shteivi noted the importance of education and investigating whether the current extremism and polarisation is sudden. He criticised the absence of policies that work towards human development and social integration, and warned that the lack of equality forces individuals into traditional cleavages, for example the rise of family associations in the early 1990s as a reaction to economic and political shifts.

○ **Seth D. Kaplan, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University, USA**

- Kaplan discussed the history of state formation in Arab countries. He emphasised the importance of studying the conditions under which these states were built, as well as to agree on a clear definition of social cohesion, as it differs according to region. For example, in the West, definition of social cohesion is based on notions of equality in distribution of public services, while, in East Asia, the concept is based on national unity and the state building ideology.
- Kaplan asked how to build countries that are capable of negotiating ethnic and religious divisions. He discussed the concept of ‘social covenant,’ which is the incubator through which communities can determine a shared understandings and reference points. These would shape the parameters for forging a social contract. In the time being, groups might enjoy internal cohesion amongst its members, while they lack trust with other community groupings. The only way to bridge this gap, he argues, is through institution building.
- Finally, Kaplan’s suggestion to the UNDP is to develop tools to measure and monitor the changes in social cohesion, as, in the absence of such indices, the concept remains vague.

○ **Azza Karam, Senior Advisor on Culture, UNFPA, New York**

- Karam insisted on the importance of evaluating social cohesion through a global framework, noting that fragmentation in social cohesion is a global phenomenon caused by lack of trust in traditional political processes. Institutions, she argued, currently suffer from an existential crisis, which elevates fear within communities. Karam further indicated the importance of recognising the positive roles religions sometimes play towards social cohesion and strengthening communities.
 - **Fadia Kiwan, Professor, University of Saint Joseph (USJ), Beirut, Lebanon**
- Kiwan addressed the fragility of social cohesion. She argued that, while many Arab countries are artificial, this is not always due to external pressures, and, indeed, is sometimes due to internal political wills. She discussed the geographical aspect that sometimes sect and economic gap, factors that may lead to vertical social cleavages. She argued that the problem lies in the dominance of two political models within the region: (1) a liberal model that has led to the monopolisation of power (2) a socialist national authoritarian model based on the legacy of Arab nationalism that prioritised nation over individuals. She argued that Arab societies need an Arab national discourse that guarantees individuals freedoms, as well as political and civil rights.
- Kiwan called for learning from the experiences of Latin American countries to learn about the mechanisms that could be used towards social cohesion, such as the establishment of electoral policies that would better promote citizenry political participation.

II.4) **Session (4): Social Cohesion Programming: Moving from Theory to Practice on Realising Equal Citizenship**

- **Haidar Saeed, Advisor, Iraqi Institute for Strategic Studies and the Media Academy of Iraq**
- Saeed focused on the concept citizenship. He argued that ‘citizenship’ is often discussed in Arab countries as a “magic solution,” while one of the main elements of citizenship is political participation. He argued that there have been two models for state building in the last 100 years: the national and the pluralist-quota model, especially in countries with high diversity such as Iraq. He argued that current state building projects collapsed because they failed to match ethnic identities with the political identities of the respective countries. He emphasised that constitutions are fundamental for achieving equality amongst citizens, and mentioned the 2005 Iraqi constitution as an example where majority absolutism challenged the pluralistic model. More recently, the mutual veto right was discarded, and the Iraqi regime moved first to a power-sharing model that follows an informal political mechanism practiced and agreed upon by both state institutions and political players in a manner that guarantees partnership, to a model that merely distributes state resources across different divisions.

- Saeed further emphasised the need for flexible consensus to keep pace with demographic changes, and highlighted the role of political regimes and processes in trust building.
 - **Abdel Nasser Djabi, Researcher/Professor of Sociology, University of Algiers**
- Djabi emphasised the importance of achieving social cohesion in a way that expresses “our cultural particularities,” and underlined the importance of demographic data in any stocktaking research of social cohesion in the region. However, countries are often reluctant to gather and/ or share such demographic data. According to Djabi, some of the urban populations that reside in Arab cities maintain a rural/ country culture, which is why urban environments are often distorted, and which is an issue that must be dealt with carefully. Djabi also highlighted that Arab society is a “young society,” which underlines the need to focus on both families and schools, which have an important influence on the young. In some cases, families could have a negative impact on social cohesion, unlike schools, and vice-versa. Djabi underlines the importance of identifying the social institutions that influence social cohesion, which requires identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each society. He noted the importance of studying the power of media as a tool for creating social cohesion, as well as its power to fragment societies through campaigns that are neither ethical nor professional.
 - **Alaa Shalabi, Secretary-General, the Arab Organisation for Human Rights, Egypt**
- Shalabi argued that social rivalry does not necessarily reflect the existence of social differences between groups per se, but rather the targeted political mobilization of those cleavages. He emphasised the importance of human rights as the foundation for genuine citizenship, beyond their mere mention in constitutions and laws. On the contrary, he argued, constitutions are used as the basis for unjust political legislations. As a result, Shalabi emphasised the importance of inalienable basic rights, which are freedom of expression, the freedom of assembly, and the creation of trade unions, parties, and forming groups. In addition to launching support programs that offer technical assistance to judges, Shalabi argued that achieving equal citizenship also requires looking into development mechanisms currently employed in the region as well as data on social justice. So far, he argued, experience shows that the elite cannot agree on a social justice agenda, and he emphasised the need for integrating human rights into development approaches.
 - **Hannes Siebert, Chief Technical Advisor at the Common Space Initiative for Shared Knowledge and Consensus Building, Lebanon**
- Siebert discussed the political and social developments that led to the necessity of reevaluating the concept of nation states, representative democracies, majority

rule, the role of religion in politics, and the possibility of creating secular governments. One major challenge communities face, he argued, is reconciliation between individual and group rights. He stressed the difficulty of relying on theory in analysing current situations, and the need to study practices in order to draw lessons on the instruments of change. Among those instruments, Siebert highlighted the importance of national dialogue, which has seen broader applications lately. National dialogues need to remain open, and will be determined based on the cultural context of each country. To that end, there is a need for parallel knowledge creation to cultivate the necessary environment for the advancement of those dialogues, which are, by definition, outside the constitution's framework, and which include groups and opinions that are not necessarily represented in the respective constitutions' parameters. At the end, Siebert posed a number of questions, inviting the audience for discussion. Some of these questions were: what are the standards for determining which civil society associations to be represented in the national dialogue? Who defines the framework for the national agenda?

- **The debate**

The participants' questions and inputs focused on:

- The role of local institutions in strengthening social cohesion
- The role of civil society in enhancing the constitution
- Certain sectarian problems reflect structural problems, and not necessarily identity-related problems
- The necessity of separating equal individual rights from equal citizenship, as the latter tends to reflect rights of (social/ethnic/religious) groups rather than individuals.
- The Federal system and the role of the administrative decentralisation
- How is social cohesion enhanced in the absence of the state or its institutions?

II.5) **Session (5): Identifying Entry Points for Institutional Transformation and Successful Experiences in Building Capacities.**

- **Ali Sawi, Political Science Professor – Cairo University**

- Sawi inquired whether social cohesion is a feeling or behaviour, and argued that it is closely linked to the capacity to co-exist and manage resources. In order to determine successful experiences, Sawi inquired about the "meaning of institutions in our daily life." He argued that security and parliamentary institutions are the main gateways for enhancing social cohesion, but that the security institutions in some countries like Egypt have proved to be strong and at equal distance from all groups, unlike the parliament, which naturally could be biased towards one group over another, depending on the political dominance of parties. Sawi further argued that training parliamentarians is a

major entry point for moving beyond representative democracy towards more interactive democracies.

○ **Zena Ali Ahmad, Country Director, UNDP, Jordan**

Ali Ahmad argued that the secular civil state, which does not differentiate between citizens and prepares a new social contract, is the only way to promote social cohesion, fight exclusion, and establish legitimacy. Ali Ahmad presented eight programme suggestions:

- Studying the crisis of identity to reach a common identity
- Launching workshops to re-evaluate legal frameworks
- Promoting the rule of the law
- Supporting the role of local governments through administrative decentralisation
- Reforming educational curricula
- Studying the role of media
- Cooperating with religious institutions
- Designing work plans with civil society

○ **Patrice Brodeur, Director of Research, The King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID)**

Brodeur began his discussion by stating that there is no agreed upon definition of religion. Religious institutions, he followed, have a role on both vertical and horizontal levels, but their role have suffered after the spread social media, which has created a parallel space. He argued that Christian-Muslim dialogue channels must be activated, and that educational curricula must be re-assessed by using a global network that brings together ministers of education from across the region, as well as through training programmes for religions leaders.

○ **Jonathan Murphy, Chief Technical Advisor, Constitutional, Parliamentary, National Development at UNDP, Tunisia**

In his intervention, Murphy emphasised the role of the constitution drafting process on promoting social cohesion, bringing forth the Tunisian example, and how Tunisians were able to unite to draft a new constitution. Murphy further addressed the role of parliaments as official channels for fostering public discourse and communication, and noted how the new Tunisian constitution entrusted the opposition in the parliament with a major role, as it heads the financial committee. He further argues that the Tunisian revolution led to the creation of a new culture of administrative decentralisation, which helps counter political marginalisation, but has not yet helped to counter economic marginalization. One of the main reasons for the success of the Tunisian experience, he argued, is the stability of the public sector, and the contribution of civil society in political processes.

- **The debate**

The participants' questions and interventions focused on:

- The importance of measuring the degree of citizens satisfaction with services
- Determining what civil society is, since the concept is ambiguous.
- Religion is one of the basic components to preserve social cohesion.
- Councils/ committees for engaging women or municipalities.
- How to translate the role of youth in a practical way.

II.6) **Session (6): Enhancing Social Cohesion through Building Trust and Strengthening the Social Fabric in the Arab Communities**

- **Farida Labidi, Chair, Rights and Liberties Constitutional Commission, National Constituent Assembly, Tunisia**

Based on the Tunisian experience, Farida Labidi talked the tools that could be created to build a socially cohesive and diversified system, which include:

- Mechanisms for the settlement of conflicts, disputes and breaches of agreements
- Legislating an election law that represents all parties
- The creation of a committee to monitor the drafting of the new Constitution
- Building a comprehensive national dialogue that lays the foundation for a participatory political system

- **El Habib Belkouch, President, Centre for the Study of Human Rights and Democracy, Morocco**

In his intervention, Belkouch focused on the last Moroccan experience, and on the importance of creating new spaces to reach the consensus. He pointed out the necessity of addressing cultural and linguistic diversity in the region, such as the Tamazight language in Morocco. Belkouch also indicated the necessity of looking into the roots of conflicts.

- **Fanie du Toit, Executive Director, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Cape Town, South Africa**

Du Toit focused on the importance of national reconciliation, particularly in conflict-ridden countries, before thinking about social cohesion, and emphasised the role of leaderships in achieving national reconciliation. In the South African experience, businessmen had an important role in influencing politicians. Du Toit also pointed out that political transition is most of the times extended; in the case of South Africa, it went on for almost ten years, and cannot be rushed. Du Toit also called for the creation of methods for measuring opinions in society concerning social cohesion and national reconciliation, such as measuring levels of trust in democratic institutions. Based on the experience of South Africa, she considered

the education sector to have an important role since it influences the young generations.

- **Alice Nderitu, Former Commissioner at the National Cohesion and Integration Commission, Kenya**

Nderitu argued that building what she described as a ‘negotiated democracy’ begins with a deep analysis of history and the colonial experience, which shapes the cultural and religious dimensions of the current political system. Commissions, including the social cohesion commission played an important role in Kenya in reducing violence during the elections. The private sector also played a role against the violence as it was incurring major economic losses. In addition to long term programmes (such as the educational curricula), Nderitu mentioned some of the active programmes in Kenya, including the training of 4200 journalists on how to cover the news related to social cohesion

- **The debate**

The ideas that were suggested:

Social cohesion does not mean the lack of differences. On the contrary, it is co-existence, in spite of differences, and can be achieved through the following:

1. Limiting tyranny through constitutional provisions of checks and balances that prevent political parties, groups, and authorities from gaining absolute powers
2. On-going negotiations and dialogue processes to facilitate finding common grounds between the different political forces.
3. Political will, at the state and party levels and that include the opposition, towards consensus building and social cohesion
4. Political reconciliation and policies that help reduce conflict between the different political forces.
5. Prioritizing the future, over settling past disputes, in constitutions and legal texts
6. Establishing measuring mechanisms to follow public opinion, and the way it perceives reconciliation barometers, in order to increase the capacity of states and community forces to recognise problems early before they pose imminent danger to social cohesion—an experience South Africa went through recently.
7. Educational initiatives that ingrain the principles of equality and justice in students at a young age, and which require teacher trainings and curriculum reforms.
8. States ensuring economic growth that encompasses all society and does not favour one group over the other
9. Engaging the private sector in social cohesion initiatives, and persuading them that it is in their direct interest, as it leads more stable environments for trade and investment.
10. Trainings, by media institutions and civil society, of journalists and media personnel, on covering topics that relate to social cohesion in order to avoid incorrect practices that would lead to further damages in social fabrics.

11. Organising awareness sessions with governments and international organisations, for youth on the topic of social cohesion and its importance for development and stability.
12. Capacity building to ensure the development of human capacities that would realise and marinating the right social cohesion policies.
13. Considering the religion factor, and ensuring dialogue between clergymen and urging them to promote ideas of tolerance and mutual respect, which are at the core of all religious teachings.
14. Promoting the concept of citizenship as a pillar of social cohesion, being one of the most expressive constitutional principles of the concept.
15. Exchanging experiences between states to share best practice, and learn from past mistakes.