

Anchoring democratic participation at the local level in a transitioning country

NIRAS is supporting the establishment of community dialogue mechanisms, while building the capacity of local officials and empowering civil society initiatives in the most destitute regions of Tunisia

#5
Gender
equality

#10
Reduced
inequalities

#16
Peace, justice
and strong
institutions



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PACT project signing Memorandums of Understanding with the seven partner municipalities. Pictured here in Nebeur commune, Kef Governorate.



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Since the largely youth-led revolution of 2011, the formerly autocratic political system of Tunisia has seen remarkable achievements in transitioning towards a democratic form of governance. The adoption of a constitution, the two subsequent parliamentary and presidential elections in 2014 and 2019, a new decentralisation law, and electoral law reforms have been key milestones for the North African country. This democratic transition was accompanied by a shift to decentralised governance, whereby the entire territory was divided into municipalities, with the goal of turning these into real actors of local development with full administrative and financial autonomy.

A country in transition

Newly formed administrations in rural areas face deep-rooted challenges. Following 60 years of unequal resource distribution, Tunisia's 24 regions (governorates) still experience dramatic disparities, which are particularly present between the coastal and the inland regions. Especially the governorates in the Centre- and South-West (the so-called "Hautes Steppes") are marked by high unemployment, low literacy rates, limited access to infrastructure, and low rates with regards to youth and women's involvement in local decision-making.

The outcomes of the first local elections in 2018 led to a first improvement with regards to inclusiveness, creating a larger representation of youth and women in public office. In addition, the post-revolution country sees an active and increasingly organised civil society making its mark on national and local politics.

Despite these promising developments, many constitutional provisions are yet to be implemented, and the political decision to advance the decentralisation process has yet to be followed by responsive institutions and democratic culture at the local level. One obstacle arises in the newly created or extended mu-

nicipalities, where a number of officials assume office without any prior experience as public servants or political representatives. With democratic decision-making and pragmatic solution-finding less established on local level, partisan considerations and political discord quickly destabilise local institutions. Political instability also remains a challenge on the national level, with Tunisia having experienced ten governments in a decade.

Voter turnout remains low and is evidence of the growing frustration of the Tunisian people with their local government. Unmet expectations regarding public service delivery, economic growth and regional development, reinforce an increasing political disengagement of citizens, especially the youth.

All in all, recent analyses show a general lack of confidence of citizens in public institutions, a lack of legitimacy of local government representatives and a missing democratic political culture at the grass roots level. These interrelated challenges must be addressed for the newly established system to succeed.



Donor

The Swiss Confederation

Client

SDC (Swiss Cooperation Office in Tunisia)

Location

Tunisia

Contract value

CHF 4.499.864

TA value

CHF 1.678.104

Duration

March 2020–
December 2022

Partner

Foundation Hironde



"The selection of the municipality of Chrayaa Machrek Echams among the seven pilot municipalities within the framework of the PACT project, represents an opportunity to establish very important partnerships for a newly created municipality. It was an opportunity to consolidate the decentralisation process, strengthening the capacities of the council and the municipal administration. This aims to pilot a participation mechanism that promotes inclusive citizen participation."

- Mayor of the target municipality Chrayaa Machrek Echams

Project scope

The PACT programme contributes to Tunisian democratic transition by increasing accountability, citizen participation and strengthening of human rights at local government level in six target governorates:

- + **Component 1:** Community Forums: Increased participation of citizens, particularly youth and women, in public decisions at the local level
- + **Component 2:** Improving the capacity of newly elected officials and staff in targeted local municipalities to apply good local governance (Participation, Transparency, Accountability)
- + **Component 3:** Supporting civil society initiatives on control and accountability thereby increasing control and monitoring of local governance performance by civil society (youth, women and CSOs)
- + **Media outreach:** Learning, mentoring, facilitation, and communication about participatory citizenship and inclusive governance.

Developing a community participation approach

Following the SDC country strategy for Tunisia (2017-2020), the PACT programme contributes to the Tunisian democratic transition by increasing accountability, citizen participation and strengthening of Human Rights at the local government level in six target governorates.

The focus of the programme is to promote a participatory approach on a municipal level in the region of the Hautes Steppes (encompassing six governorates: Gafsa, Kairouan, Kasserine, Kef, Sidi Bouzid and Siliana), one of the most neglected regions in terms of social and economic development. It targets local citizens, especially women and youth, local public authorities, in particular newly elected officials, and national and local civil society organisations.

Together with the target actors, the programme develops a community participation approach that integrates into the existing local development processes. By facilitating community forums and contributing to the municipal development projects planned and decided through the forums, PACT establishes a dialogue mechanism offering space and tools to citizens, CSOs and municipal elected officials to strengthen dialogue and increase citizen participation in local decision-making (Component 1). In parallel, PACT works to strengthen the capacity of civil society and local governance actors to carry out their role within the democratic framework (Components 2 and 3). Creating a positive spiral of mutual trust by which citizens – especially the marginalised, women and youth – will be empowered to voice their opinion and be heard, municipalities will provide better services and demonstrate increased accountability, and citizens will gain confidence in municipal action and be willing to contribute.

Services provided by NIRAS together with consortium partner Fondation Hirondelle and sub-contracted partner CILG-VNG

- The **Community Forum (CF)** component is the biggest component of the programme and includes a financial contribution mechanism to co-finance decisions made by the forums. CF can be project, budget or intermunicipal forums. The main activity is the planning, facilitation and following up on CF and their sessions
- Capacity building of **newly elected officials:** Needs analysis, facilitation and oversight of trainings, following up on training outcomes.
- Supporting **civil society** initiatives on control and accountability through a grants mechanism.

