

SDG: #5, #10, #16

Anchoring democratic participation at the local level in post-revolutionary Tunisia

In the wake of Tunisia's transition to democracy and decentralised government, NIRAS has supported the establishment of community dialogue mechanisms while training local officials and empowering civil society initiatives in the North African country's Hautes Steppes region.

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, two subsequent parliamentary and presidential elections in 2014 and 2019, a new decentralisation law, and electoral law reforms have been key milestones.

This democratic transition was accompanied by a shift to decentralised governance. To this end, 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.

However, this transition has been far from easy. Newly formed

administrations in rural areas face deep-rooted challenges, and following 60 years of unequal resource distribution, Tunisia's 24 regions, or governorates, still experience dramatic disparities. In particular, the governorates in the centre and southwest (the so-called "Hautes Steppes") are marked by high unemployment, low literacy rates, limited access to infrastructure, and low rates of involvement among the youth and women sectors in local decision-making.

It is against this backdrop that the Participation Active des Citoyennes et Citoyens Tunisiens (PACT) programme made its mark. French for Active Participation of Tunisian Citizens, PACT was funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and its first phase ran from 2020 to early 2023. Following SDC's country strategy, PACT contributed to the Tunisian democratic transition by increasing accountability, citizen participation and strengthening of human rights at the local government level in seven pilot municipalities.

A new second phase launched in February 2023, thanks to the following achievements in several areas relating to the programme's key objectives:

- Increased participation of citizens, especially youth and women, in public decisions at the local level;
- Improved capacity of elected officials and staff in local administrations to apply good governance based on the principles of participation, transparency, and accountability; and
- Greater control and monitoring of local government's performance by civil society actors.

"In my role as team leader of PACT, I have seen in practice how community forums are an effective, structured, and inclusive way to exercise local democracy, strengthen accountability, and improve mutual trust and understanding between elected officials and citizens."

Jalila Boukari, PACT Team Leader



1590

Citizen participants in community forums (CFs),



549
Women



423
Youth

13

Facilitators & co-facilitators trained to facilitate CFs

17

Local journalists trained to cover decentralisation efforts (c/o Fondation Hirondele)

25

Trainings targeted at 252 elected officials and staff (32% female)

Community forums pave the way for participatory local governance

The first component of PACT's project resulted in the organisation of community forum cycles, with the objective of increasing the participation of citizens, especially from the youth and women sectors, in matters of governance at the local level. Community forums were envisioned as appropriate spaces for integrating civil society, the media, and local administrations into a process of constructive dialogue.

The PACT team suffered setbacks on account of the COVID-19 pandemic, as restrictions on travel and gatherings led to delays and cancellations. Despite this, the team was able to successfully complete its objectives. PACT signed Memorandums of Understanding with seven pilot municipalities in five of six governorates in the Haute-Steppes region, formalising their cooperation with the programme.

Under the pilot project, 18 sessions were held throughout the partner municipalities, with a total of **1,590 citizen participants**. Of these, 549 were women and 423 were from the youth sector.

These community forums were instrumental in the development and monitoring of several projects:

- Acquisition of road equipment shared by two municipalities;
- Extension of an existing public lighting network;
- Creation of an inclusive urban sports and leisure park;
- Paving 2km of road to improve access to municipal services;
- Construction of a mini football field in a marginalised locality.
- Other similar projects are currently in the works.

Gender-inclusive capacity building for local administrations

The second component of the project aimed to improve the capacity of elected officials and staff in the pilot municipalities to apply good local governance, with an eye toward fostering participation, transparency, and accountability. The PACT team conducted a total of 25 training activities in relation to these principles. All in all, the team was able to **train 252 elected officials and staff**, 32% of whom consisted of women.

This training encouraged local administrations to establish solid lines of communication with their constituencies. A number of pilot municipalities published rules of conduct on their Facebook pages to affirm their commitment toward respectful and appropriate communication with citizens.

A more lasting result of this far-reaching result of PACT's training was the development of e-learning platform "**Academy of Municipalities**". Designed as a comprehensive guide for local elected officials, the knowledge it contains is envisioned to spread out and take effect past the pilot municipalities toward all 350 municipalities of Tunisia.



Civil society as a partner for transparency and accountability

The third component of PACT empowered civil society—especially the women and youth sectors, as well as the media—to take part in the controlling and monitoring of local governments' performance. This entailed establishing a **grants-based scheme** to select initiatives relevant to good governance and refining them through a comprehensive workshop process.

The workshop also served as a way to build a network among the civil society organisations involved, allowing the people present to get to know each other and their respective projects. This in turn helped them identify potential avenues for collaboration and synergy between their different initiatives.

As a result, the PACT programme has funded and implemented **24 projects and 13 community initiatives**. These projects reached hundreds of women and young people and established closer ties between the CSOs and local government authorities in the pilot municipalities. Members of the media were also provided with capacity building activities. With the help of the Fondation Hironnelle, 17 journalists were given training on the coverage of local governance and decentralisation.



"PACT has successfully established a new system of public dialogue in the community designed to encourage citizens to make collective decisions with all stakeholders and to be involved in the process of controlling project execution and the evaluation of the projects identified. This experience will be further developed and extended to other Tunisian municipalities."

Jalila Boukari, PACT Team Leader

Key lessons learned

A couple of important lessons emerged from PACT.

- Think about cultural/social norms when selecting community forums. Some women might face restrictions to participate in public places so the location is important to consider.
- Designate a co-facilitator from the municipality to manage conflict during the forums.
- Consider providing transportation to ensure citizens participate at events.
- Turnout from elected officials and administrative staff is higher when trainings are organization outside of their plan of work.
- Train elected officials and administrative staff together as it improves collaboration down the road.
- Be flexible and adapt to the ability of the audience! The PACT team modified its French-language requirements and accepted proposals in Arabic, it also extended the deadline for receipt of these proposals and reviewed its overall approach to work with local CSO's skills and ability.

At the forefront of good governance

At the culmination of its three years of operation, the PACT programme has led to promising outcomes for the pilot municipalities. The community forums have increased the involvement of citizens in making decisions relating to municipal projects, giving them a closer sense of co-responsibility. Conflict management trainings have improved the quality and management of the community forums and helped to establish better rapport between municipal authorities and the communities they serve.

On the other end, elected officials have also significantly improved their internal and external communication mechanisms. They have come to understand the benefits of listening to the citizens from many different sectors, and of communicating the progress and work done on their projects.

An empowered local media has also served to increase the transparency of municipal work and to give citizens access to information. This has helped to foster a culture of accountability in local governance.

All in all, the PACT programme has helped to create a stronger climate of trust between citizens and elected officials in the pilot municipalities. For a country in the middle of a democratic transition, these municipalities stand at the forefront as models of effective participatory governance on the local level.

