



Research assistant Tom Mboya doing interview
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Whose voice matters? Inclusion in local decision-making in Kenya and Lebanon

Hanna Leonardsson and Jean-Bosco Habyarimana,
School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg

Executive summary

This policy brief analyses inclusion in local decision-making in Kenya and Lebanon and aims to make recommendations for policymakers in post-conflict contexts divided along ethnic or sectarian lines. The data was collected in Kenya and Lebanon through interviews and led to three main findings: 1) there are possibilities for local communities to participate in local decision-making, but inequalities persist between women and men and adults and youth; 2) inclusion and ability to influence local decision-making depend on personal status, including economic status, education and connections to national and local decision-makers; 3) local decision-making bodies are influenced by national dividing lines, and local participation both promotes local inclusion and risks replicating conflictual divisions.

The study concludes that participation and inclusion in local decision-making in post-conflict contexts can promote inclusion of actors not usually heard nationally. At the same time, the findings show that inclusion also risks promoting further exclusion within the local arena, primarily on basis of ethnicity, religion, gender, age, and disabilities.

The study recommends policymakers and actors working towards local governments to:

1. Implement practices for including those not usually heard,
2. acknowledge voices included in national versus local arenas, and
3. reflect on alternative avenues for influence and how less influential actors use these avenues for influencing local decision-making.



About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

Working definitions:

Local inclusion: citizens' participation and influence in local governance decision-making.

Post-conflict countries: countries that have past experiences with outbreaks of violence and the manifestation of societal divides through violent means

Introduction

Local inclusion has been promoted within the fields of development and peacebuilding as a measure to promote locally relevant service provision, local ownership and consensus building, giving local actors a role as agents in development and peacebuilding (Brinkerhoff, 2011; Donais, 2012; Öjendal & Dellnäs, 2013). At the same time, post-conflict contexts offer additional challenges through continued divisions and contestations along former conflictual lines in national as well as local arenas (Themnér & Utas 2016; Leonardsson, 2019). In practice, the benefits of and contestations surrounding local inclusion challenge the idea of local inclusion as a simple answer to developmental or peacebuilding challenges. While research has shown that local governments are aware of existing dividing lines, and make use of them to promote local developments, beneficial to all or a few (Leonardsson, 2020), the question remains as how such dividing lines influence citizen participation and influence in local decision-making. Acknowledging the complexities involved in local inclusion, this policy brief analyses practices of local inclusion in Kenya and Lebanon, two post-conflict contexts divided along ethnic or sectarian lines. In Kenya, we investigate local participation and influence on the level of the County, the sub-national unit of devolved governance in the 2010 Kenyan decentralisation reform. In Lebanon, the municipality level is in focus, as the only unit where local representatives are appointed through general elections although Lebanon has a centralised system of governance.

The study concludes that inclusion in local decision-making in post-conflict contexts is possible for some and in those cases does promote responsiveness in local governance. This local inclusion of some is often necessary for the larger state structure as these local voices might not be heard nationally. At the same time, such inclusion risks promoting further exclusion at the local level, primarily of those with other ethnicities or religions than the local majority, and those already marginalised due to gender, age or disabilities.

Methodology

Data for this policy brief was collected using a mix of methods. A total of 114 semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted by the authors in Lebanon and Kenya from 2014 to 2020. The interviewees were elected members of county/municipal assemblies, county/municipal employees as well as civil society members and community representatives. In addition, 21 structured interviews were conducted by research assistants in Kenya and Lebanon during 2020, interviewing active members of local civil society organisations. All interviews explore the role of local governments and local actors in peacebuilding, peace initiatives and local governance and the interviewees represent views of individuals active in the local development of their county or municipality.



From Machakos workshop, with participants

Photo credit: Hanna Leonardsson & Jean-Bosco Habyarimana



Machakos government sign
Photo credit: Hanna Leonardsson & Jean-Bosco Habyarimana

Findings

The study of inclusion in local decision-making in Kenya and Lebanon focused on the possibilities of citizens to participate, possibilities to influence local decisions and the relation between local participation and influence on the one hand and the post-conflict contexts on the other. The three main findings are:

1. Possibilities to participate exist but more for some than others. In Kenya, County governments enable forums for public participation. However, such participation is often perceived as not enabling influence over decisions, especially for women and youth, as illustrated in the following quote:

The Constitution of Kenya is clear that at least 30% of political positions should be given to women. However, this idea is yet to be implemented. Kenyans are still attached to cultural beliefs that women are meant to stay in the kitchen and take care of children while power and authority belong to men (Member of County Assembly, Kisumu, December 2020).

In Lebanon, general forums for participation are absent. Participation rather takes place indirectly by civil society actors channelling needs and requests through elected officials in their networks. Civil society actors are often also directly involved in implementing municipal policies. In both Kenya and Lebanon, such participation does not provide equal opportunities to participate, especially for women, youth and those without influential connections.

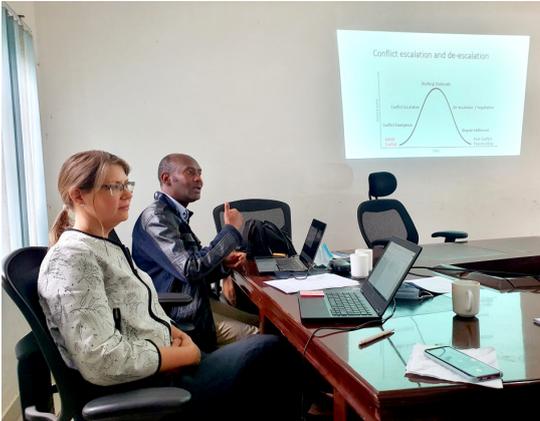
2. Inclusion and ability to influence local decision-making depend on personal status. This includes economic status, education, and connections to national and local decision-makers. A civil society member in Saida illustrated this saying:

Our chairman here of the association is a member of the municipality. [Through her] we have direct contact with [the municipality], we discuss with her daily. If we have something, she can take it to the mayor; for us, it is very easy to accomplish (Civil society actor, Saida, November 2015).

This echoes existing knowledge on hierarchies in local inclusion claiming that participation becomes favourable to a few, often reinforcing patriarchal structures and excluding women further (Leino



Research assistant Tom Mboya with interviewee
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Machakos workshop, Hanna Leonardsson & Jean-Bosco Habyarimana

“while ethnic and sectarian dividing lines enable some participation and influence, the study highlights the double nature of local inclusion, simultaneously providing space for influence as well as exclusion and a continuation of divisions”

& Puumala 2020; Vélez-Torres et al., 2022) However, our study shows that personal status also opens up for women and youth who have a prominent role locally to be able to influence local decision-making, meaning that some can actually use these mechanisms to gain access.

3. Local decision-making bodies are influenced by national dividing lines, promoting local inclusion and replicating conflictual divisions at the same time. While local decision-making bodies are expected to be open to inclusion and consensus across dividing lines, our research demonstrates that divisions, mainly along ethnic and religious lines are still important for political participation in the country and local decision-making, as one the following quote portrays:

I can say that identities, especially ethnicity and religion, are still dominant for national politics. Like you’ll find that it is difficult to join a political party because it belongs to a certain ethnic group. This is why many people here, rely on their connections with powerful people to get their voice heard (CSO member, Nairobi December 2020).

What the above quote highlights is the risk of replicating, at the local level, conflictual divisions through the reliance on personal status for influence. Thus, while ethnic and sectarian dividing lines enable some participation and influence, the study highlights the double nature of local inclusion, simultaneously providing space for influence as well as exclusion and a continuation of divisions.

Conclusions

These findings indicate that participation and influence in local decision-making in post-conflict contexts work through existing power dynamics, both locally and nationally. As such, local participation and inclusion in post-conflict contexts can help maintain societal divisions that may fuel conflict, but at the same time allow crucial space for influence for those excluded on other levels of government. Thus, while local inclusion promises locally relevant service delivery, local ownership and consensus building, this study finds that the practice of local inclusion is complex and double natured. As local inclusion is practiced in Lebanon and Kenya, it provides access and peacefulness for some, while simultaneously reinforcing hierarchies and conflictual dividing lines.

Discussion Questions for Local Governments

1. What local, regional (if applicable) and national dividing lines and actors are relevant in your local government?
2. How do these dividing lines and different types of actors influence the work of the local government?
3. What alternative forums or avenues for participation are used by local actors or communities, and what groups lack such avenues?

Policy recommendations

Building on the realization that citizens' participation and inclusion in local-level governance is still facing risks of promoting further exclusion of those already marginalized due to ethnicity, religion, gender, age or disabilities, we present three policy recommendations for political inclusion in post-conflict contexts.

Practicing inclusion of those not usually heard.

Local governments should be more inclusive towards women, youth and disabled people, as well as local minorities. This should be done by actually implementing the quotas for female representation where these exist, and taking steps to ensure the inclusion of participants beyond "the usual crowd" where quotas do not exist. Local governments must be aware that inclusion means paying attention to the ideas and opinions of marginalized groups, rather than just allowing them a seat in the room (see recommendation 3).

Transparently acknowledge different voices included in national versus local arenas.

Local governments are aware of the power dynamics within their constituencies as well as in relation to national arenas and tend to use the avenues for influence available to them in ways that benefit local development. Although the use of vertical power dynamics to improve local service delivery tends to benefit the whole local community, reliance on particular relationships for local development creates a feeling of exclusion in local politics. Local governments should be more transparent on how decisions are made. This includes how connections to national actors and agencies are pursued to benefit the community as a whole, or to compensate for national-level ignorance of a particular group. Tools for this include participatory budgeting, open hearings or using ICTs to communicate how decision-making processes are carried out.

Pay attention to alternative avenues for influence and how less influential actors use these avenues for influencing local decision-making.

Providing official forums for participation and influence is an important element. However, these may provide an illusion of participation instead of real influence. Local governments should foster meaningful inclusion by opening up multiple ways of participating in and influencing local decision-making. These should include formal as well as informal avenues for participation and influence, being aware that different actors and local contexts may prefer different methods for influence.

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Contact details

Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy

Visiting address Söderväg 1D, 621 58 Visby
Telephone +46 498-29 91 00
E-mail info@icld.se
Web www.icld.se

