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Towards a more inclusive local development planning through Social Profiles

The Local Governance Reform Programme II (LGRP II) has supported the process of developing so-called Social Profiles for Local Government Units (LGUs). The tool supports local authorities to better identify and integrate the needs of all citizens, including women and marginalised groups. A Social Profile is a summary of social conditions and trends in the targeted locality which helps to understand and assess the needs of the local community and the prospective impacts of projects and plans on it.

Two of the first municipalities to apply the methodology were Surif and Dura, towns in the Hebron governorate famous for their agricultural lands and production. At the same time, the municipalities face multiple challenges due to the Israeli occupation, their location in the marginalised South and the lack of resources at the local level.

60-year-old Taghreed lives in Surif. She is a respected woman in her family and community, where she also heads the ladies' embroidery association. While she spends much time at home to support in household and childcare, she makes use of every opportunity to become an active member of her community.

However, as an elderly woman, she often feels unseen and not taken seriously. Many times, she tried to approach the municipality to bring in her ideas of how the local life in Surif could be improved, particularly for women, yet often without success:

“Elderly women don’t participate at all, there are no institutions for them. When a woman gets old, she stays at home only. With all respect to all women - the society considers old women as if they don’t understand anything”.

Social Profiles at a glance

A Social Profile is a methodological tool that operationalises citizen participation in local planning and decision-making.

Social Profiles help local authorities to capture the priorities, wishes and challenges of their communities, particularly those of marginalised groups, and to develop and update their strategic development plans accordingly.

The tool makes use of primary data through focus groups and interviews with citizens and local representatives, as well as of secondary data through the analysis of relevant studies, statistics and reports.

A Social Profile is a part of the diagnostic report of the local plan.

After a pilot phase in five locations in the West Bank and Gaza in 2020, Social Profiles were created in 70 municipalities in the West Bank, 25 municipalities in the Gaza Strip as well as 40 village councils (VCs).

The Social Profile process has been integrated into the updated Strategic Development and Investment Plans (SDIP) methodology and is thus sustainably anchored in the partner system.

Now, the process is an integral part to the planning process, mainstreaming the identification of needs and participation of marginalised groups across all parts of the planning cycle, without causing delays.



Planning session in Dura municipality

Mohammad from Dura faces other forms of challenges. He is a citizen with disabilities and a member of the Disabled Union. He has never participated in any of the municipality's activities and feels that there is not enough awareness around the issues of accessibility and people with disabilities.

This is true for most municipalities and VCs in Palestine. The levels of engagement of marginalised groups including women, youth and people with disabilities in local planning and service delivery feedback are still low. The Social Profiles tool, therefore, aims to improve the participation of citizens in local planning in VCs and municipalities.

Since 2009, three cycles of local development planning took place in Palestinian LGUs. An evaluation by the Ministry of Local Government (MoLG) and the Municipal Development and Lending Fund (MDLF) found that the needs of marginalised groups and women are not yet sufficiently embedded and integrated into Strategic Development and Investment Plans (SDIPs) and Annual Capital Investment Plans (ACIPs). Based on a sequence of consecutive assessments of the planning process, the MoLG's and MDLF's technical working group identified the need to refine the assessment phase and include the analysis of the society and the differing needs and demands within the community. Against this background, LGRP II supported in developing a methodological tool that operationalises citizen participation in local planning and decision-making – called Social Profile.

Taghreed understands the diverse challenges that local authorities have to deal with – and that the available budget and resources do not allow to realise all possible projects. However, she believes that the participation of all societal groups in planning processes will allow for a more needs-based allocation of resources and the realisation of meaningful projects. Taghreed wishes to support the municipality's work and not only help them understand her and other elderly women's needs but also, to feel that she has contributed her share as an active citizen in her community. When Taghreed was informed by a community-based women's organisation that the municipality organised community sessions, she did not hesitate to join.

Mohammad, too, strongly believes that he can contribute to more effective and inclusive planning of Dura's council: **“Participation of marginalised groups improves the quality of planning”**.

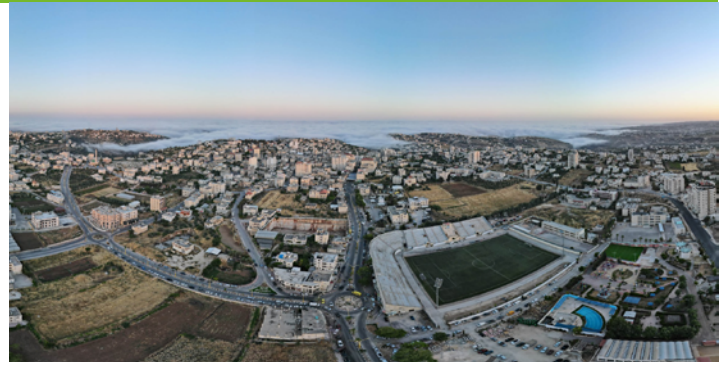
Development

The Social Profile methodology was established together with the support of an experienced consultancy firm in the field of planning and social inclusion in the local government sector.

The methodology was tested during a pilot phase in five locations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during 2020. The pilots showed that the desk research and the data collection process require time and resources. Also, the successful establishment of Social Profiles relies on the availability of data as well as the openness and awareness of local authorities and citizens to the process. However, experience shows that the process alone already creates more awareness and capacities on both sides.

In a broad roll-out, Social Profiles were created in 70 municipalities in the West Bank, 25 municipalities in the Gaza Strip as well as 40 VCs. Based on the findings, some SDIPs/ACIPs have been updated during the yearly monitoring sessions to include the marginalised groups' needs. Communities and community-based organisations were trained and prepared to participate in the sessions to encourage the participation of marginalised groups in the local planning processes. However, LGUs and communities could not yet fully maximise the use of Social Profiles. The regular update of the SDIPs and ACIPs has been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the political circumstances. While in the Gaza Strip 25 municipalities updated their plans, the 2021 update of the plans in most LGUs in the West Bank has been postponed based on the recommendation of the MoLG, due to local elections.

Through the integration of the Social Profile methodology in the updated Local Development Planning Manual, this mechanism has been institutionalised and anchored in the system. The creation of Social Profiles is now a mandatory step before the drafting of the plans. Based on the updated methodology, the planning cycle 2023-2026 has started recently. The whole planning cycle, including the Social Profile methodology, is usually facilitated by externally contracted experts, both due to the lacking resources within the LGUs as well as the added value of impartiality. Currently, the MDLF is supporting the local authorities in choosing, hiring and financing the experts.



Application

Hebron is one of the governorates that piloted the implementation of Social Profiles in 15 municipalities.

In Surif and Dura, the councils, together with the planning staff and a consultancy firm, organised community sessions to review their strategic plans at the beginning of the planning cycle. Civil society organisations supported this process by bringing in different societal groups and amplifying or representing their needs. These included also marginalised groups such as people with disabilities, women, youth and elderly. Committees for women, youth and the elderly were re-activated to participate in the planning process. They reviewed the strategic plans together, made recommendations and voiced their needs.

Taghreed joined the sessions in Surif. **“I participated in strategic planning sessions, and several groups of society were present in the sessions, such as employees, workers, girls, people with disabilities and the elderly. All of them participated.”** Marginalised groups were involved successfully and have become active in decision-making. The percentage of citizen participation in the municipality was raised by around 15%. **“We discussed suggestions and needs, the problems of the country, and the projects that we need to implement. There were many sessions conducted to review and discuss the strategic plan. Eventually, the plan has been finalised with our inputs,”** she tells.

Among the inputs are infrastructure projects or cultural and educational facilities.

In Dura, joint development planning has only reached around eight per cent of participation of marginalised groups in the past. With the new Social Profile methodology, the municipality hopes to increase the quality participation.

Mohammad and the Disabled Union he is working with joined the planning sessions. The participants raised several issues, which resulted in the municipality adopting three of them as part of the plan: the improvement of waste collection, the accessibility of public buildings, and the establishment of a women’s association under the supervision of the municipality. Work is currently underway to implement the projects on the ground. Mohammad and the other community members appreciated the process - which had never taken place this way. The percentage of citizens’ participation has reached 55 %, which is one of the highest rates of community participation Dura has seen in recent years.

The sessions even opened the door to Mohammad’s membership in the council: **“It is the first time for me to be represented and active in the local council of Dura”**. In his new role, Mohammad continues to advocate for people with disabilities and accessibility in his town.

Also, Taghreed feels that she has contributed her share. Now it is upon the decision-makers to continue, and she plans to attend the monitoring sessions to be part of the follow-up. **“The Social Profile sessions deserve the efforts – if they implement all the projects. If the suggestions are implemented, this would motivate citizens to attend and participate every time!”**



Surif Municipality constructing a new road



Relevance

The Social Profiling process has underlined and reaffirmed the relevance of participatory approaches to local and community-based planning and urban development in the Palestinian context. Local authorities achieve higher levels of service delivery performance through strengthening citizen engagement and participation in local planning. The participatory approach provides an opportunity for LGUs and citizens to come together and seek a common understanding and expression of their needs and priorities. It promotes accountability and transparency and thus provides further legitimacy to the LGU. Moreover, also through the improved availability of data related to services, Social Profiling has shown a positive impact on the cooperation among the relevant stakeholders and between the councils and the citizens.



Taghreed joining a planning session in Surif municipality

Published by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

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As of February 2023

Photo credits Surif Municipality (2021, 2022), Dura Municipality (2021, 2022)

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GIZ is responsible for the content of this publication.

On behalf of Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)