



شبكة المنظمات الأهلية الفلسطينية The Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Network

Perspective on the PRDP Palestinian NGO's December 2007

PREAMBLE:

The Palestinian Reform and Development Plan (PRDP) for the years 2008-2010 has been drafted by the Palestinian Authority in response to the pressing need for formulating a comprehensive national plan for development in the Palestinian areas under its jurisdiction.

After reviewing the PRDP and examining the process through which the plan has been developed, PNGO believes that, based on the experience and concerns of the NGO sector in Palestine regarding the issue of development, it is its responsibility and obligation to share its view and position on the new development plan, first with the Palestinian government, and eventually with other stake holders in the development process within Palestinian society as well as within the donor community.

This is necessary in order to ensure that a transparent, participatory and consultative process takes place in adopting this plan.

Although the Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO) appreciates the efforts made by the current government to devise such a comprehensive development plan, Palestinian NGOs have identified some serious limitations to the government's approach to the plan, potential problems that it could face during implementation. As well as shortcomings in both the content of the plan and its capacity to meet the real needs of Palestinian society in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem given current state of affairs.

While Palestinian society is living through an extremely acute political and security hardship and where the Israeli military occupation is shaping and affecting the daily lives of the Palestinian community, the plan simply assumes that economic prosperity is the major goal and makes no mention of other vital aspects of life such as free access, feeling secure, not being under constant, severe distress, and other freedoms of all kinds, which are lacking for Palestinians.

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Furthermore, the plan does not take into consideration supporting and strengthening the resilience of the people to cope with existing, enormous hardships, whether those are related to poverty or otherwise.

We truly believe that supporting and strengthening the resilience of Palestinians should be seen as a major goal in this process as development is as much about people's well being and life quality (physical, social, psychological and environmental), at the heart of which lies their personal security and human dignity, as it is about economic growth.

Thus, while continued international aid to the oPt is vital for survival, this is why it must not draw our attention away from the root cause of Palestinian de-development and social suffering: a long lasting military occupation of Palestinian lands and the inability of the international community to facilitate and conclude a meaningful political process that could bring about a just and lasting political settlement in accordance and compliance with international law, including international humanitarian law and human rights law. Indeed, we must continue calling for an end to injustice, and freedom, and work towards peace not only for Palestinians, but for all peoples of the region.

PROBLEMATIC ASSUMPTIONS:

The plan was developed based on the best case scenario that an anticipated improvement in the political situation will take place following the possible beginning of a meaningful political process that will ostensibly lead to a just political settlement, and that will bring about a more stable and conducive environment for development in the occupied Palestinian territory.

Furthermore, the plan assumes that Gaza and the West Bank are a contiguous entity with no restriction of movement of people and goods between the two areas and with the outside world, nor within the West Bank itself.

However, the existing facts on the ground demonstrate an opposing reality. Gaza has become a prison to 1.5 million persons and is physically separated from the West Bank. The severe restrictions on movement in the West Bank render economic growth impossible, as has been stated by the World Bank and other international donors. Moreover, the Gaza Strip was also recently declared a "hostile entity" by the Israeli Government, which has subsequently been applying severe measures of collective punishment on the Gazan population, including the recent, drastic reduction in fuel supplies, with serious, harmful implications for civilians.

All these facts on the ground indicate the need to recognize that Gaza and the West Bank face different socio-economic and political contexts that have emerged recently. Therefore, the development plan must take this into account.

Has the plan taken these facts into consideration?

The division of the occupied Palestinian Territory into separate Bantustans has not been addressed in the development plan.

Yet, again, as the World Bank and other international donors note, without serious efforts to tackle of this issue, economic growth and development will not materialize, and donor aid will only be met with failure, as it has done in the past.

Indeed, the long-term geographical fragmentation as a result of the closure regime imposed by the Israeli Government on the WBGS and Jerusalem has severely impacted on social cohesion, the provision of services, access to work and to land, as well as initiatives in system building.

These facts cannot be ignored and must be factored into any current development planning initiative. Yet, the current development plan has ignored these vital aspects of development.

Vision:

It is our contention that the underpinnings of a development plan should originate from a shared vision of the kind of society we aspire to build, which is then reflected in an overall development policy that is shared with citizens.

Based on the shared vision and overall development policy, development planning entails the operationalization of the principles contained in the policy. While the exceptional conditions in the country may make this task difficult, it is nevertheless vital to clearly lay down the principles around which the plan was developed, so that all can agree.

Development planning is therefore the third step in a process, not the first, which should involve defining the vision and the policy of the plan.

The question is: What are the principles around which this plan was made?

Do these principles constitute a shared vision?

Did they entail a focus on macro-economic growth or social development?

A content analysis of this plan indicates that the vision that has been set out in the plan consolidates the notion of building a state with functional institutions in the areas occupied by Israel in 1967 with East Jerusalem as its capital.

While we agree with the overall political statement presented in the plan, we note that state building should be seen within the context of a comprehensive political process, with issues such as the Palestinian Refugees living outside the occupied territory at the heart of this settlement.

Furthermore, the underlying vision of this plan rests on one assumption, that is, of the “smooth implementation” of the first and the second phases of the Road Map, without addressing its political limitations. In this respect, there is a different interpretation and unclear standing of what is required from the Palestinian and Israeli sides in these two phases, which have still yet to be concluded upon. At the same time, the progress on this

track depends mainly on the ability of the Israeli government to fulfill its obligations in removing the closure regime and guaranteeing access of movement for people and commodities within the Palestinian territory (Gaza Strip, West Bank and Jerusalem) and to the outside world.

In such a context, a contingency plan should surely be formulated based on different possible political scenarios if it is to remain relevant in the short- and medium terms.

Process:

The plan described the process of its formulation and conclusion as a participatory and bottom-up approach.

In reality, civil society - one of the major players in development - has not been involved in this planning process nor has it been consulted with.

This is especially problematic given that PNGO upholds the rights-based approach to citizenship and development, with citizenship combining rights, including civil, political and social rights and responsibilities, which contrast with a purely economic approach to development.

PNGO's approach necessarily means partnership and sharing, discussions and evidence generation, followed by the laying out of a development plan that is based on evidence and people's aspirations.

Where is the evidence around which the plan was made? Has it been shared with key players and social groups?

Furthermore, the absence of the notion of partnership between government and civil society is glaring.

The plan does very little in describing the role of civil society and the complementarity of roles between the government and NGOs in the oPt, bearing in mind the very rich experience of Palestinian NGOs in development, together with the competence of NGOs in delivering vital services to poor and marginalized groups within this society.

Thus, it is imperative that the plan should focus on the issue of active NGO involvement as part of reform and improved governance performance through developing accountability mechanisms at the societal level, so as to bring about wider public participation and involvement in the development process.

We believe that Palestinian NGOs in particular should have been consulted. Palestinian NGOs are also keen to cooperate with government structures to achieve desired goals that can bring about better living conditions for Palestinian citizens.

Unfortunately, the opportunity to initiate a wide public discussion on this plan so as to ensure the widest possible participation by social structures at all levels was lost.

Economic growth: How and for what purpose?

The plan has ignored the pressing external factors that are obstructing and suffocating the Palestinian economy and that are to very large extent shaping the overall process of development in Palestine.

This has been made explicit in the presentation of the plan's framework in a very technical manner, where economic indicators have been used as the main progress benchmarks rather than political and social indicators that relate to people's well being and quality of life.

Viability:

The question of viability in this part of the world is not a luxurious mental exercise, as in this context, viability is the first question to be asked when setting out an economic and social agenda. The legitimate questions are:

- a. Is this plan applicable to the Gaza Strip, and how can it be implemented without ensuring the integrity of one governance structure, and territorial contiguity?
- b. What about the 250,000 Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem? How did this development plan include them?
- c. What kind of interventions has the plan developed to deal with the consequences of building the separation WALL, the completion of which will see more than 28% of the most fertile lands and vital water resources annexed to Israel, in addition to the fact that more than 400,000 people are severely affected by this reality?
- d. With the current policy of closure and the control of border crossings imposed by Israel, as well as the Paris Protocol which gives Israel the upper hand in each single decision that relates to the Palestinian economy: what are the chances for viability in developing an intact and independent economy that could alleviate poverty and ensure better living conditions for the Palestinian population in the areas still controlled and occupied by Israel?

Accountability and social development:

We rightly believe that, in order to become legitimate, any development plan should contain an internal notion of accountability first and foremost towards the public that it should primarily serve, as well as to the existing legal structures.

The plan contains elements presenting and promoting itself as a reflection of a context of legality and democratic reform. However, the plan has not even mentioned the role of the democratically elected Palestinian Legislative Council in this process and its mandate to discuss, adopt and monitor the implementation of this plan.

It is also astonishing to note that the plan does not include discussions of the role of civil society organizations and how to preserve and further develop these vital civil society structures in Palestine.

Herein lies the legitimate question of whether the plan is about social development that would lead to more empowered societal structures and the greater participation of different stakeholders in the development process, or whether it is solely about economic growth and better fiscal and financial performance?

And, whether it serves particular groups or Palestinian society at large as it should?

We believe that development is about:

- a. Widening the choices and opportunities of people;
- b. Ensuring their full and active participation;
- c. Bringing about change and reform in social structures that obstruct justice and equity;
- d. Perceiving reform as a tool to build accountable and transparent structures; and
- e. Bringing about real improvements in the life conditions of the people and meeting their expectations.

Based on this understanding, we believe that the plan has approached the issue of the social agenda through an almost entirely economic lens, where revenues, expenditures and fiscal reform in the government budget are the main pillars on which the plan stands.

The intention is to make severe cuts in public expenditures through reducing the number of public servants and imposing a freeze on wages and public employment, except in the sectors of education and health.

At the same time, the plan entails increasing income tax revenues while cutting public lending for water and electricity bills.

At first glance, these measures can be seen as an effective way of reducing heavy public expenditure and improving the efficiency of the system.

However, they are being proposed in the absence of a social security system in place that can guarantee social protection to the most needy and vulnerable groups of the society.

As such, while it intends to make major cuts in public expenditure the only alternative that the governments has in order to combat poverty and decrease unemployment rates is to seek private and some public investments and to create a more conducive environment for private investment, including the operation of an effective judiciary system.

The question is whether this can realistically yield results that can impact the overall macro economy given the current and predicted political context. Indeed, there are very serious doubts that this could happen.

CONCLUSION:

Development planning is not about producing logical frameworks and utilizing economic indicators to improve system performance and measure outcomes.

It is first and foremost about human and social development. As such, vision, approach and process are **key**. Only when these are compatible with a population's real needs can a development plan hope to produce positive results.

In the case of the oPt, a fundamental precondition for economic growths (and social growth) - as the World Bank continuously indicates - include the following three preconditions:

1. A serious improvements in the security environment;
2. Dismantling Israeli restrictions on the movement of people and goods; and
3. Progress on Palestinian reform and institution building

Without these preconditions being met, the World Bank maintains that donor assistance will not produce results.

We maintain that the experience of the past 13 years, massive aid that failed to generate economic growth and to take into consideration the root causes of poverty, namely, the Israeli military occupation of Palestinian land, only led to aid failure and the emergence of a systems crisis that can come in the way of the best development plan. In other words, without tangible and concrete political interventions by the international community this plan will not depart far from the runway.

The Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO)