

Assessing Mayors' and Council Members' Perceptions on Improving Community Involvement and Municipal Performance: The Case of Palestinian Local Governments

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Abstract. Enhancing community involvement and municipal performance are among the major issues, which are now under debate in the majority of the developed as well as emerging countries. To do so, various mechanisms may be employed such as using regional indicators, citizens' evaluations, state-based performance indicators, and benchmarking and community participation indicators. Based on questionnaire responses sent to a sample of mayors and council members in Palestinian municipalities, this study tries to fathom a better understanding of the local politicians' perceptions on how community participation in the performance and efficiency of local governments could be enhanced. The study finds that council members prefer to limit their involvement to participating in municipality committees, rather than extending their responsibilities or to having permanent offices in the municipality headquarters. Both council members and mayors of the Palestinian local governments favor indirect communications with citizens, as they consider the idea of enhancing community participation in municipality affairs as potentially reducing their powers. Although they disagree in their preferences with regards to some other practices, both groups show a reluctance to adopt IT innovations to enhance the efficiency and transparency of local government activities.

JEL Classification Codes: D79, H79.

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1. Introduction

The majority of Palestinian local governments including municipalities of all sizes have existed for a long time; some of these municipalities were created during the Ottoman era in the nineteenth century, others were established

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during the British mandate. Thereafter, other local governments emerged during the Jordanian period, and recently under the Palestinian Authority. These local authorities aim to organize civil activities and local services for the Palestinian communities. Today, the Palestinian local governments are working under the Palestinian local government law approved in 1997 (PNA, 1997), which includes provisions on their formation, management and financing, as well as the responsibilities of the elected mayors and council members. In addition, they work under the supervision of the Palestinian Ministry of Local Government, which introduced many regulations to organize and monitor the work of local governments including technical, housing, administrative and financial aspects.

The major sources of income for local governments differ from one municipality to another, due to the fact that the majority of Palestinian municipalities own and run water and electricity projects, while others do not have such projects because water and electricity services are provided by the private sector in their districts. However, in general, the major part of their income comes from three sources: the utility revenues of water and electricity projects, collected taxes, and building licenses fees. On the other hand, the utilities expenditures represent the largest item in the municipalities' budget, while the rest of the expenditures are divided into engineering, health, management, and financial expenditures. The annual allocated budget of the Palestinians local governments increased from \$ 90 million in 1993 to \$ 280 million in 2004 (Sabri 1994; Sabri and Jaber 2006; and Jaber and Sabri 2010). The Palestinian local government sector offers many services including creation and maintenance of roads, water and electricity supplies, controlling of buildings, building permits, and infrastructure, in addition to providing health and environment services (PNA 1997).

2. Significance and Aim of the Study

Local governments are obliged to undertake functions that are not being provided by other government agencies. Thus, they play a significant role in organizing the Palestinian cities and villages. The local governments are supposed to be run by elected mayors and municipal councils, with the cooperation of local communities and residents who pay fees and taxes in order to receive the needed services. However, it is known that the mayors and technical and administrative staff with little community participation or involvement of council members mainly run these local governments. In addition, a recent study has found that the efficiency of local governments is

still limited in the Palestinian municipalities, due to the low level of participation and involvement of citizens in municipal activities, and the lack of transparency (Sabri and Jaber, 2007).

The low level of community participation in local governments is manifest in various aspects. First, the small share of taxes paid by residents to the Palestinian local governments is considered immaterial compared to the total allocated budget of local councils and municipalities. The ratio of local taxes to household expenditures is about 0.5% in Palestine compared to 2.5% in many cities of developed countries (World Bank 1999). Second, there is an increasing debt owed by municipal residents including due taxes and fees for electricity and water services. The average accumulated debt of residents during the last ten years reached 125% of the total annual budget in 2006. Third, a UNDP report (2005) stated that Palestinian local governments' system has evolved through many historical periods, which failed to empower the system to be representative of the true interests and aspirations of the local people.

However, Palestine has one of the most vibrant local government sectors, which are the most autonomous system and offering the broadest sets of assignments in the MENA region (World Bank 2007). Therefore, the enhancement of community involvement in its local governments is urgently needed.

Accordingly, this study tries to better understand the perceptions of local politicians on how the council members' and community involvement, as well as the performance and efficiency of local governments could be enhanced. Specifically, it aims to answer the following questions, based on the perceptions of the present mayors and council members in the Palestinian municipalities.

1. What are the relevant ways and means of enhancing Palestinian local council members' involvement in running local governments based on mayors' and council members' opinions?
2. What are the relevant ways and means of enhancing Palestinian citizens' involvement in running the Palestinian local governments based on mayors' and council members' opinions?
3. What are the best ways and means of enhancing transparency and performance in managing municipal activities as perceived by mayors and council members?

4. Are there significant differences in the opinions of council members and mayors regarding the best ways of enhancing citizens' involvement in running local governments?
5. Are there significant differences in the opinions of council members and mayors regarding ways of improving transparency and performance in conducting municipal activities?

3. Literature Review

3.1. Literature Related to Palestinian Local Governments

The majority of the literature regarding Palestinian local governments concentrates on accounting and managerial issues. For example, some studies discuss the issue of local taxation (Sabri 1994; Sabri 2000; Sabri 2004; Sabri and Jaber 2006), highlighting the need to unify the local tax systems in both Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and to unify various local taxes. Sabri and Al- Haj (2006) recommend establishing a unified retirement fund law, and building law and adopting a modified accrued accounting basis to replace the existing cash basis system. Other related studies discuss the efficiency and distribution of international aid to the Palestinian local authorities, and develop criteria to distribute international aid considering total population in all cities and towns within the governorates by using various indicators and weights (PNA and MDF 2006).

3.2. Literature Related to Stimulating Public Participation in Local Government

Various studies discuss and explore the ways and means of enhancing community involvement in running local governments in both developed and emerging economies. For example, Barrett and Scott (2008) discuss how to foster community participation in decision making by using public meetings and engaging representative interest groups. Caperchione and Zuffada (2003) report that building partnerships between different stakeholders in local government is becoming an important issue at the local level in many countries, and find that building relationships is difficult and not always successful. Mcateer and Orr (2006) discuss the issue of improving the quality of public participation in council decision-making as a key part of local government modernization and explore the challenges of building both consumer and citizenship consultation processes. Dollery and Dallinger (2007) find that community engagement in local community reforms in Australia may be considered as a means of retaining the enthusiasm for local

democracy as well as of improving the enthusiasm for reforming local communities.

Silverman (2006) examines the mechanisms used by municipalities to stimulate public participation in the USA and Canada. He finds that Canadian municipalities adopt a broader range of public participation techniques related to public engagement, neighborhood and strategic planning, and e-government. In contrast, the article indicates that the US municipalities are more likely to promote public participation through mechanisms such as annual community meetings and referenda on public issues. Finally, Arnaout (1998) finds from the experience of local government in Lebanon that public participation has a very limited role in planning.

3.3. Literature Related to Transparency and Efficiency

Other studies discuss issues related to improving transparency and efficiency of local governments. For example, Piotrowski, and Ryzin (2007) measure citizens' demand for transparency at the local level and find that there are several dimensions to the public's demand for transparency, including fiscal, safety, and principled openness. Hartley (2002) argues for the need to consider institutional and organizational perspectives in analyzing local government modernization. Nyman, Nilsson and Rapp (2005) describe the ongoing debate on ways to enhance transparency in order to avoid future scandals in local governments in Sweden, and find that neither better accounting nor better auditing systems alone would resolve the dilemma of improving accountability. They report the need for linkages between auditors and elected officials and civil servants. Other studies examine what is known as the best value to improve the local government services. For example, Boyne (2000) examines the best value that has been presented by central government as a means of promoting local diversity and innovation, through performance indicators, audit, and inspection operations. Shackleton et al. (2006) examine the e-government concept in local governments in Australia and find that using e-government may not be positively compared to traditional methods which include active community participations and interaction.

Afonso and Fernandes (2006) assess the expenditure efficiency of Portuguese local governments and find that municipalities could achieve, on

average, the same level of output allegedly using around one third fewer resources, and improve performance without necessarily increasing municipal spending. Other studies such as Jolicoeur and Barrett (2004) report that local government is the level of government closest to the public, thus the framework of strategic asset management must be transparent and beyond reproach. Wisniewski and Ólafsson (2004) argue that local authorities are increasingly under pressure not only to improve their performance but also to be able to demonstrate such improvement through effective performance measurement. Schneider and Samkin (2008) examine the quality of intellectual capital disclosures in the annual reports of the New Zealand local government sector and indicate that the reporting of intellectual capital by local government authorities varies and ranges from joint collaborations to licensing agreements. However, other studies (Worthington and Dollery, 2008) evaluate local government performance measurement systems such as national performance indicators and state-based performance.

4. Methodology

To accomplish the aim of this study of better understanding local politicians' perceptions on how the performance and efficiency of local governments could be enhanced, a special survey instrument was developed and adopted based on the existing ways and means used by local governments in both developed and emerging economies to enhance community participation and transparency. The questionnaire was developed considering the Arab heritage and the Palestinian experience of local governments as well as the relevant laws.

The final questionnaire was articulated in three parts. The first part included ten statements related to ways and means of enhancing the Palestinian local council members' involvement to act closely with the mayors in conducting municipal affairs. The participants were asked to rank each of the listed statements according to their perceptions, in which rank "one" means the most favorite, and rank "ten" means the least favorite. The second part of the questionnaire included ten statements on measures, which may enhance Palestinian citizens' involvement in municipality activities. The statements were listed in the form of a Likert scale with five possible responses. The third part included again ten statements representing administrative procedures which are supposed to improve efficiency and transparency of Palestinian local governments, articulated in the form of a Likert scale with five possible responses.

The total population of the two groups includes 575 mayors and 4,214 council members in the Palestinian Territory, of which 3,651 are men and 563, are women (PCBS, 2008). In order to enumerate the perceptions of the local government leaders including mayors and council members, the questionnaire was addressed by e-mail to a sample of 40 mayors and 40 council members from the official list of the Palestinian local government manual (APLA, 2006). In addition, a follow up procedure by telephone was conducted to encourage participants of the study to fill in the questionnaire and return it either by e-mail or by fax. The survey collected 29 valid questionnaires from mayors, and 31 from council members. The average rank of each statement of the first part was calculated for each group. In addition, the average means for each statement of the ten listed ways were calculated for the second and third part in order to find out the most acceptable means. Moreover, and based on the average means for each of the listed statements mentioned in the second and third part of the questionnaire, the t-test was conducted in order to examine whether there is a significant difference between the two groups of the study towards aspects of community involvement in managing the Palestinian local governments.

5. Findings

Based on the opinions of the participants of this study, which included mayors and council members of the Palestinian local governments, the findings are presented in three sections. Both mayors and council members devote the first section to exploring ways and means of enhancing Palestinian local council members' involvement as ranked. The second section is devoted to presenting ways and means of enhancing Palestinian citizens' involvement in the municipal activities as perceived by mayors and council members, and to show the ways and means of improving transparency of Palestinian municipalities and village councils. The third section reports on the differences between mayors' and council members' opinions regarding each of the suggested practices in relation to community involvement, and in relation to improving efficiency and transparency in Palestinian local governments.

With regard to the first question of the study, which was about determining the relevant ways and means of enhancing Palestinian local council members' involvement in running local governments, the study found that for the mayors, the favorite ways of encouraging council members to be more involved in managing local governments are to incorporate them in

municipal committees, including the strategic planning committee and the budget committee, and to supervise activities in their residents' areas (see Table No.1).

Table 1: Enhancing Palestinian Local Council Members' Involvement as Perceived by Mayors and Council Members

List of ways and means	Mayors Ranks	Council Members' Ranks	Total Participants' Ranks
1. To participate in the strategic planning committee	1	2	1
2. To participate in the budget committee	2	3	2
3. To participate in the employee appointment committee	5	1	3
4. To participate in meetings with external visitors	9	6	7
5. To supervise activities in the residents' areas	3	5	4
6. To increase allowances paid for attending council meetings	10	9	10
7. To have offices in the municipality headquarters	7	10	9
8. To review public complaints before they are transferred to relevant staff	8	8	8
9. Appointments and promotions decisions to be taken by the municipality council and not only by the mayor	4	4	4
10. To form an independent control committee to supervise the municipality council	5	7	6

The most favored practice was ranked as No. 1 and the least favored was ranked as No. 10.

On the other hand, increasing the allowances paid in return for attending council meetings, participating in meetings with external visitors,

and reviewing public complaints before they are transferred to the relevant staff were the least accepted practices by the mayors. To form an independent control committee to supervise the municipal council and to participate in appointment decisions received moderate acceptance by both groups of participants. Participating in employee appointment committees was ranked as number one by the council members, followed by participating in both the strategic planning and budget committees, and by supervising activities in their residents' areas. The council members rejected the idea of having offices in the municipality headquarter; thus they do not seem to support the idea of increasing their involvement in running major daily municipal activities.

Both mayors and council members thus agreed upon two important practices, which may encourage members' involvement in conducting municipal affairs. These are participating in the strategic planning and the budget committees. In addition, both groups agreed on the least favorite practices as being reviewing public complaints before they are transferred to the relevant staff, increasing allowances for council members, and council members having offices in municipality headquarters. This means that both mayors and council members do not agree on having more participation by members in running the daily operations of the municipalities.

In order to answer the next research question, this section presents the relevant ways and means of enhancing Palestinian citizens' involvement in running local governments. The study found that municipalities' mayors are in favor of having joint meetings with civil society organizations including chambers of commerce and professionals unions. They also accept the idea of having systematic procedures to handle public complaints, having internet websites to present major projects being implemented in the municipality, and publishing budget documents publicly. All of the above practices received "agree" or "strongly agree" by the majority of the mayors as shown in Table No. 2. On the other hand, some practices were not accepted by the mayors of the Palestinian local governments, including: to convey council meetings outside the municipality headquarters, to get the approval of the majority of citizens by voting in case of some significant decisions, presenting the financial statements of the municipality in open meetings and with public participation, and to open council meetings to the general public. This means that the mayors of Palestinian local governments do not agree to what they perceive as diminishing their powers and responsibilities in running the municipal activities. They find that increasing community

participation may reduce their authorities; thus they were not in favor of adopting some democratic practices such as opening council meetings to the general public.

Table 2: Enhancing Palestinian Citizens' Involvement in Municipality Activities as Perceived by Mayors and Council Members

List of ways and means	Mayors' means**	Council Members' Means**	Total Participants' Means**
1. To have a complaints box inside the municipality headquarter	4.53	4.37	4.45
2. To have an internet website presenting all major projects	4.40	4.36	4.38
3. To have a systematic procedure to handle public complaints	4.36	4.33	4.35
4. To get the approval of the majority of citizens for some significant decisions	3.70	3.67	3.69
5. To open all council meetings to the general public	3.73	3.43	3.58
6. To publish all budget documents publicly	4.20	4.07	4.14
7. To present the financial statements of the municipality in an open meeting and with public participation	3.60	3.33	3.47
8. To have the priorities of development projects selected with the participation of municipal citizens	4.23	3.57	3.90
9. To convey council meetings outside municipality headquarters	3.57	2.80	3.19
10. To have joint meetings with civil society organizations including chamber of commerce professionals and labor unions	4.58	4.14	4.36
**Average means (Strongly agree 5 points; agree 4 points; no opinion 3; disagree 2 points; and strongly disagree 1 point)			

As for the councils members, a majority supported some practices to increase community participation such as having complaints boxes inside

municipality headquarters, having an internet website to present ongoing municipal projects, putting in place systematic procedures to handle public complaints, having joint meetings with civil society organizations, and publishing all budget documents publicly. On the other hand, they did not encourage adopting other practices such as getting the approval of the majority of citizens for some significant decisions, opening councils meetings to the general public, presenting the financial statements of the municipality in open meetings, and conveying council meetings outside the municipality headquarters. Finally, both mayors and council members have similar attitudes towards some practices, which may enhance community participations, while they disagree on other practices. Such differences will be presented in the third section.

The next research question focused on the ways and means of improving the efficiency and transparency of Palestinian municipalities (see Table No. 3). The mayors accepted policies which may increase the transparency and improve the municipality performance such as giving cash discounts for residents who pay their dues within specific dates, determining time limits for finishing citizens' transactions and meeting these commitments, appointing municipal employees based on public announcements and transparent competition. They did not accept some other practices since they believe that such practices may be costly and not justified, such as to inform residents about their transactions using SMS system, to use Visa cards as payment instrument by citizens, and to present financial dues owed by citizens on the internet websites. However, they supported offering subsidized cultural and entertainment services, but they did not strongly agree to stopping such services even if their cost is higher than their respective revenues. This is understandable due to the fact that they are elected mayors who feel that not all services should be based on a neutral cost - revenue model.

Table 3: Improving Efficiency and Transparency of Palestinian Municipalities Based on the Opinions of Mayors and Council Members

List of Ways and Means	Mayors Means**	Council Members' Means**	Total Participants' Means**
1. To have the possibility to apply for some services using an internet website	3.74	3.78	3.76
2. To determine time limits for finishing citizens transactions and to meet these commitments	4.13	3.84	3.99
3. To inform residents that their transactions are ready using SMS system	3.94	3.32	3.63
4. All employees to be appointed based on announcement and using fair competition process	4.39	4.13	4.26
5. To offer subsidized cultural and entertainment services	4.07	3.73	3.90
6. To have an emergency department open around the clock	3.93	4.03	3.98
7. To use Visa cards and bank transfers in paying municipal dues	3.73	3.70	3.72
8. To present citizens dues on an internet website including taxes and fees, using login and passwords for each resident	3.80	3.73	3.77
9. Give cash discount for residents who pay within specific dates	4.17	4.30	4.24
10. Stop services which cost more than they bring in revenues	3.32	3.71	3.52
**Average means (Strongly agree 5 points; agree 4 points; no opinion 3; disagree 2 points; and strongly disagree 1 point)			

The council members prefer adopting some practices which may strengthen the performance of municipalities such as having an emergency department open around the clock in each municipality, giving cash discounts for residents who pay their dues within specific dates, appointing employees based on announcement and using fair competition processes, and offering subsidized cultural and entertainment services. On the other hand, they did not support using IT practices such as using Visa cards in paying municipal dues, using SMS to communicate with citizens who have unfinished transactions, or using internet websites to give citizens the possibility of login to follow up on their transactions.

This last section is devoted to answering the last two questions of the study, i.e. whether there are significant differences between the opinions of council members and mayors regarding the best ways to enhance citizens' involvement in running local governments, and improving transparency and performance in conducting municipality activities. As can be seen from Table No. 4, both mayors and council members of the Palestinian local governments disagreed on four practices including having citizens participate in selecting project priorities, conveying council meetings outside municipality headquarters, having joint meetings with civil society, and opening council meetings to the general public. The t-test for each of the four mentioned practices indicates that there is a significant difference between mayors and council members at the 0.05 level or less.

Table 4: Differences in the Opinions of Mayors and Council Members Regarding Ways and Means of Enhancing Community Participation in Palestinian Local Governments' Activities

List of ways and means	t-test	Significant at
1. To have a complaints box inside the municipality headquarter	.961	0.344**
2. To have an internet website presenting all major projects	.154	0.879**
3. To have a systematic procedure to handle public complaints	.205	0.839**
4. To get the approval of the majority of citizens for some significant decisions	.197	0.845**

5. To open all council meetings to the general public	2.523	0.017*
6. To publish all budget documents publicly	.724	0.475**
7. To present the financial statements of the municipality in an open meeting and with public participation	1.861	0.073**
8. To have the priorities of development projects selected with the participation of municipal citizens	2.763	0.010*
9. To convey council meetings outside municipality headquarters	2.755	0.010*
10. To have joint meetings with civil society organizations including chamber of commerce professionals and labor unions	2.917	0.007*
*There are significant differences between both groups at the significance level of 0.05 or less		
**There are no significant differences between both groups at the significance level of 0.05 or less		

On the other hand, the t-test results for each of the other statements show that there are no significant differences between mayors and council members on practices such as having complaints boxes inside municipality headquarters, having an internet website to present major on-going projects, having systematic procedures to handle public complaints, getting approval of the majority of citizens for some significant decisions, publishing budget documents publicly, and presenting the financial statements of the municipality in open meetings.

Finally, the results presented in Table No. 5 show that there are also significant differences in the opinions of mayors and council members regarding five procedures and practices for improving transparency and performance of Palestinian local governments. These include informing residents about their transactions using SMS system, offering subsidized cultural and entertainment services, stopping unprofitable services, and determining time limits for finishing citizens' transactions. On the other hand, there were no significant differences among the other listed five practices.

Table 5: Differences in the Opinions of Mayors and Council Members Regarding Ways and Means of Improving the Efficiency and Transparency of Palestinian Municipalities

Lists of Ways and means	t-test	Significant at
1. To have the possibility to apply for some services using an internet website	.373	.712**
2. To determine time limits for finishing citizens transactions and to meet these commitments	2.334	.026*
3. To inform residents that their transactions are ready using SMS system	5.547	.000*
4. All employees to be appointed based on announcement and using fair competition process	2.108	.043*
5. To offer subsidized cultural and entertainment services	2.408	.023*
6. To have an emergency department open around the clock	-1.140	.264**
7. To use Visa cards and bank transfers in paying municipal dues	.441	.662**
8. To present citizens dues on an internet website including taxes and fees, using login and passwords for each resident	1.000	.326**
9. Give cash discount for residents who pay within specific dates	1.439	.161**
10. Stop services which cost more than they bring in revenues	2.834	.008*
*There are significant differences between both groups at the significance level of 0.05 or less		
**There are no significant differences between both groups at the significance level of 0.05 or less		

6. A Summary of the Findings

Measuring and subsequently enhancing local governments' performance and efficiency is one of the most important issues under debate in the majority of the developed as well as emerging countries. There are various mechanisms that may be followed such as using regional indicators, customized citizens' evaluations, state performance indicators, benchmarking, and community participation indicators. This study tried to get a better understanding of local politicians' perceptions on how the involvement of council members and the wider community, as well as the performance and efficiency of local governments could be enhanced. The study used a questionnaire addressed by e-mail to a sample of mayors and council members from the official list of the manual of local authorities (APLA 2006). Based on the opinions and perceptions of mayors and councils members, the findings of the study may be summarized as follows.

First, the council members like to limit their involvement to municipal committees such as the employee appointment committee (which was ranked number one by the council members), the strategic planning committee, and the budget committee, as well as to supervising some activities located in their neighborhoods. However, at the same time they do not like to extend their responsibilities beyond that, for example, by having permanent offices in the municipality headquarters or getting more financial allowances which may increase their efforts and responsibilities. This conclusion also applies to the mayors who prefer to restrict members' participation apart from regular councils meetings to participation in committees and do not agree on more participation by the members in running the daily operations of the municipalities.

Second, the mayors of the Palestinian local governments do not agree on diminishing their power and responsibilities in running the municipality activities. They regard some types of community participation as reducing their authorities, and there is little enthusiasm for some democratic practices such as opening council meetings to the general public.

Third, both mayors and municipal council members accept indirect community communications such as having complaints boxes inside the municipality headquarters, having an internet website to present on-going major projects, and having systematic procedures to handle public complaints. On the other hand, the council members do not encourage adopting face-to-face practices and direct community participation, such as opening council meetings to the general public, presenting the financial

statements in open meetings, selecting the priorities of municipal projects by citizens' voting, and conveying council meetings outside the municipality headquarters.

Fourth, both mayors and council members are less enthusiastic towards some democratic measures, such as getting approval of the majority of citizens regarding some significant decisions. They also prefer more limited community participation such as having joint meetings with civil society organizations to being open to the general public.

Finally, while both mayors and council members accept policies such as giving cash discount for residents who pay within specific dates, and determining time limits for finishing transactions, they are not in favor of adopting certain IT (or e-government) practices such as using Visa cards, SMS communication and internet websites for dealing with citizens' transactions.

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