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Towards Enhancing the Performance of Civil Society in Light of the Participatory Democracy Approach: A Comparative Study of the Brazilian and Moroccan Experiences

Abstract

This research paper aims to highlight the roles played by civil society organizations in promoting participatory democracy. These organizations have become key actors, especially in light of the declining role of the state and its difficulties in meeting the needs of local regions and addressing their demands. This situation has necessitated the development of the roles of these organizations and efforts to involve them in the management of public affairs, including deliberations and decision-making.

From this perspective, the study will shed light on the most significant roles performed by civil society organizations in consolidating participatory democracy. It will also examine the main features of civil society participation in Algeria and seek to identify key mechanisms that could empower these organizations, drawing on the experiences of Algeria, Morocco, and Brazil in strengthening the participatory model.

Keywords: *civil society, participatory democracy, Algeria, Morocco, Brazil*

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İştirakçı demokratiya yanaşması işığında vətəndaş cəmiyyətinin fəaliyyətinin artırılmasına doğru: Braziliya və Mərakeş təcrübələrinin müqayisəli tədqiqi

Xülasə

Bu tədqiqat işi vətəndaş cəmiyyəti təşkilatlarının iştirakçı demokratiyanın təşviqində oynadığı rolları işıqlandırmağı hədəfləyir. Xüsusilə, dövlətin rolunun azalması və yerli bölgələrin ehtiyaclarını qarşılamaqda, onların tələblərinə cavab verməkdə çətinlik çəkməsi fonunda bu təşkilatlar əsas aktorlardan birinə çevrilmişdir. Bu vəziyyət həmin təşkilatların rollarının inkişafını və onların ictimai işlərin idarə olunmasına, o cümlədən müzakirələrə və qərar qəbul etməyə cəlb olunmasını zəruri etmişdir.

Bu baxış bucağından, araşdırma vətəndaş cəmiyyəti təşkilatlarının iştirakçı demokratiyanın möhkəmləndirilməsində həyata keçirdiyi ən mühüm rolları işıqlandıracaqdır. Həmçinin, Əlcəzairdə vətəndaş cəmiyyətinin iştirakının əsas xüsusiyyətlərini araşdıracaq və bu təşkilatları gücləndirəcək əsas mexanizmləri müəyyənləşdirməyə çalışacaq, iştirakçı modeli gücləndirmək sahəsində Əlcəzair, Mərakeş və Braziliya təcrübələrinə əsaslanacaqdır.

Açar sözlər: vətəndaş cəmiyyəti, iştirakçı demokratiya, Əlcəzair, Mərakeş, Braziliya

Introduction

Modern societies are witnessing the emergence of numerous concepts and approaches linked to a range of variables, and these transformations have had a significant impact, particularly concerning the functions of the state and its core components.

Among these recent changes is the retreat of the state's role in administration, influenced by global, regional, and even local shifts. This has led to the development of the idea of local administration in each country, tasked with managing local affairs.

Within the context of growing interest in public administration, various concepts and strategies have emerged to improve its performance, among which is the notion of the participatory democracy approach. This is considered one of the essential entry points for addressing underdevelopment and is regarded as an indicator of contemporary administration, which is built on involving all actors in the process of making public policy. This objective can only be achieved through the participation of local community members in decision-making processes that directly affect them, as the effectiveness of these decisions depends on the capacities of these local actors.

Research

Based on the above, the adoption of participatory democracy has evolved into a forward-looking vision aimed at enhancing and valuing local capacities. Expanding its application has become a necessity for modernizing administration through various methods and partners in local administration, represented by civic associations.

Problem Statement

Addressing the issue of civil society and enhancing its performance, along with initiating discussion around the participatory democracy approach, has opened the way for civic movements to play their role—especially with the rise in political awareness, which has demonstrated the need for collective action to bring about changes in the social structure. Accordingly, this study seeks to examine the various roles played by civil society organizations in promoting participatory democracy, focusing in particular on Algeria, Morocco, and Brazil.

In light of the above, and given what has been written on the topic and the recognized need to involve civil society as a reliable partner in the management of public affairs, we pose the following research question:

What is the nature of the role played by civil society in promoting participatory democracy in the Algerian, Moroccan, and Brazilian experiences?

To study this research problem and clarify its variables, we pose the following questions:

- What is meant by the participatory democracy approach?
- What role is assigned to civil society organizations in consolidating participatory democracy in Algeria, Morocco, and Brazil?

To address this issue and place it within an analytical framework, we test the following hypothesis:

- The success of participatory democracy is to some extent linked to activating the role of civil society in performing its functions.

To answer the main research problem and its related sub-questions, and to test this hypothesis, this study has been divided into the following parts:

1. A conceptual approach to the notions of civil society and the participatory democracy approach:

1.1. The Concept of Civil Society and the Participatory Democracy Approach

Francis Fukuyama defined civil society as the realm of spontaneously created social structures separate from the state, upon which democratic political institutions are built. According to Dunn, civil society is “broadly viewed as the sphere of relationships situated between the private sphere of the family on the one hand and the state on the other” (Fukuyama, 1995, pp. 7–14).

Charles Taylor defined civil society as “a network of associations independent of the state, which connect citizens to one another in matters of shared concern, and whose presence or actions can have an impact on public policy.” Schmitter defined civil society as “a set or system of self-organized intermediate groups” (Dunn, 1996). Similarly, *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics* defines civil society as “a set of intermediate associations which are neither the state nor the (extended) family; thus civil society includes voluntary associations, corporations, and other legal entities.” One of the advantages of this type of definition is that it allows for the empirical activation and testing of civil society.

From these definitions, it becomes evident that the general purposes for which civil society institutions were established—and which they seek to achieve—highlight their non-profit (voluntary) nature, granting them independence from the state and its apparatus. Therefore, civil society refers to the social relationships characterized by voluntary association and the participation of individuals acting in their personal capacities. Put simply, civil society can be seen as the sphere of private contractual relationships. Accordingly, we can regard voluntary organizations as the institutionalization of social relationships, as identified by scholars such as Tester (Schmitter, 1995).

2.1. The Concept of Participatory Democracy

Participatory democracy refers to “an approach that aims at development in which the population actively participates, seeking to empower individuals and groups, enabling them to adopt solutions they propose themselves, for which they bear responsibility in both choosing and implementing.”

It also means “the contribution of citizens, to varying degrees, in designing and overseeing the implementation of local development policies, whether through their own efforts or in cooperation with central and local government bodies.” From this, we may define participatory democracy operationally as a set of voluntary activities that unify popular and governmental efforts related to the local community—be they economic, social, or cultural—carried out through opinion, effort, or financial contribution, while respecting community considerations to avoid conflict, ultimately achieving shared interests within the same society.

2. Analysis of the Role of Civil Society in Activating the Participatory Democracy Approach

Civil society organizations are key actors in the political system, especially with the emergence of democratic systems linked to local participation and globalization. This context has strengthened the effectiveness of civil society organizations as a result of changes affecting the functions of the state, which have often negatively impacted its ability to meet the needs of all regions and to address local demands. This has made it necessary to develop the roles of these organizations and to involve them in managing public affairs.

Civil society has thus become an important economic and social partner for the state across different political systems, by assisting local government through direct cooperation, financial support, or by providing social services to citizens. Meaningful participation by civil society is realized through the activation of development initiatives, and the proximity of civil society organizations to local communities enables them to serve as channels for people's participation in economic and social activities. This helps citizens organize themselves and become more influential in shaping public policy decisions and in accessing public resources, particularly for the benefit of the poor (Montero, 2013).

Moreover, these organizations can act as checks on government power, monitor social abuses, and provide opportunities to enhance people's capacities and living standards—for example, by protecting the environment, supporting the underprivileged, developing human resources, and facilitating communication among business actors.

In addition to these roles in local community development, participatory development today is no longer confined to the relationship between the state, the citizen, and civil society organizations alone; rather, civil society organizations are among the key mechanisms relied upon to advance local development in many countries.

They work to influence government decisions by continuously advocating around issues affecting the local community, which directly concern citizens and encourage participation in local development. Despite the importance of these roles played by civil society in Algeria at both the national and local levels, associative activity still suffers from certain shortcomings, which have negatively affected its performance and its ability to fulfill its assigned functions (Kadache, 1980).

Civil society has played a tangible role in advancing comprehensive development and democratic transformation by instilling values and promoting democratic practices in society, and by making these real at both governmental and popular levels. This includes broadening participation in shaping public policy and thereby avoiding top-down, centrally imposed decisions that do not take citizens' needs and diverse problems into account. It has also enabled citizens to access all relevant information, encouraged them to be at the center of the development process, and worked to defend marginalized groups in Algerian society and reintegrate them. This effort aims to mitigate the negative impacts of economic reform policies and to adjust structural policies to account for social dimensions such as unemployment, poverty, and other social challenges, ultimately in search of solutions to these problems.

This is achieved by monitoring the work of official bodies in the process of local public policy-making and by managing organizations based on the principle of transparency in their operations and sources of funding. In doing so, these organizations evolve from being purely civic associations to becoming development-focused organizations.

Civil society institutions have thus become involved in a range of activities that can be summarized as follows:

- Supporting health services in remote and underserved areas.
- Working on projects related to primary healthcare and positive health promotion.
- Supporting small-scale production projects.
- Defending human rights and freedoms.
- Engaging in training, capacity-building, literacy, and poverty reduction initiatives.
- Focusing on childhood development and supporting youth.
- Contributing to local community development by providing various services and strengthening the community's infrastructure.

It should be noted that, as is widely known, the activity of associations in Algeria is surrounded by a set of constraints that limit their effectiveness and hinder their ability to perform their societal functions.

3. Aspects of Civil Society Participation in Consolidating the Participatory Democracy Approach

The manifestations of civil society participation in strengthening the participatory approach can be seen in its contribution to ensuring the integrity of local elections and its involvement in legislation, oversight, and local governance.

3.1. Civil Society Participation in Ensuring the Integrity of Local Elections

Participation in local elections is considered one of the most democratic means and an important expression of the values of political participation. Ensuring the integrity of elections reflects the genuine will of the people and the independence of opinion and expression. Algeria reinforced this mechanism through political and legal reform in 2016, emphasizing the promotion of participatory democracy at the local level under *Organic Law 16/01*, which enhanced the status and role of civil society in serving the public interest within a democratic context (Al-Mazuni, 2019).

Given the large number of municipalities nationwide—totaling 1,541—it becomes difficult to reach all municipalities during local elections. This makes it necessary to coordinate with civil society, which sometimes nominates candidates alongside political parties, reflecting the overlap between political parties and civil society. These associations engage directly with local residents during election campaigns, making them well aware of their daily concerns and demands, and work to raise voter awareness about the importance of participating in elections through seminars, meetings, and gatherings organized jointly with local communities.

Among the key functions performed by civil society at the local level are:

1. Ensuring the proper conduct of the electoral process in accordance with the relevant laws and regulations.
2. Safeguarding citizens' rights to freely stand as candidates and to vote.
3. Ensuring equal campaigning opportunities for all candidates, ultimately leading to free, fair, and transparent elections that reflect the voters' true will.

3.2. Civil Society Participation in Legislation and Oversight

Civil society organizations contribute to democratic development and to broadening the base of popular participation while monitoring government actions through education, awareness-raising, and training activities.

The oversight role of civil society organizations is evident in their monitoring of the work of elected local councils, which helps to establish good governance. This is achieved by attending meetings and deliberations of local councils, adding a layer of transparency and granting these organizations a supervisory role over local government bodies (Boubaia, 2011).

Returning to the internal regulations of Parliament, it becomes apparent that there is no explicit provision for involving civil society in legislative work, except for Article 43 of the internal regulations of the People's National Assembly, which states that permanent committees, in the course of their work, may invite experts and specialists to assist them in fulfilling their duties. Similarly, Article 47 outlines a set of tasks these committees may undertake. Article 38 of the internal regulations of the Council of the Nation also stipulates that permanent committees, while carrying out their work, may invite experts and specialists to support them in their responsibilities (Rachid, 1981).

3.3. Civil Society Participation in Local Governance

In addition to its oversight role, civil society institutions also play important roles in managing local affairs. This includes promoting transparency, combating and preventing corruption, collaborating with government bodies in decision-making, and involving citizens in the management of their public affairs and responsibilities, thereby enabling them to access information relevant to them (Ben Nasser, n.d.).

Law No. 11-10 on Municipalities, in Article 26, stipulates that “the sessions of the Municipal People's Assembly are public and open to the citizens of the municipality and to any citizen concerned with the subject of deliberation,” which contributes to ensuring the transparency of these deliberations.

Furthermore, Article 22 of the same law specifies that the meeting agenda should be posted at the entrance of the deliberation hall and in places designated for informing the public as soon as members of the Municipal People's Assembly are invited. The Municipal People's Assembly then approves the items listed on the agenda and may add new additional items. It also takes all necessary measures to inform citizens about local matters and to consult them on urban planning, economic, social, and cultural development priorities and choices (Ben Nasser, 2015).

To achieve local development in its participatory dimension, it is necessary to activate the role of civil society institutions in Algeria.

This requires clear policies and mechanisms aimed at strengthening the role of these organizations, which can be summarized as follows:

1. The need to lift restrictions on the establishment of associations to ensure their independence.
2. Establishing clear legal mechanisms that allow these organizations to participate in proposing legislation, setting local development priorities, and monitoring their implementation.
3. Requiring officials to consider the proposals and concerns of civil society organizations, and creating frameworks to discuss these demands and proposals in a way that aligns them with general objectives as well as with available human and material resources for local development.
4. Ensuring that these organizations themselves operate with democratic governance and transparency in their management and decision-making processes.
5. Repealing all laws and measures that restrict meetings and demonstrations in public spaces and encouraging associations to express their views and to collaborate with other associations that enjoy the same rights as Algerian associations.
6. Understanding civil society as a political laboratory and a space for citizens' political socialization, which facilitates the acquisition of civic spirit and the social integration of individuals.
7. Enabling civil society to participate both directly and indirectly in decision-making, ensuring these decisions are realistic and grounded in genuine needs that support local projects, while avoiding political posturing and personal interests (Mohsen, 2012).

4. Models for Applying the Participatory Democracy Approach – A Case Study of the Moroccan and Brazilian Experiences

Previous experiences that have adopted the participatory approach as a mechanism of governance have demonstrated that it is the most effective model for managing public affairs, especially as it is practiced directly by involving all groups and segments of society, consulting them on issues that concern them, and aligning priorities with these projects. Within this context, we will attempt to examine the Brazilian and Moroccan models, and briefly touch upon their democratic experiences and the extent to which they succeeded or faced challenges in this type of democratic practice (Benaïmer, 2018).

4.1. The Brazilian Experience

Observers of Brazil's trajectory in integrating the participatory approach note that it is inspired by liberal state principles enshrined in the *Brazilian Constitution of 1822*, evident in provisions safeguarding civil liberties and rights, influenced by the North American model, particularly the federal system of 22 states. Gradually, Brazil shifted away from the liberal state towards a social state model inspired by the Portuguese constitution. In the 1990s, Brazil adopted a reformist path to democratize the country, with political parties playing a significant role, particularly regarding the Brazilian political scene. The Brazilian experience, in which the opposition was a key actor, culminated in the recognition of political pluralism and the organization of free elections. Brazil also followed global economic trends by implementing privatization, opening up to foreign markets, and adopting economic reforms such as revising bankruptcy laws and controlling deficits at municipal and state levels. Despite successive crises in 2004, 2008, and 2009, the economic landscape maintained positive growth (Montero, 2013). The Brazilian model progressed through a positive trajectory, led by social movements aiming to redefine the relationship between state institutions and society through initiatives that established new mechanisms for practicing democracy. These

mechanisms allowed for broader popular participation, making citizens active contributors to public policy-making and capable of monitoring their elected representatives. In this regard, the city of Porto Alegre represents a model of “participatory budgeting,” particularly in local administration and other cities. It focused on setting priorities for public spending in sectors like services and public utilities, negotiating with the city council and mayor, and monitoring their performance. These initiatives created wider prospects for expanding public participation, local-level consultation, and evaluating and monitoring public policy. The *Brazilian Constitution of 1988* further strengthened federalism and administrative decentralization, recognized fundamental individual rights and popular sovereignty, and established universal suffrage for men and women. It also enhanced popular participation through policy councils and included provisions for referendums, ensuring citizens’ input on legal matters (Schmitter, 1995).

Several constitutional articles promote participatory governance and citizenship as the foundation of the democratic state.

For instance:

- Article 14 affirms that "popular sovereignty shall be exercised through universal suffrage and direct and secret voting, with equal value for all, via referenda, plebiscites, and popular initiatives."
- Article 58 mandates that executive committees and all committees must ensure proportional representation of political parties or parliamentary groups in the relevant council as far as possible. It further allows for public hearings with civil society entities and receiving petitions and complaints from anyone against actions or omissions of governmental authorities or public entities.
- Article 10 ensures the participation of workers and employees in administrative bodies of public institutions where professional or social security interests are discussed.

Additionally, the Constitution stipulates the creation, merging, integration, and division of municipalities through state laws, conditional on prior consultation via referendum, after publishing feasibility studies as provided by law. Brazil also encouraged public-private partnerships as a form of popular participation, promoting competitive tenders for public works, services, and procurement while adhering to the principles of public administration (Dunn, 1996). In parallel, Brazil reaffirmed its commitment to human rights by joining international conventions and consistently inviting special rapporteurs and mechanisms to monitor its compliance with international obligations. The Brazilian Constitution is thus seen as a model for recognizing and guaranteeing citizens’ fundamental rights. Importantly, women's political participation advanced, culminating in the election of the country’s first female president in 2011, reflecting the government’s commitment to gender equality in response to demands from civil society and human rights movements.

In this context, a draft urban planning framework was introduced, integrating social, political, and economic issues. Participatory urban management thus presents an operational challenge affecting municipal performance, as planned policies must align with broader urban planning (Kadache, 1980).

4.2 The Moroccan Experience in Participatory Democracy

The Moroccan experience is among the first in the Arab world to begin adopting a participatory approach in public policy-making, driven by both internal and regional factors. The regional uprisings of 2011, which affected parts of North Africa, marked a turning point that compelled Morocco to implement political reforms. These reforms were also influenced by international recommendations, such as those of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, calling for genuine democratic practice based on decentralization and support for regional governments. Additionally, Morocco's rapid economic development in partnership with the European Union necessitated adherence to EU recommendations, particularly promoting local democracy as the best measure for economic and developmental integration.

Among the reforms initiated by Morocco was the adoption of the 2011 Constitution, which followed widespread popular protests involving around 150–200 thousand Moroccans in 250 cities, demanding change to the political and economic system.

The preamble of this constitution reaffirms the democratic choice under the rule of law, giving participatory democracy a special place and linking it to the concept of citizenship. It considers

participatory democracy a cornerstone of Morocco's constitutional monarchy, based on the separation and balance of powers and the principles of good governance and accountability (Benaïmer, 2018).

Introducing the concept of participation was not merely rhetorical; the constitution established new rules empowering Moroccan society with a key role in decision-making. It outlined how advisory councils and governance bodies should steer public policies. In 2015, Morocco introduced a local development plan known as the "2015 Communal Development Plan," outlining the Ministry of the Interior's vision and future transformations of territorial communities. It emphasized financial administration, professional management of local services, modernization of information systems, recruitment of skilled human resources, and optimal mobilization of financial resources, including asset management, and addressing irregularities in local governance. Participatory democracy, as described in the Moroccan Constitution, responded to citizens' demands and needs. A notable initiative was the establishment of the "Advisory Council for Youth and Community Action," a civil constitutional body under public law dedicated to ensuring participatory governance, human development, and wider youth participation, as well as fostering civic engagement, professional development, quality education, and improved health services. According to the 2011 Moroccan Constitution, participatory democracy is practiced through two mechanisms: submitting legislative petitions and presenting petitions to public authorities, under implementing laws 14-44 (on legislative petitions) and 14-64 (on petitions to public authorities). These laws granted citizens broad powers to request the inclusion of issues within public policy agendas (Benaïmer, 2018). These political reforms were accompanied by the issuance of the National Charter of Participatory Democracy, emphasizing the construction of a democratic system based on participation, pluralism, and good governance.

The charter highlighted four goals:

- Participation in influencing public decision-making.
- Achieving transparency.
- Activating civil accountability.
- Institutionalizing good governance in public administration.

The Moroccan legislator also established institutional channels that represented a qualitative leap toward democratizing governance, ensuring transparency, quality performance, and administrative accountability.

These include:

- The High Authority for Audiovisual Communication, which safeguards pluralistic expression and access to information in the audiovisual sector.
- The Competition Council, which promotes economic ethics, transparency, and fair market practices while combating irregularities.
- The National Authority for Probity, Prevention, and Combating Corruption, which addresses all forms of corruption and promotes values of good governance and a public service culture.

From the above, it is evident that adopting a participatory democratic approach has become a priority at the local level. It reflects the aspirations of all societal groups, supports transparency, prioritizes the public interest, and links responsibility with accountability, aiming to empower local citizens to participate in public policy-making and advance local development (MOHSEN, 2012).

Conclusion

Through our study of the topic *Enhancing the Role of Civil Society in Activating Participatory Democracy*, we have concluded that participatory democracy constitutes one of the key approaches of contemporary governance. It offers a pathway to improving administrative performance, alongside the role played by civil society organizations, which contribute as partners to increasing the effectiveness of participation in local communities.

These efforts aim to address deficiencies and shortcomings within public administration. Today, local democracies affirm the extent to which administrations require this new model of local governance. It is considered one of the indicators of good governance, as it enables all segments of society to participate in shaping and making local and national decisions. All of this underlines the

need to innovate new methods and approaches in this field and to create more opportunities for civil society movements to be involved in the development process in the future.

In order for local administrations to overcome the negative impact of past failures, it is necessary to broaden the base of popular participation and grant civil society its rightful role within a participatory framework. Civil society should also be empowered to access information, given its political influence on the broader political system. Furthermore, it is crucial to expand the scope of dialogue and continuous discussion with these institutions, which can help coordinate local efforts and engage marginalized groups in society, ultimately working towards their reintegration.

Recommendations

- Open channels of dialogue with local citizens and associations, and establish a municipal council dedicated to addressing the concerns of local residents.
- Ensure that civil society consults with local citizens and takes their proposals into account regarding projects that affect them.
- Provide civil society—particularly neighborhood committees—with greater space to express the issues facing local communities and to communicate these to decision-makers.
- Reform the legal framework governing associations to address existing gaps, and reconsider the issue of financial resources.

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