

Supporting Local Government in the Gulf

The governments of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have been experimenting with political liberalization since the early 1990s and have implemented a significant, albeit measured, series of political reforms. While one of the results of these reforms is the emergence of partially elected legislative and municipal councils that have enabled limited citizen engagement, these institutions are largely excluded from GCC political discourse and have little direct responsibility for governance. The evolution of municipal councils as genuine governing bodies would represent a significant step toward democracy in the Gulf region.

At the request of municipal councilors from GCC countries, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) has supported the development

of regional institutions through which local officials can organize and collectively influence policy and decision-making processes within the GCC political systems. Working closely with municipal councilors, the Institute has provided technical assistance for the establishment and improvement of effective networking bodies including a municipal association and annual conference tasked with developing and promoting good governance at the local level. In support of these initiatives, NDI has led workshops on creating and managing a regional municipal association, study missions to learn best practices from other municipal officials and consultations to develop leadership skills.

Citizen Input and Policymaking at the Local Level

In January 2008, NDI and the Kuwait Municipal Council co-sponsored a workshop for 31 municipal officials from Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia. It was the first initiative ever undertaken in the region to foster cooperation among municipal executive directors, ministry officials and councilors. In skill-building sessions focused on strategic planning, capacity building and institutional cooperation, participants discussed establishing a regional municipal councils association and municipal executive office; and utilizing the annual municipal work conference to improve local governance.

Following the January workshop, NDI will hold two seminars in the region for municipal councilors and executive directors of municipalities. These seminars will involve practical training in leadership skills and

exposure to case studies demonstrating the impact that strong leadership has on the political process. The workshops will help to prepare municipal leaders for the Third Annual Gulf Municipal Work Conference, which will take place in Doha, Qatar from April 21 to 23, 2008. In addition to conducting a two-day pre-conference workshop developed with the Qatar Central Municipal Council (CMC), NDI will provide the Qataris with technical assistance to plan and implement the conference.

NDI anticipates initiating additional programming in 2008 that will expand current efforts with Saudi municipal councilors and other local officials. Additionally, NDI has coordinated with Saudi partners to promote Saudi women leadership through a new program, which began in February 2008.

Program History and Rationale

NDI's activities in 2008 will build on previous regional programming over the last several years. With technical assistance provided by NDI, the municipal association initiative was conceived in 2004 by the late Ebrahim Hussein, former President of Bahrain's Central Area Municipal Council. In December 2005, following a successful conference earlier in the year that introduced the association concept to 120 local officials, the Institute aided Mr. Hussein's efforts to produce a working paper on the establishment of a regional association. The working paper envisioned an independent democratic association capable of: developing and promoting good governance at the local level; providing technical advice, information sharing and leadership development to its members; advocating for strong local councils; and influencing national governments and the GCC on behalf of their constituencies.

The working paper was formally adopted at the First Annual Gulf Municipal Work Conference in Bahrain, which took place in 2006 and brought together 250 elected and appointed municipal councils, municipal government and ministry officials, and GCC Secretariat representatives. Conference attendees passed a resolution that: supported the establishment of an association for the Gulf municipalities; and established a plan to lobby the ministers of municipality affairs of the GCC states to support the creation of a regional association. The GCC Secretariat welcomed the initiative and declared its support for the establishment of the association.

From December 9 to 13, 2006, NDI conducted a foundational workshop on developing a municipal association in Kuwait City, Kuwait for 21 municipal leaders from Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. This workshop provided municipal councilors in GCC countries with: an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of a municipal

association and the skills to develop the function and structure of a regional association.

During the workshop, the participants formed a five-member steering committee whose stated goal was to obtain commitments for the establishment of an association from municipal councils in the six GCC countries through advocacy and cooperation with local executive bodies and the GCC Secretariat.

In January 2007, NDI hosted a study mission of 10 GCC municipal councilors in Washington, DC. The local representatives studied various mechanisms of local governance in the United States through case studies in Maryland, Virginia and Washington. The study mission provided the participants with the opportunity to observe firsthand the planning and decision-making processes of local government as well as the role of municipal associations.

Throughout the rest of 2007, NDI conducted a number of workshops for Saudi municipal councilors, which included a study mission to examine the Spanish municipal system, and developed a work plan with municipal councilors throughout the region. In October and November, NDI staff visited Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE to promote and coordinate upcoming program activities.

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