

Perspective on the PRDP
Palestinian NGO's
December 2007

PREAMBLE:

In responding to the pressing need to formulate a comprehensive and orchestrated national plan for development in the Palestinian areas that are under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority, the current Palestinian government has drafted out the Palestinian Reform and Development plan for the years 2008-2010.

After reviewing the PRDP, examining the process through which the plan has been developed, and based on the experience and concern of the NGO sector in Palestine regarding the issue of development, PNGO believes that it is its responsibility and obligation to share its view and position regarding 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 with the donor community.

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

Although we appreciate the efforts made by the current government to develop such a comprehensive development plan, nevertheless Palestinian NGOs have identified some serious limitations in its approach to development planning, as well as problems confronting the implementation process of this plan.

In addition, Palestinian NGO's have also identified key shortcomings in terms of the content of this development plan and its capacity to respond to the real needs of Palestinian society in the WBG and Jerusalem in light of the current state of affairs.

PROBLEMATIC ASSUMPTIONS:

The plan was developed based on the best case scenario that assumed an anticipated easing of the political situation and a launching of a meaningful political process that would inevitably lead to a just political settlement and bring about stability and further a more conducive environment for development in the occupied Palestinian territory.

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

In contrast, the existing facts on the ground demonstrate an opposite picture where Gaza has become a prison to 1.4 million persons; where the physical separation of Gaza from the West Bank, and the severe restrictions on movement on the West Bank make economic growth and system building impossible, according to the World Bank and other

international donors; and where the Gaza Strip is considered as hostile entity by the Israeli Government, subject to severe measures of collective punishment, including the drastic recent reduction in fuel supply which mostly harms civilians.

All these facts on the ground indicate the need to recognize that Gaza and the West Bank are two different socioeconomic and political contexts that have emerged recently, and consequently must and do shape the development picture in the country.

Has the plan taken these facts into consideration?

At the same time the issues of disintegration of the occupied Palestinian Territory into 4 Bantustans has not been addressed in the development plan.

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

Indeed, the long-term geographical disintegration as a result of the closure regime imposed by the Israeli Government on the WBG and Jerusalem has severely impacted the 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 this vital aspect of development.

Vision

It is our contention that the underpinnings of development plans originate in a shared vision of the kind of society we are building, 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 then is the third step in a process, not the first!

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

Do these principles constitute a shared vision?

Did those entail a focus on macroeconomic growth or societal development?

A content analysis of this plan indicates that the vision that has been set in the plan consolidated 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 over all political statement presented in the plan, we note that state building should be seen within the context of a comprehensive political process where issues such as the Palestinian Refugees situation outside the occupied territory is at the heart of this settlement.

In addition the underlying vision in this plan has been limited to one assumption that is of the “smooth implementation” of the first and the second phase of the road map without seeing the political limitations in this process.

Surely, a contingency plan should be made, to say the least, based on different possible political scenarios.

Process

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

Has this process been completed when laying down the current development plan?

In reality, civil society as one of the major players in development has not been involved in this planning process, not 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 may contrast with a mere economic approach to development.

PNGO’s approach necessarily means partnership and sharing, discussions and evidence generation, and then 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 this country, bearing in mind the very rich experience of the Palestinian NGOs in development, and adding to that the competence of NGOs in delivering vital services to the poor and marginalized groups of the society.

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

We believe Palestinian NGOs especially should have been consulted, as they have much to contribute to this process of development planning. Palestinian NGOs are also keen to cooperate with government structures to achieve the desired goals that can bring about better living conditions for Palestinian citizens.

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

Economic growth: how and for what purpose

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

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

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 living of the Palestinian community, the plan simply assumed that economic prosperity is the major goal and not other vital aspects of life such as free access, feeling secure, not being under constant severe distress, and freedoms of all sorts, which are lacking for Palestinians.

Furthermore, the plan did not take into consideration supporting and strengthening the resilience of the people to cope with the 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 not only about merely economic growth but rather about people's well being and life quality (physical, social, psychological and environmental) in the core of which their personal security and human dignity come first.

Viability:

The question of viability is not a luxurious mental exercise as in this part of the world viability is the first question to be asked when you try to set your economic and social agenda. The legitimate questions are:

- a. Is this plan applicable to Gaza, and how can it be implemented without ensuring the integrity of one governance structure, and contiguous territorial integrity?
- b. What about the 250 thousands residents of East Jerusalem? How did this development plan include them?
- c. What kind of interventions the plan has developed to deal with the consequences of building the separation WALL where more than 28% Of the most fertile lands and vital water resources will be left out behind, in addition to the fact that more than 400 thousands people are severely affected by this reality.
- d. With the current imposed policy of closure and the control of border crossings by Israel, as well as the Paris protocol that 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 societal development:

We rightly believe that 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, so that it becomes legitimate.

The plan contained 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 elected PLC in this process and its mandate to discuss, adopt and monitor the implementation of this plan.

It was therefore astonishing to see that the plan did not include discussions of the role of civil society organizations and how to preserve and develop further this vital civil society structures in Palestine.

Here then comes the legitimate question of whether the plan is about social development that would lead to more empowered societal structures and more participation of different stakeholders in the development process or whether it's merely about economic growth and better fiscal and financial performance?

And, whether it serves particular group or the Palestinian society at large at it should be?

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 in social structures that obstruct justice and equity,
- d. Perceiving reform as a tool to build accountable and transparent structures
- e. And finally bringing about real improvement in the life conditions of the people and meet 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 were the main pillars on which the plan stands.

The intention is to make severe cuts in public expenditures through the reduction in the number of public servants and freezing of wages and public employment, except for education and health.

At the same time the plan entails increasing income tax revenues and taking a decision to cut public lending for water and electricity bills.

At first glance those measures could be seen as an effective way to reduce heavy public expenditure and improve efficiency of the system.

But: those measures are intended to take place without a social security system in place that can guarantee social protection to the most needy and vulnerable groups of the society.

Whatever, happened to equity and the struggle to reduce poverty and remove inequality, which are major Millennium Development Goals?

In a scenario like ours, while the intention is to make major cuts in public expenditure the only alternative that the government has, in order to combat poverty and decrease unemployment rates, is through attracting private and some public investments and 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 log frames and utilizing economic indicators to improve system performance and measure outcomes.

It is first and foremost about human and societal development. As such, vision, approach and process are *key*. Only when those are compatible with a population's needs can a development plan have the hope to produce positive results. In the case of the oPt, a fundamental precondition for economic growth (and societal growth) as the World Bank keeps indicating include the following three preconditions:

1. A serious improvements in the security environment;
2. Dismantling Israeli restrictions on the movement of people and goods;
3. And 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 past 13 years experience, massive aid that failed to take into consideration the root causes of poverty, and the lack of economic growth, namely 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.

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