

The Challenging Facing City Council, as a Democratic Institution, in Iran towards Sustainability: a Case Study of Mahmoodabad, Mazandaran

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Abstract— Introduction: This study focuses on city councils as public, democratic, and participatory institutions to identify the key challenges and barriers faced by democratic organizations towards full democracy. It also discusses the role of democratic institutions in fostering societal movement toward democracy and building a more sustainable society and city.

Methods: It is a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews with council members from different cities in Iran, focusing on council challenges, local management, participation, the role of citizens; and exploring selected documents from Mahmoodabad City Council.

Results and Conclusions: The results highlight the serious and complex problems that city councils in Iran face, particularly concerning the application of democratic principles and values. Iran has a long path ahead to establish democratic institutions and internalize democratic principles among citizens. It appears that Iran, like other developing societies, require non-political mechanisms and a committed atmosphere to guide society toward a democratic direction. Society must focus on guidelines to introduce strategies for individual and collective citizen actions to embrace democratic values and build a more sustainable society.

Keywords: *Sustainability, Democracy, Democratic Institutions, City Council, Iran*

Introduction

Goal 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030) aims to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”; and Goal 16 seeks to “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” [1].

The Agenda emphasizes the importance “Sustainable Cities and Communities” (Goal 11); and “Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions” (Goal 16) to move towards sustainability by 2030. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as a global guideline, encompassing 17 Goals, 169 global targets and 232 indicators to measure the process; enhance the quality of life for everyone and to make the world a better place.

By focusing on the effective ways to engage with goals 11 and 16 at local, national and global levels, grassroots

institutions have important roles to integrating local governance and sustainability strategies.

Democratic structures can facilitate the promotion of sustainability principles by enhancing knowledge and awareness, ensuring transparency and accountability in governance, fostering dialogue, critical thinking, and participatory processes, ultimately improving the quality of life for all.

City councils, as democratic institutions and mechanisms for decision-making and representative democracy, guide societies toward a more just and sustainable path. However, the challenges faced by these institutions can significantly impact the successful implementation of sustainability strategies.

Therefore, this study aims to highlight the capacity and potential of democratic institutions, especially city councils, for local governance and sustainability strategy implementation at the grassroots level. It also seeks to present the major challenges faced by the Mahmoodabad City Council in its pursuit of participatory local governance and sustainable city development as a sustainable city.

Democracy And Sustainability

Democracy, as the most widespread form of governance, is grounded in the belief that people are equal in fundamental humanity and basic rights. This concept is characterized by “economic freedom, control of abuse of power, free and fair elections, multiparty systems, citizen participation, accountability and transparency, independent judiciary, political tolerance, accepting the results of elections” [2]; “citizen involvement in decision making, a system of representative, the rule of law, and an electoral system majority rule” [3].

Additionally, democratic values and principles emphasize “human rights and fundamental freedom; respect for the human person, freedom of expression, tolerance of all groups of society, equality of opportunity for each person” [4]; respect to minority rights, promoting tolerance and empathy among different groups, no disrespect toward political opponents, and respectful dialogue and debate.

These principles are intertwined with social sustainability in communities and cities, fostering “local action, deliberative democracy, and citizen empowerment” [5]; and “Sustainable planning and development would build the community capacity through improving trust, increasing knowledge, and developing social relations among members” [6].

To achieve these principles in practice, society must promote a culture of democracy among citizens. It should be “structured to ensure transparency and objectivity through an open voting system” [7]. “Transitioning to more democratic regimes similarly increases the sustainability of a nation” [8] and “without a sustainable urban governance development, democracy faces many hindrances and could be undermined” [9].

Democracy will be involved through the process of implementing institutions for “providing opportunities for everyone to participate creatively and critically in community affairs, connecting individuals, building trust, respect and confidence in the democratic processes and in the future” [10]. These institutions occur to enhance democratic principles and protect against undemocratic ways. Moreover, democracy is threatened by these institutions in an unhealthy democracy.

In this context, questions arise about what is wrong with democracy in less democratic societies; and how to establish successful democratic structures in developing countries like Iran.

Methodology

The study includes interviews with 15 council members from different cities in Iran to discuss issues and explore council meetings and documents. The interviews involve in-depth, semi-structured questions, which allow the research to be a flexible and on-going process. The gathered information provides the basis for this research, concentrating on research questions to answer and offer possible solutions and recommendations.

Research Questions:

- Can democratic institutions, such as city councils, promote democratic processes and internalize democratic

concepts in a developing country like Iran?

- What challenges affect democratic institutions in their pursuit of a desirable democracy and sustainable development?
- How do these challenges impact efforts towards sustainability?

The Experiences of City Council in Iran

“On urban management in Iran, it can be said that the city has existed since ancient era, but the turning point in the management of cities in Iran is constitutional era that was done by approval municipality law in 1286 [1907]. This law was defeated and there was a strong centralization in the Pahlavi dynasty. In this era, government authorities were in charge of cities management. After the Islamic revolution in 1357 [1979], a new law was approved on managing council department based on the constitution at the country, state, urban and rural levels. At city level, city council was replaced to city association and became in charge of the tasks rather than city council. The first Islamic city council election was held in 1377 [1999] and the first Councils representatives were started to work since then and for the first time government power in urban management reduced and local and public institutions power increased [...]. By council elections, major step were taken in the management of the administrative affairs of the country based on the free exchange of knowledge, insight and people votes” [11].

In fact, the essence of the city council is decentralization and local governance, where people exercise democratic local management by free and fair elections to plan, implement and monitor in urban affairs. The major duties of city council, as a public and legislative institution, are related to municipality by selecting mayor, and planning and supervising the activities of municipality. As mentioned, the first Islamic city council elections were held in cities and villages on Friday, 26 February 1999 to elect some 200000 seats to a 4 year term.

Many people believe that “the position of councils in urban management of country is ambiguous and city councils don’t have sufficient and necessary authorities for local planning” [12]. Hence, by considering more than 23 years, it would be helpful to highlight the role of city council in society through focusing on some of the main challenges of the city council, as a democratic, public and participatory institution, some of which are related with an effective council to foster society to be more democratic; and more sustainable.

Sustainability Plan in Mahmoodabad

In 2013, the Mahmoodabad City Council designed a sustainability strategy to guide the city toward becoming sustainable [13]. Mahmoodabad, situated on the southern coast of the Caspian Sea, boasts rich natural resources, a robust local economy, high levels of citizen participation, and a commitment to addressing sustainability challenges.

The strategy covers environmental, economic, and social dimensions; and seeks to involve residents in the implementation process. However, despite the strategic planning, the city faced challenges in achieving its sustainability goals, especially concerning the relationship between effective democratic institutions and the implementation of sustainability strategies.

The Main Challenges

This section delves into the primary challenges and barriers faced by democratic institutions and, in particular, the city council. These challenges impact the democratic and effective functioning of the council, with direct implications for public trust.

Politicization: City councils in Iran often face politicization and interference in their affairs by the government and political parties. A notable example is the election of mayors, which can undermine trust in the council.

Uninformed Voters: “Citizen participation builds a stronger democracy” [14] and their roles are crucial for moving towards true democracy. High-awareness voters can engage in problem-solving and make informed decisions. However, there is a significant presence of low-awareness voters who prioritize personal interests over the common good.

Lack of Integrated Urban Management: City councils are responsible for decision-making, policy formulation, and monitoring of municipal activities. Nevertheless, there is a lack of integrated planning and management, resulting in overlapping responsibilities within state organizations and ambiguity or misunderstanding in the law. Additionally, there is a lack of comprehensive urban planning to guide cities toward their desired state.

Political Culture: Notwithstanding a long history in Iran, society faces challenges related to knowledge sharing, dialogue, transparency, and trust. These elements are crucial for moving toward democracy and social sustainability. Society must overcome structural, legal, and cultural challenges by enacting laws that protect democratic values and principles.

Corruption and Lack of Transparency: Corruption, lack of transparency, and accountability undermine democratic institutions. Corruption means the abuse/ use of power by members of city councils. Corruption within city councils is a pressing issue, with reported cases surfacing in recent decades.

Non-Specialist Members: City councils comprise elected members who make policy decisions. The success of these councils depends on the skills, abilities, and knowledge of council staff and elected representatives. More specialists who are experts in municipal law and urban policy planning are required for improved council performance.

Discussion

City councils in Iran have faced challenges in preserving democratic traditions during their more than 23 years of existence. When democratic institutions lack effectiveness, public trust in the overall democratic system diminishes, influencing voter participation. A certain level of social and interpersonal trust is vital for the legitimacy of the political system.

It is clear that “to flourish local democracy (City Council), the environment should be appropriate that in our country councils didn’t have such conditions” [15]. In fact, “it can be perceived that participation in developing countries [...] is still inadequate. It tends not to be broadly representative of the population, and it fails to involve meaningful dialogue that affects public decision making” [16]. Additionally, it “can influence efforts to build social capital and make consensus towards sustainability and sustainable development” [17].

In fact, the study shows the serious and complex problems that city councils in Iran face, particularly concerning the application of democratic principles and values. Iran has a long road ahead to establish democratic institutions and internalize democratic principles among citizens. Additionally, “such conditions may be labelled as unsustainable, as they do not promote inclusion, prosperity, creativity, education, health, democracy, a good quality of life, and do not allow the participation of the society in all the aspects associated with public issues” [18].

It appears that Iran, and other developing societies, require non-political mechanisms to guide society toward a democratic direction. “Adopting a sustainable development strategy requires changes in cultural, economic, political and social practices, but citizens will only reform their cultural and social behaviour if they understand the importance of adopting new attitudes” [19].

All citizens are responsible for protecting democracy against political despotism and totalitarianism, implementing local governance, internalizing the values of democracy and committing to living a sustainable life through emphasis on human dignity, respect the human rights of all persons, trust-building and raising public awareness to move towards a more desirable society.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes that city councils in Iran have not had the ideal conditions to foster local democracy. Participation remains inadequate and unrepresentative, lacking meaningful dialogue in public decision-making. This can hinder efforts to build social capital and consensus toward sustainability.

To overcome these challenges, society must focus on integrating democratic values and sustainable principles, concentrating on citizen beliefs, values, human rights, and peace, ultimately building a more sustainable society.

The existence of democratic institutions does not guarantee democracy or catalyze sustainability strategies. Iran and other developing societies may require non-political mechanisms and a committed atmosphere by introducing strategies and actions both individually (in behaviour, habits and lifestyles), and collectively (in public spaces in society) to embrace democratic values and build a more sustainable society.

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