ARDD
النهضة العربية للديمقراطية والتنمية
Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development

مركز النهضة الاستراتيجي
Renaissance Strategic Center

ODI Global

From Mobilization to Governance

Local Governance Comparative Approaches Seminars

Session 1 Summary Report

Nearly half of all people living in fragile and conflict-affected states now reside in areas where central authority has collapsed, receded, or is actively contested. From the DRC and South Sudan to Syria, Yemen, and Myanmar, state fragility and institutional breakdown have become increasingly the norm rather than the exception, yet governance itself has not disappeared. Across these environments, communities are constructing practical systems from below, often delivering healthcare, education, dispute resolution, and accountability under conditions of extreme constraint, often led by new generations of civic actors whose authority rests on community trust rather than elite patronage.

To increase knowledge and understanding of these systems, ODI Global and Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD) are collaborating on a seminar series, the Local Governance Comparative Approaches Seminars, bringing together activists and governance practitioners in closed virtual sessions to generate comparative insight into emerging local governance models, document practical responses to fragmentation, and inform international policy adaptation to a more decentralised world. These seminars are held under the Chatham House Rule, where participants agree that the substance of these discussions can be shared, but the identities of participants will be kept confidential. The themes of the different sessions are: (i) From Mobilisation to Governance, (ii) Comparing Forms of Service Delivery and Governance, (iii) International Systems and Transitional Justice, and (iv) the Role of Local Governance in Transforming the State.

Summary Report 1: ‘From Mobilisation to Governance’

On 17 March 2026, the Renaissance Strategic Centre at ARDD, in collaboration with ODI Global, convened the first session of the Local Governance Comparative Approaches Seminars. The first session, ‘From Mobilisation to Governance’, convened a group of civic actors, activists, and researchers from around the world to discuss the essential precursors of mass popular mobilisation, what activist movements have achieved, and what lessons can be learned from the politics and process of ‘transition.’ Three main objectives underpinned these discussions: to deepen collective understanding of the new wave of activism that began with - but did not end in - the Arab Spring; to create a space for activists to reflect candidly on their experiences, strategies, successes and frustrations; and finally, to inform and influence international engagement with this emerging generation of civic actors. This discussion invited activists from Iraq, Iran, Kenya, Lebanon, Madagascar, Myanmar, Nepal, Palestine, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, Yemen and Zambia.

Session 1: Key Findings
Communication Strategies, Social Media, and Movements

Social media is critical for mass popular organising in the 21st century. It allows for the amplification of collective grievances, the acceleration of the flow of information, and the enabling of awareness raising and new forms of mobilising at scale. However, digital spaces can entrench division and reinforce polarisation with the creation of exclusive and polarised echo chambers. Regimes have also rapidly adapted to the use of social media in mobilisation, in many cases now harnessing ‘online armies’ and using structured disinformation to demobilise and delegitimise civic actors.

Furthermore, while social media has allowed activists to communicate quickly, clear and organised messaging is essential. In certain contexts, securing negotiations with existing power holders constitutes a significant achievement for activist movements - the act of opening previously closed doors within existing systems can be instrumental in advancing activists’ demands. However, movements without a coherent communications plan, strategized outreach, and clearly outlined goals quickly lost momentum, particularly if allowed to participate in the governing process. Inclusion was not sufficient; activists risked becoming delegitimised and losing popular support if inclusion in governance failed to facilitate tangible change. In Lebanon, protests occurred in 2019 with lessons learned from previous regional protests in 2011. When activists moved to influence municipal elections, they immediately hired a marketing company, creating campaigns with a clear strategy and communicating to the population that even though they were entering into traditional politics, they were still aligned with the grievances of protestors on the street.

Because of these factors, all participants underscored that durable mobilisation still very much depends on physical presence, trust-building, and organisation at the ground level. Without this, online activism risks becoming performative rather than transformative. Furthermore, despite its appeal, the reach of social media - such as its capacity to reach diverse segments of the population or to influence governmental decision-makers - is limited, throwing into doubt its usefulness as a tool for transforming mobilisation into actual reform or change.

The Provision of Services and Governance

While the central state itself is often a key motivator for change among protesting populations, it is often the first obstacle to activist movements achieving their objectives. Entrenched institutions, legacy power networks, and bureaucratic inertia impede the transformation of revolutionary energy into change. Even in the case of a regime's removal or collapse, state structures and power dynamics may endure, with old elites exploiting familiar networks like clientelism, identity politics, or corporatism to preserve their influence. Assessing the degree of interdependence between state structures and traditional power networks is an important step in planning durable reforms to the system following the removal of a regime.

To overcome these obstacles, several activists highlighted that rather than focus on the central state, their focus was on local services, including emergency services. For activists, the mechanism of either resistance or engagement is a real dilemma: maintaining independence from local power structures or engaging with them sufficiently to shape outcomes.

In some cases, activists substituted a retreating state. The structure of activist movements and the communities themselves influences the way in which this transition takes shape. In Karenni State, Myanmar, civil society leaders filled the vacuum created by retreating military forces, contributing significantly to the emergence of a participatory form of local governance. Activists in Syria and Yemen gained credibility when they filled the gaps left by absent governments. In Kurdish communities, local councils organised to provide services and bridge the void created by the government's withdrawal. In other contexts, activists collaborated with governments on security, human rights, and governance, identifying 'champions' within institutions. In Yemen, an evolution was seen within civic movements, as they transitioned from resistance to engagement. Tribal networks and local mechanisms often proved to be the key to access. However, being able to maintain a group's identity as a genuine resistance movement while working alongside institutions becomes a struggle, and consulting with local communities is absolutely vital for this to occur, especially in the area of service delivery.

Financial support is often key at this point and must be predictable and sustained. Activists described how political parties, private sector actors, and hybrid arrangements, such as an engaged and supportive diaspora channelling funding, technical expertise, and connecting local struggles to global platforms, were important. Expectations, once raised, must be met. Without this, momentum falters, legitimacy erodes, and space opens for alternative voices. The collapse of many Western donor-funded Local Councils in Syria, and the advance of better-resourced proscribed religious groups is a stark illustration of this reality.

The Question of Legitimacy

In many contexts, activists and civic actors encounter hybrid authority structures and multiple systems of power. As civil society steps in to provide services, what often emerges is not a clean transition, but a contested reordering of authority. Legitimacy is not a static condition; it requires consistent navigation, through the careful application of language, through service delivery, through accountability, and through the use of communication strategies which clearly demonstrate the goals of a movement transitioning from mobilisation to governance.

When civil society steps in to deliver services, it fills an immediate need but also creates tension. Who is the real provider? Who is accountable when things go wrong? In conditions of scarcity, these questions become more acute, and the absence of clear answers erodes trust. Ambiguity over roles and responsibilities can further fragment already weakened governance spaces, undermining both state and non-state actors.

The risk of armed takeover of movements was a central concern expressed by all. Displacing traditional authorities, armed groups often entrench themselves, reshaping authority in their image. Grassroots structures, largely unarmed and in many cases underfunded, are particularly vulnerable to such coercions. Movements that begin as civic and peaceful can even drift towards armed structures, often to the detriment of the very legitimacy they initially commanded. Activist movements can succeed in delegitimising the state but leave a power vacuum or political void, which armed actors can fill, as was seen with the military in Madagascar. In all such cases, armed actors often entrench impunity, granting immunity to those armed elements in power and undermining prospects for accountable governance. Efforts to prioritise stability can lead to the de facto immunity of such armed actors, sometimes paving the way for future violence.

All participants underscored that beyond the state or armed actors, they are faced by the power of traditional political parties, often organised along sectarian, tribal, or ethnic lines. Examples from Bosnia, Iraq, and Lebanon highlight this struggle, as individual activists are only able to rise to a certain level of influence before sectarian power networks limit their independence. In Bosnia, the upper echelons of political parties are controlled by ethnic blocs; activists must choose to either align with these traditional parties or forgo the possibility of further influence within the government system. The same can be seen in Iraq and Lebanon, where sectarian interests mediate the ability of activist movements to gain influence. In Iraq and Lebanon, traditional political parties have demonstrated the ability to divide and fragment civil society and activist movements, and the consequences of going against traditional political elites can be dangerous and even deadly.

The resilience of power structures argues for the need for change to be bottom-up and based on a coalition of local actors. The ability of different groups within the same context to work together and involve a wide array of actors (civil society organisations, activists, religious figures, local sheikhs, tribal leaders, private sector actors) is crucial to building lasting change. The decision to influence national governance, by for example, working with representatives within an incumbent government who are sensitive to activists' demands, or to focus on the local level and build coalitions at a district or governorate level, is central. Importantly, this must still happen alongside communication strategies that utilise the huge outreach capacity of social media to convey the objectives of activist movements to the wider population. Activists do not necessarily need to participate in the government to become political leaders, and in fact there is a fundamental issue when members of protest movements achieve positions of political power but continue to operate within the same state structures as previous regimes. The experience of Yemen offers a cautionary lesson. Former activists gained positions of political power but continued to operate within essentially the same state structures as the regime that they were initially protesting against.

Towards the Next Session:

Based on the central conclusions drawn from Session One, the following questions will frame the analysis in the upcoming phase of this webinar series.

- **In contexts where activists have established influence through negotiation with political actors, how is it possible to preserve the space that has been created without becoming dependent on 'champions' within the system?**
- **What steps must activists take to prepare for governance from the outset? When time and resources are directed to the immediate needs of activism or service provision, what can be done to make sure that when governance becomes a possibility, the movement does not collapse?**
- **Is the Diaspora always a constructive force? To what extent are those "outside" able to appreciate the opportunities emerging "inside"? Can they end up wittingly and unwittingly entrenching conflicts?**
- **What role does militarisation play? Can it catalyze the effective transition to governance? What are the associated risks to long-term legitimacy and impact?**

Session Two will explore more deeply the nature of service provision and local governance by scrutinising specific case studies - focusing respectively on the provision of emergency services, the question of enforcement and militarisation of local governance, and engagement with existing governing structures.