

## The importance of civil society in supporting local communities to achieve sustainable development

Brahim Meziani <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PhD, Political Science and International Relations, Local Governance Administration, University of Algiers 3, Algeria. Email: [meziani.br@gmail.com](mailto:meziani.br@gmail.com)

**Abstract---**This article provides a comprehensive study on the role of civil society in supporting local communities to achieve sustainable development, by focusing on the interactive relationship between civil society and local authorities, as well as the mechanisms of public participation in decision-making and development. The study begins by defining the basic concepts of civil society and local communities, while reviewing the evolution and emergence of civil society through Western and global political thought. It also highlights its characteristics and diverse functions, which include social, economic, and political dimensions, in addition to its role in promoting accountability, transparency, and combating corruption. The article further discusses local communities in Algeria, including their types, functions, and resources, while emphasizing the importance of partnership between these communities and civil society organizations in planning, implementation, and monitoring of development projects, in order to ensure that development responds to the real needs of citizens. The research also highlights the importance of establishing a legal and regulatory framework that supports the independence of civil society and enhances its effectiveness, as well as the need to activate platforms for community dialogue, encourage volunteer work, and promote a culture of transparency and accountability. This is essential to ensure the achievement of economic, social, and environmental development at both local and national levels, guaranteeing resource sustainability, improving quality of life, and achieving balanced and sustainable societal well-being.

**Keywords---**Civil society, Local communities, Sustainable development, Public participation, Partnership.

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## Introduction

Civil society represents one of the fundamental pillars in building modern societies, as it constitutes an independent space for interaction between individuals and non-governmental organizations. Through this space, public participation, accountability, and transparency in managing public affairs can be enhanced. Civil society derives its importance from being a tool that strengthens dialogue between citizens and the state, and contributes to supporting local development in a way that ensures meeting the needs of the population and achieving sustainable development at economic, social, and environmental levels.

In Algeria, civil society has witnessed significant development following the events of October 1988 and the transition toward political pluralism, becoming an active partner in the development process. Despite this progress, legislative constraints sometimes limit its direct participation in decision-making and resource management. Its role has become evident in monitoring project implementation, supporting local associations, strengthening development programs, and activating community dialogue platforms that bring together various local, national, and international organizations.

The importance of this research stems from the growing role of civil society in supporting local communities to achieve sustainable development. Studying the relationship between civil society and local communities constitutes a key axis for understanding the mechanisms of public participation, as well as the role of associations and non-governmental institutions in improving the quality of public services and contributing to comprehensive regional development.

Despite the increasing number of civil society organizations and their evident role in local development, the legal and regulatory framework governing their participation in decision-making related to development projects remains insufficiently defined. This raises the following research question:

How does civil society contribute to supporting local communities in achieving sustainable development, and what legal and regulatory mechanisms ensure its effectiveness?

The main objectives of this research paper include:

- Clarifying the concept of civil society and local communities and their importance in local development.
- Studying the characteristics and functions of civil society organizations and their various roles.
- Analyzing the mechanisms of civil society participation in supporting local development projects.
- Highlighting the relationship between civil society and local communities and ways to strengthen their partnership.

The research problem revolves around the role played by civil society in supporting local communities to achieve sustainable development, especially in light of the transformations witnessed in Algeria, which have reinforced the need to involve various actors in managing local affairs.

Despite the increasing number of civil society organizations, their actual contribution still faces several challenges, leading to the central question:

How does civil society contribute to supporting local communities to achieve sustainable development?

This main question includes several sub-questions:

- What is the concept of civil society and local communities?
- What are the characteristics and functions of civil society organizations?
- What are the mechanisms of their contribution to local development?
- How can partnership between civil society and local communities be strengthened to achieve effective and sustainable development?

This research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, through reviewing previous studies and legal and legislative documents related to civil society and local communities. It also examines field experiences of civil society organizations in Algeria.

In addition, the comparative approach is used to analyze recent experiences and their role in local development, in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of the partnership between civil society and local communities.

## **Chapter One: Conceptual Framework of Civil Society**

### **Section One: The Concept of Civil Society**

#### **First: Definition of Civil Society**

Before addressing the definition of civil society, it is important to understand its fundamental role as a space from which societal initiatives emerge, fostering active participation of individuals and groups in public life. Civil society represents the bridge that connects citizens and the state, contributing to the creation of a civic environment characterized by cooperation and social awareness.

The Italian thinker **Antonio Gramsci** defined civil society as one of the main levels of the superstructure in any society. He described it as the set of private institutions and organizations operating in the social, cultural, and economic spheres, which are largely independent from direct governmental institutions. In contrast, the political society represents the sphere of authority and official control exercised by the state through its institutions and laws.

Gramsci emphasized that the state needs to establish a form of intellectual and moral hegemony over civil society to ensure stability. In this context, civil society supports groups aligned with the state while countering opposing influences. From this perspective, civil society becomes a space for social interaction and oversight, as well as a tool for enhancing public participation, making it a key component in achieving sustainable development and raising social awareness<sup>1</sup>.

Civil society refers to all non-governmental organizations formed voluntarily by individuals, either to achieve private interests or to serve public ones, while adhering to core values such as tolerance, respect for diversity, and appreciation of differences. Thus, civil society is not merely a collection of organizations, but a framework that enhances active participation and allows individuals and groups to contribute to shaping a more balanced and just social life. It also constitutes a fundamental tool for supporting sustainable development at the local level<sup>2</sup>.

Civil society is characterized by its diversity and richness. It includes various forms of associations and organizations often referred to as voluntary groups or secondary institutions. Examples include families, religious organizations, labor unions, self-help groups, charitable associations, and neighborhood organizations. Researcher **Jane Stein** highlights this diversity, while **Stephen Delow** adds that civil society also encompasses professional organizations such as bar associations and medical associations, as well as groups that support specific social categories, such as agricultural and consumer groups.

What distinguishes these organizations is their operation outside the formal structures of state authority, providing individuals with an independent space—often described as an “autonomous field” where they can freely engage in social and cultural activities and gain diverse experiences. Through this diversity, civil society becomes a platform for knowledge exchange, skill development, and strengthening social solidarity, thereby playing a major role in empowering individuals and contributing to sustainable development at the local level<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Abdel Hadi Al-Gohary and others, *Studies in Social Development*, Modern University Office, Alexandria, 2001, p. 201

<sup>2</sup> Mahmoud Hegazy and Nagwa Ibrahim Al-Sharqawi, *Voluntary Work and Civil Society Organizations\**, Dar Al-Zahraa, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2012, p. 188.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed Abdel Halim Attia, *Philosophy and Civil Society: John Locke and the Essay on Civil Government*, Philosophical Texts, Arab Culture House, Egypt, 2007, p. 13.

In this sense, civil society can be considered a dynamic social force that fosters dialogue, supports shared values, and enables individuals and groups to actively participate in shaping their society's future. Each organization or association provides an opportunity for societal advancement across various fields, making civil society a fundamental pillar of sustainable development and progress.

### **Second: Emergence and Evolution of Civil Society**

The concept of civil society is central in political thought and has attracted the attention of many thinkers throughout history. From the pioneers of the social contract theory such as **Thomas Hobbes**, **John Locke**, and **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**, to German philosophers like **Hegel**, and later thinkers such as **Marx and Gramsci**, the idea has evolved significantly.

The social contract theory provided the main framework for explaining the emergence of civil society, focusing on the relationship between the individual, society, and the state, and proposing the transition from the state of nature to organized civil life.

**Thomas Hobbes** viewed the natural state as one of chaos and conflict, where relationships among individuals are hostile. In contrast, civil society is an organized system based on a central authority established through a contract in which individuals surrender their natural rights (such as freedom and equality) to a ruler or governing body in exchange for security and protection. In this view, civil society is almost synonymous with the state.

**John Locke**, however, presented a more balanced perspective, arguing that the transition to civil society aims to protect natural rights, particularly property, through a consensual government that ensures respect for rights and equality among individuals. Here, civil society becomes a regulatory framework organizing relations between individuals and the state<sup>4</sup>.

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau** emphasized the collective dimension of the social contract, arguing that individuals become part of the general will, subordinating personal interests to the common good. Thus, civil society represents the transformation from natural man to civic man capable of participating in social and political life.

Later, **Hegel** introduced a different perspective by distinguishing between the state and civil society in his work *Philosophy of Right*. He considered civil society as an intermediate sphere between the family (natural society) and the state (political society). In this sphere, individual interests often conflict, driven by personal needs and desires, while the state remains responsible for safeguarding the general interest<sup>5</sup>.

Overall, the evolution of the concept of civil society reflects the development of political thought itself—from viewing it as synonymous with the state to recognizing it as an independent sphere where individuals and groups express their interests and organize their social, cultural, and political lives. Today, civil society is seen as a vital space that promotes balance between individual rights and the public interest, while supporting active participation in sustainable development.

## **Section Two: Characteristics and Functions of Civil Society Organizations**

### **First: Characteristics of Civil Society**

Understanding the characteristics of civil society is essential to appreciating its role in promoting sustainable development and empowering local communities. Scholar **Samuel Huntington** contributed to defining key attributes that characterize civil organizations:

1. **Independence:** Organizations operate without direct control from other institutions or individuals, ensuring freedom in decision-making and effectiveness in fulfilling their roles.
2. **Adaptability:** The ability to respond to environmental, social, and cultural changes, including temporal, generational, and functional adaptation.
3. **Complexity:** The presence of a structured organizational framework with clear distribution of roles and responsibilities, allowing wider impact and sustainability.

<sup>4</sup> Manal Talaat Mahmoud, *Development and Society: A Study in Social Development*, Modern University Office, Alexandria, 2001, p. 152.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Sobhi Ahmed Shukr, *The Future of Civil Society in the Arab World*, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 2000, p. 168.

4. **Cohesion:** Harmony among members and the ability to resolve internal conflicts peacefully, reflecting organizational maturity and effectiveness<sup>6</sup>.

### **Second: Functions of Civil Society**

Civil society performs a wide range of vital functions that enhance its role in sustainable development and support local communities, including:

1. **Promoting political and social participation:** Enabling individuals and groups to influence decision-making and enhancing transparency and accountability.
2. **Reform and oversight of government performance:** Identifying shortcomings in public policies and advocating for improvements while holding authorities accountable.
3. **Mediation and conflict resolution:** Acting as an intermediary between different groups and interests, contributing to social and political stability, and providing social services such as building schools and hospitals.
4. **Advocacy for social demands:** Conveying citizens' concerns and demands to authorities through dialogue and reports, ensuring protection of rights<sup>7</sup>.

#### **5. In the Social Field:**

Acting as a bridge between the state and citizens.

Providing financial and social support to vulnerable groups.

Supporting community initiatives such as building schools and hospitals.

Combating poverty, ignorance, and disease.

Promoting socialization and volunteerism.

#### **6. In the Economic Field:**

Contributing to sustainable development through local initiatives.

Promoting regional balance by distributing resources fairly.

Creating job opportunities and encouraging local investment<sup>8</sup>

## **Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework of Local Authorities and Sustainable Development**

### **Section One: The Concept of Local Authorities**

#### **First: Definition of Local Authorities**

Local authorities are organizational units of great importance within the administrative structure of the state. They represent the level closest to citizens, allowing for active participation in social, economic, and political life. Local authorities can be defined as any urban or rural community, or any other legally recognized entity, that possesses legal personality as well as financial and administrative autonomy.

Local authorities constitute an integrated human and administrative unit composed of a population, an administrative structure, elected bodies, and executive institutions, in addition to human and financial resources that enable them to perform their functions. They are also defined as geographically territorial units whose boundaries are determined based on historical, social, economic, and institutional considerations, or to enhance cooperation and integration among the different components of a region. Thus, local authorities become a central tool for achieving development at the local level, through their ability to organize resources, provide services, and activate community participation, thereby ensuring a balance between local needs and national policies<sup>9</sup>.

Local authorities are considered the cornerstone of the development process, as they are closest to citizens and provide an effective framework for managing local resources and implementing development projects. Through them, sustainable development can be achieved, ensuring that the

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 1st ed., trans. Samia Faw Abbas, Beirut, Lebanon, 1993, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Junhani Al-Habib and Saif Al-Din Abdel Fattah, *Civil Society and Intellectual Habit*, Dar Al-Fikr Al-Mu'asir, Lebanon, 2003, p. 98.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Dib Al-Hajj, *Prospects of Civil Society in the Arab World and the Challenges of Globalization*, *Parliamentary Thought Journal*, Issue 18, 2007, p. 171.

<sup>9</sup> Abdel Muttalib Abdel Majeed, *Financing and Local Development*, University House for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, Alexandria, 2011, p. 205.

needs of the population are met and improving their quality of life across economic, social, and cultural dimensions.

Local authorities undertake a wide range of responsibilities covering all vital sectors to meet the needs of the population and achieve sustainable development:

- **Preservation of public property:** Including maintenance and renovation of administrative, educational, cultural facilities, and infrastructure such as dams and networks, while ensuring their protection and adequacy for community needs.
- **Urban environment and planning:** Improving the urban environment through cleaning and beautification of neighborhoods, waste collection, disease prevention, and environmental protection from pollution, alongside enforcing construction regulations and promoting architectural development aligned with local identity and environmental standards.
- **Social and service activities:** Addressing citizens' needs in cases of housing during disasters, providing construction assistance, food aid, supporting vulnerable groups such as the poor and disabled, creating employment opportunities for youth, and assisting low-income families.

These functions contribute to achieving social justice and solidarity while enhancing the role of local authorities in improving citizens quality of life<sup>10</sup>.

Overall, the competencies of local authorities are comprehensive and diverse, making them a fundamental element in achieving sustainable development. They go beyond basic service delivery to serve as instruments of comprehensive development, combining urban planning, environmental protection, social support, and economic opportunities.

### **Second: Types of Local Authorities in Algeria (Municipality and Wilaya)**

Local authorities in Algeria are defined by legal frameworks, and the Algerian Constitution recognizes two main types: **municipality (commune)** and **wilaya (province)**. Both possess legal personality and financial autonomy and are governed by specific laws defining their responsibilities within the administrative system.

#### **1. Municipality (Commune):**

According to Law 80–88, the municipality is “the basic territorial unit of the state.” It represents the primary level of local governance, characterized by legal personality and independent financial capacity. Municipalities are the closest institutions to citizens, managing local resources and implementing development and service programs at the neighborhood level, thereby enhancing community participation and balancing local needs with available resources.

#### **2. Wilaya (Province):**

The wilaya is the larger territorial unit within the administrative structure of the state. It also has legal personality and financial autonomy and functions as a decentralized administrative entity. The wilaya plays a key role in coordinating and implementing public policies between the state and local authorities. It contributes to comprehensive regional management, including economic, social, and cultural development, environmental protection, and improving citizens' quality of life<sup>11</sup>.

The evolution of local governance systems in Algeria has been influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include population growth, the need for equitable service distribution, regional disparities, and the state's desire to strengthen citizen participation and local democracy. External factors include global calls for good governance and the need to adapt to technological advancements and digital transformation.

<sup>10</sup> Abdel Hadi Al-Gohary and others, *Studies in Social Development*, Modern University Office, Alexandria, 2001, p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> Algerian Democratic Republic, Law No. 12-07 of 21 February 2012, relating to the Wilaya, Official Gazette No. 12 issued on 29 February 2012, Article 1.

As a result, local authorities have become essential tools for ensuring sustainable resource management, enhancing citizen participation, and achieving balanced economic, social, and environmental development at the local level.<sup>12</sup>

## **Section Two: The Concept of Sustainable Development and Its Dimensions**

### **First: Definition of Sustainable Development**

Initially, development concepts focused mainly on the economic dimension, aiming to increase production and achieve economic growth. Over time, this concept expanded to include the social dimension, placing human well-being at the center of development by emphasizing improved living standards and social rights.

In recent decades, the international community has recognized that economic and social development cannot be sustained without considering the environmental dimension. Traditional development projects often neglected the protection of natural resources and the needs of future generations. Consequently, the concept of sustainable development emerged, focusing on achieving balanced economic growth, improving quality of life, protecting the environment, and ensuring resource sustainability for future generations.

Sustainable development is not entirely new but has evolved rapidly due to the tension between economic growth and environmental protection. It is now a comprehensive framework integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions to ensure balanced and lasting development that safeguards the rights of both present and future generations<sup>13</sup>.

It emphasizes that economic growth alone is insufficient for human well-being; it must align with social and environmental considerations to create a resilient and balanced society. Therefore, sustainable development serves as a guiding framework for public policies and a practical approach linking humans, the environment, and the economy.

### **Second: Dimensions of Sustainable Development**

Sustainable development is based on three interrelated dimensions: **economic, social, and environmental**, ensuring balanced and stable development that meets the needs of current and future generations.

#### **1. Economic Dimension:**

This refers to coordinated policies and actions undertaken by the state, local authorities, and civil society to improve living standards, achieve economic well-being, and enhance regional economic health. It includes investments in human capital, infrastructure development, regional competitiveness, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability.

It is important to distinguish between economic development and economic growth: development involves comprehensive policy interventions aimed at improving well-being, while growth refers to increases in productivity and GDP. Thus, growth is part of development but does not fully encompass it.

#### **2. Social Dimension:**

Social development aims to improve quality of life and relationships among individuals and groups, including education, culture, health, political participation, and freedom of expression.

Both government and civil society organizations contribute to meeting social needs.

Social development can be viewed from three perspectives:

- As **social care**, focusing on meeting basic needs.
- As **social services**, including health and education.

<sup>12</sup> Naji Abdel Nour, *The Algerian Political System from Unipartism to Multi-Party System*, University Publishing Directorate of Guelma, Algeria, 2006, p. 118.

<sup>13</sup> Abdel Halim Ousaleh, *The Role of International Environmental Agreements in Protecting Fragile Ecosystems under Sustainable Development Controls: A Case Study of Arab ESCWA Countries*, *Research Files in Economics Journal*, Issue 4, Part 1, 2015, p. 194.

- As **comprehensive social change**, aiming to restructure society and create new values and relationships that promote progress.
3. **Environmental Dimension:**  
Environmental development focuses on protecting natural resources, preserving the environment, and ensuring sustainability for present and future generations. It is based on the principle of coexistence between humans and nature, promoting rational resource management, balancing development with environmental protection, maintaining biodiversity, and minimizing negative impacts on ecosystems<sup>14</sup>

### **Chapter Three: The Role of Civil Society in Supporting Local Communities to Achieve Sustainable Development**

#### **Section One: Mechanisms of Civil Society Contribution to Local Development**

Civil society plays a pivotal role in supporting local communities to achieve sustainable development through a set of mechanisms aimed at enhancing public participation, ensuring the effectiveness of development projects, and achieving balance between social, economic, and environmental needs, These mechanisms can be summarized as follows:

- **Establishing a culture of public affairs:**  
Civil society contributes to raising citizens' awareness of the importance of participating in local development and overcoming the traditional perception that public funds are "ownerless." Strengthening this culture enables citizens to engage in development processes through participatory mechanisms, reducing social tensions and increasing the credibility of development projects, while focusing on meeting the needs of different social groups.
- **Transparency, accountability, and disclosure:**  
Civil society promotes public oversight and transparency in managing public affairs, reducing ambiguity surrounding development projects and highlighting their objectives, This mechanism ensures alignment between local and national development and fosters trust between citizens and local authorities.
- **Developing spaces for local dialogue and discussion:**  
Civil society expands opportunities for dialogue on shared daily issues, helping to shape a unified vision of local development priorities. This interaction facilitates mobilizing resources and energies necessary for effective project implementation.
- **Adopting the principle of accompaniment:**  
Civil society acts as a supporter and monitor throughout project implementation, removing administrative obstacles and ensuring accurate follow-up. This allows evaluation of actual performance and ensures sustainability and quality of development<sup>15</sup>.

These mechanisms show that civil society is not merely a passive observer but an active partner in development, enhancing transparency, participation, and responsiveness to societal needs.

Civil society also strengthens development through community dialogue platforms that bring together local, national, and international actors, These platforms aim to foster solidarity, exchange experiences, and coordinate efforts, Their main roles include:

- Monitoring social dialogue
- Expanding community participation (especially youth and women)
- Issuing periodic reports
- Coordinating with media
- Supporting monitoring and evaluation
- Establishing observatories for media freedom

<sup>14</sup> Medhat Abu Al-Nasr and Yasmine Medhat Mohamed, \*Sustainable Development: Concept – Dimensions – Indicators, 1st ed., Arab Training and Publishing Group, Cairo, 2017, pp. 85–86.

<sup>15</sup> Kim Samir, The New Roles of Civil Society under Participatory Local Governance: A Reading of the Algerian Case, *Al-Mufakir Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Algeria, 2018, p. 441

- Strengthening institutional frameworks
- Promoting volunteerism and ethical standards<sup>16</sup>

### Section Two: Partnership Between Civil Society and Local Communities

The partnership between civil society and local communities is essential for achieving sustainable development, as it enables integration of efforts between authorities, citizens, and NGOs in planning and implementing development projects.

In Algeria, this partnership evolved significantly after political pluralism, allowing the creation of independent associations. Previously, under a single-party system, associations were limited and dependent on state control.

For civil society to be effective, it must maintain independence in:

- Setting goals and priorities
- Organizational management
- Decision-making

This independence allows civil society to act as a true partner in planning, implementation, and monitoring development projects.<sup>17</sup>

Civil society activity in Algeria increased notably after **October 1988 events**, and further after stability in 1995. The number of associations grew from:

- 86 (1988)
- 151 (1990)
- 600+ (1995)
- 80,000+ (2009)<sup>18</sup>

Legally, although civil society is not explicitly defined as a main partner, Algerian laws include mechanisms supporting its role, especially in:

- Fighting corruption (aligned with UN Convention, Article 13)
- Urban planning (Law 90-29 requiring consultation with associations)

However, the legal framework still lacks clear mechanisms for effective participation in decision-making.

Civil society contributes to municipalities by:

- Participating in committees
- Monitoring projects
- Filing objections or appeals

Yet, participation remains mostly consultative rather than mandatory.

Modern experiences highlight the importance of neighborhood associations in:

- Environmental improvement
- Public lighting
- Cleanliness
- Local monitoring

This role resembles **pressure groups** in Western countries, influencing policies and ensuring citizen representation<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Medhat Abu Al-Nasr and Yasmine Medhat Mohamed, *Sustainable Development*, op. cit., pp. 288–289.

<sup>17</sup> Abdel Muttalib Ghanem Al-Sayyid, *A Study in Political Development*, Nahdet Al-Sharq Library, Cairo, 1991, pp. 122–123.

<sup>18</sup> Abdel Muttalib Ghanem Al-Sayyid, *A Study in Political Development*, op. cit., pp. 123–124

<sup>19</sup> Samira Kamel Mohamed, *Social Development*, Modern University Office, Alexandria, 1998, p. 129.

## Conclusion

This study shows that civil society has become an indispensable actor in supporting local communities and achieving sustainable development, due to its ability to mobilize human resources, enhance participation, and contribute to policy-making and implementation.

Civil society organizations, through their independence, flexibility, and diversity, play a key role in promoting transparency, accountability, and sustainable development across social, economic, and environmental dimensions.

In Algeria, despite the quantitative growth of civil society after political reforms, qualitative participation in decision-making remains limited due to:

- Lack of clear legal framework
- Weak coordination with local authorities
- Limited resources
- Weak participation culture

## Recommendations:

- Develop legal frameworks to ensure real participation of civil society
- Involve associations in local council committees and development planning
- Strengthen capacity through training and funding
- Promote partnerships with local actors
- Activate community dialogue platforms
- Encourage youth and women participation
- Support volunteerism and local initiatives
- Promote transparency and public accountability
- Strengthen monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

## Final Insight:

Achieving sustainable development at the local level cannot rely solely on the state. It requires collaboration among all actors, especially civil society, which represents a strategic partner, a force of proposal, oversight, and contribution—ensuring balanced, inclusive, and sustainable development.

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