

Background Note

Stakeholders' Consultation on Transparent and Accountable Local Government System in Punjab: Challenges and Opportunities

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1. Introduction

During the last couple of decades, the spread of local governments and decentralized economic systems have unleashed debate and tremendous efforts towards advancing public participation in governance in the developing countries. As a result central governments started to allocate more of the national budget to local authorities besides facilitating a greater role for civil society and the private sector in governance and service delivery.

Pakistan experimented with various forms of devolution and decentralization since its inception. However, in 2001 a new Local Government system was introduced in which historical 'top-down' approach of local government was combined with the notions of 'bottom-up' approach. According to Local Government Ordinance (LGO), 2001 the aim of devolved system was to promote local participation and accountability, thereby leading to improved service delivery and poverty reduction.

In 2008, after the restoration of the democratic process, key constraints of LGO 2001 emerged which hampered the efficacy of the system. As a result almost all provinces came up with amended or new versions of the LG enactment and system. In August 2013, the Punjab Local Government Act, 2013 was passed by the Punjab assembly. The Punjab government has committed to hold the local government elections on non-party basis but despite directions by the Supreme Court, it has not given a timeframe for holding elections. It is important to note that for the past three years local governments in Punjab are being run in a bureaucratic manner. There exist no forums for the citizens to voice their concerns and give feedback on the service delivery and on the local government system itself.

Keeping the above in view, I-SAPS initiated its efforts to engage all stakeholders for strengthening Local Government System in Punjab. These efforts are being supported by the Citizens' Voice Project of USAID. In this regard, we are undertaking review and analysis to produce evidence-base for engaging all stakeholders in a fruitful debate through dialogues and consultations. These public advocacy efforts are envisaged to contribute towards improvement in legal framework and strengthening system through effective implementation of the law.

2. Aim and Objectives

The broad aim of this stakeholders' consultation was to facilitate an informed discourse on local government system in Punjab from the standpoint of improving transparency and accountability. Specific objectives of consultation were as follows:

- i. Provide the much needed interface between government officials, public representatives and civil society for improving the legal framework and local government system in Punjab;

- ii. Share recommendations for improving opportunities for transparency, accountability and citizens' participation;
- iii. Advocate for effective local government system in Punjab and articulate demand for early LG elections.

3. Topics Covered by Speakers

The speakers and discussants at the consultation included experts in the areas of governance, devolution and political economy. The topics covered in the consultation are briefly described below:

- a. Public Perception of LG System: Early Elections a Citizens' Agenda
- b. Transparency, Accountability and Citizen's Participation: Opportunities and Challenges in LG Act, 2013

4. Participants

The participants of consultation comprised of key stakeholders i.e. parliamentarians, members of political parties in Punjab, representatives of relevant government departments, academics, civil society organizations (CSOs), and media.