

Civil Society Playing Key Role in Extractive Sector Reform in Once-Autocratic Tunisia

THE PROBLEM

A central challenge of Tunisia's transition out of dictatorship has been finding a way to implement democratic reforms in a country where citizens place little trust in the volatile, post-authoritarian institutions. One pre-requisite for trust is dialogue; if civil society actors don't have a forum for exchange with the government, they can't be heard, and trust remains elusive. Social tensions (sometimes manifesting as protests) are high in Tunisia, and the government's responses have been mostly ineffective.

The natural resource sector is one locus of this tension. Poor infrastructure, economic marginalization, lack of employment opportunities and environmental degradation (caused by poor management of resources) have fueled protests, which have in turn significantly disrupted production in the country's phosphate- and oil-producing regions. Annual phosphate production dropped from 8 million tons in 2010 to 3 million in 2017, while oil production has also declined. Successive governments have responded to each protest movement by implementing *ad hoc* measures, including promising new employment opportunities or allocating funds for subnational development. These lackluster efforts have been further weakened by governmental volatility, and have failed to address the key issue: lack of trust and a forum for dialogue between civil society (including local communities) and the government.

In Tunisia, there is a historical lack of trust and a forum for dialogue between civil society (including local communities) and the government.

NRGI'S ROLE

Since 2013, the NRGi has employed a multi-stakeholder approach aimed at long-term, sustainable reforms in the natural resource sector. Key elements of this approach are 1) empowering civil society actors to play an active and informed role in natural resource policy reform and 2) establishing a forum in which all relevant stakeholders can participate.

NRGI has provided extensive technical and financial support to Tunisian civil society actors, including capacity development workshops on technical issues (such as the natural resource legal framework, oil contracts, and international transparency standards such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative [EITI]); grants to civil society actors to conduct natural resource advocacy and awareness-raising; and support to increase the capacity of civil society organizations (CSOs) to generate and manage project funding. In tandem, NRGi supported the establishment of the Tunisian Coalition for Transparency in Energy and Mines (CTTEM), a 13-member coalition that translates local grassroots demands into national-level advocacy campaigns.

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Concurrently, NRGi has provided technical support and capacity development to foster trust and collaboration among other stakeholders involved in the natural resource sector, including parliamentarians, journalists and government officials. In order to bring these stakeholders together, NRGi partnered with the Tunisian Anti-Corruption Authority (INLUCC), a national independent body with leverage and political capital across party and stakeholder lines. INLUCC is a public authority equally respected by actors across the political spectrum; its commitment to championing reform of the resource sector was an important step toward safeguarding multi-stakeholder reform against political and governmental volatility.

IMPACT

NRGi has fostered a sustainable reform environment where various stakeholders come together to create joint reform agendas and where civil society plays an effective role in debates and policy formation in the natural resource sector.

In December 2017, INLUCC agreed with Tunisia's Ministry of Energy, Mines and Renewable Energies, the main decision-making body in the natural resources sector, to working together toward natural resource-related reforms, including Tunisia's adherence to the EITI.

CTTEM, the NRGi-supported CSO coalition, has successfully advocated for government disclosure of oil contracts and for concrete steps towards EITI accession. Accession to the international initiative was included in two successive Tunisia Open Government Partnership action plans (starting 2016), pushing the government to officially commit to EITI implementation through the creation of the "multi-stakeholder group," which is the key engine of reform in any EITI member country. The government subsequently called civil society actors to appoint their representatives to the group. All five civil society representatives have participated in NRGi trainings.

"Transparency and anticorruption in this sector go hand in hand," says one of the civil society representatives, Manel Ben Achour, executive director of Tunisia's I-Watch. "Our representation in the multi-stakeholder group will allow us to access information while engaging in productive dialogue with other stakeholders. Our role as representatives will be to organize civil society and set a positive example in establishing a productive and successful reform action plan."

The Tunisian government had made wavering commitments to EITI since June 2012, and it was thanks to civil society partners' continuous advocacy (along with INLUCC's political weight) that real progress toward accession was made. INLUCC has already helped move Tunisia closer to EITI adherence by organizing civil society representative elections for the stakeholder group. As soon as the government and extractive companies appoint their representatives, the multi-stakeholder group will be complete.

NRGi and its partners have achieved the institutionalization of a multi-stakeholder platform which will soon draft reform action plans. As a result, in formerly autocratic Tunisia, a diversity of voices, including those from civil society, are being heard in crucial natural resource governance reform discussions.

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