The 2015 Decentralisation Law (DL) and Municipality Law (ML) mark a milestone in Jordan’s democratic development and ongoing effort to improve public governance. In line with the objectives of “Jordan 2025”, the country’s strategic vision, the laws represent an unprecedented effort to place citizens and their needs at the heart of policymaking and service delivery.

Jordan is a unitary state with a high degree of political, administrative and financial centralisation. In such a centralised system, planning can become detached from citizens’ needs. Jordanian authorities are therefore seeking to overcome this centralisation while at the same time addressing rising levels of dissatisfaction with government performance. The 2015 DL and ML form key elements of this reform effort, which has since been complemented by the creation of Jordan’s third National Action Plan for the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in early 2017. Notably, this reform process is being rolled out amid complex economic and security challenges – aggravated by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq and the refugee crisis – that have put increasing pressures on economic resources and public services.

The creation of elected governorate and local councils has induced high expectations that public service delivery will be more responsive to the needs of local communities. Importantly, however, the new legal framework does not include a major transfer of powers to subnational levels of government. In fact, it sustains a largely concentrated system of day-to-day service delivery while providing for a more active (yet still undefined) role for local non-governmental stakeholders in the development process.

There is thus a need to manage the expectations among civil society organisations (CSOs) and citizens regarding their role, as well as to provide additional information on the tools and mechanisms available to them and to the newly elected public officials in the governorate and local councils.

A clear roadmap for implementing the new legal framework

The focus of the 2015 DL and ML leaves important issues, such as mandates, competencies and procedures, to be developed through the drafting of subsequent by-laws. For instance, the relationships between the elected councils themselves and between the elected councils and other government levels are not yet fully defined. In some cases, lines of accountability are blurred.

An implementation roadmap setting out short-, medium- and long-term objectives would ensure more coherent implementation of both laws and relevant by-laws for key actors, such as the members of the inter-ministerial committee that steers the decentralisation reform. In particular, a more integrated approach could align the activities of the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Municipal Affairs and the Ministry of Planning and International Co-operation. Although the reform does not push for greater financial decentralisation, the role of the Ministry of Finance in rolling out the reform
could be strengthened to ensure that subnational expenditure information is included in development planning, as well as to strengthen fiscal and budgeting capacity at all levels.

Clear responsibilities need to be assigned to each entity across all levels of government for both day-to-day service delivery and in the national development process. The roadmap could outline the tools and systems needed (e.g. data management) to facilitate communication and co-ordination. Through training and dissemination campaigns, roles and procedures should be communicated among public officials, CSOs and citizens to ensure a common understanding of the reform’s implications. In an effort to strengthen transparency, the government could submit an annual progress report on the reform’s implementation to Parliament.

A bottom-up approach to identifying service needs and policy priorities

Shifting from a highly centralised to a more locally-driven process of identifying needs and policy priorities is challenging. The report therefore identifies four factors that could support the effective operation of the new system and increase public support for the reform process.

First, local development units at the governorate and municipal level should be supported in their efforts to promote local needs by increasing their human and financial capacities, identifying common operational procedures and reinforcing the interaction with each other and with other subnational entities. Second, governorates could establish specific offices to improve strategic planning and ensure that the inputs from the municipalities are integrated in the governorate and national development plans. Third, capacity building and training should be provided for the members of elected councils to ensure they have the skills to fulfil their new responsibilities, as well as the ability to work with CSOs and citizens. Finally, the creation of co-ordination bodies, such as a council of governorates and associations of municipalities, could facilitate the exchange of information and experience and, over time, institutionalise collaboration across and within levels of government.

Fostering a culture of open, participatory, transparent and accountable governance across all levels of government

Jordan’s open government agenda, within and beyond its OGP Action Plan, would benefit from more input from subnational stakeholders (both public officials and representatives of CSOs). A thorough review of legislative, institutional and procedural obstacles is needed, as well as efforts to promote better production and access to public sector information and data, the definition of guidelines for public officials on strengthening citizen participation, and the development of new mechanisms to foster a culture of monitoring and evaluation of participatory initiatives.

Creating momentum for reform among public officials, CSOs, and citizens

The creation of elected subnational councils is an important step toward strengthening local democracy. Nonetheless, the predominance of the central level in addressing the day-to-day demands of citizens and in providing funding for subnational levels may slow the rise of a more decentralised governance culture.

The mandates of the elected councils and sub-bodies tasked with representing citizens’ interests should be clarified and adequate resources provided. Initiatives to
support vulnerable members of society, such as women and youth, could encourage their participation as candidates and voters in local elections. Initiatives that promote inclusion and diversity, such as e-participation tools and citizen advisory councils, should also be developed to facilitate citizen participation. Furthermore, direct engagement activities, such as petitions and participatory budgeting schemes, can complement representative and deliberative approaches.