

Governing Municipal Spaces: The Importance of Addressing Sociological Factors in Boundary Reform

Research shows that:

By drawing municipal boundaries, states can give symbolic recognition to certain areas and economically empower some regions or groups over others.

Boundary delimitation is never a “neutral” or purely technical exercise but involves sociological factors and political and economic interests.

Where boundaries are drawn in ways that have little connection with the daily spatial practices of residents, it can undermine the authority of subnational institutions.

(De)centralized municipal boundary reforms:

After the 2011 uprising in Tunisia, decentralization was proposed as a structural solution to achieve territorial justice for marginalized regions. As part of this decentralization process, Tunisia undertook a municipal boundary reform in 2015-2017. The reform was the biggest reorganization of municipal boundaries since reforms just after independence. However, the criteria used for drawing new boundaries ignored the views and preferences of residents whose daily lives were affected by the reform. In some cases, the reforms created municipal centers that are physically inaccessible to residents.

These boundaries have generated local opposition and boundary disputes while also weakening the legitimacy of municipal authorities and causing some residents to boycott municipal elections. The reorganization of boundaries without regard to physical and economic factors has also negatively affected municipalities’ capacity to govern their territory.

How can boundary reforms best be carried out?

Tunisia’s recent boundary reforms process illustrates how neutral, technical criteria can overlook important sociological and spatial factors. In addition, a lack of transparency in the process can deepen public distrust. Insisting on adopting a “neutral” technical approach while refusing to consult or take into account local views, preferences and identities produce perceptions that new boundaries are illegitimate and seek to impose a homogenizing vision of national identity and conceal clientelist interests. Thus, a process that seeks to promote national unity risks doing the very opposite. To enjoy greater legitimacy, public authorities should aim to constitute internal boundaries that reflect local identities and spatial practices, and preferences regarding how people use and view the space around them. There are many ways to do this, such as using technology and data to map spatial patterns in movement, social exchanges, and economic activity. These actions help to produce boundaries that are functional and reflect human activity.

Participation in boundary delimitation:

If legitimate and functional boundaries are the goal, central authorities can benefit from consulting local residents and organizations to understand how people use and view the space around them. As the research shows, failing to do so creates internal boundaries that provoke local conflicts, which can then be exploited by national and local actors to stoke divisions and undermine social cohesion.

To access the full paper, see:

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About GLD

The Program on Governance and Local Development (GLD) is a research program based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Program Director, Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The program is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Program findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.



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