

Ministers voice support for increasing decentralization, boosting municipalities

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BEIRUT: A group of Lebanese ministers voiced their support for stronger and more independent municipalities that acknowledge their role in promoting sustainable local economic development, during the Municipal Convention for Local Economic Development Tuesday.

"Empowering municipalities is an essential step to restoring decision making on administrative and local economic matters to citizens," [acting](#) Interior Minister Ahmad Fatfat said. He added that the government should continue to supervise municipalities without diminishing their

authority.

In the recent past, relations between the Interior Ministry and the Beirut municipality were "negative and controversial" with the ministry considering the municipality as merely a tool to implement its decisions, Beirut Mayor Abdel-Monem Ariss said.

In order to remove obstacles hampering the productivity of municipalities, Ariss called upon the ministry to draft a modern municipality law as well as take on an administrative decentralization role stressing that municipal committees have a great deal of legitimacy as they're directly elected by citizens.

A series of workshops will be organized for municipalities to discuss a new law governing their work and their suggestions will be conveyed to the Interior Ministry, Mahmoud Batlouni, Lebanon director of the State University of New York (SUNY) said.

Tuesday's conference was designed for employees from municipalities all over the country to meet with relevant officials from various ministries and donor institutions, such as the World Bank, UNDP and the European Commission.

It was part of the Municipal Governance Assistance Program executed by the Center for Legislative Development at SUNY since 2001 and funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID). As a result of the program, municipality revenues reached over \$400 million in 2004 and 663 municipalities received an increase in income from direct taxes of, on average, 35 percent between 2003 and 2004, Baltouni said.

"Last year, workgroups from SUNY carried out more than 15,000 field visits to most of the Lebanese municipalities and provided [technical](#) and administrative assistance to more than 850 of them," he added.

The program aims at expanding the municipal revenue base, strengthening the role of local government in economic development, institutionalizing municipal standards and procedures, and increasing transparency and accountability. Municipalities are assisted in changing from manual to electronic record keeping, and in inputting all [historical data](#) and current [taxpayer](#) information. Baltouni urged central government and donor institutions to help municipalities implement more development projects.

USAID mission director for Lebanon, Raouf Youssef, elaborated on projects carried out with municipalities and supported by the agency in the environmental, [agricultural](#) and governance fields. These covered issues such as organic [farming](#), marketing Lebanese food products, solid waste and [wastewater](#) treatment and community building.

Helping municipalities to increase their revenues helps create new development projects which improve economic conditions and create a positive environment for foreign investment. Representatives from the European Commission, the World Bank and UNDP also spoke of the importance of promoting local economies.

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