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Fostering open government in the Arab region

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Open government and development

Open government is described as a government, which is effective and efficient in the performance of its duties, transparent in and accountable for its actions, and accessible to all through its services. It also refers to a government that is responsive to the needs of its citizens, values their participation, knowledge and expertise in decision-making, and embraces new and emerging technologies to enhance its governance.

In fact, there are many definitions for 'open government', the Rule of Law Index, developed by the World Justice Project, defines 'open government' as a Government that shares information, empowers people with tools to hold the Government accountable, and fosters citizen participation in public policy deliberations. Nonetheless, the definition of 'open government' is constantly changing because of several factors, including what Governments want to achieve in accessing data and information, in providing online services, and in including citizens in decision-making and service design. In all cases, improving participation, transparency and accountability remain the main goals of open government.

Shifting to an open government entails amending decisions, legislation and administrative, legislative, regulatory, institutional and technological procedures. Such reforms impact various government actors, and affect government interaction with citizens and stakeholders in society.

Open government adopts emerging technologies, especially those that improve interaction between Government and its various components, on the one hand, and the public, non-governmental organizations and the private sector, on the other. Such new technologies enable Government to develop and implement initiatives on open government in line with frameworks and models related to open data, open cooperation, open participation and open innovation.

Open government has a major impact on good governance because it operationalizes its fundamental principles, namely accountability,

transparency, inclusiveness, effectiveness and contestability. A sixth principle can be added to this list: responsiveness (figure 1) . Open government also contributes to building strong institutions, cementing citizenship and achieving democracy.

Figure 1. Governance principles

Source: The ESCWA Governance Report, 2014.

Figure 2 shows the status of governance in the Arab region based on the Worldwide Governance Indicators of the World Bank that focus on the following key dimensions of governance: government effectiveness, which captures perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the quality of the civil service; control of corruption, which captures perceptions of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including that of elites and private interests; and voice and accountability, which captures perceptions of the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their Government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association and a free media.
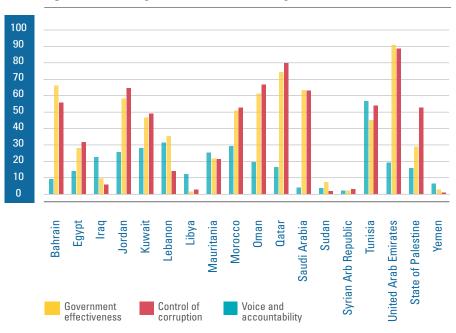
Figure 2. Status of governance in the Arab region (Percentile rank)

Government effectiveness — Control of corruption — Voice and accountability

Given that open government assists in increasing transparency and strengthening accountability and responsiveness in societies, especially between Governments and citizens, it therefore contributes to achieving several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, especially targets 16.6, 16.7 and 6.10. Moreover, open government expedites efforts to end poverty (SDG1) by making institutions more transparent and effective, which gives citizens a key role in scrutinizing public expenditure. Open government also improves the efficiency of public services, because open data and participatory planning improve planning, distribution and accountability (SDGs 6 to 8). Moreover, open government promotes innovation (SDG9) since open data enables individuals, the private sector and non-governmental organizations to develop innovative community applications through access to larger amounts of open data and information on social needs.

Open government globally

Over the past two decades, the concept of open government has gained a wide global momentum. It became apparent that government openness not only benefited citizens, but also the Government itself by improving record management and efficiency in decision-making and service provision. It is also considered a guarantee against misrule and corruption. Many developed countries have made important steps towards becoming more open. In contrast, developing countries have been more reluctant to open up, with the exception of Chile and Uruguay. Northern European countries hold the top five positions in most performance indicators on open government, while other developed countries hold the other 15 positions in the ranking .

Table 1 sets out the Open Government Index rankings of selected advanced countries, developing countries and Arab countries contained in World Justice Project reports, which employ the following qualitative indicators: open government data, dispute resolution and disclosure of assets, budget transparency, and policy inclusiveness. The evaluation comprises six Arab countries, including Tunisia that holds the top ranking among Arab countries in the field of open government, and Jordan that is making concrete efforts to shift towards open government.

Table 1. Rankings of selected developed, developing and Arab countries in the Open Government Index

Country	Global ranking 2016	Open Government Index 2016	Global ranking 2018	Open Government Index 2018
Norway	1	0.87	1	0.88
Finland	3	0.85	2	0.86
Sweden	5	0.84	4	0.85
United Kingdom	7	0.84	8	0.81
United States	12	0.78	13	0.77
South Africa	35	0.61	34	0.62
Indonesia	37	0.58	47	0.54
Tunisia	60	0.51	57	0.50
Jordan	94	0.43	79	0.45
Morocco	76	0.47	84	0.44
Lebanon	93	0.43	89	0.44
United Arab Emirates	102	0.39	98	0.39
Egypt	113	0.23	112	0.25

Source: World Justice Project 2016, 2017-2018 Rule of Law Index.

Moving towards open government in the Arab region

The Arab countries met mixed success in areas related to open government such as e-government, open data, and the adoption of related legislation and laws; while current and future developments are still hampered by obstacles. Following a summarized description of the Arab countries' efforts that will support the transformation towards open government.

1. E-government

The envisaged goals of open government differ greatly from those of e-government; however, connections exist between the methods employed in each and their outcomes. E-government strengthens interaction between Government and its institutions, on the one hand, and stakeholders (individuals and groups), on the other, thus enabling stakeholders to better access desired services. Table 2 shows e-government rankings in selected Arab countries in 2016, according to the E-Government Development Index.

Table 2. E-Government Development Index in selected Arab countries, 2016

Country	Global ranking 2016 (of 193)	E-Government Development Index 2016
Bahrain	24	0.7734
United Arab Emirates	29	0.7515
Kuwait	40	0.708
Saudi Arabia	44	0.6822
Qatar	48	0.6699
Oman	66	0.5962
Tunisia	72	0.5682
Lebanon	73	0.5646
Morocco	85	0.5186
Jordan	91	0.5123
Egypt	108	0.4594
Libya	118	0.4322
Syrian Arab Republic	137	0.3404
Iraq	141	0.3334
Sudan	161	0.2539
Yemen	174	0.2248

Source: UN E-Government Survey 2016.

Effective e-government facilitates participation, especially through social media. Some Arab countries ranked above average globally in the E-Participation Index despite ongoing conflicts and wars, as shown in figure 3.

Figure 3. E-Participation Index in selected Arab countries, 2016

2. Open data

Most efforts in the field of open government in the Arab region have focused on open government data. The application of open data has faced significant challenges, including identifying data that can be made available, recognizing the importance of those data, and reluctance to openly share government data. Table 3 sets out some open data initiatives in the Arab region.

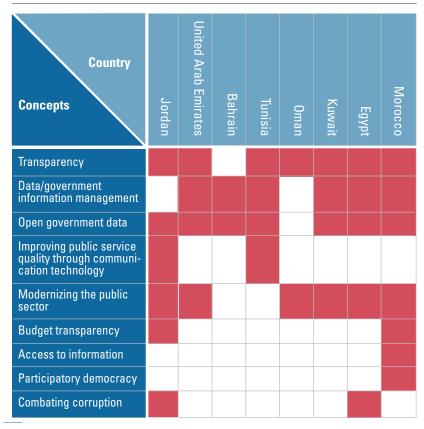**Table 3.** Open data initiatives in selected Arab countries

Country	Initiative/website
Jordan	Open government data platform https://data.jordan.gov.jo
United Arab Emirates	Official data portal of the Government bayanat.ae
Bahrain	Bahrain open data portal www.data.gov.bh/
Tunisia	Open data portal www.data.gov.tn
Saudi Arabia	Saudi open data data.gov.sa
Oman	National open data initiative www.oman.om/opendata
Qatar	Qatar Information Exchange (Qalam) www.gov.qa/wps/portal/opendata
Morocco	Moroccan portal of open data data.gov.ma

Source: Compiled by ESCWA based on Arab countries' responses to a survey on open government.

3. Open government policies and strategies

Most Arab countries do not have a clear and integrated policy or strategy on open government, but many have full or partial national plans towards open government. Some countries are in the process of developing plans in that regard. Countries that have clear and integrated plans for open government are Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. Figure 4 shows the issues that Arab countries are striving to incorporate into open government policies; the information is taken from an ESCWA survey on open government.

Figure 4. Issues covered by open government policies in selected Arab countries

Concepts / Country	Jordan	United Arab Emirates	Bahrain	Tunisia	Oman	Kuwait	Egypt	Morocco
Transparency	■	■		■	■	■	■	■
Data/government information management		■	■	■		■	■	■
Open government data	■	■	■	■			■	■
Improving public service quality through communication technology	■			■				
Modernizing the public sector	■	■			■	■	■	■
Budget transparency	■							■
Access to information								■
Participatory democracy								■
Combating corruption	■						■	

Source: Compiled by ESCWA based on Arab countries' responses to a survey on open government.

4. Legislation in the Arab region on the right to access information

The success of open government projects requires an appropriate legislative framework that strengthens the project's application. A law on the right to access information is vital to implementing open government, since it enshrines a basic human right and reinforces rights related to freedom of thought and participation in public life thus, in turn, promoting democratic practices; in addition to its fundamental impact on enhancing accountability and transparency and highlighting potential corruption. Open government projects also necessitate legislation or regulations on a legal definition of

open data and on access to them. They should require public bodies to publish government documents, and determine publication methods and the nature of data. Only five Arab countries have adopted laws on the right to access information, namely Jordan, Lebanon, Morroco, Tunisia and Yemen. However, many Arab countries have enacted various legislation on other aspects of open government, such as transparency, open data, and promoting financial integrity and transparency. Several draft laws on the above subjects are currently under consideration in some Arab countries.

ESCWA framework for open government in Arab countries

ESCWA has developed a framework to apply open government in Arab countries, that is consistent with countries' level of ICT investment, e-government status, and the legislative and regulatory situation in government institutions. The framework is also consistent with Arab culture and the level of interaction between citizens and the public sector. The framework is considered a guidelines for developing national workplans for the transformation towards open government. Government departments and institutions can also use it to apply open government by following a logical sequence.

By applying the open government framework in Arab countries, ESCWA aims to increase government transparency; enhance accountability and responsiveness; and strengthen participation, especially between Government and citizens. All those objectives intersect with SDG16 on peace, justice and strong institutions.

Preliminary steps

Before applying open government, it is necessary for Governments to take several preliminary measures to prepare procedures for every phase of the proposed framework, including drafting a concept paper for wide dissemination that explains the meaning of open government. It is also vital to organize continual training, especially for government workers, on technology investment and the professional use of social media. Governments must also develop plans to improve ICT networks and reduce the cost of using them, to enable all citizens to access and use electronic services.

Government should also prepare a policy document that sets out a national framework for open government, and the Government's vision and principles in applying open government and that guide decision making.

Phase 1: Openness

Phase 1 aims to achieve openness to enhance transparency, which is the main channel for implementing open government. This phase forms the cornerstone of open participation and cooperation between Government, citizens and other stakeholders. During this phase, it is necessary to focus on data dissemination through ICT, while ensuring data quality and periodic updates. It is also vital to raise awareness among the public and government workers on the importance of open data and government openness and accountability. This phase is important for encouraging innovation through open data investment to develop key public services.

Phase 2: Participation

Phase 2 aims to strengthen the culture and practices of open government by promoting interaction between government departments and citizens. This is achieved by encouraging citizens to present ideas, knowledge, comments and proposals to Government so as to benefit from and disseminate them and respond to citizens by providing feedback on steps taken. This phase enhances inclusiveness and citizen involvement in government work and decision-making. It relies on intense use of ICT, especially social media.

Phase 3: Collaboration

Phase 3 aims to enhance open cooperation between government departments, citizens, civil society organizations and the private sector. It focuses on promoting dialogue between Government and citizens on public policies and decisions, and on responsiveness in the provision of services according to beneficiary needs. This phase uses social media as a collaborative tool, and uses other collaborative applications such as "blog" and "wiki". Involving citizens in service design is expected to increase quality and innovation in government services, and reduce costs.

Phase 4: Citizen engagement

Phase 4 aims to achieve effective citizen participation by promoting the previous three phases (transparency, participation and collaboration) to ensure full citizen involvement in government work, where citizens and all stakeholders (citizens, civil society organizations, the private sector and government actors) participate in formulating policies and in decision-making. This phase also aims to build an accountable Government that places citizens at the centre of its concerns, so as to achieve the SDGs. Figure 5 sets out the ESCWA proposed framework for open government.

Figure 5. ESCWA proposed framework for open government

Phase 4: Citizen Engagement
- Ensure full citizen access to information and services
- Involve all stakeholders in decision-making: Government, citizens, non-governmental organizations, the private sector
- Transparent Government focused on citizens

Phase 3: Collaboration
- Encourage citizen contributions to decision-making
- Provide innovative government services with value added, and enable access to them at any time and in any place
- Employ participatory platforms, social media and open dialogue

Phase 2: Participation
- Encourage citizen participation in government work
- Strengthen interaction with citizens and receive proposals and comments
- Intensify the use of bi-directional communication technology and social media

Phase 1: Openness
- Develop and implement open data initiatives to increase transparency
- Ensure data quality, management and evaluation
- Use appropriate and available technologies such as the Internet and mobile applications

Preliminary steps
- Raise citizen awareness of open government concepts, and capacity-building
- Prepare a concept paper explaining open government
- Develop regulatory and technology infrastructure
- Prepare a policy document containing open government principles