



## Concept Note

(Draft of November 5, 2020)

### **Agile Government Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Arab Region: what are we learning for a better future?**

#### **Webinar organized jointly by**

*The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development/SIGMA, United Nations Economic Commission for Western Asia (UN ESCWA) and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA)*

**Tuesday, 17 November 2020**

2.00 – 4.30 PM CET (Paris time)

3.00 – 5.30 PM EET (Beirut Time)

8.00 – 10.30 AM EST (New York Time)

#### **Background**

The current COVID-19 pandemic calls for unprecedented efforts and coordinated action. It requires more than ever strengthening public institutions, implementing innovative measures and a collaborative spirit by all countries and the global community to contain the spread of the pandemic, mitigate its far-reaching socio-economic impacts, and more importantly build a better future.

The policy brief<sup>1</sup> “The COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis surrounding the efforts to contain the spread of the virus and limit its negative impacts have provided an alert and opportunity for government and non-government actors, along with development community to reflect and strategize on how to develop governance capacities that provide, protect, defend, include, collaborate with, unify, facilitate and listen to, and are transparent and accountable to people.

It had highlighted the need for legitimate, credible and trusted leadership in all institutions of governance across all sectors and levels of society so that challenges such as COVID-19 pandemic can be successfully addressed.”

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to be made to page 1 of Policy Brief (upcoming) on Governance Capacities to address COVID-19 and build back better – UNDESA-John-Mary Kauyza

In this framework, the 2030 UN Agenda provides a blueprint for the future we all want. Agility and effective governance are interconnected and key elements of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Through its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the Agenda provides a global transformation strategy which aims to foster agile and resilient societies that embrace the value of equity, equality, inclusion, accountability, integration, peace, justice, respect for diversity, collaboration and partnership.

Along these lines, The United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA) has outlined 11 principles of effective governance<sup>2</sup>. The principles, endorsed by the Economic and Social Council on 2 July 2018, highlight the need for pragmatic and ongoing improvements in national and local governance capabilities to reach the SDGs.

Digital technologies and innovation have proven their importance for business continuity, education and trade during the COVID-19 pandemic. The OECD has issued a series of COCOVID-19 digital policy response briefs in which the crucial role of digital technology for publishing and disseminating up to date information that reach all connected people was demonstrated during the pandemic period and beyond<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the digital technology was crucial for facilitating the interaction between citizens, NGOs and the government on matters related to well-being of people in society. Digital platforms and e-government services, when available, ensured the continuity of service delivery and were important factors for strengthening relationship between government and citizens. Looking at the various advantage of digital technology, we have to stress on its vital role for education sector. School, university and the government created innovative ways, tools and programs to keep the education system operational and functioning. The same apply to the health sector which benefited from many advantages offered by digital technologies.

However, not all countries had the appropriate infrastructure and suitable platforms and e-services to ensure the continuity of work, the provision of information and the delivery of essential services. Digital technology was a fundamental factor that showed the level of agility of government to respond to the needs of citizens. Furthermore, digital technologies and digital services were determinant factors of the ability of government institutions, schools and universities to ensure their activities during the pandemic.

Inclusive digital transformation is a great enabler in normal time and is even more so in the time of crisis when the agility of governance responses is of paramount importance in building a more sustainable future and implementing SDGs.

It requires learning the right lessons from Covid-19. The current tragedy proves we can't afford to leave unattended the underlying fragilities at the core of our current economic and social system. Resilience and agility must be put at the center of governance and decision-making at all levels, such that the impact of future shocks can be absorbed more readily and with less upheaval and disruption to people's lives and livelihoods.

Tackling the challenges of the COVID-19 era and beyond requires an interconnected, coordinated, inter-institutional response at all levels. It also offers a great opportunity to build a better future. This event will look at the intersection of governance, digital transformation and SDGs in the Arab region. It will aim to disseminate through governance lenses the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://publicadministration.un.org/en/Intergovernmental-Support/CEPA/Principles-of-Effective-Governance>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/going-digital/>

immediate response and long-term vision, including the implementation of UN 2030 Development Agenda in building forward.

OECD, UNDESA and UNESCWA are at the forefront of supporting government efforts to tackle challenges imposed by the pandemic through policy briefs, online dialogues, capacity building events, and enhanced efforts to disseminate best practices and innovation. The OECD / SIGMA (a joint initiative from the OECD and the EU, principally financed by the EU) organizes annually the Observatory for Public Sector Innovation (OPSI)-a global forum for public sector innovation.

At this time of increasing complexity, rapidly changing demands and considerable fiscal pressures, governments need to understand, test and embed new ways of doing things. OPSI is working with governments to understand and encourage new approaches to address society's complex problems by empowering public servants with new insights, knowledge, tools and connections to help them explore new possibilities. It is in this respect that the OECD/Observatory for Public Sector Innovation is organizing the 2020 annual global event on the theme "Government after shock".

Against this backdrop, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)<sup>45</sup> jointly with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)<sup>6</sup>, and the United Nations Economic and Regional Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)<sup>78</sup> are joining forces and building synergies through co-organization of an virtual event on "Agile Government Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Arab Region: What are we learning for a better future?" as part of the Government After Shock Conference initiated and led by the OECD/The Observatory for Public Sector Innovation

### Context of the event

At this time of increasing complexity, rapidly changing demands and considerable fiscal pressures, governments need to understand, test and embed new ways of doing things. The OECD/OPSI is organizing the 2020 annual global event on the theme "Government after shock" on 17 and 18 November 2020 in Paris, France. This two-day event will combine in-person and digital experiences and focus on questions such as:

- **What do we need to leave behind from this shock?** What are the things that no longer fit with the world we are heading into, what are the structures and processes that have revealed themselves to be inadequate, unsuited or inappropriate for the world emerging from the crisis? What did the crisis show was no longer appropriate, or what has emerged from or been exacerbated by the crisis that we need to stop doing?
- **What do we want to keep?** What do we hold dear or value from before or during the crisis that we want to keep or sustain? What things might we cherish but need to adapt to the changed context?

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<sup>4</sup> Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government <https://publicadministration.un.org/en/>

<sup>5</sup> Public Service Innovation Branch <https://publicadministration.un.org/en/Public-Service-Innovation-and-Transformation>

<sup>6</sup> SIGMA <http://www.sigmaweb.org/>

<sup>7</sup> ESCWA, Technology for Development <https://www.unescwa.org/our-work/technology-development>

<sup>8</sup> ESCWA, Governance and Conflict Issues <https://www.unescwa.org/our-work/governance-and-conflict-issues>

- **What should we do differently?** What could we do differently, given what has been revealed by the crisis? What should we change, what should we experiment with and what should we attempt now?

Coordinated by the OECD's Observatory of Public Sector Innovation and with the support of the European Commission through its [Horizon 2020 Programme](#), *Government After Shock* will be an event to suit today's unsettled context, one built upon learning from diverse experiences and bringing them together to help identify and consider the implications for governments and those involved in public purpose work. The two parts will be:

- Day 1: Rethinking and rebuilding through innovation - a series of local conversations hosted around the world, connected together by shared elements to help inform a global dialogue
- Day 2: Collaboration for systemic change beyond crisis - this high-level forum will bring together contributions from leaders to discuss the insights from day 1 and how governments can build upon the hard-won lessons from the crisis to make for better government into the future.

Its main goal: to support each country's capacity to anticipate, understand, and govern complex and changing circumstances, at the same time as promoting international collaboration.

This joint event on "Agile Government Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Arab World: What are we learning for a better future" will be a great contribution to the ongoing global discussions on how to build back better, inclusive, people-centred, agile and resilient public administrations and governance system for the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges.

## Objectives

Within the larger framework of OECD/OPSI Conference on [Government After Shock](#) this webinar will present and discuss agile government responses and approaches from the Arab region in dealing with the crisis.

The Webinar through its three main sessions, will look at three pillars:

- (i) The role of public service during covid-19 crisis and beyond;
- (ii) The importance of accelerating digital transformation in crisis response and pathways towards a better future.
- (iii) The open and inclusive innovation: what challenges and opportunities were provided by covid-19 pandemic response and what will we take as we rebuild and look at a better future.

## Format

The Webinar will run for two hours and thirty minutes.

Simultaneous translation will be provided in English, French and Arabic. The online event will include three panel discussion followed by a Q&A session. The event will be conducted using video conferencing tool of zoom.

The recordings and the presentations will be disseminated on the below websites of the co-organizers, respectively OECD/SIGMA, UN DESA and UN ESCWA.

<https://gov-after-shock.oecd-opsi.org/event/agile-government-responses/>

<https://www.unescwa.org/events/agile-government-responses-covid19>

<https://publicadministration.un.org/en/agile-government-responses-covid19>

## Target Audience

The event will benefit from the large and diverse audience of the OECD/OPSI Conference. It includes government officials, business sector representatives, civil society leaders, representatives of academia and think tanks, international development community at large. The networks of UN DESA and UN ESCWA will further expand the targeted audience, including the networks of schools of public administrations and alike. The profiles of participants include:

- High Level Public Officials at the national and local levels;
- Director Generals of key public institutions;
- Key leaders from academia and civil society;
- Representatives of private sector and innovation hubs;
- Representatives of schools of public administration in the region and globally.
- Representatives of UN and non-UN development organizations

The annual OECD/SIGMA Conference hosts over 2000 participants from across the world.

## Expected Results

The main findings/lessons learnt from this online event will be disseminated through professional networks of three organizing institutions, namely the OECD/SIGMA, UNESCWA and UNDESA.

Such findings will guide intergovernmental, research and capacity building work in the Arab region for each of the organizing institutions. It will further enhance their cooperation with the government and non-government actors in the region in enhancing crisis response through digital transformation, continuity of public service delivery and open and inclusive, innovative approaches. It is expected to enhance inter-institutional cooperation at the national, regional and global level as we aim to take the lessons learnt and finding pathways towards a better future.

## Registration

- 1- Registration in the [Webinar on "Agile government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Arab region: what are we learning for a better future?"](#) can be through the link below:

- <https://meetoecd1.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJUrd6opjIpGteE7Gx2tgORIEMe1PiQy1t3>

2- Registration in the Government After Shock Conference can be through the link:

- <https://gov-after-shock.oecd-opsi.org/register/>

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