



United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

## Draft Report

### Agile government responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Arab region: what are we learning for the future? Webinar, 17 November 2020

#### Summary

The [webinar](#) on [Agile Government Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Arab World: what are we learning for a better future?](#) was held on 17 November 2020 and addressed good government responses to the covid-19 pandemic in the Arab region. It was jointly organized by the joint [EU-OECD](#) Initiative [SIGMA](#) (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management), [ESCWA](#) and [UNDESA](#). Aimed at rethinking public services and leveraging innovation to improve their quality, the webinar formed part of the "[Government after shock](#)" forum initiated by the OECD [Observatory for Public Sector Innovation](#). Over 100 participants actively engaged in the webinar that involved international experts and speakers from Arab countries, namely from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia and the UAE.

Webinar conversations asserted that the Arab region needs to accelerate digital transformation through using new technologies and providing innovative solutions for responding to the covid-19 pandemic. In this context, the status of digital transformation and development in the Arab region was overviewed with highlights to the emerging trends in government responses to the pandemic, including sharing up to date information, providing innovative services, interaction and collaboration with all stakeholders, formulating policies and strategies to speed up digital transformation, and using emerging technologies in the provision of advanced services. Furthermore, conversations considered digital technologies and innovation as a must for expanding public services, and that trust in governments is a major factor in the Arab region where countries need to build resilient, open, transparent and accountable institutions to meet the public's expectations.

## Introduction

1. The pandemic started as a health crisis and moved to the whole society causing abrupt changes to the lives of people and operations of businesses and public administrations, both in terms of services and work methods. For national response, strengthening of public institutions and governance capabilities across all sectors is required more than ever, together with implementing innovative measures and a collaborative spirit to face and contain the spread of the virus, mitigate its negative socioeconomic impacts, and build a better future. In responding to the pandemic, Governments and public administrations needed to urgently act respond to the health crisis and were more open to work with all stakeholders to provide governance solutions.
2. Agility and effective governance are interconnected and are key elements of the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the United Nations 2015-adopted 2030 Agenda for sustainable development; and the 2018-endorsed 11 principles of effective governance<sup>1</sup> emphasize the "need for pragmatic and ongoing improvements in national and local governance capabilities to reach the SDGs".
3. During the covid-19 pandemic, digital technologies and innovation have proved their crucial role in business continuity of all sectors, in sustaining education systems and trade operations, and in facilitating communication and service delivery.<sup>2</sup> However, not all countries had the appropriate infrastructure and platforms needed to support governments in responding to the needs of people and institutions during the pandemic. This makes inclusive digital transformation a necessity in times of crises and when the agility of governance responses is important for building back better and implementing the SDGs.
4. The webinar subject of this report was held through Zoom on 17 November 2020 and was jointly organized by the [European Union](#) and [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(OECD\)](#) joint initiative [SIGMA](#) (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management), [United Nations Economic Commission for Western Asia \(UNESCWA\)](#) and [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs \(UNDESA\)](#). It aimed at rethinking public services and leveraging innovation to improve their quality, and was held as part of the "[Government after shock](#)" forum initiated by the OECD [Observatory for Public Sector Innovation](#). Panellists discussed government responses to the crisis in the Arab region and highlighted where lessons were learned and where governments can do better for the future.

## I. Main messages

5. The main messages emanating from the webinar are summarized below:
  - a) Excellence in public governance needs to spread in governments, especially now where the covid-19 crisis has boosted change in public administrations through the adoption of digital and remote solutions.
  - b) Continuing to form partnerships is crucial in facing the covid-19 crisis and for reaching SDG17, especially that governments are also impacted as all other victims of the pandemic.
  - c) Developing institutions to be resilient, transparent and accountable is essential for the societal progress in managing the pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> Endorsed in 2018 by ECOSOC. [Principles of Effective Governance for Sustainable Development](#).

<sup>2</sup> [OECD series of covid-19 policy briefs are available through the link: Going digital](#)

d) Building capabilities to use technologies and innovate in public services are key in facing the crisis, and the adoption of effective and participatory approaches lie at the heart of addressing challenges.

e) Promoting open government is increasingly at the core of efforts for governments to deliver up to the public expectations, and to share good practices and set the scene for an environment conducive for innovation.

f) During the disruptive pandemic, innovation is key for all efforts and it is important to co-create by harnessing global networks and adopting public sector innovation, as well as engaging youth and older and experienced members of society in entrepreneurship for developing innovative solutions.

g) Sustaining public services through online tools/platforms and call centres requires strong technical standards and innovation to extend e-services to all and reduce in-person contact, with special attention to the needs of vulnerable groups, including persons with disability, the elderly and people with high health risk.

h) The work of Governments, a provider of discipline and public services, should be closer to people and with humanness in order to enhance the state-citizen relationship and build trust in public governance. Government employees drive public services and need to be supported and prepared to help make governments work and build back better.

i) Digital technologies have proved to be a must rather than a choice during the pandemic, whether in response efforts or in sustaining public services; and the digital divide is more challenging than ever as many countries still need to set the infrastructure and networks and many people are not yet connected.

j) Building a repository for agile government responses to the covid-19 pandemic can be of benefit for the Arab region and the world.

## **II. Panel Discussions**

6. The webinar included an opening with a keynote speech and three panel discussions that addressed public service delivery, accelerating digital transformation, and open innovation. A briefing on each of these sessions is provided below.

### **Opening**

7. This panel included three high-level speakers from the organizing institutions, a keynote speaker from Bahrain, and an overall moderator. The first speaker was Mr. Gregor Virant, Head of OECD/SIGMA Programme, OECD, who described the responses to covid-19 pandemic and related changes in public administrations as "digital, simple and remote solutions" and has emphasized the need to spread excellence in public governance. The second speaker was Mr. John-Mary Kauzya Chief, Public Service Innovation Branch, Division of Public Institutions and Digital Government. UNDESA, who considered that partnerships are crucial for tackling the crisis as well as targeting SDG17, especially that governments are also impacted as all other victims of the covid-19 pandemic. The third speaker was Mr. Tarik Alami, Director, Emerging and Conflict Related Issues Division, UNESCWA, who considered that trust in government was a major factor in the national responses and of significance for all countries in the Arab region; and has stressed the need for building resilient institutions that are open, transparent, and accountable to enable service delivery up to public expectations and societal progress in managing the pandemic.

8. The keynote speaker was Mr. Ra'ed Mohamed BenShams, Founding Director of the Institute of Public Administration in Bahrain, and sought to answer the question of "What should we do? in facing the global pandemic". The covid-19 crisis has challenged all countries, even the most effective ones,

where accountability towards public interest was jeopardized and the ability for inclusion and leaving no one behind was at risk. He emphasised (a) the need for promoting open government as a core of government efforts to deliver up to the public expectations and to share good practices and set the scene for an environment conducive for innovation; and (b) the importance of co-creating through harnessing global networks and adopting public sector innovation, as well as engaging youth and older and experienced members of society in developing solutions. The opening and keynote speech session was moderated by Ms. Elida Recí (UNDESA).

### **Session 1: Panel Discussion on Public Service Delivery**

9. This session addressed the role of public service and public servants during the pandemic and beyond, with focus on the main challenges for ensuring continuity of public service delivery, as well as other areas, such as the agility of responses and relationship between state and people, lessons learnt, and the future needs in governance and public service delivery and opportunities for building a better future. Moderated by Mr. John-Mary Kauzya (UNDESA), the session included two speakers, from Morocco and the UAE, who shed light on national responses to the pandemic.

10. The first speaker was Mr. Mohamed Sefiani, Mayor of the city of Chefchaouen, Morocco, briefed on the city response to the health crisis that had negative impacts on society and the economy. He emphasised that partnerships between local government entities and civil society organizations was crucial in the response to the pandemic, and that more partnerships are needed together with decentralization and services. Furthermore, developing the infrastructure and networking capabilities was considered key for reducing inequalities between rural and urban areas, and for facilitating logistics such as those related to food distribution. Attention is needed to reduce inequalities between cities and rural areas, and to build resilient, smart, sustainable and integrated cities, with reference to SDG11; and digital transformation, digital economy and digital solutions were considered a priority for future government work towards better governance and sustainable development.

11. The second speaker was Mr. Salem Belyouha AlMuhairi, Ministry of Government Development and the Future, UAE, who briefed on the national response that aimed at a survival mode and extending public services to all people in the UAE or abroad. A call centre with more than 10 languages was utilized to respond to inquiries on services, together with using chat and whatsapp, and government operations moved to remote work and engagement to ensure safety and health. During the pandemic, innovation is key for all response efforts, and learning from experiences and taking lessons is essential to enhance services and leave no one behind. To sustain public services using online tools and platforms, the UAE national efforts extended around the clock and required a high level of innovation and strong technical standards; and e-services were extended to all with the aim of reducing in-person contact and with special attention to the needs of vulnerable groups, including persons with disability, the elderly and people with high health-risks.

12. Mr. John-Mary Kauzya (UNDESA) considered that the work of Governments, as provider of discipline and public services, should be closer to people and with humanness in order to enhance the state-citizen relationship and build trust in public governance. Public sector employees drive public services and need to be supported and prepared to help make governments work and build back better. Furthermore, remote participants raised the need for mastery of data analysis and extracting directions for the future, and that institutions need to be well structured, flexible and agile in mobilizing resources to tackle weak areas and solve problems.

### **Session 2: Panel Discussion on Accelerating Digital Transformation**

13. The speakers and moderator of this session briefed on good government responses to the pandemic and considered digital transformation through technologies and innovation as a must rather than a choice. They addressed the key challenges of digital transformation in the Arab region, and looked at the dimensions of strategy, leadership and institutional frameworks, as well as innovation. The perspectives and pathways of Arab countries in responding to the challenges of covid-19 and

building a better future were tackled with focus on digital transformation and selected national responses. Discussions sought to answer questions related to the challenges, opportunities and readiness for digital transformation, and technology diffusion and update for an agile government response to the pandemic.

14. Ms. Nibal Idlebi, Chief of Innovation Section, UNESCWA, who also moderated the session, stressed the need to accelerate digital transformation in the Arab region, highlighting emerging trends that included the use emerging technologies to provide new and innovative solutions for responding to the pandemic. She presented a quick overview of the State of play in the region related to digitalization as well as the indexes that ESCWA and UNDESA have developed in this field. The important role of digital technologies was confirmed during this pandemic. Ms. Idlebi mentioned that digital development and transformation started in the Arab region in 2003 with the design of several digital strategies and information society. After 17 years of development, the digital development is heterogeneous in the Arab region. Three clusters could be distinguished in regards to this development, namely: (a) the GCC that are the most developed, with good infrastructure and services either from the government or from private sector; (b) the middle-income countries that developed good strategies and implemented some of it, such as Jordan, Tunisia, Lebanon, Morocco and Egypt; and (c) the least developed countries and the countries that made some progress previously but witnessed in the last years serious crisis.

15. During covid-19, digital transformation has proven its importance in all countries. The emerging trends during this period are the openness, sharing of up-to-date information, delivery of new and innovative services and the importance of collaboration, through digitalisation, between the government and NGOs. The actual pandemic pushed some countries to formulate policies for digital transformation.

16. Ms. Ghada Labib, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, Egypt highlighted that digital technologies are crucial for government institutions to be able to provide connectivity and digital services to citizens and interact with people and extend financial support to the groups who are most impacted by the pandemic. Ms. Labib presented on e-government in Egypt and the adoption and the implementation of the main measures during COVID-19, which required coordination with various ministries in order to achieve digitalisation and financial inclusion and opted for making government services digital. For this, the organisation was restructured, and a new digital strategy developed. Egypt invested significantly in improving its ICT infrastructure, which allowed to manage communication with other administrations but also to create a new platform as well as a hotline dedicated for health to support and guide citizens on issues related to the pandemic, quarantine, hospitals and medical facilities. This was yet another proof of the importance on the ICT in conducting the general affairs of the State.

17. In Egypt, online education became a common practice after making sure that all curricula are digitised and that students are trained to use online platform and that parents are able to supervise their children's work. Support was also provided to the informal sector as many people found themselves jobless e.g. the seasonal workers; thus, a financial assistance to this segment of the society was also provided online through algorithm and artificial intelligence that analysed the cases and sent responses to the applicants via phones. The country provided computers, tablets and smart phones to various segments of societies regardless their incomes and created a gateway to people with disabilities and special needs was provided, to disseminate information and provide assistance.

18. What helped in realising this was the establishment, throughout the past three years, of the superior digital council that helped extending digitalisation to society as well as the assistance of the Government financial body. Ms. Labib summed the challenges faced during this period as related to (a) the development of the infrastructure to reach and provide Internet access to all segments of the society; (b) Guaranteeing a secured and virus free internet connection to provide secure public services; (c) the development of the public officials' digital skills; and (d) the limited capacities of public institutions to adapt and cope with covid-19.

19. Mr. Hassen Harrabi, Advisor in the Tunisian Ministry of Communication Technology and Digital Economy, highlighted four big strategic axes related to digitalisation in Tunisia. The first one is about social inclusion as a major challenge to the digital transformation. In developing countries, there is still an important digital gap where a big range of people does not have access to internet. The figures show that one in five people in these countries does not have access to internet. Technology infrastructure is being crucial for social development and needs to be taken into account to tackle digitalisation. The second one is about the obligation with digital technology is related to citizens' expectations and requirements towards the quality of the services, the liability and the transparency of the public administration. Mr. Harrabi considered the digital sovereignty as the third important element to have in order to secure a leading position in terms of digital development by the world in terms of data management and collection. The fourth and last crucial element is cybersecurity.

20. While digitalization represents 25% of the GDP worldwide, it is only 4% of the GDP in Tunisia. The way is still long and there is need today for transformative strategy. Mr. Harrabi presented the new Tunisian digitalization strategy and its six main aspects: social and financial inclusion, attraction of foreign investment in the digital field, digital transformation of the public administration, technology development, online training and employment and finally cybersecurity.

21. The session was wrapped-up by questions from the audience that focused on the pattern in the Middle East for moving from e-government to smart government and to open government, and how the public and private sectors are collaborating on these issues. The audience stressed on the necessity of measuring and evaluating the digital policies applied during this pandemic, analysing the lessons learnt and adjust for the future.

### **Session 3: Panel Discussion on Open Innovation**

22. This panel discussion covered the topic of open innovation in responding to covid-19 pandemic, and the speakers conveyed their perspectives and experiences amid the pandemic in the Arab region. Speakers sought to elaborate on the movements in shifting from whole of government approach to a whole of society approach, while addressing the challenges and gains in open data, open government and open innovation in the Arab region. Focus was on questions related to the challenges and opportunities of covid-19 response pertaining to open innovation, open data, open government, the gains and setbacks from the perspective of civic movements, academia, start-ups and youth, and the lessons learnt and pathways towards a better future.

23. Ms. Lamia Moubayed, President, the Institute of Finance Basil Fuleihan, Lebanon, briefed on the situation in Lebanon and the digital platforms amid covid-19 crisis and highlighted the key vulnerabilities faced. The covid-19 health crisis has hit the country at times of financial and monetary crisis, long-accumulated debt, and public protests and distress from the lack of governance to address the various crises; and the situation turned desperate with the tragic explosion of Beirut port. The Government was repeatedly called to have reforms and accountability, and to rely on innovative digital technologies; however, the covid-19 crisis and its disruptive impact have helped push the use of digital technologies and openness in the national responses. The crisis has shown the large digital divide and has impacted and changed the face and future of all sectors, including education, work, businesses, and public services. Also, the virtual social interaction during the pandemic have revealed the importance of digital platforms and applications for engagement and surviving the quarantine and lockdown. Applications developed using digital technologies, such as 5G, artificial intelligence, cloud and big data, have helped all society and enabled Governments to control the measures during the pandemic and to sustain public services. She considered that the pandemic has changed the face and future of all sectors and social interactions and that digital applications were the means to survive during the lockdown measures.

24. The multiple social, economic, political and health crises facing Lebanon has pushed forward the creation of digital initiatives that involved civil society, private sector, talented and people, and local governments, and these include: (a) [Inter-ministerial platform for assessment, coordination and tracking](#)

[\(IMPACT\) e-Gov platform](#) for sharing information and coordinate response to covid-19; (b) [Lebanon Citizen Budget Dashboard](#) made available user friendly budget information; and (c) [Beirut Port Disaster Donor Coordination Platform](#) that was a multi-stakeholder effort and it shows the relief efforts for Lebanon in recovery, showing transparency on aid management and distribution. Also, initiatives driven by civil society through collaborations included (a) [Jobs for Lebanon](#) to link job seekers with diaspora; and (b) [Lebanese alternative learning platform Tabshoura](#), an example of Lebanese digital curricula to provide access to education. The challenges and vulnerabilities that were exacerbated during the crises include lack of trust in public governance and services, limited capacities of governments to be agile, adapt and transform, and the conflict and lack of peace that limits the abilities in countries to benefit from digital technologies projects aimed at transformation.

25. Mr. Alessandro Bozzini, Policy Analyst, Open Government Unit, OECD, delivered a presentation on collaboration between Government and non-government stakeholders in the domain of open government with examples from Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries. The OECD defined Open Government as "A culture of governance that promotes the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation in support of democracy and inclusive growth" (2017), and the pillar on participation incorporates practices and levels of stakeholder engagement. The steps for stakeholder participation include sharing of information and data, conducting consultations to gather comments and views, and engaging stakeholders in the policy development and decision-making processes (from drafting to implementation). The benefits of engaging non-state actors and strengthening government-citizen relations include enhancing the quality of policies, meeting the challenges of digital society, responding to people expectations and calls for government transparency and accountability, and building trust in public institutions.

26. The examples of collaboration from MENA countries include Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, and Lebanon, and were coupled with a highlight of the main challenges and good engagement principles during the covid-19 crisis. From Tunisia, the citizen charters include indicators and allow monitoring engagement in services to uphold the standards of quality, transparency and accountability for these services, and were coupled with a legal framework for each charter. In Morocco, the co-creation of an international open government partnership (OGP) has enabled the participatory development of an open government national action plan for 2021-2022, including an [open public consultation platform](#) led by civil society organizations and engaging governments and public institutions. In Jordan, the OGP national action plan 2018-2021 focuses on enhancing partnerships and dialogue between the public sector and civil society. As for Lebanon, the Gherbel Initiative for transparency and open data have successfully engaged a number of public institutions within the timeframe established by the Access to Information law. The challenges of engaging stakeholders included interest, awareness, capacity, incentives, awareness of benefits, and the good practices include early engagement and follow up. Under covid-19, the good practices include digital participation and accessibility, trust in government to ensure compliance during crisis, work on open government data and provide reliable information to face fake news, and collaborating to mobilize aid, equipment and public sensitisation on the pandemic.

27. The panel discussion also covered experiences of innovation from Palestine and Iraq, conveyed by innovators in the medical sector and in the entrepreneurship and youth sector. From Palestine, Mr. Ahmed Darwish, a medical doctor with the Ministry of Health, has briefed on the TebFact Telehealth start-up for fostering innovation to respond to covid-19 and build a better future. During the pandemic, start-ups grew with digital solutions aimed at solving problems, and some solutions have helped in tracking and understanding the virus towards developing a vaccine. The [TebFact](#) mobile application was utilized during the pandemic to connects between patients and doctors for online consultations during lockdown. This start-up, like others, needs government support to sustain and flourish. From Iraq, Ms. Safa Fadhil Al-Qoch - Head of Exploration, UNDP Country Accelerator Lab, gave insights on the work and challenges facing the movement towards innovation and entrepreneurship and youth and employment. Starting in 2010, this movement was led by international organizations at a time when innovation was not mature and was faced by challenges of insecurity and conflict. The main challenges facing the entrepreneurship and youth in Iraq include the weak human capital and lack of planning, together with the necessity driven businesses. The covid-19 pandemic has shaped the

ecosystem of entrepreneurship in Iraq, and the situation showed that start-ups with good human capital and digital and innovative work methods have performed better.

28. The session was moderated by Mr. Nick Thijs, Service Delivery and Public Administration Reform, OECD/SIGMA, and the main lessons learned for the future include the need (a) to invest in human capital and digital solutions that are innovative and open, and (b) to build trust and accountability that are essential for building resilient public institutions, delivering services that meet public expectations, and sustaining collaboration that help building a better future for all.

### **III. Participation**

29. The webinar was attended by more than 100 participants who actively engaged in panel discussions that involved international experts and speakers from Arab countries, namely from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia and the UAE. Participants included government officials at the national and local levels, representatives from the private sector and innovation hubs, leaders from the civil society and academic, and international development community at large.

Webpage of the Meeting:

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

Agenda of the Meeting:

<https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/events/files/agenda-v17-11-20.pdf>

## Annex

### List of speakers (Based on the Agenda)

#### Opening and keynote speech

- Mr. Gregor Virant, Head of OECD/SIGMA Programme, OECD
- Mr. John-Mary Kauzya, Chief, Public Service Innovation Branch, Division of Public Institutions and Digital Government, UNDESA
- Mr. Tarik Alami, Director, Emerging and Conflict Related Issues Division (ECRI), UNESCWA
- Keynote speaker: Mr. Ra'ed Mohamed BenShams, President, International Institute of Administration Sciences (IIAS), President, Middle East and North Africa Public Administration Research (MENAPAR), and Founding Director General, Institute of Public Administration Bahrain (BIPA)
- Overall moderator: Ms. Elida Recí, Governance and Public Administration Officer, Public Service Innovation Branch, Division of Public Institutions and Digital Government, UNDESA

#### Session 1: Panel Discussion on Public Service Delivery

- Mr. Salem Belyouha AlMuhairi, Ministry of Government Development and the Future, UAE
- Mr. Mohamed Sefiani, Mayor of the city of ChefChaouen, Morocco.
- Moderator: Mr. John-Mary Kauzya, Chief, Public Service Innovation Branch, Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government, UNDESA
- Web interactive discussions: Ms. Roula Sylla, Policy Advisor, OECD

#### Session 2: Panel Discussion on Accelerating Digital Transformation

- Ms. Ghada Labib, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, Egypt
- Mr. Hassen Harrabi, Advisor to the Minister, Ministry of Communication Technology and Digital Economy, Tunisia
- Moderator: Ms. Nibal Idlebi, Chief of Innovation Section, UNESCWA
- Web interactive discussions: Ms. Roula Sylla, Policy Advisor, OECD

#### Session 3: Panel Discussion on Open Innovation

- Ms. Lamia Moubayed, President, the Institute of Finance Basil Fuleihan (Lebanon), and Member of the UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA).
- Mr. Alessandro Bozzini, Policy Analyst, Open Government Unit (OECD)
- Mr. Ahmed Darwish, TebFact, Telehealth, Palestine
- Ms. Safa Fadhil Al-Qoch, Head of Exploration, Country Accelerator Lab, (UNDP)
- Moderator: Mr. Nick Thijs, Service Delivery and Public Administration Reform, OECD/SIGMA
- Web interactive discussions: Ms. Zahr Bou-Ghanem, Innovation Section, UNESCWA

#### Closing and main findings

- Ms. Bianca Brétéché, Head of Operations and Regional Manager EU Neighbourhood South OECD/SIGMA
- Mr. Youness Abouyoub, Chief of Governance and State- Building Section, UNESCWA
- Mr. John-Mary Kauzya, Chief of Public Service Innovation Branch, Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government, UNDESA