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Concept Note
Expert Group Meeting (Hybrid Event)
Open Government and Digital Transformation for the New Urban Agenda in the Arab region
18 of November 2021
Cairo, Egypt

BACKGROUND

Urbanization is rapidly increasing world-wide and in 2018, 55 per cent of the world population made their homes in urban areas, while projections indicate it rise to 68 per cent by 2050¹. Urban areas are concentration points for economic activities, social interaction, and environmental and humanitarian impacts. There is also a possible negative impact on sustainability as the need for housing, infrastructure, health services, education and government services grow. The paradigm shift needed for better planned, built, and managed cities are elaborated in the New Urban Agenda² and supported by SDG 11³.

During the COVID-19 pandemic around 95 per cent of the cases were recorded in cities in the first months of the outbreak, clearly indicating that these areas, due to their high number of people as well as their importance as economic centers are vulnerable to various stresses, whether man-made or natural. The impact of COVID-19 on all aspects of urban life further highlighted the need to question and find better ways to plan, develop and manage cities.

A central element of concern in the sustainable growth of cities are the systems of governance on urban areas. Both the New Urban Agenda and SDG 11 promotes systems of governance that are people-centered, inclusive, and participatory. A recent policy paper on urban governance, capacity and institutional development emulated these documents, suggesting that the new urban governance should be democratic and inclusive, long-term, and integrated, multi-scale and multi-level, territorial, proficient, and conscious of the digital age⁴. Open government, with its principles of transparency, participation, and collaboration, supports this view on new urban governance as well as the paradigm shift envisioned in the New Urban Agenda and SDG 16. This approach to government focus on building better and collaborative working relationships between citizens, their communities and government to ensure better governance and can be implemented even with low penetration of ICT technologies.

¹ United Nations (n.d.). *World Urbanization Prospects: the 2018 Revision*. Available from <https://population.un.org/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2018-KeyFacts.pdf>.

² United Nations Conference on Housing and Urban Sustainable Development (2017). *New Urban Agenda*. Available from <https://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/NUA-English.pdf>.

³ United Nations (2021). Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. Available at <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal11>.

⁴ Habitat III, 2017, [Urban Governance, Capacity and Institutional Development](#).



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ESCWA has elaborated, jointly with the OECD, a report⁵ on “**Economic and social impact of Open Government: policy recommendations for the Arab countries**”. This report stresses that Open Government is a concept of governance at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 16 on “*Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions*” and its targets 16.6, 16.7, 16.8, 16.10 and 16.b. Thus, the Open Government approach/model encompasses Open Government Data and e-government that use smart and digital technologies. Among its recommendations for the Arab countries, the report points out the priority to develop Open Government at the sub-national level, in particular in cities and urban environments, as the local level is where citizens interact the most with public authorities, while the State level provides the essential public services, hence the local level is the most beneficial locus to apply the principles of transparency, accountability, integrity, participation, collaboration and engagement with individuals, enterprises, and social and economic associations.

Digital transformation, which relies on the exploitation of the potential of digital and emerging technologies for enhancing services, procedures, and business, is spreading in many developed and developing countries today. Digital transformation as one of the means of implementation of the NUA will accelerate the achievement of the NUA as it will facilitate the inclusion of all societal groups in the development process; support economic growth, competitiveness and the creation of new job opportunities and will provide support for addressing environmental challenges in urban areas.

The UN-Habitat, UN-ESCWA together with other regional commissions and UNCDF worked on building urban economic resilience during and after Covid-19 (in partnership with and the municipalities of Alexandria, Beirut, and Kuwait). In-line with the concept of building urban resilience, ESCWA explored through a technical paper, developed in partnership with UN-Habitat, how Smart Sustainable Cities (SSC) and smart digital solutions contribute to urban resilience in the Arab Region in normal situations and in times of pandemic⁶. This further put focus on the importance of open access to services using smart and digital solutions and its relation to urban resilience. These concepts and others were also discussed in the recent release by UN-Habitat of the report on “*Cities and Pandemics*”⁷.

ESCWA and UN-Habitat (Regional Office for Arab States) are currently working on enhancing their partnership in the Arab countries with a project focusing on Open Government and Digital Transformation for the New Urban Agenda, based on the principles of Open Government applied at the decentralized urban level in line with the People-Centered Smart cities. Also, ESCWA and UN-Habitat has worked recently with the “*Cercle des Economistes Arabes*” experts on related issues in Arab countries, including municipal financing, urban governance, and public services.⁸

⁵ It will be published in 2021, ESCWA & OECD.

⁶ “[Smart Sustainable Cities and Smart Digital Solutions for Urban Resilience in the Arab Region: a Pandemic lens](#)”, ESCWA and UNHabitat (currently being edited)

⁷ <https://unhabitat.org/cities-and-pandemics-towards-a-more-just-green-and-healthy-future-0>

⁸ Please see Annex for more details about the previous work of both organizations on related matters.



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OBJECTIVES OF THE EXPERTS GROUP MEETING

This meeting aims at bringing together international organizations (potential partners) and representatives of cities, local and national authorities from the Arab countries, decision makers, experts, and researchers with expertise in urban governance, open governments, and digital transformation to exchange knowledge on open government and digital transformation practices in cities globally and in Arab cities. The meeting will also explore the challenges and opportunities of applying open government initiatives for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. It also aims at identifying the main objectives and targets/activities of future regional projects on open government and digital transformation for facilitating the implementation of specific aspects of the Urban Development Agenda and achieving the SDGs in the Arab region.

This meeting is linked to the Eleventh Edition of the World Urban Forum (WUF 11) which will be organized from 26 to 30 June 2022 under the theme “Transforming our cities for a better Urban Future”. In fact, the outcomes and recommendations derived from the Expert Group Meeting (EGM) will inform the WUF11 dialogues on people-centered smart cities in line with the sub-themes of “Innovation & Technology” and “Urban Planning & Governance”. Moreover, this meeting will support the implementation of a regional project that will enhance the implementation of the New Urban Agenda in the Arab region with focus on specific aspects that are important for the region.

OUTCOMES

- Highlight best practices and experiences from cities around the world and the Arab region.
- Devise a set of recommendation to support the implementation of the component on Open Government for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda in Arab Cities.
- Identify the main aspects of the component related to digital transformation for the New Urban Agenda, with focus on urban resilience.

OUTPUTS

- Paper on Open Governments best practices and recommendations for Arab cities to support the formulation of a joint regional project on Open Governments and Digital Transformation for the New Urban Agenda in the Arab Region and inform the WUF11 dialogues on open governance and people-centered smart cities.

PARTICIPANTS

- Decision makers at national and local levels working on the implementation of NUA.



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- Regional and international experts in open government, digital transformation, and urban development.
- Experts from international organization working on open government, digital transformation, and urban development.

TENTATIVE AGENDA

Meeting Link: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_dcsqWtgCQLae6UIaEt88w

Languages: English and Arabic

| Time | Session |
|--------------|---|
| 10:00 -10:15 | <p>Opening Session</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mr. Erfan Ali, Regional Director, UN-Habitat Regional Office for Arab States - Mr. Tarik Alami, Director, Emerging and Conflict Related Issues Division, ESCWA - Mr. Alessandro Bellantoni, Head of the Open Government and Civic Space unit, OECD. |
| 10:15-11:00 | <p>Launch of the ESCWA-OECD report on “Economic and social impact of open government: Policy Recommendations for the Arab region”.</p> <p>Moderator: Ms. Nibal Idlebi, Chief of Innovation Section, ESCWA</p> <p>This session aims at summarizing the ESCWA-OECD report and highlight the main observations and policy recommendations.</p> <p>Speakers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mr. Alessandro Bozzini, Policy Analyst, Open Government Unit, Directorate of Public Governance, OECD - Mr. Samir Aita, ESCWA’s Consultant, Preseident of Cercle des Economistes Arabes, - Ms. Nibal Idlebi, Chief of Innovation Section, ESCWA <p>Discussion</p> |
| 11:00-11:15 | <p>Introduction Session: Why “Open innovative government for the New Urban Agenda and the achievement of Goal 11 and Goal 16”?</p> <p>Moderator: Ms. Nibal Idlebi, Chief of Innovation Section, ESCWA</p> <p>The session aims at highlighting the relevance of open government to Urban Development Agenda and the realization of Goal 11 in the Arab region. It will also</p> |



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| Time | Session |
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| | <p>clarify the concepts of e-government versus open government and show the linkage with smart and digital solutions.</p> <p>Guiding Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What are the linkages between open government and the New Urban Agenda? <p>Speakers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ms. Nagwa Lachine, Programme Officer, UN-Habitat - Mr. Younes Abouyoub, Chief of Governance Section, ESCWA <p>Discussion</p> |
| 11:15-11:30 | Short break |
| 11:30-13:00 | <p>Session 1: Lessons learned and challenges of open government at local level from cities in the World and in the Arab region</p> <p>Moderator: Mr. Younes Abouyoub, Chief of Governance Section, ESCWA</p> <p>This session aims at exploring the concept of open governments and showcasing different examples of best practices of good governance at city/local level. The session will also explore key challenges hindering the development at local level and reflecting on the potential obstacles for applying open government principles and strategies in Arab cities. This session will also discuss the role of technologies in strengthening participation, transparency and accountability and in improving interaction among local and national government entities for the achievement of NUA, Goal 11 and Goal 16 of the SDGs and their related targets.</p> <p>The priority areas of open government for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda will be identified during this session.</p> <p>Guiding Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What are examples of best practices of Open Government initiatives globally and in Arab cities? ➤ What are the main challenges and opportunities confronting local governance in the context of the New Urban Agenda in the Arab region? ➤ What differences exist between the implementation of Open Government at the national and local levels? ➤ What are the main policy issues to be considered to enhance the openness, participation, collaboration and engagement of local governance structures? ➤ How Open Government can benefit from the current significant progress in e-government? |



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| Time | Session |
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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What are the most important policies and actions needed to address the challenges and where focus should be made to drive urban open government progress? ➤ What opportunities for partnerships exist to strengthen Open Governments in the Arab region? <p>Speakers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mr. Ahmed Laamoumri, Secretary General, Ministère de la fonction publique et de la modernisation de l'Administration, Morocco - Ms. Maria Pia Junquera Temprano, director-general for citizen participation, Madrid municipality - Ms. Anne Amin, Programme Management Officer, Policy, Legislation and Governance Section, UN-Habitat - Mr. Tarik Nesh Nash, Senior regional Coordinator for Africa and the Middle East, OGP - Ms. Hayet Bayoudh, Carthage Municipality, Tunisia - Mr. Abdelghani Aghzal, Vice Mayor of Chefchaouen, Morocco - Mr. Mariusz Jankowski, Head of the Investor Service Department, Katowice City Hall, Poland <p>Discussion</p> |
| 13:00-14:00 | Lunch Break |
| 14:00-15:15 | <p>Session 2: Digital Transformation for Urban Development Agenda in the Arab region</p> <p>Moderator: Ms. Sukaina Al Nasrawi, Sustainable Urban Development Lead, ESCWA</p> <p>This session will highlight the role of smart and digital technology and innovation in local development for the realization of New Urban Agenda (NUA) and Goal 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. It will also explore how technology could be exploited to foster urban resilience with focus on social and economic aspects.</p> <p>The priority areas of digital transformation for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda will be identified during this session.</p> <p>Guiding Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the added values of digital transformation for local development? - How central is the link between the use of smart and digital technologies and urban resilience? - How digital technologies support Urban social and economic resilience? |



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| Time | Session |
|--------------|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the main challenges for developing digital solutions in Arab cities? <p>Speakers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ms. Sukaina Al Nasrawi, Sustainable Urban Development Lead, ESCWA - Ms. Dina Storey, Sustainability Operations director @ Expo 2020, UAE - Ms. Maysoun Ibrahim, President of the Palestinian Syndicate for Information Sciences and Technology, Palestine - Ms. Katja Schafer, Inter-Regional Advisor, Global Solutions Division, UN-Habitat <p>Discussion</p> |
| 15:15- 15:30 | Short break |
| 15:30-16:15 | <p>Session 3: New regional initiative: Open Government and Digital Transformation for the New Urban Agenda in the Arab region</p> <p>Mentimeter Facilitator: Ms. Yasmine Mostafa, Knowledge Management and Reporting Officer, Regional Office for Arab States, UN-Habitat</p> <p>This session will focus on discussing the scope and main objectives of this initiative and the targeted countries and/or cities in the Arab region. It will also discuss the main activities and actions needed and the involvement of Arab countries/cities during the life cycle of this initiative.</p> <p>Furthermore, the participants of this meeting will also converse about the estimated timeline for the implementation of this initiative considering other related initiatives in the region. The participating organizations will also discuss their respective role and the funding of this initiative.</p> <p>Speakers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mr. Samir Aita, Président of Cercle des Economistes Arabes - ESCWA - UN-Habitat - OECD <p>Discussion</p> |
| 16:15-16:30 | Closing remarks |



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Annex

ESCWA and UN-Habitat activities on Open Innovative Government and Urban Development

ESCWA has elaborated, jointly with the OECD, a report⁹ on “**Economic and social impact of Open Government: policy recommendations for the Arab countries**”. This report stresses that Open Government is a concept of governance at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 16 on “*Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions*” and its targets 16.6, 16.7, 16.8, 16.10 and 16.b. It also points the framework elaborated by ESCWA for applying Open Government in the Arab countries consisting of four successive stages: 1) Openness, 2) Participation, 3) Collaboration and 4) Engagement. It also describes the OECD frameworks for open government and provide success stories from OECD and Arab countries. The report precises that information and communication technologies (ICT) facilitate Open Government and allow innovative approaches; but an Open Government approach can be implemented even with low penetration of ICT technologies. Thus, the Open Government approach/model encompasses Open Government Data and e-government that use smart and digital technologies. Among its recommendations for the Arab countries, the report points out the priority to develop Open Government at the sub-national level, in particular in cities and urban environments, as the local level is where citizens interact the most with public authorities while the State level provides the essential public services, hence the local level is the easiest and most beneficial locus to apply the principles of transparency, accountability, integrity, participation, collaboration and engagement with individuals, enterprises, social and economic associations.

In times of the ongoing pandemic, urban areas have been at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis. Around 95% of the cases were recorded in cities in the first months of the pandemic which increases the need to focus on cities and local development for achieving urban resilience. The centrality of local development, urban resilience and open access lie at the core of **Goal 11 on sustainable cities and communities**.

All United Nations Member States have adopted in 2016 the **New Urban Agenda** and committed to work together towards a paradigm shift in the way cities are planned, built, and managed. For that purpose, Habitat III policy units elaborated a framework for Urban Governance, Capacity and Institutional Development¹⁰. The framework identified six thematic areas: 1) Social cohesion and equity-livable cities, 2) Urban frameworks, 3) Spatial development, 4) Urban economy, 5) urban ecology and environment and 6) Urban housing and basic services. The issues of Urban Governance, Capacity and Institutional Development were mainly addressed in the context of Urban Frameworks that also addresses Urban Rules and Legislations and Municipal Finance.

⁹ It will be published in 2021, ESCWA & OECD.

¹⁰ [Habitat III](#), 2017, [Urban Governance, Capacity And Institutional Development](#).



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A policy paper has been elaborated by the two organizations¹¹ reporting on Urban Governance, Capacity and Institutional Development for the UN. This policy paper became an official UN assembly document¹². It identified 10 key messages for the **right to the city**, sustainable and equitable development and territorial equity: “1) By and large, urban governance frameworks and institutions in most countries need to evolve to face critical challenges; 2) In many countries, existing institutional frameworks prevent urban governments from fully delivering on their responsibilities; 3) Cities and urban societies continue to suffer from an imbalance of political power and insufficient inclusiveness and participation; 4) The expansion of metropolitan areas and the growing gap between these and intermediary cities pose additional challenges to urban and national governance; 5) Above all, new urban governance should be democratic, inclusive, multiscale and multilevel; 6) New urban governance requires robust national urban and territorial policies; 7) Local and subnational governments anchor new urban governance on the ground and play a pivotal role in implementing the New Urban Agenda; 8) Strong metropolitan governance is a key component of new urban governance; 9) A buoyant and participative civil society involves clear recognition of citizens’ rights and 10) Capacity-building for urban governance needs to be accelerated.” The policy paper pointed that the new urban governance should be democratic and inclusive, long-term and integrated, multi-scale and multi-level, territorial, proficient and conscious of the digital age. Priority policy options and transformative actions were proposed.

Followingly, UN-Habitat launched the “**People-Centered Smart Cities**”¹³ flagship program that promotes the deployment of technological innovations to realize sustainability, inclusivity, prosperity and human rights. This will make the urban digital transformation work for the benefit of all. This program led to the creation in 2018 of the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights¹⁴ where cities committed to: 1) Universal and equal access to the internet, and digital literacy; 2) Privacy, data protection and security; 3) Transparency, accountability, and nondiscrimination of data, content and algorithms; 4) Participatory Democracy, diversity and inclusion and 5) Open and ethical digital service standards. Within the Arab countries, only Amman (Jordan) joined the Coalition. Also, UN-Habitat promoted “Digital Cities” with an “Open City Data” initiative that was launched for municipal data: “Data for public good”, as well as a “Technology and innovation procurement” initiative and a “Free Software, Open Data and Open Standards, Document and Data formats and communication protocols” that are the bases for technological sovereignty for cities and best support the digital rights of their citizens.

The recently held UN-Habitat Expert Group Meeting on Urban Governance emphasized the importance of digital inclusivity to ensure access to technological services, infrastructure and literacy skills, digital

¹¹ These two organizations were LSE Cities, London School of Economics and Political Science (<https://www.lse.ac.uk/Cities/research/urban-governance/Habitat-3-Policy-Unit-4>) and the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), facilitating the Global Taskforce (<https://www.uclg.org/en/issues/global-taskforce>).

¹² https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/CONF.226/PC.3/17

¹³ <https://unhabitat.org/programme/people-centered-smart-cities>

¹⁴ <https://citiesfordigitalrights.org/>



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rights, privacy and public procurement implications. The need for people to be co-creators of digital solutions was clearly underscored and there is a need to find common ground on enabling regulatory framework for digital governance.

The theme that stood out was the importance of putting people and communities at the center. Participants converged on the need for **“people-centered approaches” in urban governance** embodied by public engagement in decision-making; co-creation of solutions; equitable access to digital technologies; promotion of human rights; and multi-stakeholder partnerships that are driven by and focused on real needs of urban populations.

Besides Open Government, the ESCWA is a leading actor on technology and innovation in the Arab countries for sustainable development. Besides its work on digital development, innovation policies and technology transfer, it has also addressed the role of technology and an innovation in specific sectors such as transport sector and recently published a report on this subject “Technology and innovation for developing land transport in Arab countries”¹⁵. ESCWA is willing to continue its work in this domain and to extend it to urban development including urban mobility. Another ESCWA focus area concerns building urban economic resilience during and after Covid-19 (in partnership with UN-Habitat, UN regional commissions, UNCDF and the municipalities of Alexandria, Beirut, and Kuwait). In-line with the concept of building urban resilience, ESCWA explored through a technical paper, developed in partnership with UN-Habitat, how Smart Sustainable Cities (SSC) and smart digital solutions contribute to urban resilience in the Arab Region in normal situations and in times of pandemic¹⁶. This further put focus on the importance of open access to services using smart and digital solutions and its relation to urban resilience. These concepts and others were also discussed in the recent release by UN-Habitat of the report on “Cities and Pandemics”¹⁷.

¹⁵ <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/technology-innovation-development-land-transport-arab-countries>

¹⁶ “Smart Sustainable Cities and Smart Digital Solutions for Urban Resilience in the Arab Region: a Pandemic lens”, ESCWA and UNHabitat (currently being edited)

¹⁷ <https://unhabitat.org/cities-and-pandemics-towards-a-more-just-green-and-healthy-future-0>