The economic and social impact of open government

Policy Recommendations for the Arab Countries

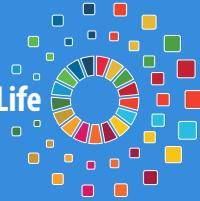## Summary

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Introduction

Governments worldwide have been confronted with complex political, economic and social challenges, exacerbated by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic that has unveiled deep structural flaws in terms of governance and institutions. This context has further eroded public trust in Governments and State institutions at a moment when citizens expect their leaders to apply the highest level of transparency, accountability, integrity and effectiveness in managing the crisis and related recovery plans. Citizens' pressing expectations to fully participate in public affairs are also on the rise in most parts of the world.

An open government is a Government that is effective and efficient in carrying out its duties. Its work is transparent and accountable, and everyone can access its services.[1] It is a Government that responds to the needs of its citizens, values their participation, experience and knowledge in decision-making, and relies on modern and emerging technologies to enhance its governance. Open government is also defined as "a culture of governance that promotes the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation in support of democracy and inclusive growth".[2] Although, there is no single, universally accepted definition of open government, almost all definitions include the core concepts of transparency, accountability and participation. ESCWA has defined an open government framework for Arab countries[3] to support its member States in their transformation towards open government.

Open government is directly linked to the SDG 16, specifically its targets 16.6, 16.7, 16.8, 16.10 and 16.b. However, several other SDG targets explicitly mention the open government principles of transparency and participation, such as 5.5, 6.B, 8.1, 8.2, 9.c, 11.3, 12.8, 17.7, 17.8.

1. Impact of open government

Open government approaches improve governance by operating the core principles of transparency, accountability, openness, inclusiveness, effectiveness and responsiveness. Citizens are at the heart of open government, and their effective participation represents a fundamental principle of the open governance approach. For the public sector, open government aims to improve Governments worldwide by making them more accountable through increased transparency, especially in budgeting, thus supporting anti-corruption efforts; and more efficient by enhancing public services and resource allocation.[4]

By opening up government data and inviting various stakeholder to access and use government data, open government has a positive impact on economic growth, job creation and growing enterprises. Private sector firms undergo the most notable potential economic growth and increased productivity through the development of new products and services enabled by open data (box 1). Open government also offers new job opportunities for citizens through the creation of new startups based on the reuse of government data. Moreover, it allows citizens to have free access to data that were once closed or charged.

Open government can have a positive impact on employment, health and wellbeing, quality education and gender equality. Open health data is a common open government initiative, and its benefits extend beyond ensuring transparency and accountability to supporting new clinical research using artificial intelligence.[5]

Box 1. Open government has a significant economic impact

In European Union countries, the open data market size was estimated at €184 billion in 2019, and was expected to reach somewhere between a baseline of €199.51 billion and an optimistic €334.21 billion in 2025, employing 1.09 million employees in 2019 with an up to 80 per cent forecast increase in jobs in the upcoming six years under the optimistic scenario.

Source: European Data Portal, 2020.

Box 2. Open government has positive social impact.

With its focus on inclusion, participation and collaboration, it is uniquely placed to drive gender equality. The provision of sex-disaggregated data and indicators that affect women and girls could raise the visibility of inequalities in all activities.

Source: Ana Brandusescu and Nnenna Nwakanma, Issues in Open Data: Gender Equity, 2019.

2. Open government in OECD countries

OECD and its members have been at the forefront of the global open government movement since its inception, as confirmed by the 2017 OECD recommendation of the Council on Open Government.[6] The first generation of open government initiatives are being pursued with new emphasis, while a range of new sectorial second-generation initiatives have been designed, often inspired by public sector innovations and digitization.

Several national constitutions of OECD member countries include provisions on open government-related principles, demonstrating the long tradition such principles have in some countries. In particular, most constitutions mention the rights to access public information, and include provisions on citizen participation and on the protection of civic space.

Open government principles are part of the legal framework of OECD countries as all OECD countries now have laws on access to public information, and some have specific laws on citizen participation. In addition, more than 70 per cent of OECD countries have a civil service law or code of conduct, which includes reference to transparency, integrity and accountability, and some countries have recently adopted a national strategy on open government. Digital technologies and data can help accelerate the implementation of open government principles as underlined by the OECD recommendation of the

Council on Digital Government Strategies.[7] Open data is another core element for the success of open government. In the last couple of years, the development and implementation of sound open data policies in OECD countries accelerated, as shown by the OECD OURdata Index.[8] In addition, growing public sector innovation agendas in OECD countries[9] complement accelerating open government agendas.[10]

Civil society and citizens in OECD countries are often involved in open government reforms. However, engagement levels vary greatly and many forms of engagement are still ad hoc. There are many positive examples of meaningful involvement of citizens and civil society. For example, the case of participatory budgeting in cities such as New York[11] and Paris,[12] the world's first national participatory budget in Portugal,[13] and recent deliberative processes.[14] At the local level, some subnational governments have adopted a comprehensive strategy for open government, such as the state of North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany.[15] Many local authorities in OECD countries have also launched specific initiatives to foster transparency, accountability and citizen participation, including the well-known Decide Madrid[16] and Decidim Barcelona[17] platforms in Spain.

3. Open government in the Arab region

In the Arab region, three countries have joined the global Open Government Partnership (OGP), and have committed to apply policies and strategies to implement commonly agreed recommendations, namely Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. Nonetheless, several Arab countries have taken advanced steps to create the legal environment necessary to cement the principles of open government.[18] The legal aspect concerning the right to access information (RTI) is the key building block for good governance based on transparency and accountability (table 1). In addition to ATI, there are many laws that facilitate the transition towards open government, such as ratification of the 2003 United Nations Convention against Corruption and personal data protection laws. Only Six Arab countries have access to information laws.

Table 1. Access to information laws in Arab countries and Right to Information (RTI) rating

Country	Year of law	Total points according to RTI 2019
Jordan	2007	56
Lebanon	2017	70
Morocco	2018	73
Sudan	2015	64
Tunisia	2016	120
Yemen	2012	103

Source: ESCWA compilation based on multiple sources.

Figure 1. Evolution of EGDI in Arab countries
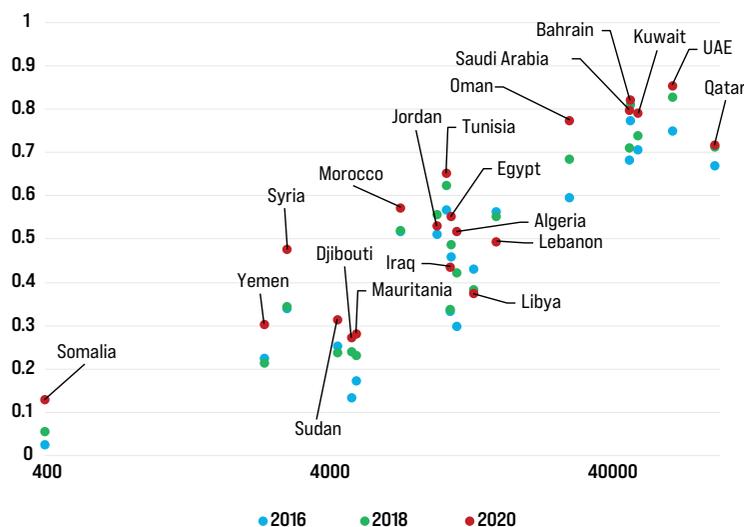
Source: Compiled by ESCWA from E-Government Survey 2016, 2018 and 2020.
Note: The horizontal axis shows the GDP ppp, and the vertical axis shows the EGDI value.

Many Arab governments have strongly engaged in e-government and made considerable efforts to shift towards openness, notably by developing open government data portals and adopting participation at different levels. The United Nations E-Government Survey 2020[19] recognizes that all Arab countries[20] have made considerable progress in their E-Government Development Index (EGDI) in the last five years (figure 1).

Many Arab countries have launched open data strategies to promote the transparency and accountability of the public sector. Several Arab countries, such as Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates, have developed specific open data portals.[21] However, no Arab country has adhered to the Open Data Charter, which was adopted in the OGP Summit of 2015 in Mexico, including countries that have joined OGP.

After government openness, the second stage towards open government according to the ESCWA framework is encouraging the participation of citizens and stakeholders in government decision-making, which should subsequently be upgraded to collaboration and then full engagement.[22] According to the E-Participation Index, some Arab countries are rank better in comparison with world trends. However, many Arab countries still underperform compared to other countries with similar levels of economic development (figure 2). Some Arab countries have launched initiatives to promote citizen participation; however, none have adopted a national strategy for citizen participation and engagement.

Figure 2. E-Participation Index, 2020
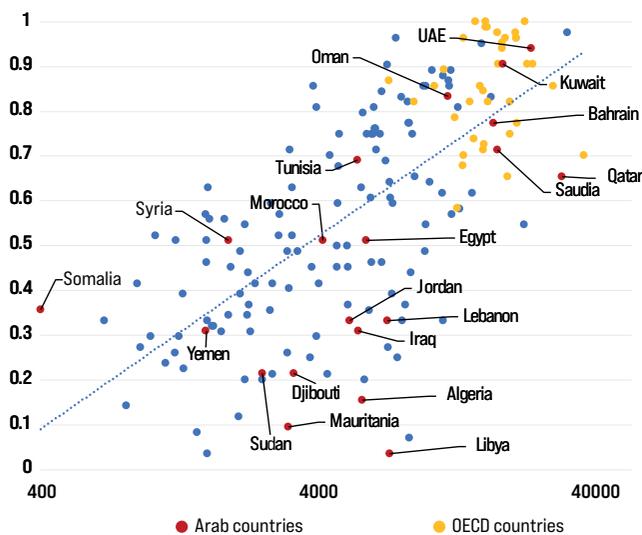
Source: Compiled by ESCWA from E-Government Survey 2020.
Note: The horizontal axis shows the GDP ppp, and the vertical axis shows the E-Participation Index value.

4. Policy recommendations

Open government is strongly linked to the SDGs. Based on the status of open government in the Arab region, several policy recommendations can be formulated to ensure progress in implementing open government principles to deliver on SDG commitments.

1 Legal framework: More Arab countries should establish a structured social dialogue, publicly consulting with stakeholders and citizens, to develop and enact modern ATI legislation, in line with the highest international standards. In parallel, there is a need to enact other necessary legislation on transparency, personal data protection and privacy, civic space, fundamental freedoms and anti-corruption. Arab countries should also enforce and implement adopted laws to guarantee the achievement of their objectives.

2 Policy and strategy for open government: Governments should consider developing specific policies or strategies for open government to promote access to information, open data and transparency, and to foster citizen participation and engagement. Arab Governments should also strengthen institutions to implement open government, and appoint a body in charge of coordination, monitoring and evaluation of open government initiatives. Open government reforms should be designed and implemented in collaboration with all stakeholders.

3 Cultural changes and awareness raising: To promote a culture of openness, Governments should encourage and support public officials to embrace open government principles. There are a multitude of ways to do so, including conducting awareness-raising campaigns, drafting guidelines and codes of conduct, and providing training to staff members in public institutions. Public communication and sensitization initiatives targeting citizens, civil society organization, and the private sector are also crucial to increase "demand" for openness.

4 Open data and transparency: Current open government data initiatives in Arab countries need to align with international standards, as defined by the ESCWA framework. To enhance open government data, capacity-building programmes on open government data are needed in the Arab region. A useful way of fostering access to public data and information is establishing transparency portals, either as a single whole-of-government portal or different websites/platforms by institution.

5

Participation, collaboration and engagement: Arab countries need to hold public consultations and economic and social dialogues on public policies and their challenges, encouraging citizens to contribute their views, opinions, ideas and evidence to the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of public policies and services. New approaches are needed to develop participatory mechanisms on key issues of the business environment and socioeconomic development, the economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, and measures for recovery and growth enhancement.

6

Open government at the local level: Municipalities and local authorities in Arab countries should consider designing and implementing open government strategies and initiatives at the subnational level, in line with the UN-Habitat New Urban Agenda. The local level should be strengthened as it is where citizens interact the most with authorities. The principles of open government, namely transparency, accountability, participation, collaboration and engagement with individuals, enterprises, social and economic associations, should therefore be applied at the local level.

7

Regional partnership on open government: In parallel with the commitments of some Arab countries in the Open Government Partnership, a specific regional partnership should be initiated to develop regular action plans, under a United Nations mandate, on specific open government-oriented issues. Such action plans could address the most relevant challenges for Arab countries, with proper measurement and evaluation methodologies. Such a regional partnership would support the achievement of SDG 16 in Arab countries.

8

Priority areas of open government in the Arab region: One priority area in the Arab region concerns open data in central government budgets, as there is a need for greater transparency in relation to planned and effectively executed budgets of both the central government and major public service bodies. Municipalities and local authorities' budgets constitute another priority for progress in open government in Arab countries. They are directly linked to SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities. Employment, the labour market, informality and social protection are also a priority for the adoption of open government principles in the Arab countries. Alongside these three cross-cutting priorities, sectorial policies as highlighted by each country could also benefit from openness.

Endnotes

The present policy brief is based on the OECD-ESCWA report entitled *Economic and Social Impact of Open Government: Policy Recommendations for the Arab Region.* https://www.oecd.org/fr/publications/the-economic-and-social-impact-of-open-government-6b3e2469-en.htm

1. The ESCWA definition of open government can be found in E/ESCWA/TDD/2018/INF.1.

2. The OECD definition of open government can be found at https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0438.

3. E/ESCWA/TDD/2018/TP.1.

4. Andrew Young and Stefaan Verhulst, The Global Impact of Open Data, 2016. Available at https://data.gov.ru/sites/default/files/documents/the-global-impact-of-open-data.pdf.

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6. https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0438.

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18. E/ESCWA/CL4.SIT/2020/TP.2.

19. https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2020.

20. Except Lebanon due to its financial crisis.

21. E/ESCWA/TDD/2019/TP.1.

22. E/ESCWA/TDD/2018/TP.3.