



Shared Prosperity Dignified Life



THE ARAB REGIONAL FORUM ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Effective Public Governance for Sustainable Development:

Modernizing Public Administration in the Arab Region: Challenges and Opportunities

12-13 November, Amman, Jordan.

Concept Note

Effective, accountable and inclusive public governance plays an essential role in achieving sustainable development outcomes. It shapes the policies, institutions and processes that ultimately will drive progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Public administrations are the cornerstone of this, as they translate policy into action and have the potential to drive forward transformative initiatives for sustainable and prosperous societies.

Sustainable development administration refers to the institutional and administrative structures that enhance sustainable development, aligning with global paradigms agreed upon at international summits such as the Rio Earth Summit and the subsequent SDGs. Good governance, supported by a well-functioning public administration, is identified as the cornerstone of sustainable development, emphasizing the transformative power of effective public administration in realizing a sustainable future.

In recent years, the necessity for public administration reform globally, including in the Arab region, has become more evident and pronounced. Amidst a rapidly changing global landscape and new challenges, rethinking the way public administration perform their duties and responsibilities is not just a policy option, but a pressing need. Public administration plays a pivotal role in steering the course towards sustainable development. It is the machinery through which policies and programs are enacted, ensuring that sustainability is integrated into the governance framework. The intricate relationship between public administration and sustainable development is evident in the way administrative bodies can influence environmental, economic, and social dimensions of a nation. By fostering innovative practices, public administration can lead the way in implementing sustainable solutions that address the pressing challenges of our time.

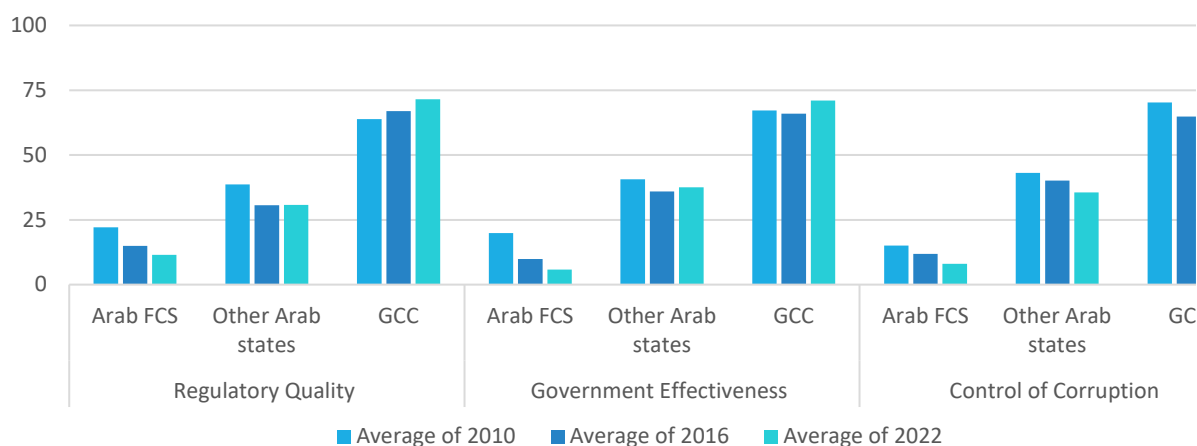
The United Nations has underscored the importance of public governance and administration in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting the need for effective, accountable institutions at all levels. This is crucial for promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, providing access to justice, and building a sustainable future. Moreover, the role of public entities and local authorities in the execution of sustainable practices cannot be overstated. Through strategic planning and proper execution, public administration can achieve good performance across all sustainability dimensions.

1. The state of governance in the Arab region

The Arab region faces significant challenges when it comes to various aspects of governance and public administration, having the highest governance challenges index (GCI) score compared to other world regions.¹ In countries with the highest governance challenges, effective delivery of public services and the quality of public and civil services emerge as primary concerns. Such challenges are evident also when looking at different aspects of governance, such as government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and control of corruption. The Arab region's average percentile rank is well below the global average.²

However, there are wide subregional differences when it comes to governance performance, as showcased in Figure 1. The Gulf countries generally outperform other Arab countries on different indicators of governance, sometimes scoring well above the global average. Several have also improved their performance on some governance indicators since 2010, especially regulatory quality as well as smaller improvements on government effectiveness. Importantly, the performance on control of corruption has declined overall across country groups since 2010. LDCs and conflict-affected countries, however, tend to perform well below the global average, with fragile and conflict-affected countries seeing significant deteriorations in performance across governance indicators during the same period.

Figure 1: Governance performance



Note: Fragile and conflict-affected situations (FCS) are as classified by the World Bank: Comoros, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Palestine, and Yemen. GCC members are: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Other Arab states are: Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. The scale goes from 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest) with a global average of ~50.

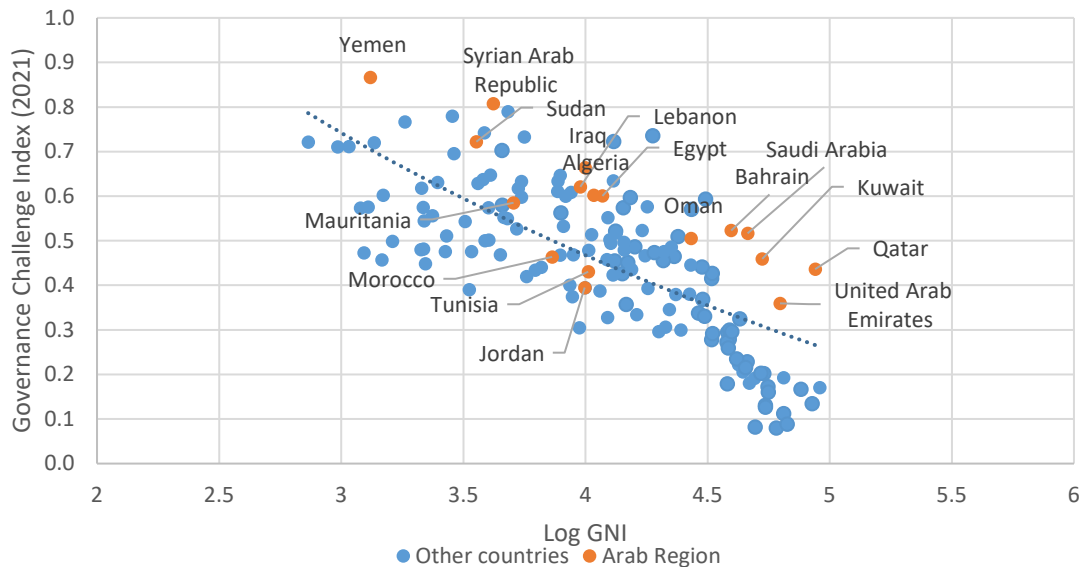
Source: World Bank WGI

Interestingly, Arab countries lag behind countries of similar income levels when it comes to governance metrics. This is illustrated in Figure 2, which shows that most Arab countries face higher governance challenges than countries with similar income. This underscores the complexity of governance challenges in the region and the imperative for focused interventions.

Figure 2: Governance challenges and income

¹ ESCWA, Development Challenges Report 2022

² Authors' calculations based on the world Bank WGI



Source: ESCWA Development Challenges Report 2022

2. Reform efforts and challenges

Efforts to reform public administration in the Arab region have often focused on improving administrative efficiency and public service delivery.³ Reform initiatives have also aimed at leveraging digital technologies to streamline bureaucratic processes and modernize public administration.⁴ Indeed, most Arab National Development Plans (NDPs) include pillars dedicated to governance and public administration.⁵ However, in fragile and conflict-affected countries, which generally face the largest governance challenges, only half include governance pillars in their NDPs.

Despite efforts to carry out reforms aimed at modernizing public administration, several challenges persist that hinder their progress. Financial resource constraints limit the ability to invest in reforms and lack of adequate skills hinders the workforce’s capacity to drive change. The prevalence of corruption, as illustrated in Figure 2, erodes institutional effectiveness and trust in public institutions. Lack of effectiveness and gaps in coordination between ministries and across different government levels lead to siloed approaches and hinder public administration reform efforts. These challenges complicate efforts towards reform and modernization of Arab public administrations.

The presence of protracted conflict and political instability in some Arab countries have severely affected the functioning of public administrations and hindered modernization efforts. It has disrupted existing structures and diverted resources, creating an uncertain environment for public administration modernization and reform. Nonetheless, several conflict-affected Arab countries have made efforts to improve and strengthen public administration.

³ واقع وأفاق (World Government Summit (2022) [Government in the Arab World: reality and prospects](#)) تقرير حالة الإدارة الحكومية في العالم العربي.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Authors’ assessment based on ESCWA’s Arab National Development Planning Portal

3. Opportunities and requirements for reform

Public governance and administration that is ready to meet today and tomorrow's challenges and drive sustainable development for all, need to be effective, accountable and inclusive.⁶ As such, these principles are essential for public administration reform and modernization initiatives.

Improving the effectiveness of public administrations is crucial as it helps ensure efficient use of resources, collaboration, and that policies are well-informed and coherent, thus promoting achievement of desired outcomes and improving governance overall. Accountability helps ensure that government actions are transparent, officials are held to account, which contributes to building public trust and improving the overall quality of governance. Public administration reform that is inclusive is important to continue to deliver public services and respond to the different needs of people. It is especially crucial amid different demographic trends across the Arab region, such as a notably young population, low female labor force participation, increasingly aging populations, and conflicts.

A few key levers of change can help achieve public sector reform and modernization that embodies these principles, notably: participation, digitalization, transparency, upskilling of the workforce, depoliticization, subsidiarity.

Participation promotes accountability and helps ensure people's needs are heard so that government's efforts can effectively target the actual issues people face. The right to participate should be protected and enforced by the rule of law without discrimination. Since a good governance deficit continues to plague the Arab region,⁷ improving participation is important to promote governance that is response, accountable and inclusive.

The rapid advancement of digital technologies presents an opportunity for more efficient, transparent, and participatory governance. Digitalization could streamline administrative processes, improve public service delivery, provide increased transparency, and enhance the relationship between citizens and governments. While some Arab countries have successfully incorporated digital technologies, digital divides, lack of access to ICT and high illiteracy rates in others create challenges for leveraging the potential of digital technologies for others.⁸

Transparency promotes accountability and has been shown to enhance the effectiveness of public service delivery, public policy design, implementation, and decision-making and administration.⁹ It also helps prevent corruption and increase the legitimacy of public administration decisions, thus enhancing public trust and support. In the Arab region, transparency has emerged as one of the main levers to improve governance, being included as a goal in many national strategies, particularly through Open Government initiatives.¹⁰ While several Arab countries have launched Open Data strategies to promote transparency and accountability, there is still room for improvement.

Modernization of the public administration system will necessarily need the reinvention of the competencies and skills required by the public sector. Training, implementing merit-based and inclusive hiring practices, adequate remuneration and some degree of can all help ensure a

⁶ UN Economic and Social Council, Principles of effective governance for sustainable development, E/2018/44-E/C.16/2018/8, para. 31

⁷ as highlighted by the region scoring the highest on the democratic governance challenge dimension of the governance challenge index

⁸ OECD (2021). [The Economic and Social Impact of Open Government: Policy Recommendations for the Arab Countries](#)

⁹ OECD, ESCWA (2021) [The Economic and Social Impact of Open Government](#) - Policy Recommendations for The Arab Countries

¹⁰ ESCWA. [Arab Open and Innovative Government Portal](#).

diverse workforce of highly skilled and empowered professionals ready to tackle the challenges of contemporary administration. While Arab states have given more attention to this in recent years, recruitment based on kinship and loyalty rather than competency and merit and low pay remain chronic challenges in several countries.

Autonomous administrative institutions help protect public administrations from politicization. Unlike other political positions that have a mandate, the functions of civil servants should be governed by professionalism, ethics, continuity and stability, serving society as a whole and guaranteeing unbiased public service delivery. Independence from political interference, work stability and career development should be in accordance with skills, performance and work experience and shielded from political interference. However, in many parts of the Arab region, political interference has been often due to overly powerful executives, and in some cases sectarianism.

To promote government that is responsive to the needs and aspirations of all people, central authorities should perform only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more intermediate or local level. This could involve strengthening urban governance, municipal finance and local finance systems, as well as enhancing local capacity for prevention, adaptation and mitigation of external shocks.

In conclusion, public administration is not just a facilitator but a key driver for sustainable development. It has the potential to transform societies by integrating sustainability into the core of governance and decision-making processes. By doing so, it ensures that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, thus fulfilling the essence of sustainable development. This being said, governance challenges remain significant in the Arab region, despite notable subregional variations and efforts to improve administrative efficiency and public service delivery. Corruption, and lack of resources, effectiveness and coordination all create obstacles for reform across the region. Conflict, fragility and instability have also created particular challenges for some of the countries, which complicate governance reform and modernization efforts. Nevertheless, there are important opportunities for improving and enhancing public governance. Participation, digitalization, transparency, upskilling, depoliticization, and subsidiarity can all be levers of positive change.

A comprehensive approach is thus essential for successful public administration reforms, combining short-term and long-term measures to enhance effectiveness, accountability, and inclusion. While short terms efforts are important to build momentum for further reform and improvements, longer term initiatives are needed to plan and implement more substantial change that sets the path for good governance in the long term. Maintaining political commitment and a strategic approach is crucial for successful and sustained reforms that ensure public administrations that are inclusive, accountable and effective, and promote sustainable development for all.

The first edition of the Arab Regional Forum on Public Administration will convene in Amman, Jordan on 12-14 November 2024, with the participation of member states from across the Arab region, as well as experts, academe, and other partners to discuss pathways for modernizing Arab public administrations for effective, accountable and inclusive public governance in the pursuit of better sustainable development outcomes.

