

## CONCEPT NOTE

### REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN THE ARAB STATES

*Stronger* networks for *responsive* institutions: how to achieve effective and accountable public administration in the Arab region?

October 26-28, 2015, Dead Sea, Jordan

#### SUMMARY:

The **Regional Conference on Public Administration in the Arab States – Stronger Networks for Responsive Institutions** will gather practitioners, policy makers, scholars and opinion leaders from the public and private spheres throughout the Arab Region — together with similar specialists from other regions and international organisations — to exchange knowledge and experiences on the role of public administration (which includes both the national and local levels) in regional environments.

Acknowledging the uniqueness and variety of public administration systems and ongoing reform and enhancement efforts across the region, this Conference forms part of an initiative aiming to strengthen the institutional capacity of governments across the Arab States to improve state-society relations and perform the core functions needed to sustainably deliver services. In the context of the official launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September and specifically in relation to the “Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”, the Conference provides a window of opportunity for stakeholders in the Arab region to take the lead in supporting and promoting the new development agenda through supporting PA institutions to become more accountable and effective, and consequently more responsive to the needs of citizens.

This Conference is the first of a two-part series dedicated to public administration: an October 2015 conference focusing on public administration capacity, followed by a conference in the spring of 2016 that will provide a more in-depth examination of effective local governance systems. A separate concept note and detailed agenda will be prepared for this latter meeting. The main objective of the two-part conference series is to discuss and identify priorities and practical solutions to address the challenges and seize the opportunities for public administration and local government development in the Arab region. Following the tribulations of Arab transformations, the capacity of the public administration and local governments is a critical factor to rebuild trust in government and re-establish the social contract between the State and society.

This conference is aligned with the Core Government Functions section of UNDP’s Strategic Plan. This line of work includes local governance, aid management, civil service and public financial management (PFM), as well as the provision of support to the centre of government. The outputs and recommendations from yielded from this conference will help shape UNDP’s programmatic support to countries across the region.

## 1. Background and Rationale

Consultations with UNDP Country Offices in the Arab Region, in July and August 2015, revealed a changing and diverse political and social landscape, as well as specific needs and public aspirations in each country. Over the last few years, responding to the demands and aspirations of ordinary citizens in the Arab Region has been the major challenge of Arab governments and their institutions: men and women across the region have voiced their aspirations for a say in the decisions that affect their lives, and for transparent and accountable governance. Youth were also instrumental in bringing the priorities of citizenry in the region to the fore and in demanding accountability from national governments. These aspirations highlight public interest in the scope, type and quality of governance and point to broader aspirations relating to economic and political opportunities aligned with human and national dignity.

Citizens across the Arab Region aspire to a voice in an orderly and transparent system of governance, which respects, protects and enforces their rights and their equitable access to resources, assets and quality services. Such increasing demands are being voiced in the region, as recently reported in the new Arab Human Development Report which will be presented in December 2015. The diverse countries of the Arab world face different kinds of challenges and in order to support and consolidate progress, states should focus on successfully delivering goods, public services and a social safety net; facilitating participation of broad sections of society; improving representation within all state institutions and increasing accountability. The specific areas in need of support and development in each country are, however, to a large extent dependent on that country's particular context, in which many different aspects play decisive roles.

However, there is an overall and broad consensus that issues of governance and public management form an essential part of any solution to these challenges. Indeed, there is no evidence in our modern world that sustainable peace, stability and development are realised in the absence of a government structure which provides a peaceful and inclusive forum for political debate, maintains a judicial system that reflects citizen's sense of justice, and manages a public sector administration that is capable of responding to the development aspirations of the citizens to ensure services are provided in the different socio-economic domains. Governments provide critical services such as public health and education, while regulating the private sector. They are often the largest employer, as well as the employer of first and last resort. In the Arab Region, governments have a significant influence over the lives of their citizens and the development trajectory of their countries, in both the economic and social spheres.

Discussions with the 18 UNDP Country Offices across the Arab Region revealed various developments and priorities in the public administration arena, which are briefly summarized in Annex 1. The most common areas identified as public administration reform priorities include improving the performance of public administration (included here are innovations and the use of information technology in public administration, such as e-governance), improving citizen access to quality public services, advancing accountability, impartiality and transparency in public services (combating corruption and advancing the professionalization of the public function), as well as gender equality in public administration and women's access to leadership positions (supporting policies and institutions), partnership-building with regards to government and public/private sector, fostering regional networks and building core government functions, and recovery and reconstruction for post-crisis contexts.

While progress has been made in some countries, the political process continues to lack a constructive and inclusive dialogue between the State and its people, driving citizens to collective action to display dissatisfaction. There is demand to develop and improve the interface between state and society (including the private sector), and to restore citizen trust in governance and economic institutions.

## 2. Objectives

In the context of the above situation analysis, UNDP's Regional Conference in October 2015 will consider the progress in developing and implementing public administration support in the Arab countries and consider comparative experiences in other countries and regions. The Conference will facilitate discussions between decision-makers from across the Region and experts on public administration. In particular, the Conference will provide a much-needed opportunity to debate the important role of public administration in building more legitimate, inclusive and rights-based societies in the Region.

The objectives of this Conference will focus primarily at the level of national public administration systems, but also contribute to identifying initial directions on local governance priorities that will be addressed in substantive detail during the second regional meeting on local governance, in 2016.

Concretely, the **objectives** of this Conference are:

- Map out the key issues, opportunities, and challenges that current environments in Arab States present in relation to public administration development;
- Bring to the forum comparative experiences and lessons from countries in the Region and beyond, on modernising and reforming the public administration;
- Identify practical solutions, principles, and approaches that can help guide the formulation and implementation of strategies and action plans for public administration development;
- Provide basis for establishing partnerships and supporting existing networks among regional organisations and public administration institutions in view of developing a knowledge forum of public administration specialists.

## 3. Conference Outcomes

The First Conference proceedings in Jordan in October 2015 will result in four **key outcomes**:

- **Mapping of priority issues, opportunities and challenges** on the public administration reform agenda in the various development settings in the Arab States. The mapping will both highlight common issues as well as illustrate those that are particular to only some contexts.
- **Regional conference statement** on public administration development in the Arab States, outlining recommendations proposed by the regional partners and serving as a road map to discuss and support key policy measures emerging from the Conference. The statement will possibly contemplate tangible time-bound goals for improving the quality of public administration, demonstrating the ownership and commitment of participating authorities to national and regional initiatives to improve the performance of public administration systems to deliver better services and inclusive development. Together, the priorities and perspectives from the pre-conference consultations and the Regional Conference will serve as reference points in the field of public administration to support the advancement of the post-2015 development agenda across the Arab States.
- **Mapping of innovative options and solutions** - The Conference will provide an opportunity for stakeholders to jointly explore innovative options to effective and responsive public administration, as well as to exchange knowledge about current challenges and needs to reform the PA systems in place. Pre-conference studies of Public Administration Reforms in the Arab States since 2011, as well in other regions, will provide evidence and information for the discussion of options and potential solutions.

- **Facilitation of partnerships and exchange among the existing regional networks** of public administration and local governance institutions working to advance public administration systems in the Arab Region, in order to support and advocate for reform principles and priorities established by the outcome statement. The Conference provides a unique opportunity for these networks to pool their resources and comparative strengths.

#### 4. Main Thematic Pillars

Sub-themes of the Conference will include:

- 1. Crisis Context** (*"Building Resilient Institutions"*): This sub-theme will focus on topics such as resilient institutions (inclusion, responsiveness, institutional capacity and legitimacy), recovery and reconstruction, and capacity building/addressing the capacity gap (in some countries, the migration of skilled labour leads to a growing capacity gap). The exploration of this sub-theme will hopefully assist in the articulation and initiation of a new State-civil society rapport, focused on civil society involvement in the design of institutions and the practice of public administration, and give voice to a new generation on their alignment with government initiatives and their vision for their national public administration. In addition to being a thematic focus in its own right, this sub-theme will also be mainstreamed into other sessions during the conference.
- 2. Gender** (*"The Role of Women in Public Reform in the Arab Region"*): This sub-theme will focus on topics such as economic empowerment, violence and the Gender Equality in Public Administration (GEPA) initiative (featuring the regional launch of GEPA Phase 1). The exploration of this sub-theme will hopefully assist in analysing and intensifying the role and involvement of women in public administration – notions such as quotas, policies, access to the labour market/economic empowerment, civil service leadership, genuine participation and barriers of entry into the decision-making process will be discussed. In addition to being a thematic focus in its own right, this sub-theme will also be mainstreamed into other sessions during the conference.
- 3. Innovations** (*"Innovations in Public Administration Reform"*): This sub-theme will focus on topics such as the relationship between civil society/private sector and government (including involvement of civil society in government planning and public administration reform, and UNDP-created platforms between the government and the private sector focused on information and collaboration), e-government, the development of new and innovative participatory/inclusionary policies and institutions, and citizen involvement in institutional reform.
- 4. Quality of Public Institutions: accountable and transparent management of human and public financial resources** (*"Building Tomorrow's Institutions"*): This sub-theme will focus on topics such as transparency, competence, effectiveness, responsiveness, accountability and equality/inclusiveness in public administration (including policies, guidelines, practices and integrity in the civil service), as well as improving aid absorption rates, managing public finances and the cost of public administration reform (including planning, reporting and evaluation), and modernising heavily bureaucratic public systems. The discussion will yield lessons and useful comparisons across regional experiences, as well as inform future UNDP and partner efforts regarding public administration reform in the area.
- 5. Good Practices in Public Administration** (*"Best Practices in Public Administration in the Arab Region and globally"*): This sub-theme will focus on highlighting positive lessons, success stories and effective innovations in public administration in the Region and at the global level. The discussion will hopefully

inform future efforts in public administration development for both countries and UNDP and their partners.

These thematic pillars will be discussed with a view to identify specific challenges and opportunities for reinstating or reforming the public administration in the Arab Region. The overarching goal is to leverage and build upon regional knowledge, experience and capacities. The discussion will also draw extensively on comparative international experiences and lessons-learned from countries in other regions with similar background.

## **5. Conference Proceedings, UNDP-commissioned Papers, and Methodology**

Prior to the conference, UNDP's Regional Hub organised consultations with country offices to set an agenda rooted in national and local priorities. The result of these consultations has shaped the final agenda of the Regional Conference.

The three-day Conference will be held in Jordan, on 26-28 October 2015. To inform the discussions, UNDP will commission studies and papers on public administration development, from experts in and on the Region, on both thematic issues and on country case studies. Papers presenting lessons from other countries or regions (e.g. Central and Eastern Europe), as well as the political economy aspects of public administration reform, will also be prepared and presented.

The Conference will consist of expert presentations and interactive panel discussions in plenary, with time allocated for break-out sessions and group work throughout the conference. In a region with great disparity in the advances made in the field of public administration, the break-out sessions will allow for a narrower focus to target issues of relevance to smaller groups of delegates, and consequently, the outlines of appropriate action as well as necessary international support. The outlines of appropriate and concerted action will be summarized in the PAR outcome statement to be articulated by conference participants.

There will be another round of consultations, following the Regional Conference, at national level in, the same countries involved in pre-conference consultations. The post-conference consultations will follow up on the outputs of the Conference, and specifically aim to generate ideas on how to operationalise the spirit and targets of the Regional Conference Statement in national and local contexts as well as to plan a second conference in 2016 that will provide a more in-depth examination of effective local governance systems. The Conference will thereby add value to a wider process of increasing awareness among national and local decision-makers of transferable good practices. This wider process will also support the strengthening of regional networks among decision-makers in the region, which in turn will support reformers in mutual exchange of experience and knowledge.

The full proceedings will be published by UNDP in Arabic, English and French. A short policy brief will also be prepared, targeting policy-makers to highlight the key issues, challenges and opportunities, and to map out the contours of any emerging consensus on international support.

## **6. Partnerships**

One of the main key objectives of the Conference will be to develop and reinforce partnerships within the region and beyond.

Regional think tanks will also be invited and engaged to contribute to the success of the Conference, particularly in the organisation of any pre-conference consultations to initiate the identification of national

and regional priorities to be reflected in the conference outcome statement and the possibility of establishing a regional network or support centre similar to the SIGMA initiative in Eastern Europe in the 1990s.

The October 2015 Conference (October 26-28) on Public Administration will be integrated in the timeline of related regional conferences taking place in the fall of 2015, which include the second MENAPAR conference in Tunis (6-9 October), the ninth International Conference on Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance in Tunis (3-5 November), and the fourth Global Conference on Public Policy and Administration in the Middle East organised by the AMEPPA conference, in Cairo (5-7 December). Within this context, the UNDP regional event is keen to support and strengthen the existing regional networks and actors (MENAPAR, ARADO, ACINET, MENA-GIFT, etc.) while facilitating the exchange and fostering partnerships among themselves.

## **7. Participants**

The Conference will primarily be aimed at political decision-makers and senior civil servants working on public administration and local government reform, political parties, policy think tanks, academics, private sector, interested civil society organisations from the region, international agencies and donors.

Specifically, participants will include:

- Official delegations of Arab countries representing national government institutions engaged in public administration reform (minimum of 1 decision-maker + 1 technical expert);
- Decision-makers from Arab cities;
- Specialized public administration and local governance think tanks and institutions in the Region;
- Other UN agencies and international organisations working on public administration and local government in the Arab Region;
- Bilateral development agencies;
- CSOs that are active in the field of public administration and local government;
- Representatives from the private sector concerned with issues of public administration;
- Arab media organisations.