

Executive summary and key messages

In a context of complex policy challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed structural governance flaws, open government (OG) provides a response to citizens who expect to participate in the public sphere and their governments to manage the crisis in a transparent and accountable way.

While there is no single, universally accepted definition of open government, all definitions, including those developed by the OECD and ESCWA, focus on the core concepts of openness, transparency, accountability, and citizen participation and engagement. The OECD Recommendation on Open Government and ESCWA open government implementation framework provide the baseline for this analysis .

Open government directly supports the UN's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 to promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies, but its principles contribute to most of the SDGs and, indeed, to the whole 2030 agenda. Indeed, increasing transparency and engaging stakeholders in policy-making can support economic growth, job creation and increased productivity, through the development of new products, services and startups. Furthermore, engaging people in decision making on social services and providing them with public information and open data can significantly contribute to higher quality, more accessible and citizen-centred services in sectors such as health and education. With its focus on inclusion, participation and collaboration, open government is also uniquely placed to drive gender equality and women's empowerment. More broadly, open, collaborative and engaging environments, contribute to enhancing accountability and effectiveness of public decision-making and elected representatives.

The OECD and its members have been at the forefront of the global open government movement from the very start. A significant number of OECD countries' constitutions include provisions on open government-related principles and most mention the right to access public information, include provisions for citizen participation and for the protection of civic space. All OECD countries now have laws on access to information and some have specific laws on citizen participation, while others have recently adopted (or are currently drafting) a national strategy on open government. The majority have a number of policy documents indicating the government's intention to pursue and implement open government principles and have identified a specific governmental office responsible for the horizontal co-ordination of open government initiatives.

In OECD members, civil society and citizens are often involved in open government initiatives. The level of engagement, however, varies greatly and many forms of engagement are still *ad hoc*. Yet, there are many positive examples of meaningful involvement of citizens and civil society both at national and local level, from participatory budgeting and participation portals to more recent deliberative processes. Digital government, open data and public sector innovation are closely linked to open government and often facilitate reforms that enhance transparency, accountability and participation. Ongoing challenges include how to better co-ordinate, monitor and evaluate OG initiatives.

When it comes to the Arab region, three countries, namely Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, have joined the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and adopt national action plans on a regular basis. Other Arab countries do not have specific policy/strategy documents for open government, and, while several have taken steps to create the legal environment for openness, only six have passed laws pertaining to access to information, and their implementation has been variable.

An area in which Arab countries have made considerable progress is digital government, as confirmed by the UN e-Government Survey 2020. There is an opportunity to build on this progress to move towards open government. Many Arab countries have launched open data strategies and open data portals, though these do not necessarily cover all sectors and no country in the region has yet adhered to the Open Data Charter.

Some Arab countries have launched initiatives to promote citizen participation, but none has a national strategy for citizen engagement. On digital participation, the UN DESA index shows that some countries score better compared to other countries in the world with similar levels of economic development, but many still underperform.

Based on this analysis and on a number of good practices from OECD and Arab countries, this report provides a number of policy recommendations to promote open government in the Arab region:

- Countries should establish a legal framework conducive to open government, including adopting modern access-to-information laws and legislation concerning transparency, personal data protection and privacy, civic space, fundamental freedoms, and anti-corruption. Arab states should also enforce, monitor and evaluate the implementation of the adopted laws.
- This report also suggests developing policies and strategies to promote OG principles and strengthening institutions responsible for the implementation and co-ordination of OG initiatives. Open government reforms should be designed and implemented in collaboration with all stakeholders.
- Arab governments are encouraged to promote a culture of openness, through awareness-raising campaigns, public communication and sensitisation targeting both public officials and citizens at large.
- Governments are also called on to disseminate and enhance open government data, including by establishing transparency portals and launching capacity-building programmes, and to better engage people on key public policy issues through public consultation, economic and social dialogue, and other participatory mechanisms.
- This report also identifies subjects that are particularly relevant for open government in the Arab region. These encompass the government budget and sectors such as education, health, employment, social protection, transport, energy, food security and agriculture.
- While Arab governments should consider launching a regional partnership on open government under the auspices of the ESCWA, a priority should also be to foster OG principles at subnational level, as municipalities and other local authorities are well placed to pilot initiatives for transparency and participation given their daily interactions with citizens.



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