

Executive Summary

Since 2015, the Government of Jordan embarked on an ambitious process to decentralize power to the sub-national level in efforts to place citizens at the heart of policies and services. This impetus for reform stemmed from King Abdullah II's vision emphasizing that "political development should start at the grassroots level". In response, the enactment of the 2015 decentralization laws introduced new elected and non-elected councils at the governorate level and a participatory approach for the design of local development plans, through a yearly collection and assessment of citizens' needs, known as the "needs assessment process".

Acknowledging decentralization as an ongoing process, the Government of Jordan is continuing its efforts toward mainstreaming open government initiatives at the sub-national level to realise the promises of this historical reform. While much has been achieved with local elections in 2017 and two rounds of the needs assessment process, challenges remain to achieve a real devolution of power and meaningfully engage stakeholders in local policies. At the same time, these transformations are taking place at a volatile time for the country, with stagnating economic growth, growing perceptions of corruption, and large influxes of refugees, all of which are exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

This report analyses the main opportunities and challenges in the needs assessment process. It begins by contextualizing the factors shaping the country's decentralization reform, its main tenants and the progress achieved since the enactment of the 2015 laws (Chapter 1). The report then examines the evolution of decentralized structures at the local level and provides recommendations regarding roles and responsibilities, coordination mechanisms, strategic planning and human and financial resources (Chapter 2). The report also provides recommendations on how to better inform, communicate with, consult and engage stakeholders in the different stages of the needs assessment process (Chapters 3 and 4). Throughout, the report draws on successes from OECD member countries to illustrate good practices in this field.

Good governance enablers in the needs assessment process

Reforms to the role of sub-national governments in Jordan have raised a series of operational issues in terms of clarifying mandates, promoting coordination, conducting strategic planning, and ensuring available resources. In fact, a majority of local authorities cite the lack of or insufficient incentives (70%), financial (70%) and human resources (57%) as the main bottlenecks for the process to link citizens' development needs to the country's budget process more effectively. To that end, the OECD has identified several key recommendations to strengthen governance mechanisms, including:

- Clarifying the overall structure and organization of the needs assessment process;
- Ensuring greater multi-level coordination and transfer of information via the needs assessment process;
- Developing an effective strategic planning cycle in the needs assessment process;

- Strengthening the capacities and skills of public servants to conduct stakeholder participation activities in the needs assessment process; and
- Ensuring the continuity of participation initiatives through dedicated financial resources.

The role of public communication in supporting the needs assessment process at the sub-national level in Jordan

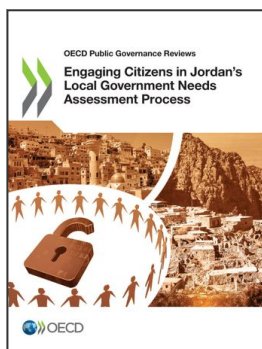
The needs assessment process would also benefit from improved communication around the decentralization reform, opportunities for participation and the results achieved. In fact, local authorities (63%) and civil society (57%) alike noted that low levels of awareness are one of the main challenges in promoting the participation of stakeholders. Sub-national authorities could thus focus on ensuring greater transparency and access to up-to-date, clear and relevant information, particularly on the criteria for selection of local projects as well as the final plan and budget. Beyond sharing information, local authorities should adopt a two-way communication approach, by tailoring their messaging and channels, as well as using interactive platforms – such as social media – to engage underrepresented segments of the population. To that end, the OECD has identified several key recommendations to strengthen the role of public communications in the needs assessment process, including:

- Establishing a more strategic communication approach for local governments;
- Strengthening implementation efforts around access to information (ATI) at the sub-national level;
- Promoting the proactive disclosure of relevant, clear and timely information on the process and results of collecting needs; and
- Developing a more sophisticated use of communication channels according to the needs and preferences of different audiences.

Stakeholder participation in the needs assessment process

Reaping the full benefits of decentralization will entail engaging stakeholders more meaningfully at all stages of the needs assessment process. Despite consultations taking place at the local and municipal level, opportunities remain to expand these initiatives across the subsequent phases of approving, implementing and evaluating local development plans. In addition, adopting different models of participation according to the needs of local communities – such as citizen panels, planning cells or town hall meetings – could promote meaningful avenues for engagement in local decision-making processes. While there is no one-size-fits-all model of stakeholder participation, the success of these initiatives will also depend on the existence of adequate legal and institutional mechanisms. To that end, the OECD has identified several key recommendations to strengthen the role of stakeholder participation in the needs assessment process, including:

- Promoting stakeholder participation throughout the needs assessment process;
- Enhancing opportunities for consultation and engagement at the local level; and
- Building mechanisms to support stakeholder participation at the local level



From:
**Engaging Citizens in Jordan's Local Government
Needs Assessment Process**

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/c3bddbcb-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2020), "Executive Summary", in *Engaging Citizens in Jordan's Local Government Needs Assessment Process*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/49b44f8e-en>

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