**Regional Conference on Opportunities and Challenges for Public Administration and Local Government Reform in Transitions**

**in the Arab States**

Draft Concept Note

**SUMMARY:**

The **Regional Conference on Opportunities and Challenges for Public Administration and Local Government Reforms in Transitions in the Arab States** 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 organizations—to exchange knowledge and experiences on the role of public administration and local government in transition environments. The main objective will be to discuss and identify practical solutions and priorities to overcome the challenges and seize the opportunities for public administration reforms in the aftermath of conflict and political transitions, a time when the capacity of the public administration is a critical factor to rebuild trust in government and reestablish the social contract between State and society. The conference proceedings will result in four key outcomes:

1. Adoption of a Declaration on Public Administration Reform in Transitions in the Arab States (PAR Declaration), serving as a road map to implement key policy priorities emerging from the conference;
2. Establishment of a regional network of public administration and local government specialists to support and advocate for reform principles and priorities established by the PAR Declaration;
3. Formation of a South-South and triangular cooperation initiative in support of public administration reforms in the Arab transitions, such as a regional support center to strengthen public administration capacities;
4. Regional launch of the joint UNDP/Folke Bernadotte Academy *User’s Guide for Self-Assessment of Respect for Rule of Law Principles in Public Administration*.

As a centerpiece outcome of the regional conference, the Declaration on Public Administration Reform in Transitions in the Arab States will be informed by pre-conference national consultations in key countries in the region, organized with the support of regional organizations and networks on public administration, together with UNDP Country Offices in the region. The Declaration will contemplate tangible time-bound goals, targets and indicators for improving the quality of public administration and local government, demonstrating the ownership and commitment of participating authorities to launch a regional initiative 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 regional conference will serve as reference points in the field of public administration and local government to support the advancement of the post-2015 development agenda.

**1. Background and rationale**

Since December 2010 when the popular demands for a revolution began in Tunisia, responding to the demands and aspirations of ordinary citizens has been the major challenge of Arab governments and their institutions.

The collective action of the Arab peoples in the streets of capitals, towns and villages alike has been the spark and the iconic characteristic of the Arab Spring. The power to inspire revolutions and tear down stagnant and consolidated structures of power and governance through mass gatherings and displays of collective defiance, came as a surprise to many, including protesters themselves in the early days of the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt. The masses in the streets expressed a desire for a new social contract between State and citizens, based on dignity and equal opportunity irrespective of ethnicity, class, age, gender, religion and political affiliation. The streets became the preferred arena for citizen participation, and displays of defiance became the preferred method as well as the uniting factor among protesters from all layers of society.

The events unfolding in several Arab states have since initiated a process of transformative change. The transformations have been different in nature and more than three years later, the destination of their paths is neither uniform nor clearly defined yet. However, the common denominator is that the transitions were sparked by the resounding call issued by millions of women and men across the Arab region for more inclusive, transparent and accountable governance. After decades of autocratic rule, without real governance reform, this call has triggered the attention on governance models and social contracts to reflect more responsive institutions and state-society relationships.

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| **Public administration as a political instrument** Public administration at the central and local level generally reflects the orientation and character of a country’s politics. Regimes may exert control over both local government and central ministries with repeated change and reorganization as a part of a deliberate strategy to thwart the development of the institutions of a modern state. Similarly, civil services may be considerably overstaffed as part of a wide ranging patronage strategy intended to shore up support for the ruling leadership. Further, in patriarchal and exclusionary societies, women, youth and minorities are also generally excluded from administration or ghettoed in narrow functions.Transitions towards more democratic forms of governance pose additional challenges for the public administration. New political parties that gain power may want to replace the old civil service – seen as representative of the former regime – with new recruits from their own ranks. Up to a point, such changes favor policy implementation and service delivery if balanced between the functional politicization and merit-based requirements of a professional civil service, serving to consolidate transitions to more participatory, inclusive and responsive forms of public service. In transitions environments, forging a dynamic relationship between the state and society, based on a reconstituted social contract that is also reflected in public administration institutions, is a foundation for the sustainable development of resilient nations and empowered citizens.  |

However, while progress has been made in some countries, in others, collective action continues to be the main means to display dissatisfaction with a process that lacks a constructive and inclusive dialogue between State and people. Unless new ways of fostering credible and results-oriented State-citizen dialogue are developed and implemented, and citizen trust in governance and economic institutions is restored, populations will continue to voice their opinions in the streets. Meanwhile, the social cohesion of some Arab countries in transition is also being challenged by the polarization of religious forces, and ethnic groups.

In this context of heightened political turmoil, and the consequent economic deterioration in the region, most international attention to date has been on the political and security aspects of the developments in the Arab States – on ensuring fair elections, constitutions, conflict mitigation and security sector reform. The important role of the public administration in the success or failure of the transitions has been ignored, or neglected.

If State and society are to reconfigure a new social contract built on inclusive economies and governance systems, they will need to be reflected and institutionalized in a range of reforms of the public administration. Evidence indicates that political reforms and development gains without citizen’s participation and public accountability tend to be short-lived and fragile with a higher risk of backlashes and social conflict.

Transitions provide a unique opportunity for national and local institutions to engage with citizens. For the first time in decades, the women and men of the Arab region are making their voices heard in the public sphere. The people in the Arab region are calling for a new social contract between state and people, a contract that develops political changes into more inclusive political institutions, better and more responsive service delivery by the state, as well as more inclusive economic institutions, that provide economic opportunities for men and women of all social and ethnic backgrounds. This will be particularly important at the local level - the level of government most people interact with most of the time, and the level that is often less developed in highly centralized and autocratic regimes.

As experience in many countries demonstrates, reforming public administration and local government to reflect a new political reality that poses considerable challenges: it is slow and complex, it arouses considerable resistance from groups entrenched under previous dispensations who are nevertheless often essential for ongoing service delivery, and it requires sustained political consensus and vision to see it through. The use of the public administration as a political instrument remains as much a possible threat in a nascent democratic regime as it was under previous autocratic regimes.

**2. Objectives**

In the context of the above situation analysis, UNDP and [partners to be specified] are organizing a **Regional Conference on Opportunities and Challenges for Public Administration and Local Government Reforms in Transitions in the Arab States**.

The conference will consider the progress in developing and implementing public administration reforms in the Arab transition countries and look at comparative experiences in other countries and regions. The conference will facilitate discussions between decision-makers from across the region and experts on public administration and local governance. In particular, the conference will provide a much-needed opportunity to debate the important role of public administration and local government in building more legitimate, inclusive and rights-based societies in the region.

The objectives of the conference are:

1. Map out the key issues, opportunities, and challenges that the Arab transitions present in relation to public administration and local government reforms;
2. Contribute to and enrich that debate by bringing to the forum comparative experiences and lessons from countries, in and beyond the region, that have conducted public administration and local government reforms as a result of a political transition or shift to more democratic politics;
3. Discuss possible scenarios and sequencing for addressing public administration and local government reforms emanating from these political change processes;
4. Identify practical solutions, principles, and approaches that can help guide the formulation and implementation of strategies and action plans for public administration and local government reforms in the Arab transitions;
5. Develop some consensus about priorities for international support;
6. Establish partnerships with regional organisations and public administration and local governance institutions in view of developing a knowledge forum and regional network of public administration and local governance specialists;
7. Anchor collaborative exchanges of knowledge and capacity development through South-South and Triangular cooperation initiatives.

**3. Conference Outcomes**

* *Declaration on the Role of Public Administration in Transitions in the Arab States*

By committing to the Declaration participants will define guiding principles and set tangible, time-bound goals, targets and indicators to priority components, such as but not limited to:

* establishment of a regional support center (e.g., similar to the SIGMA initiative for the post-communist societies in Eastern Europe);
* set-up of public administration reform task forces at local levels;
* development of national action plans, etc.
* Establishment of a regional network of public administration and local government specialists to champion the reform principles and priorities established by the Declaration;
* Formation of a South-South and triangular cooperation partnership in support of public administration reforms in the Arab transitions;
* Global launch of the joint UNDP/Folke Bernadotte Academy *User’s Guide for Self-Assessment of Respect for Rule of Law Principles in Public Administration*;
* The Conference will facilitate the development of regional recommendations to inform the post-2015 process in the fields of public administration and local government.

**4. Main Thematic Pillars**

The conference is organized around the following main thematic pillars:

* Challenges, opportunities and objectives for restoring or reforming the public administration in the Arab transition countries;
* Comparative international experiences and lessons learned on the role of public administration reform in transition environments, woven into each specific thematic pillar;
* Civil service reform;
* Local governance and decentralization;
* Gender equality and inclusiveness of ethnic minorities and youth in public administration and decision-making cadres;
* Reconstituting the social contract between state and society, including in the aftermath of conflict;
* Integrity and the fight against corruption in public service;
* Measuring and integrating respect for rule of law principles in public administration functions and service delivery;
* The role of ICTs and e-Government in creating open and responsive public administration systems;
* Public administration and service delivery in the context of rapid urbanization.

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

Prior to the conference, consultations will be held at national level in selected countries identified by UNDP and its organizing partners. These consultations will add value to the conference by informing the discussions in advance of the event, and ensuring that participants arrive with an even level of understanding and expectations.

The three-day conference will be held in a country in the region. To inform the discussions, UNDP will issue a Call for Papers as well as commission studies on public administration and local government reforms in transitions in the region. Studies will be commissioned from experts in and on the region, on both thematic issues and on country (or local government) case studies. Papers presenting lessons from other countries or regions (e.g. Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, South Africa) will also be prepared and presented.

The conference will consist of expert presentations and interactive panel discussions in the 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 PA, 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 Declaration to be adopted by participants at the final session of the Conference.

Post-conference, there will be another round of consultations at national level in, as a minimum, the same countries where pre-conference consultations took place. The post-conference consultations will follow up on the outputs of the Conference, and specifically aimed to generate ideas on how operationalize the spirit and targets of the PAR Declaration in the respective national and local contexts. 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 a new and largely inexperienced political class, which in turn will support reformers in avoiding isolation and thereby strengthen their resolve.

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

**6. Partnerships**

A key objective of the conference will be to develop and reinforce partnerships within the region and beyond.

The idea is to partner with a regional organization to co-organise the conference. A potential partner that could provide political backing to the conference could be the Secretariat of the League of Arab States.

Regional think tanks will also be invited and engaged to contribute to the success of the workshop, particularly in pre-conference consultations on the Declaration on the Role of Public Administration in the Arab Transitions and the possibility of establishing a regional support center similar to the SIGMA initiative in Eastern Europe in the 1990s (e.g., Bahrain Institute of Public Administration, CAFRAD, ARADO, AUC, AUB).

**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 and interested civil society organizations from the region, and international agencies and donors. Geographically, the original ‘Arab Spring’ transition countries are considered the core target group.

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), in particular from transition countries;
* Decision-makers from major Arab cities, in particular from ‘Arab Spring’ transition countries;
* Specialized public administration and local governance think tanks and institutions in the region;
* UNDP Regional Centre in Cairo and relevant UNDP Country Offices in the region;
* Other UN agencies and international organizations working on public administration and local government in the Arab region;
* Bilateral development agencies;
* CSOs active in the field of public administration and local government;
* Arab Funds for development, the Islamic Development Bank, the African Development Bank;
* Representatives from the private sector concerned with issues of public administration;
* Arab media organizations.