



# ARAB STATES: Overcoming the fragilities of governance systems for sustainable recovery

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In the Arab States region, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed many of the fragilities of the governance systems and their constrained capacities for responding to public needs, which is worsening already pre-existing negative trends such as deteriorating public trust and falling levels of institutional legitimacy and accountability. This policy brief presents key trends on SDG 16 on peace, justice and inclusive institutions in the region and assesses how a lack of responsiveness of government institutions is weakening the social contract and public trust; how uneven effects of COVID-19 measures have tightened restrictions on women, youth and persons with disabilities; and how concern about the increasing centralization of decision-making is growing. The brief highlights that there is a need to improve state responsiveness for a stronger social contract, to build more transparent and accountable institutions, and to better ensure inclusiveness in the governance system so as to leave no one behind and to build forward better from the pandemic.

## Introduction

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The Arab region has been subject to multiple and protracted crises and conflicts, with the COVID-19 pandemic adding an additional layer of complexity for development challenges in the region. An additional 14.3 million people, many from the middle class, are expected to fall into poverty due to the economic impact of the pandemic, including an increase in inequality (UNESCWA, 2020). Even prior to the pandemic, there was strong popular demand to address socio-economic disparities, political exclusion and discrimination, as well as to reduce corruption. The pandemic has only further exposed structural weaknesses across the region's political and economic systems and made ever more urgent concerns over low levels of trust and confidence in the state, unresponsive governance systems and increasingly restricted civic space. Under the impact of the pandemic, institutions are buckling under increased demand, and governance reforms have stalled.

The pandemic's impact is most evident in the challenges in delivering health services in countries where health systems are inadequate, and weak governance systems have resulted in severe consequences and the loss of lives. In Iraq, for example, the health system faces intense pressure due to widespread corruption and neglect as well as the impact

of years of international sanctions. In fragile contexts, with overstretched health systems, the ability of today's systems to cope with the onslaught of the pandemic has been extremely limited (Deutsche Welle, 2020).

Limited capacities to respond to the population's health needs, accompanied by severe strains on the social, economic and political systems, alongside increased levels of systemic corruption, have all combined to generate widespread disillusionment and the deterioration of trust in the political system for many countries in the region. As noted in the UN Brief on the impact of COVID-19 in the region, "The legacy of violent political transitions in some countries of this region, continued conflict in others and massive social protests, reflect a deep structural crisis of confidence, vertically between citizens and the state and horizontally, among groups of citizens themselves" (UNESCWA, 2020).

This brief highlights the fragility of the social contract in the region and how this is detrimental to the achievement of peace and justice, with potentially severe consequences for regional stability. While weak institutional capacities in the region predate the pandemic, the significant consequences of unresponsive public institutions have been clearly illustrated in the fallout from the pandemic. The prevalence of corruption and the politicization and heavy-handedness of the measures taken in some countries has meant that



governments have struggled to respond effectively to the pandemic. In some cases, the pandemic has actively been used to consolidate power and undermine opposition. As the social contract frays further, public trust and the legitimacy of the state is being eroded. The path to “build forward better” from the pandemic thus necessitates going beyond addressing health-related aspects of the pandemic to identify ways in which more resilient, inclusive and accountable institutions can be built.

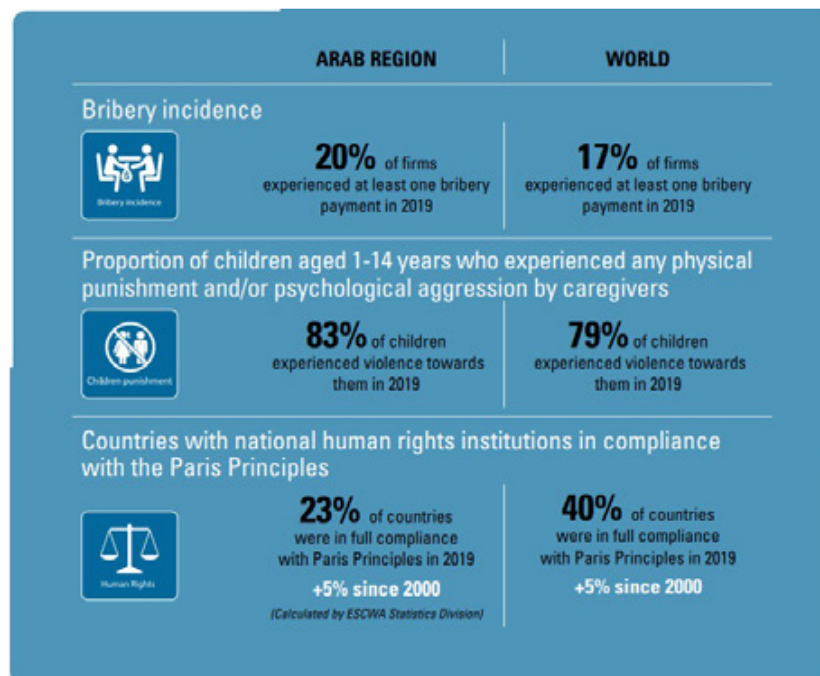
Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, “weak rule of law, low adherence to universal human rights treaties and conventions, lack of accountability, increasing lack of trust, and protracted conflict and occupation already impeded Arab countries’ ability to achieve SDG 16 and all the other SDGs” (UNESCWA et al., 2021). The pandemic has exacerbated this negative trend, as COVID-19 has put severe pressure on effective governance. The graphic below shows data from the Arab SDG Monitor (UNESCWA, 2021), which indicates how the Arab States are lagging behind in progress on key SDG 16 indicators, such as 16.2.1 on children experiencing physical punishment and/or psychological aggression; 16.5.1

on the incidence of bribery; and 16.a.1 on the existence of national human rights institutions.

This regional policy brief presents key and emerging trends on peace, justice and inclusion in the Arab States region. It derives information and analytical perspectives from consultations held with experts from academia and think tanks from the region on how COVID-19 has impacted progress on SDG 16. The regional roundtable convened governance experts in the Arab States region and was co-organized by the UNDP Regional Hub for Arab States and the UNDP Oslo Governance Centre, as part of an initiative with Southern Voice on understanding how the pandemic has impacted progress on SDG 16, particularly in the Global South.

Policy recommendations highlight the need for a responsive state in order to rebuild the social contract, to invest in transparent and accountable systems and to promote inclusion and social protection. Interlinked in nature, these clusters provide a clear picture of how the foundations of the region’s governance systems require urgent support if progress is to be made by 2030. Effective, accountable and inclusive governance—which lies at the heart of SDG 16—has been

Figure 4: SDG 16 in the Arab Region



Source: UNESCWA Arab SDG Monitor. <https://arabsdgmonitor.unescwa.org/>



central to determining the effectiveness of response-and-recovery efforts during the pandemic, and it continues to be a critical enabler for sustainable development.

## Emerging trends around SDG 16 in the Arab States since the pandemic

The following section summarizes the discussion and highlights key findings from recent studies.

### Limited government responsiveness undermining the trust in and legitimacy of governments

Weak governance systems, entrenched political biases and widespread corruption in the region have been key obstacles to development. While the Arab Spring protests that swept the region in the early 2010s had provided some hope that political regime shifts would result in more responsive governance systems, the reality has been that continued capacity constraints as well as elite capture of political and economic systems has resulted in very little change in the lives of poor and marginalized populations. Slow progress on SDG 16 issues of peace, justice and inclusion, combined with a lack of political will in addressing such issues, has resulted in deteriorating state-society relations and a growing risk that development gains will be reversed.

COVID-19 has further amplified these negative trends and, as expectations have not been met in responding to the pandemic, citizens' already low level of confidence and trust in their governments has only been reduced further (Brookings, 2020). For many countries in the region, the pandemic emphasized the lack of preparedness and institutional fragility in dealing with crises—a product of the lack of investment in the public sector and its limited capacity (Brookings, 2020). In Lebanon, where multiple crises have been layered on top of each other, it has often been NGOs that have provided support for the community. Although this situation is not sustainable, long-term systemic reform of the economic and political sphere has yet to be delivered.

The main driver of reduced trust in the region's governments is the high level of corruption and cronyism prevalent across most countries (Transparency International, 2021). Combined with ineffective measures to combat corruption at all levels of society, including in the public service, corruption

constitutes a key concern, and it is a serious hindrance to building the foundations for a strong social contract.

Transparency International reports that, “[d]espite small gains by civil society in the last decade towards building stronger, more sustainable laws to combat corruption and promote transparency, the COVID-19 crisis and resulting emergency measures essentially cancelled these efforts, setting the region back by years” (2021). The report lists, among others, the following issues: corruption entrenched in some state apparatuses, lack of transparency in decision-making, and the arrests and imprisonment of journalists who criticise public authorities and investigate corruption. Another report notes that a “lack of oversight during the pandemic has opened up space for corruption and nepotism in areas such as public procurement and execution of public health measures” (Brookings, 2020). For instance, the implementation of curfews was not as strict in wealthy neighbourhoods and was more rigidly enforced in poorer neighbourhoods in Egypt (ibid.).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, favouritism in vaccine distribution has further amplified citizens' discontent and their declining trust in governments' ability and interest in responding to their needs. Vaccine inequity poses a real threat to the achievement of the SDGs and risks reversing important progress towards equality (UNDP, 2021b). Corruption of governmental institutions thus serves as a key issue and a genuine danger to democratic principles. There were for instance several incidences of corruption reported in relation to COVID-19 measures across the region, including bribes to allow hotels to avoid quarantine measures (Rahel, 2020). Legal reforms that can encourage more accountability and transparency along with efforts to create a culture of good governance to combat corruption and its normalization are necessary.

### Lack of transparency, limited data availability and unequal digitalization, all impeding access to information and services

Transparency serves as a cornerstone for accountability but continues to be deprioritized in the region. One reflection of this is the limited availability of data. Timely, reliable and disaggregated data are a prerequisite for effective policy planning. However, “[...] MENA stands out as the only region that has dropped in data capacity and transparency since 2005, as many countries have either lagged in their ability to generate data or have prevented access to data altogether”



(Belhaj, 2020). In order for states to be responsive to the emerging needs of citizens, institutions must adapt plans and forecasts based on current rather than historical data. Data is also a key contributing factor for measuring progress on the SDGs, including for evidence-based decision-making on peace, justice and inclusive institutions.

The lack of both transparency and access to reliable and timely information only further undermines trust in governance systems. Although several countries in the region have made extensive efforts to raise awareness on health and safety measures in order to limit the spread of the virus, for example through public communications campaigns on TV, radio and social media (OECD, 2020), the pandemic has even further widened the already existing gap in information and in the transparency of governance systems. Civil society has often stepped in to play an important role in demanding accountability and transparency, especially in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Efforts towards the digitalization and automation of public services can improve access to information and to public services: the use of digitalized health management and supply systems during the pandemic, for example, has been considered efficient for the health-care system, especially when cases have resurged (UNDP, 2021a). Nevertheless, the digital divide in the Arab States region continues to pose a significant barrier, and the wave of digitalization in the region has primarily been related to an increase in the use of social media, whereas e-governance is lagging behind (Belhaj and Gatti, 2021). The success of digitalized governance requires a legal framework to guarantee equal access to services for all, including at the community level. There is furthermore a need to activate laws and policies that provide protection for the most vulnerable and marginalized, who risk becoming further left behind by the digitalization of governance systems.

With increasingly digitalized societies, the ever growing social, economic and political interactions in online space further heighten the risk that freedom of speech will be misused, through the proliferation of fake news, misinformation and hate speech. The so-called “weaponization” of the digital agenda has become a real threat to an open and equitable online space, with political violence against women serving as one of many examples of this worrying trend in the Arab States. Efforts need to be accelerated to establish regulatory frameworks to stop the spread of misinformation and the targeting of individuals online. At the same time,

there remains the risk of limiting space for civic engagement in digital spaces by restricting Internet freedom in the name of addressing misinformation. Fundamental digital freedoms and access to the Internet must be protected to allow for an inclusive digital agenda based on human rights.

### Shrinking space for civic engagement

There is concern that the COVID-19 pandemic has had severe effects on human rights, freedom of expression and access to information and has been used as a pretext to limit participation in decision-making and space for political engagement (Amnesty, 2020). Ten years after the Arab Spring revolutions, the underlying causes of the revolutions have not been addressed. Inequalities have widened, and the socio-economic situation has worsened across the region due to the pandemic. Instead of dealing with these critical concerns, governments have utilized COVID-19 as a means of tightening control over the population, including to limit freedom of movement, prevent mass gatherings and step up surveillance. As the legitimacy of government authorities comes into question and new demands emerge for reforms and an end to corruption, some are resorting to the use of force to maintain power and curb protests.

The space for civil society and the media in the region to raise questions or criticize authorities has been increasingly reduced, as journalists, human rights defenders and opposition actors face censorship, harassment and detention. Youth as well have been significantly affected. One in five of the region’s population are estimated to be under 24 years of age, and this younger generation has often been at the forefront of demanding accountability and space for political engagement. In Tunisia, for example, demonstrations in early 2021 stemmed from the crushing economic impact of the pandemic, with protestors demanding an end to police repression and corruption. Many protestors were youth who, given the way pandemic conditions are being handled, see little prospect for employment (France 24, 2021).

### Women’s increasing burden of care, the violence they face, and their limited space for public participation

COVID-19 measures such as social distancing, confinement and lockdowns are new realities impacting everyone, but they have had a disproportionate impact on women. Women often work in the informal sector and in small businesses that were heavily hit by the pandemic, and they were generally



obliged to take on the burden of care in families (Afouaiz, 2021; Moghadam, 2021; Herbert and Marquette, 2021). A study from Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt (Alayli, 2020) found that while overall unemployment rates rose during the pandemic, the rates were much higher for women. “[B]y November 2020, total unemployment rates in Morocco were 30%, in Tunisia 22%, and in Egypt 9%. However, they were much worse for women: 52% in Morocco; 41% in Tunisia, and 16% in Egypt” (Moghadam, 2021). In addition, school closures negatively affected many working women, who either lost their jobs or were forced to work less or leave the labour market due to increased household and care work (ibid).

The pandemic has also led to a rise in gender-based violence in the region while at the same time shrinking the space for women’s participation in public life (UNDP, 2021c). Referred to as a “shadow pandemic”, this increase in sexual and gender-based violence has been seen across all regions as a result of the measures taken to address COVID-19 (Peterman and O’Donnell, 2020). Significant drivers of gender-based violence during the pandemic include its economic impact (Herbert and Marquette, 2021) as well as women’s limited avenues to escape violence or seek support due to lockdown restrictions. Forced isolation with abusers or new abuse triggered by stress and fear or loss of household income/livelihood, among other factors, continue to fuel this shadow pandemic (UNDP, 2020b).

In Lebanon, upon the onset of the pandemic 57% of women and girls reported feeling less safe in their communities and 44% in their homes (UN, 2020). In Yemen, the number of cases of violence against women has continued to remain high despite less access to services or mechanisms for reporting (Searle et al., 2020). As in other regions, the onset of the pandemic saw the reported figures on gender-based violence initially increase significantly.

The lack of women’s representation in decision-making, including in designing COVID-19 responses, has also meant a lack of inclusivity in the measures adopted, which can result in an unequal recovery from the pandemic (UNDP, 2021d). In the Arab region, women’s representation in pandemic taskforces clearly illustrates the gender gap in representation in decision-making. Of the 23 COVID-19 taskforces in the region with data, 96% were male-dominated (UNDP and UN Women, 2021).

## Weak social protection systems to support marginalized populations

An absence of social protection systems or weak ones with limited resources, organization and structures have even further increased the vulnerability of marginalized groups in the region. The Ministerial Declaration on The Future of Social Protection in the Arab Region recognized that there is a significant deficit in the region’s social protection systems and that more needs to be done to address their coverage, adequacy and comprehensiveness and respond to the challenges of governance, coordination and financing (UN, 2021). It will thus be important for social protection systems and tools to be established that are based on proper analyses of long-term socio-economic impacts and development, particularly for marginalized groups.

For persons with disabilities, for example, although many countries in the region adopted the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (A/RES/61/106)*, a clear commitment to implement its principles is still lacking. Egypt, Tunisia and Jordan are stepping up work to improve access to public services, strategic developments and inclusive policies, yet the path to achieving full inclusion and equality in practice is long. A first step would be to address the significant lack of disaggregated data on persons with disabilities so as to be able to better plan and monitor the delivery of services and access to social protection schemes. This, accompanied with measures to improve the inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes, is key to strengthen agency and empowerment and support the full realization of human rights.

Displaced populations in the Arab States region are another population group that needs to be supported in accessing social protection. The region currently hosts about 14 million displaced persons, many of whom are young people. Limited availability of water, sanitation, hygiene and access to health services compound the challenges facing refugees in the region. Most female refugees also face additional challenges, including economic constraints, gender-based violence and limited access to services (including education) as well as increased risks such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage (OECD, 2020). Targeted support for displaced populations that traverses the humanitarian, peace and development pillars is necessary to support refugees and internally displaced people in accessing compensation



schemes, health services and income-generating opportunities and social protection.

### Centralization of decision-making and securitization of the pandemic response

Despite efforts to better coordinate the response to the pandemic with the establishment of inter-ministerial structures and institutional coordination mechanisms, decision-making on Covid-19 responses largely remains centralized in the region. Although the central government must play a key role in coordinating the response to a nationwide crisis, the pandemic has illustrated that local governments need to be at the forefront of developing tailored measures that are responsive to community needs (OECD, 2020). The pandemic has reinforced the tendency in the region to centralize decision-making, which has often hindered the ability of communities to apply locally driven responses to the pandemic.

In many cases, the response to the pandemic has been securitized, from the language used to the tactics applied. The calls for national unity in face of the pandemic, the heavy-handed implementation of curfews by security forces, and the use of surveillance technology for tracking movement, for example, risk becoming the new normal and a standard means of reinforcing those in power and eliminating dissent (POMEPS, 2020).

## Policy Recommendations

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### Renew the social contract and strengthen the state's legitimacy

A state that is responsive to the needs and priorities of its people is the basis upon which the social contract can be built. In the Arab region, there is an urgent need to focus on strengthening citizens' trust in the state, so that state actors and politicians are not seen as predatory and exploitative, but rather as citizen-oriented and focused on providing access to quality services. The COVID-19 pandemic has weakened the already fragile social contract and ultimately put even greater pressure on the state to establish its legitimacy. There is a need to invest in the capacities of the state and the public sector to deliver equitable health services and other public services. At the same time, while strengthening public service delivery, investment is also needed in oversight and accountability mechanisms to counter the risk of the abuse of authority.

### Facilitate political reforms for meaningful change

Some governments are exploiting the exceptional measures put in place during the pandemic for their own benefit. This may include interfering in the health sector's delivery of vaccines, services and advice or extending COVID-19-related temporary measures in order to limit civic space and freedom of expression. In some instances, the pandemic has provided a convenient excuse to target protestors, journalists and political activists and to delay calls for economic and political reform. State capture by elites and politicians, i.e. clientelism and patronage, are key concerns in the region. A transformation of governance and the political process is needed to ensure that decisions are made with a long-term perspective and that they are based on principles of inclusion and responsiveness.

### Establish reporting and monitoring systems to increase transparency

Lack of transparency serves as a key obstacle to credible and legitimate governance systems, and it contributes to low levels of trust in the government. The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic called for greater transparency, especially in the context of deep polarization and the spread of misinformation. Despite this urgent need for accountable, responsive and transparent state structures, proper mechanisms to increase insight into governance systems are largely lacking in the region. There is thus a pressing need for the establishment of internal accountability mechanisms and oversight bodies for the public sector and to promote access to information.

### Create a culture to combat corruption at all levels of society

Corruption remains one of the main obstacles to development, and it has been further amplified in the pandemic, with unequal vaccine distribution based on payoffs or personal connections becoming one of many examples of widespread favouritism. This issue is grounded in poor governance, and bribes have grown into a standard means for ensuring access to services in the region. This only serves to reinforce the deep inequalities in the region and leads to disillusionment with the government. Corruption and the lack of transparency, which are deeply rooted in government institutions, pose challenges to government accountability. There is thus a need to create a culture of good governance



to combat corruption and fight for integrity at all levels of government and within governmental institutions generally.

### Adopt an inclusive, participatory and whole-of-society approach to achieve the SDGs

Governments continue to make policies with a siloed approach, even though the core idea of the SDGs is the interlinkages between various targets. A comprehensive and integrated approach that explores interlinkages is thus required to help solve the problem of the incoherence of public policies. In order to make progress on sustainable development, to expand access to education and health care, and to address poverty and inequality, achieving SDG 16 is a must. Without the requisite political reforms to combat corruption and enhance accountability and transparency and to uphold the rule of law and promote inclusive institutions, there can be little progress on other development outcomes. Undertaking systematic assessments of public policies that engage whole governments can help in promoting development policies that are grounded in human rights and freedoms and protect against restrictive and exploitative measures.

### Activate laws and social protection schemes to protect marginalized groups and leave no one behind

Beyond merely a health crisis, the pandemic has evolved into a governance crisis. This is evident in the Arab region, where resilient social protection systems are predominantly absent. Marginalized and vulnerable groups have been further exposed to the risks of the virus, and given the region's weak protection systems, these groups have been even further left behind. The increased transition to online technology for government service delivery during the pandemic also poses a threat of leaving some groups behind due to the vast digital divide. There is therefore a need for governments to activate laws and strengthen their substance to take into consideration the perspectives of marginalized groups, grounded in disaggregated, timely and credible data.

### Authors

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