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**THE GENERAL PERSONNEL COUNCIL OF
PALESTINE***

Regional seminar for high level civil servants

13th UniDem Med

**"PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION FACING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
MODERNISATION AND DIGITAL INNOVATIONS"**

Videoconference, Palestine*

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FINAL REPORT

by

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1. Introduction

The thirteenth episode of UniDem Med "Public administration facing the Covid-19 pandemic: modernization and digital innovations" was held from 5-6 Oct 2021 in Ramallah, Palestine* together with an online participation through Zoom for participations from the other partner countries. It was organized by the Venice Commission in collaboration with Palestinian General Personnel Council. Among the participants were senior government officials and experts from six countries of the southern Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Palestine*, and Tunisia) and Europe (Italy, Portugal, Belgium and Albania).

The seminar, which lasted for two consecutive days, dealt with several topics including: the Covid-19 Pandemic as an accelerator of digital innovations and digital transformation of public services: Towards a more democratic, open and inclusive public administration. As well as: Good governance in public administration in the age of digitalisation: adapting for better transformation. Best practices in this area and lessons learned from the European and regional experts. How can these methods be compatible with the principles of good governance in public administration? All participants agreed that digitisation can improve citizens' access to services and thus better life. It also accelerates economic growth, supports entrepreneurship while enabling social and political stability. The health crisis has also had an accelerating effect on the digitization process of most sectors of activity. This report summarizes the seminar proceedings, discussions, conclusions, and recommendations.

2. Seminar proceedings

The seminar was inaugurated by Mr. Mousa Abu Zaid, President of the General Personnel Council, Palestine*; Mr Mohamad Fahad Shalalkeh, Minister of Justice of Palestine*; Ms. Simona Granata-Menghini, Director and Secretary General of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe; Mr. Sven Kühn von Burgsdorff, Head of Delegation, Representative of the European Union, Office of the European Union Representative (West Bank and Gaza Strip, UNRWA) and Ms. Pilar Morales, Coordinator of the Neighborhood Policy with the Southern Mediterranean and Head of the Council of Europe Office in Tunis.

Speakers emphasized the importance of the seminar and the need for such forums in light of the enormous challenges that states and governments in the region face, as well as the need for the public sector to keep up with technological developments and find ways to meet the increasing demands for openness, efficiency, and effectiveness. Mr. Abu Zaid emphasized that despite the Covid-19, the General Personnel Council was able to function without major constraints due the technological developments carried out earlier. He insisted that the technology developments affect all human recourses and each of them should follow these developments in order not to be left out. Speakers also emphasized the need of exchanging experiences, best practices, success stories, as well as disappointments, mistakes, and lessons learned. For them, the seminar is an opportunity for networking and potential bilateral collaboration among represented nations. Palestinian speakers thanked the Venice Commission for funding the seminar and for their long-standing collaboration. For the Palestinian speakers, the seminar has added value because it is the first time Palestine* has hosted an UniDem Med regional seminar in Palestine* and partner countries participated online due to the difficulty and restrictions of travelling to Palestine*. Talks by worldwide and regional specialists on one of the seminar's primary themes were followed by presentations on individual country experiences from officials and professionals from the southern Mediterranean area. This configuration allows for the correct blend of theoretical frameworks and practical experiences. It also allowed practitioners in the region to provide peer input on their peers' experiences.

The seminar was held over two days, with each day concentrating on a different subject. The first day was dedicated to the topic "Digitization and modernization challenges. What are the factors that will lead to the establishment of democratic, open, and inclusive "digital" and "creative democracy"

* This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of Council of Europe and European Union member States on this issue.

public administration?". Speakers and panelists examined the evolution of public service ideals in the aftermath of the Corona epidemic, as well as the use of technical and human resources in the automation of public institutions. The second day was offered numerous notable examples of governmental administrations that embarked on digital transformation prior to, during, and after the Covid-19 epidemic, how has the adoption of new technology aided in meeting the expectations of users and ensuring the continuation of public services, how has digitization and digital innovation become vital for enhancing user experience and streamlining procedures in all public sectors on both sides of the Mediterranean.

They all agreed that modernizing public administration and digitization facilitates citizen participation and allows each citizen to be more effective in decision making and ensure more transparency and inclusiveness and as a result holding public authority accountable. It also should improve the living standards though delivering more cost effectiveness and efficiency of delivery of the public services. Through telecommunication we can connect different communities as it is the case in Palestine* and the separation. The digital infrastructure should be available with full access to internet as precondition for digital governance together with the digital literacy.

3. The Covid-19 Pandemic as an accelerator of digital innovations and digital transformation of public services: towards a more democratic, open and inclusive public administration.

The first session focused on the challenges that digitalization/modernization has brought about. What are the determining factors for the emergence of a "digital" and "innovative" public administration that is democratic, open, and inclusive? The issue of the digital divide was addressed, as well as the impact of digitalization on the respect of fundamental rights, as well as the protection of personal data, the use of big data by the public administration, the digital health passport, contact tracing applications, etc.

The European expert, Mr. Alessandro Mantelero, explained the role of Convention 108+ in a human rights oriented digital and innovative public administration. He advised developers keeping laws and data protection in mind while designing any program or solution/application using artificial intelligence and focusing on the social and ethical aspects of information while taking into account the basic human rights of the individual and the fundamental freedoms. He emphasized that while designing a digital strategy for public administration, there should be proper task allocation as well as key figures dedicated to data protection and human rights. Raising awareness and strengthening human rights focused digital skills among public servants is an important element of the strategy together with effective engagement of key stakeholders in public sector initiatives and programs.

The Palestinian expert, Mr. Said Zeidan, focused on the perspective of the private sector and the necessity of regulations that safeguard individuals' public data, as well as the availability of capital for private sector enterprises so that they may carry out initiatives, and the presence of incentives for individuals, as well as the quality of services offered to citizens. He mentioned the eight trends needed towards a future digital transformation in the public administration. Those trends included: Digitisation, data analysis, digital rights, innovation, digital divide and inclusive digitalisation as well as digital communication and social media. He emphasized the role of the private sector and the governments important roles to play in developing digital policies and stable harmonised regulatory environments that enable people and businesses to participate fully in the global digital economy.

The Tunisian expert, Ms. Sana Haouari, gave a comprehensive overview of Tunisia's strategic change, concentrating on four axes: technology, institutions, the legal axis, and media, awareness, and training. She stated that they were able to combat the Corona epidemic that aided in the rapid digital transition, such as electronic payment and the distribution of free phone numbers to provide people with any help needed, striving to provide free internet for education and teaching programs through television stations, and boosting internet speed.

The Jordanian expert, Mr. Tawfiq Abu Baker, spoke about infrastructural development too, with a focus on citizens, public involvement, electronic payments, the necessary administrative reform as well as the key performance indicators. He highlighted the strategy enablers as well as the laws and regulations need for personal data protection.

The experts of the second session presented several significant examples of public administrations that have embarked on digital transformation before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic. They explained how the use of new technologies helps to meet users' expectations and ensure the continuity of public services. Digitalization and digital innovations have become essential for improving the user experience and simplifying procedures on both sides of the Mediterranean in all public sectors. Some examples included e-health, single portals for public administration, distance learning, e-procurement, e-justice, e-taxes, etc.

The expert from Portugal, Ms. Elsa Belo, discussed several initiatives in Portugal, including the national network, which is being developed in collaboration with cities and institutions, as well as the simplification of government documentation for public services and communication. She spoke about services for young people and the principles that should be followed while delivering these services. Citizens' comprehensive services, particularly for marginalized instances, focus on inputs and outputs, continuous assessment and improvement of services, and training of users on these services, as well as the fact that these services are transparent. They considered public service as a living lab: an experimental program that developed, tested and monitored high fidelity prototypes in real context and explored and tested technological solutions that public entities developed in collaboration with the innovation ecosystem. The Program is a LabX operating model, which articulates three closely linked areas of activity: innovation in public services, administrative, simplification and the participation of all people.

The Palestinian expert, Dr. Kamal Al-Shakhrah, discussed the medical file, the higher medical committee, the health insurance program, health education, mammography, pediatric examinations, and infectious and communicable illnesses, among other programs and applications accessible in the health system. Despite the obstacles that the health sector faces, the results of the Coronavirus are being computerized.

From the regional experts, the Algerian expert, Mr. Smail Boukria, discussed how the Corona epidemic has accelerated digitalization and spurred software developers to innovate, work remotely, and return to electronic meetings, as well as try to lower Internet rates while increasing the speed at the same time. At the school level, they offer a "knowledge" platform, as well as a public YouTube channel for all classrooms and a platform for parents to engage with instructors. The "Estishari" platform allows any person to enquire about any service in the commercial sector. In the health sector, the "i-doctor" platform serves as a mobile medical clinic. Algeria believes the year 2020 to be the year of digital transformation, in addition to having diverse platforms for different industries. The year 2021 promises to be the starting point for establishing a digital economy, backed by a government information system for decision-making.

On the other hand, Egypt's most important successes, according to Dr. Ahmed Al-Khateeb, include increasing Internet speed by four times, allocating large sums to this area, trying to attract local and foreign investment, and working on the development of digital Egypt. The Government Gateway ease communication between government entities acting as a central communication unit to activate the principles of data integration (623 government entities already linked). They provided several kinds of human resources training. Here also the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic contributed to highlighting the importance of digital transformation and also led to the intensification of the state's efforts to implement digital transformation. The Egyptian Government responded swiftly with a comprehensive support plan to tackle the pandemic while maintaining its economic stability. The used blended approach of monetary and fiscal policies to support specific sectors, especially social protection and health, public services digitization, regulations designed to limit the spread of the virus, further social and industry measures. On the other hand, the Moroccan expert, Ms. Samia Chakri, pointed out how the Moroccan government implemented the open government plan by focusing on four criteria: access to information, combating corruption, openness, and public engagement. They worked on a legislative program and an administrative program with the goal of lowering the cost of government services. Their efforts in drafting several laws should be a good reference to exchange with the other Arab countries.

4. Good governance in public administration in the age of digitalisation: adapting for better transformation.

The third session looked at how the pandemic has changed the working and management methods in public administration, notably through the use of teleworking. The good practices in this area and the lessons learned from the period they have just gone through. Experts pointed out how these new methods are compatible with the principles of good governance in public administration.

The European expert, Mr. Zoltan Vadkerti, discussed the ToolKit on teleworking, stating that protocols must be improved on and followed, as well as the ability to work remotely. He stated that remote work will continue post-Covid too but it needs flexible work regulations and procedures. Focus on the technological needs that must be met and the gaps that must be bridged, as well as the individual's right to separate work and personal life in distant employment. His findings suggested that those working from home were disproportionately urban-based, white-collar, well-educated, service sector employees.

The Palestinian expert, Dr. Mohammad Matar, pointed out how the ministry of education faced the pandemic and was successful to securing the continuity of education while they were not ready from technological point of view but at the same time, they were obliged to change working and management methods especially the communication channels with students, teachers as well as parents. Protocols were written for the different situations regarding infected students and going back to school.

On the other hand, Ms. Olfa Souli from Tunisia spoke about maintaining public service continuity while protecting citizens and employees. They focused on creating a short- and long-term strategy for teleworking in public administration. The Corona pandemic represented the basis for establishing the adoption and experience of remote work, as it represented one of the guarantees of the continuity of public facilities. She explained the need to carry out an impact study (benefits-costs) on the generalization of teleworking in order to show its efficiency and relevance, especially at the level of improved productivity, involvement, motivation and the ability to innovate as well as the rationalization of public finances, control of the wage bill and reduction of the administrative burden. The impact also could be in energy savings, reduction of pollution as well as psychological, family and social stability and improvement of well-being.

The Moroccan expert, Mr. Mohamed Moussa, also explained the implementation of teleworking in the Moroccan administration. He stated that beyond the unprecedented context of the health crisis, the use of teleworking calls on decision-makers on at least four major aspects: cultural, managerial, organisational and human. The establishment of the teleworking system in Morocco is part of the implementation of certain provisions of Law of March 2020 relating to the state of health emergency and procedures for his declaration, aimed primarily at protecting citizens against the risks of the spread of the Corona virus, but also to ensure the continuity of the public service. They have drawn up a guide aimed at determining the main measures to be taken by the public administrations, to the implementation of telework, in these exceptional circumstances. This guide takes into account the nature and specificities of the missions assigned to the administrations concerned, while respecting the instructions of the General Directorate of Information Systems Security and cyber security recommendations related to teleworking, as well as national guidelines relating to Systems Security. It also complies with the provisions of Law No. 09.08 relating to the protection of personal data. The guide explained the obligations of the Administration as well as the rights and Obligations of the Civil Servant. As part of the government's efforts to reform the administration, in particular through the development of management methods in the public service and its digitalization, a draft decree relating to teleworking in state administrations has been developed.

The fourth session focused on digital transformation as an integral part of public administration reform and modernization strategies on both sides of the Mediterranean. The session presented strategies for public administration reform that put digital innovations and digital transformation at the heart of the process. Experts expressed how can technological advances and digital

transformation improve human resources management in public administration, including internal training, evaluation, mobility, unification, and simplification of procedures, etc.

The Albanian expert, Ms. Albana Koçiu pointed out the four pillars of their strategy which was based on policy making and quality of legislation, organization and functioning of the public administration, civil service: human resource management and administrative procedures and oversight. She presented the online platform for HRM and how it was the solution to solve many problems and enhance the quality of public services where it contained all the laws, tools and procedures to follow any HR related issues. The network facilitated the exchange of experiences as well as the networking between the HR to lead change and digital transformation. She also discussed the general administration, online e-recruiting, employee information, awards, assessment, and the pension system.

Mr. Fathi Khader from the Palestinian General Personnel Council (GPC) presented the crisis management by GPC innovation and digital transformation in light of Covid-19 Pandemic. He pointed out the change in recruitment using the technology systems and online transactions including online exams where GPC has worked on preparing a coherent electronic system to minimize the negative aspects of the traditional competitive exam and minimize the human intervention. Another example was the automation of job appraisal system.

The last speaker was the Tunisian expert, Ms. Fadhila Dridi, who spoke about professional training for employees in various professions, and she discussed relocation of the job and encouraging people to do so by offering them a transfer allowance, promoting geographic and thematic mobility in the career progression of civil servants. They worked on developing a true culture of mobility, with a win-win perspective, while ensuring the objectives of controlling the wage bill.

5. Obstacles

Here are the primary difficulties that experts mentioned at the end of the seminar:

- The political conditions for the Palestinian reality are complicated and tough, and the restrictions limit technological growth in Palestine*.
- The inability to contact Palestinians in disadvantaged locations such as Area C and the Gaza Strip.
- Problems of the Internet (the WWW) not allowing the use of 4G in the Palestinian territories.
- In Palestine*, there is no institution that examines data.
- The government's marketing of the services it offers is inadequate.
- The shortage of computers per household does not reach 36%.
- Resistance to change in general among workers or employees.
- Not all organizations were ready for digital transformation.
- Some people lack expertise in how to use technical equipment.
- An issue with the provided data's quality.

6. Recommendations

Here are some suggestions based on the difficulties encountered:

- Create regulations and legislation to safeguard people's data and information.
- Ensure the continued existence of digital infrastructure. Internet connectivity is available in Gaza and the West Bank. This is a prerequisite for safeguarding digital life.
- Provide the necessary equipment and personnel to accomplish these digital transformations.
- Prioritizing of target groups and prioritization of benefits from the remote work system.
- Develop the Telework/remote work/working from home legislations and the right to disconnect measures.
- Modification of legislation, new minimum standards, general renewed interest and recommendations and guidelines related to "disconnection" while teleworking.

- A wide range of requirements are needed for a successful teleworking policy, starting with a regulatory framework and the necessary equipment and infrastructure.
- Training and development of skills for individuals and academics in Palestine*.
- The presence of a parliament, democratic elections, the formation of a parliament, and an emphasis on legitimacy in the political scene are all important factors.
- Assessment and reduction of risks.
- Participation is essential when it comes to employing artificial intelligence and engaging individuals to get better results.
- Enhancing digital inclusion and achieving digital literacy and digital financial inclusion.
- The public sector's commitment to providing and supervising technological services in collaboration with the private sector.
- Transforming data into information, followed by education on digital rights, information security, and data privacy.
- Data protection and an emphasis on the ethical and social aspects of data, while taking individual rights into consideration.
- Services should continuously be evaluated and improved.
- Public-private research efforts should aim to deploy AI, data science and IoT to address specific and pressing challenges in fields such as urban planning, health care, agriculture, water management, education and resource optimization.
- Timely adequate transformation is needed based on innovation, simplification and participation.
- Palestine* is ready to help in the training of other HR personnel either in Palestine* or can travel to those countries to carry out the trainings needed.

7. Conclusion

More than one hundred fifty overseas professionals and senior authorities' officers from the Southern Mediterranean (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia) participated in the online seminar, in addition to eighty in-person attendees in Palestine*. The presentations and discussions highlighted a hanging resemblance in the worries and difficulties affecting the public sector in the international locations represented. The Covid-19 has affected the rapid transition to digital transformation. Corona epidemic has accelerated digitalization and spurred software developers to innovate, work remotely, and return to electronic meetings, as well as try to lower Internet rates while increasing the internet speed. The level of relative improvement and precedence plans, on the different hand, varied amongst countries. Several efforts have been made to supply the administration with the capacity to adapt in order to stay up with the evolution of its surroundings while also serving the requirements of its residents.

Participants agreed on the significance of persevering with these meetings. They suggested to have a future meeting where 20 senior civil servants from each country could participate to exchange experiences and skills needed by the HR and develop together a general framework for the digitisation and modernisation between the political and administrative levels of government, on the improvement of policies and infrastructure, and the use of information for the improvement of digitization offerings in the face of the pandemic.