

GOV AND CIVIC TECH IN NORTH AFRICA

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*These interviews are available in audio format

Foreword

This report includes interviews with a variety of experts and local actors in the fields of civic tech and gov tech in North Africa. These conversations were assembled with the ambition to share knowledge and contribute to the ongoing efforts to bring different perspectives from the region. The interviewees' profiles were as follows: journalists, activists, business owners, policy experts, technologists, academics, lawyers, and human rights researchers. Recommendations from these conversations have been compiled in the last chapter of this report. We would like to thank our interviewees for sharing their

expertise and points of view generously with us. This publication is supported by the Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA). CIPESA does not necessarily share the opinions expressed here.

Chapter One: Open Government: Action Plan for the region

Open Government in North Africa

A conversation with

Nibal Idlebi, chief of innovation section at UN ESCWA

Alessandro Bozzini policy analyst at the OECD, open government unit

Summary: In this interview*, we explored the concepts of open government and e-government, the current overview of the North African region and action steps for the future. Recently the UN ESCWA and OECD published a new report titled The Economic and Social Impact of Open Government Policy Recommendations for the Arab Countries [report](#).

Part 1: Deconstructing Limiting ideas

D.Y: What is the difference between the institutional setting for e-government, focused on ICTs, and that for open government, focused on governance? Why is it important to make this differentiation and why should we focus on open government as a critical pillar?

Alessandro Bozzini: Indeed e-government or digital government, as we call it at OECD, and open government are two concepts related to each other but they are not the same thing. E-government or digital government can be a strong enabler of open government. E-gov is related to the use of modern ICT technologies to provide better public services, while open government is a culture of governance aiming at transparency, accountability and participation. Therefore, ICTs can indeed support openness for example, think of the platforms that enable citizens to interact with the authorities, the apps that offer the opportunity to provide feedback or wrongdoings, transparency portals and so on that we see in some OECD countries but also in Morocco and Tunisia. But e-government doesn't automatically lead to openness in some cases, it can even work against openness. In addition, open government initiatives can also be low tech, if you think of a citizen filing an access to information request and analyzing government contracts, that is an open government initiative that doesn't require ict. Therefore, it is important that digital government is in line with the objective of open government and promotes

transparency, accountability and participation. It is not automatic but can be an open government tool.

DY: While some may think of administrative procedures and “skipping the line” when they first hear the term e-gov, the report highlights that e-gov has more to offer to enhance participation and promote the right to information. How is that?

Nibal Idlebi: You are right. The report mentions very well that e-government can promote and help open government. In terms of participation, for example, there are many aspects where e-government can support and enhance the participation of citizens in decision making and the government work as a whole. For example, the most important one is openness, openness of data. As you may know, many countries in the region have e-government well established, they collect enormous sets of data that are very important and relevant to society. Opening up this data would enhance the participation of citizens. It will enhance transparency and accountability. Through the openness of data, and in fact, whenever we have access to information data in countries that have such laws, in North Africa, we have it in Morocco and Tunisia, this means that government commit to openness by default which is very interesting for citizens, except of course when the data is related to security or sovereignty of the country. This is one of the forms. Digital platforms available today through e-government can enhance the participation of citizens in government strategic decisions and can be used this way through government portals for important initiatives in the country, for drafting laws, checking public opinion in any regulation related to any sector. not only ict of course. Another form is direct to e-government services where people can provide their comments and feedback about the provided services of the e-gov programs. Government can enhance these services to fulfill the requirements of citizens.

Part 2: An Overview of the region

DY: Some countries in the region are taking initiatives to adopt open government practices. Several of these initiatives are on a local level in municipalities for instance. What are your thoughts on the current stage of open gov adoption and why is it important to act locally as well as nationally?

Alessandro Bozzini: It is difficult to provide one single answer. The region is very wide and countries at different levels adopt open government initiatives. I encourage whoever is interested to read our OECD and Escwa joint report which gives a better overview. At the OECS, we work on this topic with Morocco, Tunisia in the North Africa region, but also Jordan and Lebanon. I have to say most of these countries made progress in recent years in different aspects such as the legal framework, Nibal spoke of the access

to information laws that are now a reality. Some countries joined the open government partnership, launched participation platforms. Of course, there are challenges. Open government as a culture of governance takes time. So, the implementation of legal texts, the new legal frameworks will take time. Some of the initiatives are still at the very beginning and will take time. The implementation and practice are often a bit slow. As for the local level that you mentioned, it is an important level because for many citizens that is where they interact with public authorities. It is very concrete and related to basic services, schools, education, health... It is very concrete and often less politically sensitive. So, it is easier to launch new brave initiatives of openness at the local level. Local initiatives in most countries include participation platforms, citizen budgets, deliberate citizen assembly. Local authorities in Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan are implementing similar initiatives. One caveat is that these initiatives are often scattered. So it is important to try to ensure a certain level of coordination between these initiatives but also between the national and local levels, certain vertical coordination. It is very important because on the one hand to scale up these initiatives, they are sometimes very encouraging but are very limited to one or a couple of municipalities, but also to ensure the consistency of efforts on the national level. Open government as a culture of governance should be implemented on all levels both national and local are very important.

DY: Speaking of implementation of initiatives, can we follow up and measure/understand the impact they have in the real world? If yes, how?

Nibal Idlebi: The question of measurement is quite complex. And it is at the head of many decision-makers and citizens. In fact, it is always easier to measure what we are doing when we specify specific goals. It is easy to measure. However, measuring their impact is much more complex. It needs a more sophisticated methodology. And in general, when we measure the impact there are many elements that contribute to this impact, not only what we are doing in one initiative. There are many factors that affect the impact. In general, we can monitor what we are doing and that's relatively easy. For open government in general, what we are interested in its goal to achieve transparency, accountability, efficiency, and reducing corruption.. All of these factors are important for open government. However, as you might know, these are very complex and many factors contribute to them. For example, for e-government which is in a way providing services for Citizens electronically, it is relatively easy and there are many measurements today available. There is the UNDESA e-government index, a very recognized one, OECD has also very good measurement for digital government. And we can compare countries and regions and it is now very recognized and well demonstrated. It is a way to compare advancements. We prefer to have these measurements to know about the progress of countries rather than to compete between countries globally or at a regional level. For the impact, we can use surveys to know the opinions based measurement or we can have specific elements that could be measured like saving in time

or cost or in the budget because they are tangible things we can measure. However, measuring accountability or participation is more complex and needs a more sophisticated methodology.

DY: So we can say it is not only about the numbers like the number of visits etc?

Nibal Idlebi: Yes. Everything physical can be measured easily but everything else needs more survey-based rather than a direct measurement. I would like to mention that there are global agreements about a number of indicators of these elements like the rule of law, some of them are provided by many organizations. There are many good metrics. But, It is not about measuring one initiative, it is more about the whole system of government that may contribute to such results.

Part 3: Next steps

DY: We spoke of the different aspects and levels that may be considered for actions and initiatives. Coordination is still recommended. Quoting from the report "an open government initiative is more likely to have an impact when it is part of a larger, long-term strategy and is well coordinated with other actions." Why is it important to consider long-term goals and coordinate efforts?

Alessandro Bozzini: Yes indeed I fully confirm that quote. At the OECD, we monitor the open government efforts of our member countries and other countries like in the MENA region. And We have noticed that one of the common challenges is indeed the scattered nature of open government intervention. and the difficulty to ensure a consistent coordinated approach. Why is that? Well, because Open government initiatives tend to involve a wide range of institutions and actors like Ministries parliaments., public authorities, civil society and citizens. The initiatives tend to be scattered. A lot of good initiatives lack a common understanding, a common goal. That is why a national strategy, vision and strategic approach is needed. In addition, Open government requires leadership from the very top of the country to produce outcomes and a very strategic approach can help build that momentum. As we mentioned earlier, change takes time. We cannot achieve a change of culture of governance in just a couple of years. That's why a long-term perspective is needed. A strategy over 5 or 10 years is probably needed to help build that long term perspective. Also, civil servants And public officials need to be convinced that open government is not harmful And that it is good for the Country, for themselves and good for the trust. It needs time to convince them. It also takes time and effort to convince citizens that this is a new good way to do things and that it is also useful for them. It also requires dedicated institutions, responsibilities, monitoring evaluation. Therefore, having a strategic approach can provide that, that steering of open government in a country. and that is why the OECD secretariat does propose for its member countries and partner countries to develop national strategies for open government. That is an official document that outlines

definitions, objectives, priorities over 5 or 10 years. Since you focus on North Africa, we currently are working with Tunisia and Morocco to develop such a document in a participatory way.

DY: How can ICTs further be used to achieve these goals? In a region where different countries are in different stages of connectivity and are just in different levels of adopting and trusting technology in governance, how do you see the future direction, and can partnerships help?

Nibal Idlebi: Of course, ICT is progressing in the Mena region as well as in North Africa. I would say regional Partnerships are very useful and very good for the region despite the disparity. Partnerships are very important for the exchange of best practices and exchange of evolutionary ideas and of course the exchange of expertise because For example in our work sometimes we rely on experts from Tunisia in other countries like when we worked with Palestine. As you know the Escwa works on the Arab level not only in North Africa. Partnerships are important for the exchange of best practices and so on but it's also important to have a regional framework related to specific topics like ict, government and open gov. This kind of framework which might differ a little from the International framework that exists may take into account the specificities of the region in different topics like ict or governance. In terms of open government for example we rely on the specificities of the region. We are relatively weak in the governance aspect compared to other regions in the world. Having regional frameworks and strategies encourages countries that are less developed to move ahead. It is a very good tool to convince decision-makers to have these regional strategies which could be customized later on for each country or could be customized for action plans which are very common in OpenGov in this regard. We know OECD is working on the open government action plan for Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan. When we make measurements at a regional level it is a good competition. It could encourage countries to move ahead. It is a good instrument in some cases to have this comparison at a regional level. When we speak of the Arab region as a whole, although some countries are really quite advanced in ICTs, we can mention that some countries like Tunisia and Morocco are advanced in specific areas of ICTs like institutions, the legal framework in general. They are good examples and even good to learn for countries with more advanced inaccessibility for technology like the GCC countries. Looking at the region, partnerships are very useful and can be good instruments at a strategic level, implementation level and measurement level. Of course, there will always be different levels in the region. On Ict, if we look into the Arab region, GCC are more interested in emerging technologies for development for e-gov services or even some parts related to open data and participation. North African countries like Morocco are middle-income countries that are more interested in developing more services that are related to social development openness and participation. While some countries lagging behind are more interested in the basic components in the ict area like having better laws and better infrastructure to enhance the usage of technologies in their countries. When we have partnerships, we may have differentiations of the levels and leaders should be aware of them and that they may exist and maybe the added value as well.

Open Government meets Civic Tech:

Lessons from Morocco

A conversation with

**Ismail Ilsouk Executive director of Moroccan Ngo SimSim participation
Citoyenne.**

Summary: This interview* focuses on the use of technology to leverage civil society work and what challenges are being faced locally. Our guest Ismail Lsouk, executive director of simsim participation citoyenne, told us about the organization's experience implementing civic tech projects in Morocco since 2014. He walked us through the journey of Nouabook platform from receiving one single response from parliamentarians to organizing town halls online and being a partner to the public institutions, assessing their website and training journalists on parliament work reporting.

Q: Let us start by giving our audience a brief idea of SimSim participation Citoyenne, the story and the current work

I.I: Simsim participation Citoyenne is an organization founded in 2014. Since then, our first project was with the Moroccan parliament, nouabook, a platform that people can use to reach out to their representatives in parliament. We work with all political parties represented in the first chamber, the chamber of representatives and we use their interest to engage in different activities with citizens, communicate, share information on what is happening inside the parliament and collaborate on legislation with civil society. We try to get them to work with citizens and civil society and promote a culture of openness, transparency and accountability within the institution. We also expanded to work on access to information in general in Morocco and we also work in the MENA region on a project called innovation for change, it is a project that aims to create technological alternatives that civil society and activists can use in restrictive contexts in the MENA region to do their work. We try to come up with solutions online that they can use to overcome whatever restrictions that exist in their context.

Q: As someone with experience in both civic tech and the youth sector in Morocco, do you find young people more receptive to using technology for civic engagement or this is not really a generational preference

I.I: I think civic tech does provide civil society with opportunities to reach out to a bigger audience, a wider population. I do not believe that there should be something that is only based on online platforms or online engagement because I don't think it can always be inclusive. Now we are working on civic tech trying to engage youth on online platforms. There are opportunities but there are also challenges. We believe that if you want to engage youth and citizens, you need to go where they exist, where they are. Online platforms and social media can be where they are now. But you also have to be aware of the challenges. Your content online is not the only existing content. For example, if we try to build trust between the parliament and citizens, there is also content online that can affect the trust of citizens with their institutions. We noticed since we started working there is interest in our work online with parliament. We try to use that interest from citizens and institutions to make something happen offline concretely. Again, it really has to do with your approach. We have seen projects that work with parliaments in different countries. I think Tunisia has one, but the difference is in the approach. Two main approaches: Do you want to collaborate with the institutions and work with them to be more open, or hold them accountable from a distance? I think it is a choice you have to make based on your context and also what you want to get to. In Morocco, we just saw more benefits working with the institution itself to become more open and use whatever opportunities we have online to make something happen concretely. So if we have interest from the side of parliamentarians on a certain issue and it is also something citizens are interested in, we try to get civil society and parliamentarians to sit together and do something about it offline. We also realized that sometimes we gave bigger expectations of what certain institutions can offer at the moment. So we have to be aware of that and pretty much adapt our speed to what the context provides and what those institutions are ready for at the moment. There can be some frustration here. But again that is our approach and it is a matter of perspective and approach.

Q: In your work with the parliament, what was the journey like to convince parliamentarians and did you see any evolution through time?

I.I: It has been a learning experience for us In 2014, the idea was to put a platform online, put parliamentarians' information on that platform, create their accounts and allow citizens to reach out to them and representatives of parliament would answer whatever question or request submitted to them through the platform. That was pretty much the idea. When the team reached out to 395 parliamentarians we received only one response. Only one parliamentarian was interested to be on the

platform. and that was expected. It was the first time they would do something similar with a civil society organization. They don't know what it entails and they are most of the time attacked on social media because the discussion is not moderated on social media, with lots of accusations and it is not a constructive dialogue. I took time to actually convince them that the conversation on nouabook platform will actually be moderated. The way we do it is to have a code of conduct that in a way regulates the conversation between parliamentarians and citizens. Nouabook team does the moderation, so we only accept questions that respect certain criteria. The only thing is that people need to ask their questions in a respectful manner and it has to do with the work of the parliament. It took time to convince them it is actually a safe space where constructive dialogues can happen. Since then we saw a lot of evolution. We have grown to work with more than 130 parliamentarians from different political parties and we organized a lot of activities around parliament work. One of the initiatives we started back then to encourage parliamentarians to participate was online town halls meetings, we changed its name now to Cafe politique, which is an online live discussion where we host parliamentarians, civil society activists, academics and journalists to have conversations around public policy and legislations whenever relevant. So we have seen a lot of evolution and interest from the parliament. We also have grown to work with the institution itself. One thing we've done last year in collaboration with the chamber of representatives is we submitted to them a technical study of their website. We asked them to update their website to add more information and make it more accessible to citizens and users. That is something they positively reacted to and their platform has been updated. They also asked us to work with them on training journalists in parliament. We just issued a guide for journalists and we plan to use it to train them on how to report on parliament work. There has been a lot of progress since 2014. We try to build on small successes with the institution. It has been going very well. We are trying to keep a coordination approach, a support approach where we support the institution. There are definitely a lot of things we like to see move faster, there are things we don't like but we also realize these things take time and we try to support and talk to them to see where our work can be helpful. And just be patient.

Q: How was the engagement like from citizens, what was the feedback and what interest points did you spot?

I.I: There is a lot of interest. Most of the time, citizens do not understand what is happening inside the parliament and some conversations are not clear to them, there is no access to information. In Morocco, for example, we don't have a parliament channel, the discussion within committees are private and citizens can not attend and see what is happening by the constitution. There are exceptions but the general norm they are secret discussions within the committee

During covid, it was interesting. The parliament had to adapt because parliamentarians cannot come, all of them. They streamed the discussion from committees on their platforms. There was a lot of interest from what you can see in the media. in discussions online or even in the live broadcast. There is a lot of interest from citizens. It is just that sometimes you have to explain what is happening, so people can follow the discussion. You have to provide simplified information. It is something we start within the platform. A lot of the questions we received on the platform had to do with local issues that parliamentarians do not work on, other institutions do. We had to go back to organize workshops, produce videos to explain what parliament and parliamentarians do and what they can answer. It had to be expected. It is an institution that really was closed for decades. I think the institution didn't realize or know how to adapt to new changes in society and what people expect to find information online. For example, now there is a law to access information in Morocco. But some of the challenges is that you have to request the information from the institution or does the institution have to proactively share the information on their website. There are a lot of discussions happening around that. Parliament in my point of view can do better because it is expected to lead and provide an example to other institutions so that citizens can access information. I have to say there is interest. It is not always a positive interest from the side of citizens. It is not always an informed interest. But it is the role of civil society, the media and the parliament institution itself to provide correct information that is timely and clear for citizens to understand and engage in discussions happening in the parliament. Some of those discussions can be complicated and not accessible..

Q: Regarding the right access to information, how do you see technology being used to leverage that right and is it also important to see how this information is being presented?

I.I: Access to information, it is something we started working on when we had a law in Morocco. Let us start by saying that the existence of legislation on access to information is better than not having it at all. After that, once we have it, our reflex is to look into the law and criticize it, saying it limits access or it is not effective enough and doesn't support the culture of access to information, openness in the country. You can always find for instance articles that limit citizens access to information more than it supports it. It is a conversation we had to have internally at Simsim. But we can spend time criticizing the law but we can also spend time educating citizens about it and get them to use the opportunities it provides, then find challenges and try to push the institution to fix those challenges. I will give an example. One of the early discussions we had was Why doesn't the government create a platform where citizens can easily submit access-to-information requests rather than go to certain institutions. We were very lucky because it was something done in the early stages in Morocco. We didn't have to push for it I think "chafafiya" made a platform where citizens can submit requests. Beyond that, there are other challenges. The one

thing we did in addition to organizing workshops Where we tell people about their right to access to information and how they can practice it and use the information after they receive it. We also ourselves submitted between 80 and 100 Access to information requests on chafafiya platform, the governmental platform and we tracked those requests and how much time it took them to answer and did they answer in the delays they have in the law. is there coordination between governmental institutions? Then, we issued periodic reports that were widely shared by the media and there was interest from the citizens. You have to start somewhere. The fact that there is an access-to-information law that regulates the whole thing it's good. civil society has the responsibility to take it forward. We can't expect governments to take it forward. I think they like to take their time in such things. Citizens are not always informed and if they are informed they don't always know how to act upon this. And even when they do, there are always frustrations because they may go to one institution and their request is not taken or they don't respond to them on time or there are delays. The process can be exhausting and sometimes frustrating. As a civil society, we can't stand and watch. We have to practice this right and push the government whenever they can. Again, it is going to take time. It is a sort of new culture. We will face many challenges. But as civil society organizations, we need to center ourselves and lead this new culture and try to educate citizens on one side and assist them and also hold the government accountable and push them forward. The goal is to support and encourage civic participation and civic culture rather than limit it. Using online platforms can be easier and more effective.

Q: What can the state do to encourage citizens' participation in public debates?

I.I: I think before having a law and having civil society look into it and tell us what is wrong with it.. we can use that in an earlier process. It will help create quality legislation on civic participation. This will take us forward rather than having the law, criticizing it and submitting reports on what the government can do better. We call for better participation from civil society and citizens in the legislative process. If we were involved when the law was in the making, we would push for more use of online platforms, we would push for shorter deadlines to respond to citizens' access to information requests and give civil society a role in following up and assisting the government in implementing this law. The second thing is you cannot produce legislation in 2022 the same way in the 80s. The population has changed, legislation has changed. The level of progress, development and expectations of citizens have changed. The use of technology is something that should be present in whatever mechanism we produce for civic participation and engagement or advocacy. It is present in our lives. Imagine if we had access to information law but we don't create a platform where citizens can submit requests to government institutions. Imagine if we had this law but we still ask citizens to go in person to print out a form to submit to whatever institution they want to access information from. We call for more inclusion of citizens and Civil Society in early

processes of legislation. We call for the inclusion of civil society in the implementation of these mechanisms. We also call for the use of technology and online platforms to create more engagement from citizens. It is very important in a time when there is less trust in official institutions, we should do more to enhance citizens as partners. This leads to talk about civil society. We need to give more space for civil society. We need more democracy in the region. This is always something at the heart of the discussion we have as a civil society. We need more space and democracy in the work of civil society. I believe it can only lead to better outcomes.

Q: What are your thoughts on how to implement and sustain civic tech initiatives in our context? What do you think civil society should focus on?

A: The work of the Civil Society in the region is very important on different levels. But the challenges that civil society face in the MENA region are enormous in some cases. I am not saying it is the same everywhere. Civil Societies enjoy different opportunities and face different challenges from country to country in the region. But overall it's not as easy as civil society does in the region. Sustainability of the work is one veridic challenge. When we talk about civic tech and the engagement of citizens we need to have a sort of knowledge transfer from the civil society side to public institutions. Let's say if on the Nouabook platform we create a constructive dialogue between citizens and parliamentarians, we are doing it because the parliament was not in 2014. We would like to transfer this task and the knowledge acquired and experience we gained to parliament. We want to see the parliament interact with citizens. We don't want to be an intermediary organization between citizens and parliamentarians. We were filling a void and we want parliament to take on this responsibility. We are ready to transfer this knowledge and experience. We are ready to train parliament staff to do this work. But I think there is an opportunity here because we always say public institutions should be more open and provide information online. They are not doing it very well. Civil society can start by filling the void. But the ultimate goal is for the governments to train their staff to do it. It is a way for it to become sustainable. Having dialogue channels always helps. We can always push on public institutions to take on this task. We can always assist. I don't think civil society will run out of issues to work on in the future. As we work with the parliament, we want them to do this and we can always move to something else there is always benefit

Chapter Two:

Civic Media in

North Africa

Reimagining Citizens role in the media

A conversation with

Nouha Belaid, founder of Madha Yahduth, a civic media initiative from Tunisia.

Summary: In this interview*, we looked into civic media initiatives in Tunisia, the opportunities and challenges of the local context and what role for citizens in practicing the right to information.

Q1: Tell us about Madha Yahduth and why have you started Madha-Yahdouth? What was your story behind it? Why did you start it in Tunisia?

N.B: Of course we had to start from Tunisia. Actually in Tunisia the media landscape is in crisis because of the lack or absence of advertisement revenue like the situation of Misk FM. We chose to start our media to reply to the demand by Tunisian citizens who unfortunately no longer trust mainstream media. Sp Madha Yahduth is a website where information is provided by citizens, checked and verified by journalists. a 100 percent participatory framework. Madha Yahduth is available in two languages, Arabic and French and I hope in the future in English as well. So Tunisian citizens participate in informing our website visitors on current events which are taking place in their cities, in particular what is happening in rural areas which cannot be covered by traditional media.

Q2: How can a citizen contribute to Madha Yahdouth? What is the process like? How not to fall into the trap of misinformation?

N.B: In the absence in Tunisia of a journalistic platform with 100 percent citizens contribution apart from social media at a time when citizens seek to express themselves in an official way . While the existing websites still announce that the opinion delivered by citizens do not represent the opinion of the media. So we allow citizens to contribute online to public debate taking into account the ethical and professional rules for journalists. So the rules of the journalist as facilitator of information not just a contributor. This will also contribute to building the capacities of the citizens who don't have journalism training but who are very active in public affairs related to their local communities. With the spread of fake news we highlight contributions of experts in the fields or questions related to political affairs or when it is related to political decision, economic phenomenons and what is important for public opinion

Q3: In our context, civic media is sometimes overlooked and even the current press code in Tunisia doesn't cover blogging and civic media. How do you see civic media fit in the local information scene? How is it different from conventional media outlets?

N.B: Madha Yahduth's main mission is about (providing) information for citizens then supporting freedom of expression, participatory governance and sharing credible information. That is why the space is not limited to opinion articles. Citizens can send all types of contributions like interviews, photos, video coverage and reports. So they can send us photos of events they organized, of actions they are interested in or any type of information they consider useful. The difference is that we provide at the same time training programs not for free but are supported by well known institutions like universities and associations like the international training center. This program is composed of three levels. The first level is to introduce them to citizen journalism. The second one is to be introduced to the world of journalism and the last one is to get access to journalism school. In Tunisia, access to journalism school is easy. Around the world, you have to prepare for exams and tests. If we want to have quality journalism we have to have people trained for it. We want to work in regions not just the capital, we want to go to the south of Tunisia to work with people who in the past had blogs and facebook pages and want to share information about their communities with more people.

Q4: Why do you think it is important to have civic media initiatives started locally? and also grow locally?

N.B: Having local civic media initiatives is more than important today. We have to encourage people to express themselves freely on local topics. With the absence of a journalistic platform in Tunisia with 100 percent citizen contribution, social media offer the opportunity for citizens to express themselves while the media still announce that opinions delivered by citizens do not represent the media. We want to help citizens go outside social and get information checked before. That is why we have journalists working with citizens. Today we talk about civic media as a fifth power. Today for the media it is not easy to access all events. When you are talking about an attack or else, maybe the journalists are not there but the citizens are there and able to take photos and videos and share it with the media. At Madha Yahduth, if we have information we want to share it with other media. They don't have to use our logo or anything. We want to develop partnerships with associations and even citizens living abroad.

Q5: What can we expect to see on Madha-Yahduth in the future

N.B: Two months after the launch, we have over 100 articles published and more than 500 contributions. We have more things to realize like presence in other countries mainly the Arab world and other regions like Africa, Europe and the US. It is a new idea. we plan to export the idea to other regions. During the first five years, we hope to train more citizen journalists in Tunisia and the region. I address all podcast auditors and do not hesitate to contact us to join our training communities and contribute with information on what is happening in your communities.

Reporting in Times of internet shutdowns

A conversation with,

Khattab Hamad is a Sudanese media researcher who is writing on Sudan issues and digital rights.

Q: Can you give our audience an overview of what has been happening in Sudan in the last few months and what the current situation is?

KH: On the 25 of October 2021, General Borhane who was the president of the transitional sovereign council made a military coup. He dissolved the transitional government, arrested the prime minister. After that, Sudanese people came out to the streets to protest expressing their refusal of the coup. Until now (recorded in January 2022), Sudan is ruled by a military government and the president is Borhane. He failed to announce a new government or appoint a new prime minister.

Q: The protests and the tension have been ongoing for months now. How are you able to maintain journalistic work? How was your experience reporting in such a context? and how are you doing?

KH: Protests and tension have been going on for months. Actually, after one month of the coup, I stopped my journalistic work because there was no internet, I couldn't move to different places in the country and the capital Khartoum. My reporting work stopped, I wrote only one article during that period.

Q: Regarding internet shutdowns, how frequent are they? Did it target specific content or websites?

KH: Regarding the internet shutdown after the coup, it lasted 25 days from 25 of October to 18 of November 2021. After that, the internet got back by a judge ruling when the consumer protection organization raised a lawsuit against the ISPs. The internet came back also due to a decision from the coup forces. They shut it down when there are planned protests in the capital Khartoum or other places. Actually, the shutdown didn't target any particular website or content, it was a total shutdown. It was not only the internet, they also shut down the telephone networks, SMS, but all communication methods were also down during the protests.

Q: Any particular tools are being used to document abuses and violations happening on the ground? Were there any problems posting content on social media? Has any platform taken off or removed the content?

KH: We continued to work normally but without the internet. We were working offline without publishing live information. There are no specific tools that we used during this time frame. We would work offline, take photos, record videos, make interviews and when we found any internet points like fiber optic points we upload our documents to social media, international platforms and media platforms we were working with. There were no problems in posting content on social media but when the internet came back they shut down some social media like WhatsApp and Facebook. We would use VPN to pass this blockage. No content I know of was taken off.

Q: Regarding misinformation, what challenges do you face in verifying information? Has this been a growing challenge lately?

KH: During that period, I can't say there was a wave of misinformation because of the internet shutdown. I observed before the coup a wave of mis- and disinformation regarding some topics related to the coup. During the shutdown, it was very hard to verify the information. Sometimes there were no calls or SMS. It was very hard to get any information from anybody.

Q: What differences do you see between digital and traditional media in Sudan during these tense times?

KH: There are a lot of differences between traditional media and digital media coverage during the coup. I can say that digital media is growing well, it is developing its capabilities on how to spread information, their employees how to verify news and work professionally. The traditional media is working by just taking information from official government officers. They have to develop new skills to push new blood in their institution to meet the requirements of modern media.

Chapter Three:

Civic Tech for

Human Rights

Human Rights Education through the digital space

A conversation with,

Mehdi Ben Youssef, Lawyers for justice in Libya

Q: Let us start by introducing our audience to Lawyers for Justice in Libya

A: Lawyers for justice in Libya is an international and Libyan non-governmental organization that is based in London. Our core mission is to achieve justice, accountability and respect for Human rights in Libya. We have been working for a decade on Libya through three main programs: advocacy and outreach, research and capacity building, and also a law program. Currently, we are working on some existing projects, capacity building whether in person or online. We also work with our partners in Libya to document cases of Human rights violations and support the victims to identify and access different justice pathways that are available such as the Human rights committee, the international Human rights court...

Q:” For our non-Libyan followers, let us give them an overview of the current situation in Libya

A: It's always difficult to summarize the situation in Libya. As you know Libya has faced multiple armed conflicts in the past decade that caused severe Humanitarian crises and the breakdown of multiple national institutions. So basically, between April 2019 and October 2020, an armed conflict occurred between what is called the UN-backed government of national accord and the Libyan national army. It happened mainly in and around Tripoli. During this conflict, all parties committed violations of international humanitarian law, in some cases amounting to war crimes. Ultimately, a ceasefire agreement was signed and followed by a long negotiation process. Then, an interim government called the government of national unity was formed in March 2021. That actually raised hopes for more peaceful and stable Libya. One of its main objectives was to organize elections in December 2021. But for many reasons including an unclear and incomplete constitutional basis, and very contested election laws, the elections did not take place. This brings us to today. Recently the house of representatives or parliament declared the GNU mandate has expired and must step down. They elected a new prime minister, now working on forming the new government. On the other hand, the GNU is considering that appointment illegitimate and refuses to step down until it organizes the elections. Again, there is a risk for Libya to

have two governments or renew a conflict. It is unclear how the situation will evolve. But, what is certain is that the militias and armed groups continue to flourish and compete over territorial control, financial gain and critical influence. These militias and armed groups are responsible for a wide range of serious international crimes including unlawful killing, abduction, arbitrary arrest and torture. They often target people for their political affiliation, wealth, ethnic origins or gender.

Q: How the Libyan civil society is navigating this turmoil of events

A: Despite what seems to be impossible challenges, Libyan civil society continues to be alive and vibrant. We work with a national network of Libyan civil society organizations, activists and Human rights defenders. They are those on the front line, documenting Human rights violations, providing Humanitarian support or assistance to vulnerable groups or minorities. However, they operate in a context of crackdown imposed by militias, armed groups and state institutions. They are often targeted by violent attacks including abduction, arbitrary arrest, torture and they are also subject to all forms of surveillance, threats and intimidation. For example, we documented the case of Jawhar Ali, a civil society actor who was unlawfully detained and tortured by one of the militias in Misrata, western Libya after he shared a video on his social media account where he documented and commented on an airstrike during the conflict.

Another important element is the legal Framework. Several laws from the Gaddafi era are still in place and the authorities are introducing further restrictions to paralyze and silence Libyan organizations. For example, last July, they introduced strict regulations with oppressive registration requirements, unjust regulations on funding and granting excessive power to the administration without any judicial oversight.

Last October for example, the house of representatives adopted a very problematic anti-cybercrime law. The law contains measures that threaten freedom of expression, publication and may open the way to mass surveillance on websites and online content. Along with other partners, we called on Libyan authorities to immediately appeal this law and draft a new one that is in line with Human rights standards.

Q: Speaking of human rights, LFJL launched an e-learning platform for human rights education tell us about this initiative and why is HR education so important

A: During the pandemic, like many other organizations we had to adapt our in-person training to find new solutions. Initially, we explored doing live training sessions but that also has its challenges, especially in

Libya because of some issues with internet connection and sometimes even electricity issues. We had to find an alternative that is more suitable and even more sustainable. That is how I came to create an online platform which is adela academy. The idea is to have a platform where activists, lawyers, journalists, and in the future accessible to the wider public where they can learn what they need about Human rights in Libya. We started first with a course on documentation of human rights crimes. It was a very interesting experience to make better use of the digital experience. But we also realized that we have to adapt. You cannot just take presentations you give in in-person training and just put them in the online format. That doesn't work. We have to think of creating a learning experience. For example, one hour of digital learning equals more than four hours of in-person training. We faced some challenges on how to condense and make accessible very complex material while working with experts to present a course that may take more than a week, how to put it in ten-minute videos. Through the platform, we tried to make information accessible, interactive and engaging so that learners can learn the tools and also apply them..At the same time, we tried to keep an element of in-person training. Digital learning even though it offers so many advantages, we are also aware of the limitations of online learning and try to complete that. It gives more freedom and tools to educate our partners.

Q: How was the feedback from your participants

A: The feedback was positive in the sense that it offered an engaging but simple highly condensed material. I think one of the advantages was that the content is available and the participant can go back to review and revisit some of the material at a time that is convenient to them. It is something we will continue and we are thinking of developing new courses in the future.

Q: Speaking of Documenting human rights violations, this is one field technology is progressively being used for. How is that

A: Absolutely. with the rise of digital technology, including the widespread use of smartphones and social media. Human rights researchers now have access to more information than ever before. It totally transformed the way we collect, analyze and preserve evidence of serious human rights violations. It is not only because of the amount of information that is available but also it addresses the challenge of accessing certain areas or regions. For example, in Libya, because of the conflict, there are serious physical and security barriers. So, more and more documentation provided on open source is becoming important for accountability purposes and for criminal investigations and persecutions. To give you an example, in 2017, the international criminal court issued a warrant to arrest Libyan military commander, Mahmoud Werfelli for alleged war crimes. That arrest warrant was the first to be exclusively based on social media content and videos posted online. So open-source content can be used in an infinite number

of ways. Sometimes, perpetrators post pictures and content like Werfelli as I mentioned. Sometimes, victims use digital tools to spread information about their cases. Pictures of incidents can be published. But then, the information collected needs to be analyzed to draw conclusions, to verify when a violation did happen, corporate witness statements, to contradict state and public officials' version of the facts. But I think there are many challenges that may arise as well in relation to open source documentation like ethical considerations, privacy, consent, the veracity of information and also the digital security aspect. So this is one of the aspects we are training our partners on in some of these skills to gain the tool of doing open source documentation in a way that is also safe to support investigation and turn documentation into evidence. You cannot take a picture randomly posted online by an anonymous profile and claim it can be evidence. It may have high value, but it is not likely to be accepted by courts. Verification needs to be done, like metadata and tracing the source of the picture. With these tools, you can turn documentation into evidence.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This report compiled a series of interviews with experts and local actors in the fields of gov tech and civic tech. The discussion points cover specificities of local contexts in North African countries, the challenges faced and key opportunities to advance digital rights in the region.

We hope the report will be a useful resource for government policymakers and agencies, the private sector, activists, journalists, and human rights organizations in their work to implement further civic tech and gov tech initiatives.

Our main recommendations are:

For Governments and public institutions:

- To develop and enact access to information legislation
- To foster and enable transparency and openness by developing public data digital platforms
- To proactively make public relevant information and documents in accordance with the citizens' right to access information.
- To implement a participatory approach by including civil society in the early stages of legislation drafting as well as the implementation of appropriate mechanisms

For Civil society

- To create durable dynamics to share expertise and join efforts in advocacy campaigns
- To bring forward communities of experts and skilled citizens to ensure an inclusive design and implementation of civic tech projects
- To adopt clear privacy policies and ensure the safety of data when collected

For Private Sector:

- To Comply with international human rights standards, including the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and national laws protecting digital rights.
- Proactively publish transparency reports

Conclusion et recommandations

Ce rapport a compilé une série d'entretiens avec des experts et des acteurs locaux dans les domaines de la gov tech et de la civic tech. Les points de discussion couvrent les spécificités des contextes locaux dans les pays d'Afrique du Nord, les défis rencontrés et les principales opportunités pour faire progresser les droits numériques dans la région.

Nous espérons que le rapport sera une ressource utile pour les décideurs et les agences gouvernementales, le secteur privé, la mise en œuvre des droits, les organisations et d'autres initiatives de technologies civiques humaines et de technologies gouvernementales.

Nos principales recommandations sont :

Pour les gouvernements et les institutions publiques :

Élaborer et promulguer une législation sur l'accès à l'information

Favoriser et permettre la transparence et l'ouverture en développant des plateformes numériques de données publiques

Rendre publiques de manière proactive les informations et documents pertinents conformément au droit d'accès des citoyens à l'information.

Mettre en œuvre une approche participative en incluant la société civile dans les premières étapes de la législation ainsi que la mise en place de mécanismes appropriés

Pour la société civile

Créer une dynamique durable pour partager l'expertise et conjuguer les efforts dans les campagnes de plaidoyer

Mettre en avant des communautés d'experts et de citoyens compétents pour assurer une conception et une mise en œuvre inclusives de projets de technologies civiques

Adopter des politiques de confidentialité claires et assurer la sécurité des données lors de leur collecte

Pour le secteur privé :

Respecter les normes internationales relatives aux droits de l'homme, y compris les principes directeurs des Nations Unies relatifs aux entreprises et aux droits de l'homme, et les lois nationales protégeant les droits numériques.

Rapports de transparence publiés de manière proactive

التوصيات

جمع هذا التقرير سلسلة من المقابلات مع خبراء وممثلين محليين في مجالات التكنولوجيا الحكومية والتكنولوجيا المدنية. تغطي نقاط المناقشة خصوصيات السياقات المحلية في بلدان شمال إفريقيا ، والتحديات التي تواجهها. والفرص الرئيسية للنهوض بالحقوق الرقمية في المنطقة

نأمل أن يكون التقرير مصدرًا مفيدًا لواضعي السياسات والوكالات الحكومية والقطاع الخاص والنشطاء والصحفيين. ومنظمات حقوق الإنسان في عملهم لتنفيذ المزيد من مبادرات التكنولوجيا المدنية والتكنولوجيا الحكومية

توصياتنا الرئيسية هي:

للحكومات والمؤسسات العامة

لتطوير وسن تشريعات الوصول إلى المعلومات

تعزيز وتمكين الشفافية والانفتاح من خلال تطوير منصات رقمية للبيانات العامة

الإعلان بشكل استباقي عن المعلومات والوثائق ذات الصلة بما يتوافق مع حق المواطنين في الوصول إلى المعلومات

تنفيذ نهج تشاركي من خلال إشراك المجتمع المدني في المراحل الأولى من صياغة التشريعات وكذلك تنفيذ الآليات المناسبة

للمجتمع المدني

لخلق ديناميات مستدامة لتبادل الخبرات وتوحيد الجهود في حملات المناصرة

لتقديم مجتمعات الخبراء والمواطنين المهرة لضمان تصميم وتنفيذ شامل لمشاريع التكنولوجيا المدنية

اعتماد سياسات خصوصية واضحة وضمان سلامة البيانات عند جمعها

للقطاع الخاص

للامتثال للمعايير الدولية لحقوق الإنسان ، بما في ذلك مبادئ الأمم المتحدة التوجيهية بشأن الأعمال التجارية وحقوق الإنسان ، والقوانين الوطنية التي تحمي الحقوق الرقمية

نشر تقارير الشفافية بشكل استباقي

