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THE CRITICAL ROLE OF INNOVATION
IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
IN PROMOTING ECONOMIC
AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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Meeting on Innovation of Public Administration in the Euro-Mediterranean Region

The critical role of Innovation in Public Administration in promoting economic and social development

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Excellencies,
Distinguished colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

On behalf of the United Nations, I wish to welcome you all and to thank you for taking part in the Meeting on Innovation in Public Administration in the Euro-Mediterranean Region. We are profoundly indebted to our colleagues in UNESCWA, who under the guidance of its Executive Secretary, Ms. Tallawy, have given us full support in organizing this event. We are also pleased to have with us distinguished personalities, experts, and colleagues who will join us in discussing how innovations and the exchange of experiences in public administration can help to promote democratic governance and foster economic and social development.

One of the prerequisites for strengthening democracy is to have strong and effective State institutions and public services that are efficient, accessible to all and of good quality. In fact, it is now widely recognized that many of the problems that countries around the world face today, including poverty and social disintegration, result from State capacity deficit. This refers, on the one hand, to:

- Poorly managed public institutions and services;
- Inadequate public sector human capacities in terms of knowledge, skills, motivation and commitment;
- Inability to collect and manage public financial resources; as well as
- Lack of knowledge, innovation and technology strategies.

On the other hand, it refers to:

- Lack of State capacity in creating an enabling environment for private sector development; and
- Lack of State capacity in establishing an enabling environment for the full participation of civil society in policy-making processes.
Reforming and innovating public administration systems is thus essential to ensure that “the millennium development goals, including poverty eradication, become national goals and serve to increase the coherence and consistency of national policies and programs” (A/RES/56/236).

Governments, in partnership with citizens, non-governmental organizations and the private sector, have a crucial role in effectively implementing programmes to ameliorate inequalities in society, to improve the quality of life of citizens through high-quality public services and a more efficient delivery, as well as to facilitate the evolution of communities toward the full empowerment of all citizens. A key factor in achieving these ambitious targets is not only to carry out innovative policies and strategies, but to inform citizens about the desired changes, to engage them in a dialogue and encourage them to participate in the achievement of specific goals which require citizen participation in order to be effective (for example strategies to improve cleanliness of urban areas).

Governance, as opposed to traditional public administration, puts emphasis on participation and partnership. Public administration needs to be transformed into a responsive instrument to meet the needs of all citizens, including the poor, and to be accountable to the most vulnerable populations. To accomplish this transformation, public administration needs to innovate its organizational structure, its practices, its capacities, and how it mobilizes, deploys and utilizes the human, material, information, technological and financial resources for service delivery to remote, disadvantaged and challenged people.

Globalization also requires that states adapt to new and changing local, national and international forces. In fact, public sector reform is one of the most important ingredients in reinvigorating the economy and in allowing countries to integrate into the global economy. In other words, there are two important factors that need to be highlighted: on the one hand public administration should serve the people and not the other way round, and on the other the people must also be actively engaged in facilitating and promoting compliance with reforms.
In particular, promoting social development and alleviating poverty requires a holistic and multi-sector approach because poverty is not only related to lack of income or employment, but also to access to and quality of basic public services, which in turn provide greater opportunities to all. Access to and provision of safe drinking water and sanitation facilities are vital and require efficient water management. Access to and the promotion of universal education, especially for women, is crucial in giving people the means to emerge from poverty and require that the State administer these services efficiently. Access to health services is another fundamental element in the fight against poverty in which the State has a pivotal role to play. In brief, how the public sector is structured, administered and operated; as well as what services are provided to citizens and how they are delivered have a great impact on people’s well-being and human development.

Innovations in governance and public administration can often lead directly and/or indirectly to economic and social development. Within the sphere of governance and public administration, emerging strategies include, for example:

- Participatory poverty assessments
- Inclusive and participatory policy planning (Multi-stakeholder, multisectoral)
- Client-focused one-stop service delivery for social services
- Mobile service delivery for multi-service clients in remote areas
- Decentralized policy development, implementation and evaluation
- Decentralized budgeting and expenditure management
- Standardized, computerized, decentralized, civil service eligibility examinations
- Client-involved evaluation of programme outputs and impacts
- Citizen surveys and community-based benchmarking
- Involvement of NGOs, CBOs in implementing strategic reforms
Just last week in New York, we inaugurated the United Nations Public Service Awards Day, a day that provides an opportunity to recognize the motivation, commitment and hard work of all public servants, and recognizes and encourages excellence in public administration. I am very pleased to mention on this occasion that Egypt received an Award for the Improvement of administrative machinery, Lebanon received an Award for promoting research, training and continuous education and Oman received an Award for cleanliness of Muscat Municipality. At the opening ceremony Under-Secretary-General, Mr Nitin Desai, underscored that the awards recognized the capacity that exists around the world to reinvent Government and to implement innovative measures in various fields of the public sector.

Although due regard should be given to the historical roots and cultural context of a specific country, there is a growing consensus over what is to be achieved through such innovations. For the purposes of our discussion, I wish to make reference to the UN Public Service Awards categories, which have tried to map out the most significant goals:

1) Improvement of Public Service Results implies that Measures should:
   - Respond constantly to the needs of citizens;
   - Promote equity (by ensuring weak and vulnerable groups access to basic services); and
   - Deliver public services in a manner emphasizing timeliness, courtesy, and access.

2) Improvement of the Quality of the Public Service Process implies that measures be taken to:
   - Promote transparency in decision making
   - Promote accountability to citizens, clients, and other stakeholders
   - Promote professionalism (in the areas of human resource/personnel management, public service ethics, management decision making).

3) Innovations in Public Service. In order to qualify as “Innovations”, reforms should:
   - Represent a “radical departure” from business as usual;
• Produce results beneficial to the citizens, the clients, and other stakeholders (as demonstrated in beneficiary surveys/benchmarking studies);
• Effectively reduce the cost of service delivery while maintaining/enhancing service quality.

4) Application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Local Government: Local e-Government. This implies the application of ICT solutions to local level problems, and in the process:
• Enhance service delivery capacity and quality;
• Re-engineer government operations;
• Foster e-Participation (i.e., promote interaction between public officials and the public).

During the Ad Hoc Expert Group Meeting on Innovation in Public Service Delivery, which took place last week in New York, experts agreed that in order for innovation to be successful, the following factors are necessary:

• Political will;
• Time- Institutional reforms need time to take effect;
• Flexibility of financial resources;
• Stakeholders’ support;
• Investment in ICT; and
• Support of all sectors of society.

In other words, the success of any effective reform and to promoting social and economic development is based upon the existence of leaders who have a vision, embrace change and encourage innovation in public administration; and on the availability of adequate resources, time flexibility and the support of citizens.

In view of the above, and in line with the Millennium Development Goals, the United
Nations is dedicated to promoting the exchange of experiences, ideas and best practices concerning innovations in governance and public administration in order to contribute to social and economic development. The General Assembly itself has reiterated that particular emphasis should be given to the exchange of experience related to the role of public administration in the implementation of internationally agreed goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration. It has also expressed its appreciation for the role that the United Nations Online Network in Public Administration and Finance (UNPAN) plays in promoting information sharing and exchange of experiences and in building the capacities of developing countries to utilize information communication technologies for this purpose.

Within the overall goal of innovating public administration systems, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in collaboration with Formez, an Italian research and Training Center, and with the generous support of the Government of Italy, has recently launched a programme on Innovation in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Mr. Giuseppe Pennella, Director of the centre on Innovation in the Euro-Mediterranean region, and our partner in this programme is here among us.

The major goal of this Programme is to contribute to strengthening in the Mediterranean region the capacity of national governments, in terms of institutions, human resources, technological adequacy and financial management, to better cope with emerging national, regional and international challenges, as well as to respond more effectively to citizens demands and needs.

Taking into account the existence of different administrative realities, systems, cultures and identities within the Euro-Mediterranean region, this programme aims at developing a set of strategies to promote the effective exchange of innovative experiences and successful practices in public administration among the partner countries (Northern Africa, Middle East and Balkan region). By encouraging the exchange of information and best practices, partner countries may benefit from experiences and lessons learned in other areas of the
region and develop cooperation models aimed at stimulating vertical (North-South) as well as horizontal (South-South) collaboration. The programme also envisions the elaboration of tools and methodologies to adapt successful experiences in other countries.

Among the activities that we would like to launch is the idea of establishing a network of innovators and we hope that a number of countries here present will participate as stakeholders in these initiatives. We believe that there is great expertise in the Mediterranean region but that links should be created in order to maximize the returns in terms of guiding and inspiring innovative processes in governance institutions. We would also like to link innovators at a different levels – experts, government officials, private sector specialists. As you all know, knowledge acquisition is very important in the era of Information Technology and rapid change. For that reason, it is not sufficient any longer to rely on one’s own local expertise, but knowledge may be acquired through exchange of information on successful practices, or even failures, and experiences in general that may facilitate reform in other countries. Learning from other developing countries or developed countries can save time, inspire new reforms, and in some cases help countries to leapfrog stages of development.

I would like to mention, moreover, that pioneering initiatives in innovating public service delivery and in administrative innovation can be found in every corner of the world. For example, the SAC model (services to citizens) which originated in Brazil has now been adopted in Portugal and other Lusophone countries. This proves that the exchange of innovation in public administration is a powerful tool to improve the quality of a democracy, and that innovations can benefit any country, whether in the South or the North of the world.

One of our first steps in undertaking this ambitious programme is to assess challenges in reforming public administration in the Euro-Mediterranean region. We are therefore looking forward to your comments and your views on what are the most critical challenges and priorities in innovating public administration specifically in this region. We are also looking forward to your ideas and advice on how to successfully set up a network of innovators in the region. I have confidence that the comments and deliberations as well as discussions that will take place during this Meeting will further our understanding of how innovations in governance and public administration can indeed bring citizens closer to the State as well as
promote social and economic development, and what role the United Nations can play in this process. Thank you.