OpEd: The Transformation of the Public Sector Is a Challenge Facing All Governments; Saudi Arabia Is an Example of Huge Change

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Written by Husameddin AlMadani

The root and branch modernization and professionalization of the public sector hap—required to usher in an era of diversified economic growth and increased opportun—is a change almost as big as Vision 2030 itself. It will have implications for the global discourse.

This week the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman started his American state visit in his vision for the future of Saudi Arabia and the opportunities it provides beyond it is an ambitious plan to liberalize the economy and introduce social reform and is an socio-economic change in the country’s history.

The scope and reach of these reforms demand a rapid modernization of the way Sa administered. And they raise interesting points to consider for all governments and c
now to harness technology and data to drive transparency, accountability and efficiency making.

The Saudi Vision's governance model promotes efficient planning within governments and enables coordination among them to achieve common national goals. The Crown Prince Council's Economic and Development Affairs has introduced a series of new government bodies, encouraging a culture of greater efficiency. These bodies include the National Program for Economic Performance Measurement (Adaa), the Delivery and Rapid Intervention Center (DAI), and the Management Office of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs—all focus on supporting change.

Adaa was established to measure the progress and delivery of public entities within them to achieve greater efficiency. Adaa tracks progress on initiatives, programs, and internationally established measurements, supporting all ministries working towards the goals set out in Vision 2030. However, Adaa is also looking outwards and has created a platform that collects and visualizes global data to help support better data-led policy decisions.

The International Performance Hub (IPH) captures 1.2 million data points from leading organizations such as the OECD and the World Bank, using technology developed with Microsoft and other companies ranging from education and energy to society and industry. It is aimed at helping government and multi-lateral agencies make the transformation towards data-driven decision-making, which believe is key not just for fast-developing economies, but for long established ones too. It can help empower institutions and individuals to get one step closer to addressing the worldwide development challenges.

Importantly, Adaa has been praised by the World Bank on its ability to build a strong and extensive expertise on performance measurement. In some areas, such as quality assurance, presentation and visualization, the Bank views Adaa's expertise as astonishing, saying what could be found in many OECD governments. That indicates our journey may be a contribution to the discourse on public sector reform, from Boston to Beijing.

Easy, intuitive data delivery is key to making sure that the Saudi population is kept informed, which is essential for Vision 2030. That is why Adaa is also capturing citizens' feedback, making sure that the voices of the different communities are heard in the evaluation of government performance. Beneficiary Experience employs several methodologies to collect feedback, including evaluation applications, mystery shoppers, public satisfaction polls and focus groups, something that governments across the world are increasingly focused on.

There are early, encouraging, signs that reform is already working in Saudi Arabia. For example, women, for example, went up 11 percent in the last quarter due to deregulation and changes in the labor laws, which has been highlighted in the WEF's Global Competitiveness Report.
Government online services have drastically increased. The WEF Global Information Technology Report of 2017 shows a significant improvement in Saudi Arabia, ranking 18th globally, compared to the less stellar 73rd position in 2015. The Kingdom is moving towards its goal to augment SME contribution to GDP; in the third quarter of 2018, the operational income for the segment increased 11% compared to the same quarter of 2017. We aim to improve the private sector contribution to GDP from 40% to 65% by 2030. The only way we will know if we achieve that, and the Vision 2030 program more broadly, is through regular monitoring and measuring progress, transparently.

The task at hand is monumental. We want to move away from an economy based solely on oil and gas, and must completely transform the way we look at our resources and evaluate our economic performance. Our geographic, cultural, social, demographic and economic advantages are all conducive to developing a diverse and sustainable economy. But we need a public sector built on technology, resilient institutions and established metrics to get there.

It’s easy to talk about scale and change, but people don’t believe talk, they believe results. Measuring a broader sweep of indicators than ever before. We understand the work we do matters, and we understand our citizens are watching. As we change, we hope to share the lessons we learn with others—the complexities of the modern world will demand much of our public sector and similar transformation from government agencies and development communities across the Kingdom.

About the author: Husameddin AlMadani is the Director General for the National Center for Performance Measurement in Saudi Arabia (Adaa). He is at the forefront of the performance revolution in the Kingdom, tasked with measuring the impact and delivery of the Kingdom’s 2030 agenda. He is also a member of the Vision 2030 Strategy Committee headed by HRH Mohammed bin Salman. In his capacity as a leader of Adaa and the country’s foremost performance measurement, Al Madani has been featured in media including NPR, The Atlantic, and the World Bank blog.