



Background Document on Establishing a Network for Jordan's Information Officers

To its great credit, Jordan was the first Arab country to pass a right to information law, Law No. 47 for the Year 2007 Guaranteeing the Right to Obtain Information. However, in the decade since this important milestone, implementation has remained a challenge. In part, this is due to the relative weakness of the Law. In many areas, the Law is very vague, leaving important matters up to the discretion of individual implementing authorities. The Law also fails to require public authorities to implement a number of better practices. While these are significant deficiencies, in practice they mean that the way the Law is implemented, and whether this is a success or a failure, depends in important ways on Information Officers. These officials can choose to exercise their duties to a bare minimum standard, doing only what the law specifically requires them to and nothing more, or they can choose to implement the law in line with its underlying spirit and the international standards that define this important human right. There is an enormous gap between these two approaches.

The experience of the Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD), with the support of UNESCO and the National Library, carrying out a series of trainings for Jordan's Information Officers in early 2017 showed us that, to their credit, many officials have chosen to go beyond the minimum legal requirements and have shown enthusiasm for working to develop a strong right to information in Jordan. At the same time, practices have been uneven and there is, at present, no central mechanism for sharing ideas and to facilitate the transfer of good practice between public authorities. In order to promote strong standards of implementation across Jordan's public sector, CLD, with the support of UNESCO, has developed this Background Document on professional information officer networks. The Document was developed within the framework of the European Union funded Support to Media in Jordan Project, which is being implemented by UNESCO. It aims to highlight the benefits of such networks, outline key governance standards for them and present some of the main activities that such networks undertake in other countries. It is hoped that this material will help Jordan's Information Officers to create a strong professional network for themselves, in order to promote strong right to information implementation across Jordan.

Potential Benefits of an Information Officers' Network

As a first step, it is useful to map out the benefits that such a network could provide.

1. Developing and Promoting Uniform Standards of Implementation

In every right to information system, there is bound to be some variation in how officials interpret and implement the law. The situation in which government authorities operate varies considerably. Some have access to vastly more resources than others, some deal with information which is especially sensitive, and some face particularly high demand, requiring additional resources to process requests in a timely fashion, or low demand, suggesting the need for additional awareness raising. It is natural that each agency will customise practices in order to suit their particular context. At the same time, a lack of consistency in the way the rules are implemented can be problematical. Where the response to requests varies considerably, this makes the system as a whole more difficult for outsiders to understand, so that it is difficult for requesters to develop any kind of broad expertise at navigating the system. This is also likely to lead to criticism of public authorities which are seen to be implementing the Law less effectively. It may also create problems of expectation, as requesters who have been treated well at one public authority assume they will receive the same treatment elsewhere.

A key benefit of networking information officers together is to facilitate the sharing of experiences and practices, facilitating the evolution of harmonised standards. Ideally, this should be formalised through comprehensive and binding standards, including in the main legislation. However, as noted above, the legislation is weak in Jordan, meaning that binding standards are less than comprehensive. In this context, sharing of experiences among information officers can help to harmonise the way different authorities approach their work. In addition to providing a more reliable experience for requesters, standardising practices will make Information Officers' jobs easier, since procedures developed by early leaders can be appropriated and adapted by colleagues at other institutions. As a simple example of this, a guide for requesters developed by one public authority could easily be adapted for use at other authorities.

2. Facilitating the Sharing of Ideas

As different public authorities go about implementing right to information legislation, they will inevitably have different experiences and try different ways of responding to the challenges of implementing the Law. Sometimes these experiences will be very positive and successful, and sometimes the opposite will apply. In both cases, a network can facilitate the sharing of information about these experiences, ensuring that learning goes beyond just the one public authority directly involved. Networking also allows officials facing a particular problem to appeal to their colleagues for advice on how to deal with it, since it is likely at least one of them has faced or is facing the same issue. For example, different public authorities in Jordan have tried different ways of responding to the challenge of classifying documents. Sharing experiences about approaches which have been tried and their strengths and weaknesses can lead to the emergence of better practice overall.

Another way to look at this is that networking can allow Information Officers to work collectively to generate solutions to problems. For example, an ongoing challenge with implementing a right to information law is interpreting the exceptions and deciding whether or not a document should be disclosed or withheld. Having the possibility of discussing new and difficult cases with other Information Officer colleagues can help promote better decision-making and also give Information Officers the comfort of knowing that their colleagues support their decisions.

3. Providing Opportunities for Professional Development

Continuing education is an integral part of virtually every profession and this is particularly important for Information Officers given that this is still a new area of work in Jordan. Capacity building workshops, conferences and other training events are essential to ensure that skills continue to evolve and to prevent institutional stagnation. These events need to be centrally organised and coordinated, which is a role professional networks are particularly well placed to play. Even where trainings are run by outside agencies, such as the CLD-UNESCO-National Library trainings noted above, a professional network can act as a central contact point, playing an important role in spreading the word that an event is taking place, helping to boost turnout, and providing inputs into the agenda, scheduling and general organisation of such events. All of this will help ensure that the capacity-building events are more responsive to the needs of Jordan's information officers.

In addition to these formal activities, a network can play an important role in providing informal capacity-building opportunities, for example by linking newer members of the profession with more experienced ones in a sort of mentoring arrangement. This is particularly important for a profession whose practitioners are scattered among different public authorities, so that direct mentoring opportunities would otherwise be limited.

4. Raising the Profile of the Profession

A network can help to raise the profile of the role played by Information Officers as a whole by giving the profession a public persona and by allowing its practitioners to speak with a single voice on issues that impact them. For example, if the government was considering amendments to the right to information law, the network could serve as a hub of expertise to provide inputs into these processes. It might, for example, appoint a particular representative to speak for Information Officers or develop and present publicly a common policy position.

A network can also serve a general promotional role, by informing the public about the purpose of the work of Information Officers and the value of the right to information. While the government should formally take the lead in these kinds of activities, a professional network can play an important supplementary role. Information officers have a strong common interest in heightening public

awareness of what they do and why it is important and, collectively, they have more expertise on this issue than anyone else in the country.

Characteristics of an Effective Information Officers' Network

The key to building an effective professional network is good administration and governance. The exact form that the network should take depends, in part, on its size and level of formality. Smaller networks may be able to be run on a more informal basis, built around the efforts of a few dedicated volunteer administrators. Larger, more ambitious networks may require more manpower to operate well, including potentially paid staff. It is ultimately up to Jordanian Information Officers to determine what approach to take. However, with any network, there are certain characteristics that will be integral to its efficacy and success.

1. Participatory and Member Driven

A key starting point is that the network should be open to all members of the profession or Information Officers. While professional networks are usually not mandatory, as a union might be, it would not be appropriate to deliberately exclude anyone who was active in the role of Information Officer. At the same time, it should also be limited to Information Officers. There is some room for debate as to whether membership should be extended to former or retired members, and different tiers of membership may be considered in these cases, depending on how formally the network is set up.

A related issue is how to ensure that, over time, all Information Officers are aware of the network and given an appropriate opportunity to join. In this case, there is a natural base of members for the network, namely those who have participated in the CLD-UNESCO-National Library. However, it is important to reach out to new Information Officers as they are appointed or old Officers are replaced. One way of doing this is to ensure that information about the network is integrated into ongoing training or other professional activities.

Although some professional networks require their members to contribute dues, it may be challenging to institute such a system at the outset, given that, in a non-mandatory context, this may dampen enthusiasm. This may require a new network to seek external sources of support, or to focus on activities with minimal direct costs or with cost sharing by others. As the network develops further, its members can decide whether they wish to impose dues or to continue rely on external sources of funding.

2. Accountable

In addition to trying to secure the widest possible participation, it is important for a network to be accountable to its members. The form and function of the governance

structure should be determined by the members. At the outset, it may be useful simply to delegate responsibilities among those volunteers who are most committed or eager to take on leadership roles, rather than holding very formal elections. However, as a member-driven network, better practice is to transition to a democratic structure, such as by electing the leadership on an annual or bi-annual basis.

The way that accountability works its way into everyday decision making will differ based on the structure and activities of the network. For example, if the network publishes a newsletter, then an editor or editorial team will be required to decide what material is published. Obviously, it would not be practical to crowdsource these kinds of decisions, but there should nonetheless be some means of soliciting feedback from members on an ongoing basis, such as through a dedicated email line or periodic surveys of the members to gauge their thoughts on the governance and general direction of the network.

3. Transparent

While transparency provides governance benefits to all institutions, it is particularly important that a network of Information Officers should practice what it preaches. At the very least, the network's membership should have access to full information about the operations and processes of the network, and particularly about its leadership and governance structure. Although some conversations among members will need to remain closed, for example to promote free and frank discussions about challenges faced by Information Officers, publicity is also important. A good early step could be to post the rules and structure of the network, along with its leadership, online, so that the public can get a general sense that a network has been founded and of how it is operating. Similarly, members should endeavour to make background resources on the right to information in Jordan that they have developed or shared publicly available, insofar as this can be done without running afoul of secrecy legislation.

Possible Activities for an Information Officers' Network

Once a network has been founded, there are several key activities that it could undertake.

1. Conferences

An annual event, such as a conference, has the potential to do more than simply connect members with each other. Conferences are multi-purpose ventures that can serve to educate members and as information sharing opportunities, while also affording them the opportunity to network with one another as well as with external experts and academics. Conferences also help to promote a sense of community that may help drive participation in other network activities.

Conferences may be simple, one-day events, focused on a single issue, or may last multiple days and cover broader themes. They do, however, require a higher level of organisation and time investment, including arranging a venue and other logistics, inviting speakers or trainers and publicising the event among the membership. As a consequence, arranging a conference will likely require a small team of organisers, rather than just having a single person responsible. It will also require resources, for example to fund meals and so on. It may be worthwhile to constitute a permanent “events committee” that will take the lead here, although hopefully many members will also contribute to the planning and organisation of major network events.

2. Training Sessions

A potentially important for a network of Information Officers would be to offer training programmes to members. These could be designed as initial training programmes for new members, ongoing training for all members or be targeted towards subsets of members, such as those who frequently handle information related to national security or defence. Training programmes might be carried out by specialists who are brought in specifically for the event or by senior members of the network. It is worth noting that, if the speakers are recruited locally and on a volunteer basis, the costs of the training could be limited to securing a venue and refreshments. Events featuring senior information officers would be of particular utility for newer information officers and could serve as part of the mentorship function mentioned above.

3. Publish a Regular Newsletter

Newsletters are an excellent way to inform the community about relevant developments in the field and to share advice on strategies to overcome common problems. As opposed to conferences or training events, which may take place annually or every few months, newsletters can be published on a monthly or even a more frequent basis and can provide information to the profession on everything from the latest happenings in the field, to key developments in the law, to new job openings for information officers. Setting up a newsletter will require an editor or small editorial team to curate and organise the publication. It will also require members of the community to provide content. This may be done on a purely submission basis, if the potential supply is regular enough, or through some sort of regular roster of individuals who commit to submit articles regularly. At the outset, at least, this latter model is more likely to be successful in generating a steady stream of content.

4. Maintain a Regular Discussion List or Online Forum

A discussion list or online forum provides a less formal and more interactive form of communication than the regular newsletters, and allows members to engage in conversations around issues as they arise. Typically, these conversations will take place over email or a social media platform, such as Facebook (provided that all of

the members have an account with the relevant service). A major advantage to a discussion list or online forum is that it allows for rapid and dynamic discussions, so that information officers can turn to their peers for help with a challenge involving a request and expect to receive helpful inputs back rapidly, allowing them to still meet the legally mandated deadline for responding to the request. Of course a discussion list is also central to the planning and rolling out of all of the other activities as well.

Although these lists will typically be decentralised in structure, they will require someone to act as the administrator. This commitment should not be too time intensive, although it will require volunteers to commit to resolving any problems or technical challenges that may arise.