

# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2012

THE INTERNET AND CORRUPTION  
*Transparency and accountability online*



# Global Information Society Watch

## 2012



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# SYRIA

## YOUNG SYRIANS TACKLE CORRUPTION USING THE INTERNET



Anas Tawileh

### Introduction

Fighting corruption is a very high priority on the development agenda of many developing countries, and Syria is no exception. Several initiatives have been launched in the country to increase the government's transparency towards its citizens. In the 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index, Syria ranked 129th of 182 countries, with a score of 2.6 for the index.<sup>1</sup> In the previous year, the country occupied the 126th place, scoring 2.5 on the index. Clearly, more initiatives are still needed to fight corruption, and more effective tools must be utilised to support these initiatives. A study by Dreher and Herzfeld in 2005<sup>2</sup> estimated that Syria loses an average of USD 34 of its per capita GDP as a result of corruption.

In their search for effective tools to support anti-corruption initiatives, Syrians noticed the remarkable growth in mobile and internet penetration over the past few years. Internet penetration in 2010 was 19.8%,<sup>3</sup> and around 10 million Syrians had mobile phones in 2009.<sup>4</sup> Leveraging these technologies and their growing popularity among the country's population to contribute to the fight against corruption became an obvious choice.

### Policy and legislative environment

A report produced by the committee tasked with establishing measures to prevent and fight corruption, published in 2011, clearly mentions the passive and sometimes negative attitude of most citizens when it comes to corruption, and sees this as a significant hurdle facing reform efforts. The committee's recommendations included finding ways to convince citizens that their complaints are taken seriously, and that they count when it comes to building a more transparent, effective and efficient public sector. Additionally, the report recommended establishing mechanisms for continuous monitoring

of the administrative performance of government agencies to reduce the potential for corruption.

Syrian legislators have explicitly criminalised corruption. For example, article 31 of the Economic Criminal Law states: "The initiation of an economic crime is as a full crime. Most of the acts of corruption are considered economic crimes, and punishable by economic criminal law."<sup>5</sup>

### Using ICTs to fight corruption

In a project designed to empower the Syrian youth, conceived and implemented by the Syria Trust for Development,<sup>6</sup> participants (mostly youth aged between 14 and 16 years) were asked to identify development issues and challenges faced by their local communities, and develop solutions that leverage ICTs to address these challenges. In one brainstorming session for the project, participants in the city of Homs in central Syria identified the passive attitude of their fellow citizens towards voicing their concerns and complaining about problems in the provision of governmental services. They believed that this can be attributed to two main reasons. Firstly, people do not believe that their complaints are taken seriously, and they feel that the government is indifferent towards their opinions and needs. Secondly, even if someone wanted to complain, there are no clear mechanisms or communication channels for them to do so.

Another problem identified by the project participants was the negative perception of ICTs among citizens. While the younger generation was eager to learn and adopt new ICT technologies, older citizens were more cynical of the benefits that can be gained from their use, and could not appreciate the potential of these technologies in their lives and communities. There was a widespread belief among older generations that these technologies are mostly used to access inappropriate content or are a wasteful use of time, and that such usage does not justify the high expenses associated with their use.

In a brilliant stroke of creativity, the team decided to design a project that would improve the perception of the older generations towards ICTs by

1 [cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011](http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011)

2 Dreher, A. and Herzfeld, T. (2005) *The Economic Costs of Corruption: A Survey and New Evidence*. 129.3.20.41/eps/pe/papers/0506/0506001.pdf

3 Internet World Stats [www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm](http://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm)

4 Economy Watch [www.economywatch.com/economic-statistics/Syria/Telephone\\_Statistics/](http://www.economywatch.com/economic-statistics/Syria/Telephone_Statistics/)

5 Translations are as per official government translations.

6 [www.syriatrust.org](http://www.syriatrust.org)

demonstrating how effective these tools can be in creating communication channels between citizens and the local administration. The team met with officers from the local electricity supply company and the city's municipality to sell their idea. They noticed great enthusiasm among the management of these agencies for creative ways of leveraging ICTs to strengthen connections between them and the citizens of their localities, and for improving public participation in the monitoring of local service provision. This, they believed, would increase transparency and accountability, and reduce the potential for corruption in these service areas.

To test those assumptions, the project team designed a web portal that would enable citizens to register complaints about the delivery of local services. Complaints registered in the system would be submitted to the relevant agency for response or proper resolution, and the citizen who registered the complaint could track its status and progress.

However, in the early stages of project evaluation, the project team concluded that the low internet penetration rate in the local community, and the high costs (both financial and technical) associated with the use of this communication channel at the time, would hinder the participation of a large number of potential beneficiaries of the system. Using mobile phones as an alternative point of contact was a more attractive option. Almost every person that could use the system owns a mobile phone, and the costs of mobile messaging are reasonable. Moreover, using the system through a mobile phone does not require excessive technical knowledge, which lowers the barriers to use for many potential users.

Implementing such an elaborate system that utilises mobile communications, as well as the web, as the main point of contact with the citizen, required specialised skills and expertise. Unfortunately, the project's young team did not possess such skills. Luckily, not long after they faced these technical challenges, the project leader, Eiad Yafi, stumbled upon Ushahidi, the mobile and web reporting platform.<sup>7</sup> Yafi discussed the potential for the use of Ushahidi to build the complaints and public service monitoring platform with the project team, and a workshop for this purpose was conducted shortly after.

The main idea behind the "e-complaints platform" (as the project was named) was to enable residents in the city of Homs to monitor the provision of the services of the electricity company and the city's municipality. If they found any issues or problems, or witnessed an incident of corruption,

they could immediately report the problem using the platform by either sending a text message or through the online web interface. They could also submit photos to document the problem being reported. The submitted problem reports or complaints are displayed on a map view on the platform, and an email request is immediately sent to the organisation responsible for this type of problem within the reported geographic areas (see Figure 1).

When the complaint is addressed and the problem it reports is solved, it will be removed from the map. Using Ushahidi's timeline feature, management in the concerned agencies can monitor the performance of complaint handling in their agencies by noting the timeframe during which each complaint was visible on the map. This feature was considered a great tool for establishing responsibility and accountability, as it gives management an objective assessment of the performance of their staff. It also reduces the potential for corruption as employees in the workflow for any service provision within these agencies would know that many eyes are watching over their shoulders. This, effectively, crowd-sources monitoring of administrative performance by the citizens themselves, which is one of the recommendations from the committee for fighting corruption.

Management can also use the elaborate, nicely visualised reports that can be produced by the platform to compare performance across different parts of their organisation, and establish benchmarks for the workflows required to address certain types of problems or issues. The reports can also show the corruption or carelessness levels in different departments or geographic areas. Management can use this information to better target and prioritise their anti-corruption and accountability initiatives and activities.

The project team also developed an additional feature that uses colour-coding to indicate the status of each complaint. By enabling this feature, citizens can quickly understand the status of their complaint based on its current colour, as different colours denote varying stages in the complaint report and resolution process. Management of the concerned agencies can also use this feature to quickly assess the problem areas within their agencies, and evaluate the amount of work required to address citizens' complaints.

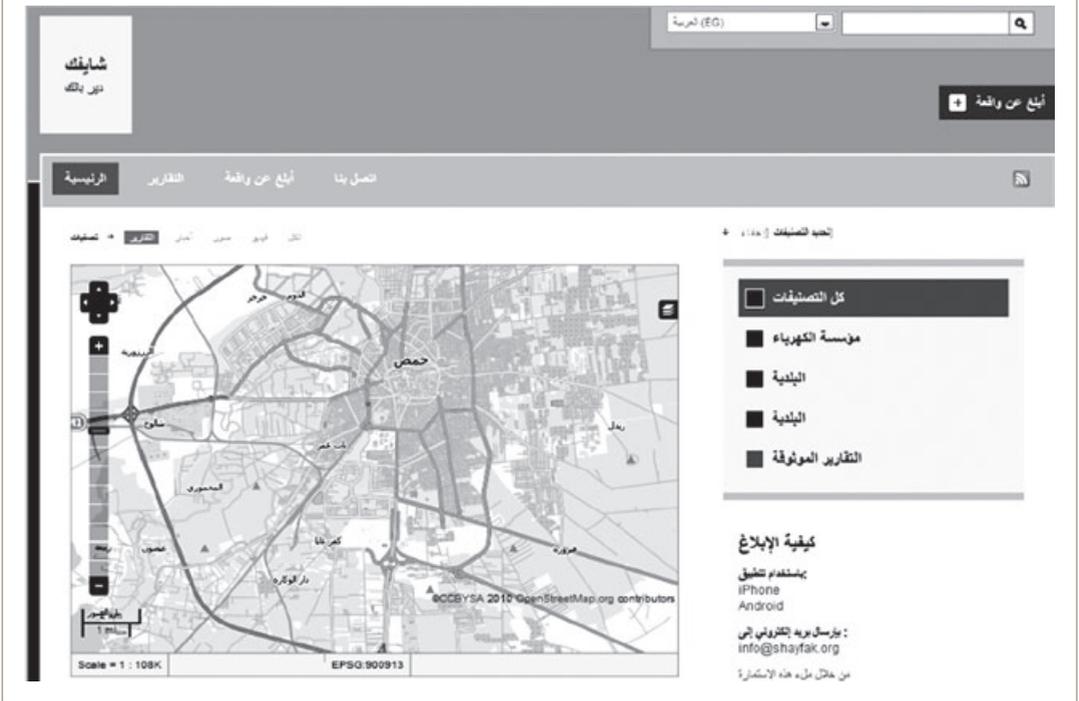
While the project was initially planned to include the electricity supply company and the local municipality in its pilot and feasibility assessment phase, the youth behind the idea were very ambitious. During their project design workshops, they planned to scale up the project, contingent on the outcomes of

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7 ushahidi.com

FIGURE 1

The e-complaint online platform



its pilot phase, to include all government agencies in the city of Homs, and probably all over Syria. They also thought of expanding its scope beyond the government to include private sector companies as well. This, they believed, can be an important source of revenue that is much needed to ensure the sustainability of the project, without compromising its transparency and independence. The platform services could be sold to companies in the private sector as an outsourced complaint management service, and the revenues could be utilised to cover the costs for platform support and future development.

Unfortunately, just before the platform was scheduled to be launched, unrest erupted in the city, and the project team was forced to put its plans on hold until the situation stabilises. However, the team remains determined to launch the platform as an experiment that demonstrates how ICTs can be leveraged to address delicate issues like corruption, transparency and accountability.

**Conclusions**

While the delayed launch of the e-complaints platform did not allow the provision of a concrete report on its actual use or the identification of specific situations where the platform contributed to reduce

corruption and increase accountability, the process through which the platform was developed, and the potential it holds, offer significant lessons.

Probably the most important feature of the platform is the fact that its idea was completely conceived, developed and implemented by young Syrians aged between 14 and 16 years. This clearly shows the determination of the upcoming generations to tackle the challenges that hindered the development of their countries for decades. It is remarkable to see children of this age thinking about ways to empower their fellow citizens and hold their government accountable.

Secondly, the project team believed that they can actually develop a solution that leverages emerging ICTs to address the complex, multifaceted and widespread problem of corruption. It seems that the children have a clear perception of the internet as an open, transparent and equitable communications channel that can give voice to the voiceless. This, they thought, may encourage citizens to change their attitude towards holding their public servants accountable, and take a tougher stance towards corruption.

But opening up communications between the government and its citizens requires strong will

from both sides. The project team believed that ICTs can actually make the process of complaining and voicing concerns accessible to every citizen. However, the government should also be willing to listen, and to take the citizens' engagement seriously. For this purpose, the project team actively pursued meetings with the top management of several government agencies to secure their participation in the project. Management of these agencies echoed the public's concerns about fighting corruption and improving transparency and accountability, and were keen to use the platform to develop their organisations.

### Action steps

- Investigate similar ways to leverage the capacity of ICTs to provide easily accessible, equitable and widespread access to citizens to engage them in the fight against corruption.
- Focus on the younger generations who have a stronger belief in their own ability to fight corruption and increase government transparency, and in the potential for ICTs to play an important role in facilitating this process.
- Identify all concerned stakeholders, secure their commitment to the initiatives from the outset, and consider their input into the development of these initiatives.
- Leverage ICTs as a medium for raising awareness about the negative consequences of corruption, and how these tools can be used to increase the public's monitoring of the areas that are suspected of high levels of corruption.
- Liaise with the government to discuss the cost-effective ways that ICTs can be used to strengthen citizen-government communications and citizens' participation in the public sphere. ■