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**Submissions from entities in the United Nations system, international
organizations and other stakeholders on their efforts in 2021 to
implement the outcomes of the WSIS**

Submission by

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

This submission was prepared as an input to the report of the UN Secretary-General on "Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels" (to the 25th session of the CSTD), in response to the request by the Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 2006/46, to the UN Secretary-General to inform the Commission on Science and Technology for Development on the implementation of the outcomes of the WSIS as part of his annual reporting to the Commission.

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Shared Prosperity Dignified Life



ESCWA's contribution to the CSTD Report on WSIS Progress 2021

Part 1: Executive Summary

During the Covid-19 era, digital technologies contributed effectively to mitigate the negative impact and ensure business continuity in all sectors, including public administration. Globally, as in the Arab region, the pandemic was considered as a main factor in the acceleration of digital transformation.

In fact, some Arab countries have reviewed their digital strategies/plan based on the accelerated digital development needs expressed during the pandemic. Other countries still need to update national policies and strategies related to digital technology to reap the benefits and mitigate negative deployment.

Despite the progress made in the region, especially the GCC, in developing technology infrastructure and digital services, many obstacles still hinder the deployment of technology and innovation. The most important challenges are: a) availability and affordability of internet connectivity specifically in least developed and post-conflict countries; b) weakness in cyber security, privacy and personal data protection; c) increased ICT gender gap and important ICT gap between urban and rural areas; d) the need to improve innovation policy and its eco-system and to enhance science-policy interface; e) low expenditure on R&D, a weak technology transfer system and limited entrepreneurship culture.

ESCWA, through its substantive and technical cooperation programs support its member States by recommending policies and strategies, in line with WSIS and SDGs, needed to enhance the information and knowledge society in Arab countries. ESCWA studies the development needs of the countries and considers the best regional and international practices, while collaborating with other UN agencies, academia and research centres to provide its recommendations to member States.

Part 2: Analytical overview of trends and experience

As stated in the previous reports, it is important to note that the development of the information society varies among Arab countries. Three clusters of countries could be identified in the region. The first cluster includes GCC countries which are well developed in various aspects of the information society. This cluster is focusing today on the use of emerging technologies such as AI, IOT, Big Data and Robotics to enhance the information society and the various ICT applications especially e-learning and e-health, improve business, and offer advanced services to all stakeholders and citizens. The second cluster includes middle-income countries that have not recently suffered from conflict, namely Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, Egypt and to certain degree Lebanon. Those countries continue to develop the digital infrastructure, improve online government services, develop e-commerce, e-learning and digital health services, and enhance the enabling environment for the information society including cyber legislation and cyber security. These countries have also started the development of AI and other emerging technologies strategies for the development of the knowledge society. The third cluster includes the other countries which are either post-conflict countries or least developed countries. Those countries are still facing many challenges and thus they are mainly developing Internet infrastructure, e-government and other ICT applications, improving the enabling environment especially cyber legislation, developing human capital and entrepreneurship eco-systems.

Below are some activities that are undertaken by ESCWA in collaboration with other UN entities and regional organizations. Many of these activities are implemented in collaboration with member States.

1. Advancing Digital Cooperation and Development- Arab States Action Programme

Guided by the principles governing the Global WSIS¹, Global IGF², the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development³ and the UN Secretary General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation⁴, ESCWA launched the "Advancing Digital Cooperation and Development- Arab States Action Programme (ADCD-ASAP)" in 2020. In this programme, ESCWA closely cooperates with strategic partners, such as the League of Arab States (LAS), ITU, UNCTAD, UNDESA and UNESCO, to engage Arab countries in activities advancing the information society for sustainable development in the region.

During 2021 ESCWA conducted research, produced knowledge products, and consolidated several policy dialogue and advocacy platforms under the Arab Forum on Digital Cooperation and Development (AFDCD) to build the capacity of Arab countries and strengthening regional cooperation on digital development cooperation. The following are selected products and channels focused on advancing the implementation of WSIS action lines in the SDGs in the Arab Region:

- The first draft of the Arab Digital Agenda/ICT Strategy was developed as a joint project led by ESCWA and LAS in partnership with several Arab countries and UN and Arab organizations. A second version of the strategy will be in the pipeline and will be presented before the meeting of the Arab Telecom and Information Technology Council of Ministers (ATICM) planned to take place in December 2021.
- In parallel, ESCWA continues to build the capacity of Arab States to produce National Digital Development Reviews 2021 (NDDRs2.0), which will feed into the Arab Digital Development Report (ADDR 2022). NDDRs are similar to and complement countries' Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) for in-depth follow-up on harnessing ICTs for accelerating development and achieving the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs at the national level. Most of the Arab countries are on board, including Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, UAE, and Yemen. This work is based on a guiding manual developed in Q1-2020.
- National digital agendas are being formulated, with the help of ESCWA, for specifically Iraq, Mauritania, as well as other countries that showed their interest to build upon the NDDRs. These agendas are national actions that break silos between sectors and unite a country behind a common agenda focused on the future.

2. Government Electronic and Mobile Service (GEMS) maturity index

ESCWA is continuing its GEMS project started in 2014 to measure the maturity of electronic and mobile government services. The GEMS maturity index measures the level of digital transformation in government services using 3 pillars namely the availability and development of services, service usage and user satisfaction, and the public's outreach to those services.

In 2021, ESCWA published the results of the second analysis using the index. The analysis took place in 2020 and covered 15 Arab countries, namely Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, UAE⁵. A new analysis is being undertaken, and the results are expected in the first quarter of 2022.

¹ <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/>

² <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/tags/about>

³ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>

⁴ https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/assets/pdf/Roadmap_for_Digital_Cooperation_EN.pdf

⁵ <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/government-electronic-mobile-services-maturity-index-GEMS-2020>

3. Technical Assistance in Policy Development and capacity building activities

Based on advisory service requests, received from public agencies in its member States, ESCWA assisted several Arab countries in developing national plans and strategies in digital transformation and new technologies. During the year 2020-2021, ESCWA assisted the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship in Jordan to develop their national strategy on Artificial Intelligence (AI) based on the previous cooperation with the ministry to prepare the AI policy adopted in 2020. The Commission is working with the Ministry of Digital Transformation, Innovation and Admin Modernization in Mauritania and the Ministry of Communication in Iraq to develop their national digital agendas. ESCWA also reviewed the Palestinian AI policy in 2021, prepared by the Ministry of Telecom and Information Technology (MTIT), and is currently working with the same ministry to develop the AI strategy. With the Higher Commission of Scientific Research (HCSR) in Syria, ESCWA is currently developing a roadmap for the transformation of the knowledge-based economy.

ESCWA is also assisting several member states in modernizing their legal frameworks to cope with new technology requirements. Current cooperation is ongoing with the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship (MoDEE) in Jordan on e-transactions the implementation of personal data protection, with the Agency of Digital Development (ADD) in Morocco on Blockchain legal framework, with Iraq on an IoT legal framework and with Libya on e-Commerce law and personal data protection law. During the period 2020-2021, ESCWA conducted multiple capacity building activities related to digital transformation and new technologies, such as a workshops on digital transformation strategies in Palestine and Yemen, Blockchain in Morocco, AI and Big Data in Palestine and Qatar, open data in Morocco and knowledge-based economy in Syria.

Part 3: Innovation policies, programmes and future actions

1. ESCWA Digital Arabic Content Award

ESCWA launched in March 2021, the ESCWA Digital Arabic Content Award for Sustainable Development. The objectives are to promote the creation of quality content related to the Sustainable Development Goals, highlight the benefits of digital technologies for advancing sustainable development, preserve the Arabic language and identity on the Internet and to bridge digital gaps in the Arab region. The Award will recognize the best digital Arabic content projects, products and/or initiatives in the Arab region in two categories: Institutions and Young Entrepreneurs⁶. ESCWA is partnering with the World Summit Awards (WSA) for the implementation of this Award, and the winners will be announced at the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development (AFSD) in March 2022.

2. E-Accessibility and the ESCWA Arab Digital Inclusion Platform (ADIP) Project:

In the Arab region, people with disabilities are still among the most marginalized population groups, facing multiple barriers hindering their ability to participate in education, employment and public life. Through this project, ESCWA supports policy and decision makers in the Arab counties to develop or improve national policies and to devise action plans and guidelines for the adoption and implementation of enhanced e-Accessibility, which will contribute in bridging the digital divide and enable all people in the society to have equal access to Internet, its content and services.

Two templates were developed to support members states namely: a) The National e-Accessibility Policy⁷ that focuses on developing a framework for a national policy to support enabling access of persons with disabilities to ICT and public services; b) The National Technical Guidelines⁸ on e-Accessibility for the Arab Region based on sound and practical international standards.

⁶ <https://www.unescwa.org/digital-arabic-content>

⁷ <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/national-e-accessibility-policy-template-arab-region>

⁸ <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/national-technical-guidelines-e-accessibility-arab-region>

ESCWA is currently working on developing the ADIP online platform⁹ to assist Arab policy makers in using those templates in an interactive way. Other activities are also planned to be implemented including a regional training of trainers (23-25 Nov 2021), and national capacity buildings and advisory services (during 2022).

3. Arab Forum on Digital Cooperation and Development (AFDCD)

Led by ESCWA and in partnership with LAS and most UN Entities working in the region, the AFDCD will take place during the second half of December 2021. AFDCD will consolidate the Arab WSIS community and the Arab IGF community and unite existing digital development and digital cooperation platforms.

AFDCD aims at optimizing the benefits of harnessing ICTs to advance inclusive sustainable development in the Arab region. This multipartite regional collaboration platform is a pioneering model being instigated by ESCWA with the hope to inspire other regions of the world. The Forum will include the Sixth Arab IGF, the Third Arab High-Level Forum on WSIS and 2030 Agenda, and the Ninth Meeting of the Arab e-Government Directors. Furthermore, an intersectional UNGIS session will be convened as part of AFDCD, with ESCWA as the Vice-Chair for this round of the annual WSIS process.

4. Social and economic impact of open government

ESCWA continued its efforts to foster open government in the Arab region.¹⁰ The Commission organized, in collaboration with UNDESA and OECD, a virtual event on “Agile, Responsive and Innovative government”¹¹ to show the role of digital and open government in the realization of SDGs, especially SDG 16. ESCWA recently published a paper on the digital divide and open government¹² that explored the impact of digital gaps on the realization of open government. To further advance open government, ESCWA and OECD are finalizing a study titled “Economic and Social Impact of open Government: Policy Recommendations for the Arab Region” which will be launched during an expert group meeting¹³ on the 18 November 2021.

5. Advising and supporting member states

ESCWA will continue its technical assistance activities including policy advisory services and customized capacity building workshops in the upcoming years in the following areas:

- a. Digital government, open government and open government data;
- b. Digital transformation in various sectors such as transport sector and urbanization;
- c. Policy and strategies for emerging technologies, such as AI, IoT, Blockchain, Big data and cloud computing;
- d. Innovation and entrepreneurship;
- e. Digital development agenda; and
- f. Digital inclusion and e-Accessibility.

⁹ <https://e-inclusion.unescwa.org/home-page>

¹⁰ <https://www.unescwa.org/initiative/open-gov>

¹¹ <https://www.unescwa.org/events/agile-government-responses-covid-19-pandemic-arab-region-what-are-we-learning-better-future>

¹² <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/digital-government-arab-region>

¹³ <https://www.unescwa.org/events/open-government-and-digital-transformation-new-urban-agenda-arab-region>