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**Submissions from entities in the United Nations system, international
organizations and other stakeholders on their efforts in 2022 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 26th 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 2022

Part 1: Executive Summary

The adoption of the 2030 Development Agenda in 2015, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic gave opportunities for accelerating digital transformation globally and in the Arab region. The crises coupled with the pandemic was instrumental for convincing decision makers of the importance of digital technologies for sustainable development. ESCWA accompanied the Arab countries in their journeys for building and advancing the information society since 2003 and is still supporting them today while considering their advancements, levels of development, new trends and the expectations of people and stakeholders.

Digital transformation is currently on the agenda of all Arab countries, and some have recently adopted dedicated strategies, such as Jordan and Lebanon. In general, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have made significant progress in digital transformation at all levels, and are moving to the advanced stage of digital development (see next part). While middle-income Arab countries started the formulation of dedicated strategies for emerging technologies (artificial intelligence, blockchain, big data and internet of things), other low-income Arab countries still need to update national policies and strategies related to the information society and digital technologies.

Among the various applications of digital technologies, digital government (e-government) is in general the most advanced one in the Arab region. In spite of the advancements in e-government, only seven Arab countries have higher score than the world average according to the 2022 UN e-Government Survey. Some countries adopted the global trends namely open data (10 Arab countries) and e-participation, while others have not yet put emphasis on these domains.

ESCWA, through its substantive and technical cooperation programmes support its member States by recommending policies and strategies, in line with the WSIS and SDGs, needed to enhance the information and knowledge society in Arab countries.

Part 2: Analytical overview of trends and experience

The situation in the Arab region in developing the information society follows a similar path to the global one that has progressed in the past two decades to be geared towards sustainable development and the 17 goals of its 2030 Agenda. The region's digital development efforts are increasingly focused on a people-centred approach in the design and implementation of digital platforms and services. Also, some countries are adopting the digital inclusion and accessibility standards that contribute to leaving no one behind in sustainable and digital development, and all countries are aiming at enhancing their cybersecurity to improve trust in digital platforms.

This focus and the level of progress on the information society varies between Arab countries, with the high-income countries of GCC significantly accelerating digital transformation, compared to the middle-income and other Arab countries. The six GCC countries are investing in digital transformation and are relying on emerging and space technologies to enhance connectivity and networks, which accelerates their progress on the information society and utilizing digital technologies for sustainable development. Digital transformation relies on cloud computing technologies for digital platforms, services and infrastructure, and is coupled with enhancing cybersecurity and online protection and following e-accessibility standards for digital inclusion. Furthermore, Governments are strengthening data governance, enhancing public

engagement, and adopting artificial intelligence and innovation to drive efficiency and promote economic innovation and diversification. Additionally, projects that rely on blockchain technologies are developing in different areas, including finance and public administration; and many countries are interested in participating in the Metaverse that would require a regulatory and governance structures.

Middle-income countries namely Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Lebanon, and Tunisia, continue to develop the digital infrastructure, improve online government services, and enhance the enabling environment including cyber legislation and cybersecurity. Some of these countries have also adopted artificial intelligence and other emerging technology strategies.

Low-income countries have a less developed situation and also varying levels of the digital divide. Some of these countries are in a conflict or post-conflict situation or are facing financial and economic crises. These countries are facing many challenges related to the digital divide and digital inclusion, Internet infrastructure, accessibility, and affordability. They are also facing challenges in their legal and regulatory frameworks as well as in human capital needed for advancing information society.

Below are some activities that were undertaken by ESCWA to advance information society and digital government in the Arab countries.

1. Enhancing the information society and Internet governance in Arab countries

To enhance the development of information society and Internet governance in the Arab region, ESCWA has implemented several activities in collaboration with the League of Arab States, international organizations and member states.

1. National digital development guide and reviews

ESCWA published a manual to guide the preparation of national digital development reviews, and this [guiding manual](#) is based on a comprehensive conceptual framework for digital development that consists of five pillars: (1) National, regional and international strategic frameworks; (2) Infrastructure, governance and legal environment policy areas; (3) Digital economy, employment and trade policy areas; (4) Digital transformation and social inclusion policy areas; and (5) culture and media policy areas. It provides technical and organizational guidelines to perform a comprehensive review of digital development in these five pillars and includes a standard template and terms of reference for national focal points. ESCWA launched the second round of national and regional digital development reviews in 2021. So far, more than 10 Arab countries have finalized their reviews. Some have formulated digital development agendas based on such reviews, with the technical support of ESCWA, namely Iraq, Mauritania and the State of Palestine.

2. Arab digital agenda/ ICT strategy 2023-2033

The [Arab digital agenda/ ICT strategy](#) is being developed under the umbrella of the League of Arab States and will provide a strategic framework for a long-term plan of action for the Arab region. Three successive iterations of this digital agenda have been produced to date, and were the product of several research and consultative meetings of the two main bodies formed for that purpose, namely the Joint Technical Committee and the Core Research Coordination Team Mechanism, comprising representatives of participating Arab countries, lead experts, and organizations working in the field. The latest draft was endorsed by the Executive Bureau of the Arab Telecommunications and Information Council of Ministers at its fiftieth meeting, held on 19 July 2022. To formulate this digital agenda for the next decade 2023-2033, ESCWA, in collaboration with the League of Arab States, launched the collective research work at an event entitled the "First ESCWA-League of Arab States joint workshop on developing the Arab digital agenda/ ICT strategy – a side event of the 32nd Arab Working Group on the Arab ICT Strategy" (online, 23-24 March 2021). Since the event, 11 research workshops and consultative meetings were held and brought together various stakeholders from Arab countries and United Nations regional entities; and these meetings have produced successive drafts of the Arab digital agenda/ ICT strategy.

c) Arab Digital Cooperation and Development Forum 2021

As part of the global Internet Governance Forum (IGF) 2021, ESCWA organized the [Open Forum on Digital Cooperation in the Arab Region](#) (Online, 7 December 2021). The Forum attracted 70 participants. Its key takeaway messages, intended as input into the global Forum, emphasized the value of the Internet that was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the shortcomings related to the digital divide, misuse and the need to protect personal data.

The Arab Digital Cooperation and Development Forum is a consolidated inclusive and streamlined multipartite regional collaboration platform for policy dialogue on digital cooperation and development issues. It is a pioneering initiative aimed at breaking the silos between the community of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and that of IGF, as well as other related development communities. ESCWA held the first edition of the Forum (online, 13-23 December 2021) under the slogan "Shaping our digital future," in collaboration with the League of Arab States and a number of major players in the WSIS and IGF processes, including the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the National Telecom Regulatory Authority of Egypt.

Around 1,000 participants have actively engaged in the Forum, and they represent all categories of stakeholders, including policymakers, experts and technologists from ministries of communication, regulatory agencies, information technology bodies, private sector companies, universities, research centres, civil society, international and regional organizations, and independent experts interested in the fields of Internet governance and ICT for development. The event resulted in an outcome document on priority issues of concern to the global community and to the Arab region in the areas of digital development and digital cooperation.

2. Bridging the digital content divide: ESCWA Digital Arabic Content Award

To bridge the digital content divide, ESCWA, launched in 2021, an annual [ESCWA Digital Arabic Content Award for Sustainable Development](#), and is implementing it in partnership with the [World Summit Awards](#). The Award recognizes the best digital products in the Arabic language that focus on or contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The [first cycle of the Award](#) (2021-2022) witnessed good contribution from 15 Arab countries and resulted with the announcement of [eight winner products](#) selected among 100 submissions. The [second cycle](#) (2022-2023) is being implemented and also open to institutions and young entrepreneurs. The Award process is governed by the [rules and conditions](#), and the announcement of results is during the [Arab Forum for Sustainable Development 2023](#).

3. Improving Digital Inclusion: ESCWA Arab Digital Inclusion Project

ESCWA efforts in the field of digital inclusion have been recognized through the [Arab Digital Inclusion Platform Project](#) that was selected as champion at the WSIS Prizes 2022. In 2021-2022, project activities focused on promoting e-accessibility in the Arab region and using digital technologies to ensure equal access to all and a more inclusive society, with specific focus on people with disabilities who are still among the most marginalized population groups. Through the project, ESCWA provided technical and substantive support to policy- and decision-makers in Arab countries to develop or improve their national policies and to devise related action plans for enhanced e-accessibility. The [National Technical Guidelines on E-Accessibility for the Arab Region](#), suggests four templates that could be customized by Arab policymakers according to their needs. Adopting these guidelines by government will facilitate the lives of persons with disabilities in their interaction on digital platforms.

ESCWA have also developed the project's [online platform](#) to assist Arab policymakers in using those templates in an interactive way. Several regional meetings, consultations and capacity building workshops were organized during 2021 to discuss and present the templates and the interactive e-accessibility tools. Additionally, a regional [training of trainers workshop on e-accessibility](#) was organized in November 2021. ESCWA also organized jointly with ITU a regional conference on [e-Accessibility for all](#) in December 2021.

4. Progress on digital government: Government Electronic and Mobile Service maturity index

ESCWA is continuing its project on [Government Electronic and Mobile Service \(GEMS\)](#) that started in 2014 and is aimed at measuring the maturity of electronic and mobile government services. In 2022, ESCWA published the results of the second assessment of this index that took place in 2021 in 13 Arab countries, namely Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, UAE. A new evaluation of the index is in progress, and the results are expected to be announced in the first quarter of 2023.

5. Open Government to foster openness and citizen participation in government decision making

Governments in Arab countries are increasingly struggling to address rising complex economic and social challenges. Published in collaboration with Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the [report](#) recommends that Governments rely on open government to respond to some of these challenges as it can help to increase public trust, reduce the risks of instability, and implement the SDGs. Using examples from OECD and Arab countries, the report demonstrates the social and economic impact of open government and illustrates how it can be used to build better social services, foster inclusiveness and achieve economic growth. The report concludes with policy recommendations that could guide furthering open government to achieve the SDGs.

To promote open and innovative government in the Arab region, ESCWA launched the [Arab Open Government Portal](#) in 2021 as a one-stop access to information on open government published by United Nations entities, Arab government departments and agencies, and international organizations. The Portal includes online training courses, programmes and toolkits for capacity development and case studies from Arab countries showcasing open government and public sector innovation initiatives.

6. Technical Assistance in Policy Development and capacity building activities

Based on requests for advisory services, received from public agencies in member states, ESCWA has assisted several Arab countries in developing their own national plans and strategies in digital transformation and new technologies.

During 2021-2022, ESCWA assisted the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship in Jordan to develop the legal implementation framework of personal data protection law and to modernize the current e-Transaction law in 2021, the Central Bank of Libya to develop the personal data protection law and e-Commerce law, the Agency for Digital Development in Morocco to analyse their current legal framework adaptability with blockchain deployment in 2021, the Ministry of Digital Transformation and Admin Modernization in Mauritania to develop their national strategy of digital government transformation in 2022, the Ministry of Telecom in Iraq to develop the national digital agenda in 2022, the Ministry of Telecom and Information Technology in Palestine to develop the Artificial Intelligence strategy in 2021, the Commission of Media and Communication in Iraq to develop the regulatory framework of internet of things in 2022, and the Ministry of Communication and Technology in Syria to develop their national e-accessibility policy in 2022.

During 2021-2022, ESCWA conducted various capacity building activities related to digital transformation and new technologies. Examples of those activities include workshops on (1) Digital transformation strategies - in Somalia, Yemen, Palestine, Iraq, Libya and Syria; (2) Open data - in Morocco and Palestine; (3) Digital accessibility - in Syria; (4) e-Commerce - in Palestine; and (5) Big data - in Qatar.

Part 3: Innovation policies, programmes and future actions

Based on the needs and challenges of the Arab region in developing the information society, ESCWA continues its programmes and efforts on developing new aspects to meet the needs of the region in terms of addressing digital divides, enhancing cybersecurity, improving the legal and regulatory frameworks, developing strategies and policies for a better use of emerging technologies for sustainable development.

On e-accessibility, ESCWA is currently conducting national rollouts, and working with three member countries to develop their national e-accessibility policies. ESCWA is well positioned to lead on promoting e-accessibility at the regional level and can play a major role in leaving no one behind.

For narrowing the digital content divide and promoting the development of digital Arabic content in the public sector, private sector and among young entrepreneurs, ESCWA will organize its digital Arabic content Award for sustainable development annually in the coming years.

For strengthening the exchange of practices and expertise in the advancement of information society and digital cooperation in the Arab region, ESCWA will build a dedicated digital platform. This platform will allow policymakers to monitor the status and maturity of digital development in their countries; and to devise national evidence-based policies and strategies. The portal is currently under development and will be operational in 2023.

Additionally, ESCWA is currently developing the digital development maturity measurement model which aims to measure and monitor the status of digital development in the Arab region, through a set of selected international and Arab indicators that address the Arab region's priorities on ICT for development.

ESCWA is planning a new project to enhance the deployment of digital technology and innovation in the public sector to improve operations and services of Arab public institutions. The aim of this project is to develop practical mechanisms to accelerate the implementation of adopted strategies/plans in the public sector and facilitate the use of digital and emerging technologies and innovation for the advancement of public services and back-office operations. The focus will fall on achieving specific aspects of the 2030 Agenda, namely inclusiveness, trust and responsiveness.

Finally, and based on the needs of the Arab region, ESCWA will continue its technical assistance in the following areas:

- a. Policies and strategies for digital transformation and digital development at the national and regional levels.
- b. Digital government transformation, open government and open data.
- c. Emerging technologies and innovation for sustainable development and accelerating the achievement of SDGs.
- d. Innovation and entrepreneurship.
- e. Digital inclusion and e-accessibility.