UNITED NATIONS

E

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Committee on Technology for Development
Second session
Beirut, 20-21 March 2019

Item 7 of the provisional agenda

Meetings of directors of e-government programmes in Arab States

Summary

The present document reviews activities undertaken by directors of e-government programmes in Arab States since the first session of the Committee on Technology for Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), especially meetings and their outcomes. It proposes a set of issues for follow-up over the period 2019-2020.

The Committee on Technology for Development is invited to discuss the present document and discuss potential areas of cooperation among directors of e-government programmes in Arab States.

19-00043

E/ESCWA/C.8/2019/6

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Introduction

1.   In 2013, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) proposed establishing a platform to strengthen coordination and dialogue on policies and measures related to e-government at the regional level. In line with the proposal, e-government programme directors in Arab States or their representatives participate in the related activities. ESCWA holds periodic meetings and proposes agendas.

2.   The platform's main objectives include conducting consultations on e-government challenges in Arab States and proposing ways to tackle them; prioritizing actions in that area; enhancing regional integration by adopting joint programmes and working on their development; exchanging best practices and regional experiences in the field of e-government; examining ways to provide joint services between States; transferring experiences and best practices from other regions; and reaching a common position among ESCWA member States for presentation at regional and international forums.

3.   The ESCWA secretariat acts as the platform's technical secretariat. In that capacity, it held a preparatory meeting in Amman on 5 December 2013, at which it presented an information note setting out goals and activities related to coordination of e-government programmes in Arab States. Participants approved the information note following amendments. A second meeting was held in Dubai on 9 February 2014, at which ESCWA presented draft rules of procedure for the platform and next steps. In 2016, ESCWA, in collaboration with the World Government Summit in the United Arab Emirates, organized a third meeting, held in in Dubai on 8 February, at which ESCWA presented its projects and initiatives on e-government for the period 2016-2017, notably the Government Electronic and Mobile Services (GEMS) Maturity Index, a project on using modern technology to provide government services (open government), and an ESCWA initiative on smart services and sectors. Participants made recommendations to ESCWA, notably preparing official communications to Arab States requesting that they appoint representatives for the meetings, and communicating with States to ensure their participation in the above-mentioned activities.

I. ACTIVITIES

4.   Directors of e-government programmes in Arab States undertake several activities in the context of the platform, including the following:

(a)   Proposing projects and initiatives to promote e-government services in member States, and discussing them at the regional level;

(b)   Strengthening indicators measuring e-government programmes in Arab States, monitoring the development of appropriate measurement tools, and following up on progress in the field;

(c)   Proposing specialized seminars, workshops and research groups;

(d)   Developing relationships with regional and international bodies working in the e-government field;

(e)   Holding annual meetings;

(f)   Strengthening coordination with the private sector;

(g)   Reaching a common position among member States on e-government issues for presentation at regional and international forums.

II. MEETINGS

5.   Directors of e-government programmes in Arab States have held three meetings since the first session of the ESCWA Committee on Technology for Development. The following sections present the meetings' key topics of discussion and outcomes.

A. MEETING HELD IN FEBRUARY 2017

6.   ESCWA, in collaboration with the World Government Summit in the United Arab Emirates, organized a meeting in Dubai on 11 February 2017, at which it presented an initiative on e-government in the Arab region. Participants discussed the importance of identifying legislation and an appropriate legal framework for applying e-government concepts, notably privacy, data exchange and data ownership, and of developing suitable mechanisms to determine ownership. They stressed the need to standardize concepts and definitions, and to take into account the Arab region's specificities, adapt global concepts to national contexts, and localize standards. They noted the importance of keeping pace with global best practices in policies on open government, while focusing on mechanisms to improve ranking in open government indexes rather than just on measurement processes.

7.   Participants discussed the GEMS Maturity Index. They underscored the need to ensure that services included under the it where suitable for countries, and to provide training on measurement methods. Moreover, the initiative on smart government and e-government in Arab States was presented. In the ensuing discussion, participants focused on going beyond the technical aspects of e-government by using it to reform State apparatuses. They also stressed the importance of keeping pace with Arab successful experiences, especially in adopting open-source software to develop services and in the field of cloud computing policies. They discussed the possibility of developing integrated services between Arab States, the importance of coordinating legislation between States, and enhancing bilateral relationships to benefit from experiences within the framework of the Council.

8.   Participants concluded with a set of recommendations, notably the need to clarify the platform's administrative aspects; and not limiting communication between directors to periodic meetings but rather encouraging continual discussions on specific issues, such as smart government and open government, which ESCWA would manage.

B. MEETING HELD IN APRIL 2017

9.   ESCWA held a meeting of directors of e-government programmes in Arab States at the United Nations House in Beirut, on 27 April 2017, at which it presented its activities in the field of smart government; preparations for the Arab High-level Forum on the World Summit on the Information Society and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was held in May 2017; and ESCWA studies on related topics.

10.   ESCWA also gave an overview of e-government indicators, especially the e-Government Development Index (e-GDI) and the GEMS Maturity Index. ESCWA proposed adding a pillar to e-GDI to measure service maturity. Participants discussed challenges in using e-GDI and ways to overcome them, including those related to the human resources pillar that did not reflect country achievements in training qualified human cadres in the field of technology. They also discussed necessary amendments to e-GDI, including amending the proposed weights for the pillars and incorporating SDG indicators. Those amendments were also discussed at an expert group meeting held in New York in May 2017, at which participants agreed to examine ways to integrate the GEMS and e-GDI indices.

11.   Participants made the following recommendations:

     (a)   Present the outcomes of meetings of directors of e-government programmes in Arab States to the ESCWA Committee on Technology for Development;

     (b)   Examine the possibility of establishing an e-platform to communicate and share information between directors;

     (c)   Conduct a pilot application of the GEMS Maturity Index in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, given that they had expressed interest in the initiative;

(d)   Support the ESCWA proposal to add a fourth pillar to e-GDI to measure service maturity;

(e)   Invite ESCWA to hold workshops on indicators for e-government services to build national capacity in that field;

(f)   Present actions taken under the GEMS Maturity Index at the expert group meeting on e-GDI;

(g)   Stress the importance of unifying Arab States' positions on amendments to e-GDI;

(h)   Present proposals to ESCWA for the next meeting's agenda.

C.   MEETING HELD IN FEBRUARY 2018

12.   ESCWA, in collaboration with the World Government Summit and the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority in the United Arab Emirates, held a meeting of directors of e-government programmes in Arab States in Dubai, on 12 February 2018. At the meeting, ESCWA presented a study entitled *Perspectives on the Digital Economy in the Arab Region* (E/ESCWA/TDD/2017/2), a proposal to develop a digital economy index for Arab countries, and a project to strengthen open government in the region using technology. ESCWA also presented the stages of the project, the proposed framework for applying open government in Arab States, future activities and key expected achievements.

13.   Participants made the following recommendations:

(a)   Focus on data integration and on digital transformation governance (by establishing higher councils and specialized committees, for example);

(b)   Assess challenges facing the adoption of open data in Arab States;

(c)   Examine Arab States' experiences in providing government data;

(d)   Clarify the difference between ESCWA activities in the field of open government and the global Open Government Partnership;

(e)   Identify Arab countries' priorities in tackling future technological challenges in the context of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution;

(f)   Facilitate venture capital measures in Arab countries to support young people and entrepreneurship;

(g)   Stress the importance of exchanging expertise between Arab countries in the field of data transformation, which ESCWA would facilitate;

(h)   Ensure the continual development of the legislative and legal environment of e-government; ESCWA would provide technical support in that area upon request;

(i)   Regulate available e-applications in Arab countries and enact legislation to provide necessary restrictions;

(j)   Expand the provision of ESCWA advisory services and capacity-building workshops in the field of digital transformation;

(k)   Shift towards adopting open-source software in Arab countries, in general, and particularly in those suffering from technology embargos.

III. THE WAY FORWARD

14.   ESCWA proposes continuing collaboration on e-government issues within the framework of the platform over the period 2019-2020. Meeting reports will be presented periodically to the Committee on Technology for Development. Directors of e-government programmes in Arab States may consider the following issues:

(a)   Full application of the GEMS Maturity Index as a tool to measure digital transformation in government services;

(b)   Regional cooperation in promoting open data and open government;

(c)   Technical cooperation in capacity-building and advisory services for digital transformation;

(d)   Lessons learned from successful experiences in digital transformation;

(e)   Possibility of preparing an Arab cybersecurity strategy and guidelines on using new technologies in the Arab region;

(f)   Coordination between member States and with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs to build capacity in applying e-GDI.