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Item 15 of the provisional agenda

Round-table discussion

Strategic directions for ESCWA work on technology for development in the period 2020-2025

1.   The present document was prepared as guidance for the round-table discussion on the strategic directions for the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) on technology for development in the period 2020-2025, under subprogramme 4 on technology for development and regional integration, and on the basis of the ESCWA secretariat's vision of the needs and challenges related to technology and innovation in the Arab region in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

I.   CHALLENGES IN THE ARAB REGION

2.   The Arab region is facing several sustainable development challenges, including the following:

- *Unemployment*: the labour market in the Arab region does not offer sufficient employment opportunities for the existing labour force, especially young people. Youth unemployment constitutes 40 per cent of total unemployment in the Arab region,[1] although the higher education enrolment rate exceeds 30 per cent in most Arab countries;[2]

- *Water scarcity*: ESCWA reports show that 18 of 22 Arab countries were below the threshold for renewable water scarcity and 13 were below the threshold for absolute water scarcity;[3]

- *Inefficient innovation systems*: weak innovation is negatively affecting value added and competitiveness in Arab countries. The region ranked fourth globally among seven regions in the Global Innovation Index 2018;[4]

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[1]   The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *UNESCO Science Report: Towards 2030* (Paris, 2016). Available from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000235406.

[2]   Ibid.

[3]   E/ESCWA/SDPD/2015/Booklet.3.

[4]   Data available from https://www.globalinnovationindex.org/gii-2018-report.

- *Weak legislative and regulatory environment in the business sector*: this limits entrepreneurs' capacity to establish enterprises in most Arab countries, reduces employment opportunities, and inhibits economic growth;

- *Low capacity to absorb technology*: this affects the development of applications in the economic, social and environmental fields, and contributes to the Arab region's low ranking in the Global Entrepreneurship Index;[5]

- *Digital and knowledge divide*: a divide still exists between the Arab region and other world regions;

- *Weak cybersecurity*: cyberthreats and risks rise with increased use of technology and with the introduction of new technologies in all aspects of life;

- *Weak e-government services*: there has been a global increase in online public services; however, the Arab region dropped over 10 places[6] in the e-Government Development Index. The region ranks below the global average in electronic participation. The reasons for this weak performance include lack of funding, brain drain, absence of required skills, and not keeping pace with existing regulatory frameworks for accelerated development. Estimates show that only 33 per cent of Arab States have policies on open government data.[7] Urban populations are expected to constitute 66 per cent of the world's population by 2050, thus increasing demand for e-services in cities.[8]

II. TRENDS IN THECHNOLOGY POLICY IN THE ARAB REGION

3.   The Arab region, like other regions worldwide, is affected by rapid technological developments, the widespread use of technology and its numerous applications, and the availability of appropriate computing capacity at the global level. The present section sets out current and future trends in that field.

4.   Governments in the Arab region are committed to combatting corruption, encouraging interaction with citizens, and increasing the efficiency and transparency of public institutions. However, they are facing digital transformation challenges, some of which are mentioned above. Policymakers are aiming to develop plans on new channels for public services, based on technology and innovation. Around half of Arab States have prepared national strategies on digital transformation.

5.   The Arab region has developed programmes to stimulate innovation and industry, but their success depends on the efficiency of the incubating environment and of the legislative and regulatory framework for innovation and entrepreneurship covering the greatest number of stakeholders. Efforts are being made and initiatives are being launched to develop technological incubators and accelerators, but States need to intensify such efforts and encourage the exchange of successful experiences.

6.   Some Arab States, with ESCWA support, have reviewed technology transfer and national innovation systems, have developed institutional infrastructure and amended related laws and regulations to strengthen those systems, and have increased collaboration between academic and research entities and industrial and economic bodies. ESCWA will continue providing support to member States to ensure the sustainability of achievements and to modernize national systems upon request by States, while taking into account their specificities. Some Arab States have also adopted national policies on science, technology and innovation, and the League of Arab States endorsed the Arab Strategy for Scientific and Technical Research and Innovation in

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[5] Data for 2016 and 2017 are available from http://thegedi.org/global-entrepreneurship-and-development-index.

[6] ESCWA estimates based on a survey by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA).

[7] OECD data, available from https://www.oecd.org/mena/governance/digital-governance-mena.pdf.

[8] UNDESA estimates, available from https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/publications/files/wup2014-highlights.Pdf.

March 2017. The implementation of national policies and regional strategies must be in line with the 2030 Agenda.

7.   Tackling threats relating to advanced technologies requires the constant updating of legal and legislative frameworks on cybersecurity. It is also necessary to adopt a multi-stakeholder approach in Internet governance, under flexible regional frameworks that keep pace with global developments.

III. ESCWA WORK IN THE FIELD OF TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT IN THE PERIOD 2020-2025

8.   Based on the above-mentioned challenges and trends in the Arab region, the ESCWA secretariat proposes to focus its work on the following issues:

(a)   Achieving government digital transformation and assisting war-torn countries to recuperate their public services electronically, supporting all member States in developing multi-channel services, promoting open data policies and e-participation, and establishing national legal and regulatory frameworks to meet the demands of digital and new technologies;

(b)   Harnessing rapid technological development to devise innovative solutions in various development sectors, such as solutions based on nanotechnology and bio-technology, developing innovative services and applications based on big data and artificial intelligence, and providing public services by taking advantage of new technologies that promise to increase productivity and contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals;

(c)   Formulating national innovation policies in member States to face challenges in social, economic and environmental development and to strengthen legislative and regulatory frameworks to establish an environment conducive to innovation and entrepreneurship;

(d)   Enhancing cooperation between member States, including public and private bodies, to implement the Arab Strategy for Scientific and Technical Research and Innovation and the Beirut Consensus on Technology for Sustainable Development in the Arab Region;

(e)   Supporting advanced programmes in the field of innovation and entrepreneurship that tackle the Arab region's challenges;

(f)   Developing national workplans on digital development in several member States, in line with the 2030 Agenda, which involve partners and counterparts and the national level;

(g)   Increase the participation of Arab societies in dialogues on Internet governance in the Arab region at the national, regional and global levels, and improving joint understanding of Internet governance issues and priorities in the field of sustainable development.

IV. TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

9.   The round-table discussion aims to present national experiences on the role of technology and innovation in achieving sustainable development, to exchange expertise and lessons learned, and to identify priorities for the coming period. It also aims to guide ESCWA work in providing support to member States in line with priorities.

10.   Participants will discuss the following topics:

- Global trends in technology and innovation policies and their impact on Arab States' policies;

- Technology and innovation policies in Arab States, including policies on digital transformation, the digital economy, innovation and new technologies, empowering young people and entrepreneurs, and related initiatives;

- Current and expected impact of those policies and initiatives on sustainable development in Arab countries;

- Challenges facing member States in implementing policies and initiatives and ways to overcome them;

- Proposals on the role of the ESCWA secretariat in keeping pace with new technological trends and in supporting member State in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

11. Participants in the round-table discussion will include representatives of member States, and several experts and consultants. Member States wishing to present an overview of their experiences and policies are invited to inform the secretariat and submit their proposed intervention by 10 March 2019.

12. Discussion will be conducted in Arabic.

13. The secretariat focal point is Ms. Manal Tabbara: tabbaram@un.org.