UNITED NATIONS

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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Distr.
LIMITED
E/ESCWA/EC.5/2018/4/Rev.1
E/ESCWA/C.8/2019/9
14 February 2019
ENGLISH
ORIGINAL: ARABIC

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

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

Item 10 of the provisional agenda

Implementation of the Beirut Consensus on Technology for Sustainable Development in the Arab Region

Summary

At the close of the thirtieth session of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), held in Beirut from 25 to 28 June 2018, member States adopted the Beirut Consensus on Technology for Sustainable Development in the Arab Region. The present document reviews the secretariat's plan for implementing it. Activities set out in the Beirut Consensus are provided in bold, followed by measures to be implemented by the secretariat.

The Committee on Technology for Development is invited to take note of current and planned activities to implement the Beirut Consensus and provide comments thereon.

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Introduction

1.   At the close of the thirtieth session of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), held in Beirut from 25 to 28 June 2018, member States adopted the Beirut Consensus on Technology for Sustainable Development in the Arab Region.

2.   The Beirut Consensus confirms the commitment of member States to place technology and innovation at the heart of an inclusive and sustainable development process in the Arab region. It stresses the importance of developing strong technology ecosystems and quality education systems to ensure decent employment opportunities. It also highlights the role that technology can play in achieving social integration, good governance and environmental sustainability, and in preventing conflicts and reducing their threats and the risk of disaster. Member States affirmed their commitment to mobilizing and increasing financing and investment at the national and regional levels in the field of technology and innovation, especially in the least developed countries, to support national development processes and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They emphasized the importance of the work conducted by the ESCWA secretariat and its impact on regional cooperation and integration, and requested the secretariat to continue its activities in that regard while focusing on promoting the role of technology and innovation in stimulating development.

3.   The present document sets out current and proposed measures for implementing the Beirut Consensus. The implementation of the Beirut Consensus will be achieved through two main approaches: benefiting from the secretariat's varied specializations to fully integrate between technology and the various dimensions of sustainable development; and ensuring consistency in the implementation of the key areas of ESCWA work, namely generating knowledge on development challenges, building consensus on addressing them and responding to them by providing direct support to member States through targeted technical cooperation activities. In the Beirut Consensus, member States requested the ESCWA secretariat to respond to the following requests, in particular.

(a) Foster coherent regional responses to rapidly evolving technological advancements, supporting norms and standard-setting and fostering an enabling ecosystem, anchored in the 2030 Agenda, with a focus on the most vulnerable segments of society

Current or proposed measures

4.   The ESCWA secretariat is working on implementing regional initiatives aimed at supporting member States' efforts to keep pace with rapid technological developments, as follows:

- Establishing in 2018 a regional framework for Internet governance entitled "Arab roadmap for Internet governance". The secretariat is implementing the framework by convening meetings with relevant stakeholders. An expert group meeting on the interlinkages between Internet governance and cybersecurity was held in Beirut in December 2018, preceded by open consultations of the Arab Multi-stakeholder Advisory Group convened in Beirut in July 2018, in preparation for the fifth Arab Internet Governance Forum to be held in 2019;

- Preparing a report on digital technologies for development, which addresses the status and inclusiveness of information and communications technology (ICT) and digital technologies and their role in empowering various social groups, in line with the 2030 Agenda, while focusing on the most vulnerable groups. The report is expected to be published in the second half of 2019;

- Preparing a study on innovation and technology for achieving the SDGs in the Arab region, which provides approaches to innovation policies that can be adopted to devise solutions and applications based on new technologies that may contribute to achieving the SDGs;

- Preparing a study on the impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution on development in Arab countries;

- Preparing a guide on managing intellectual property rights for research and development in the Arab region.

(b) Provide evidence-based policy advice to promote structural transformation through technology to enhance productivity and sustainability, thereby addressing the root causes of multidimensional poverty, promoting economic and social integration, creating decent employment, and research the impact of technology and innovation on sectoral employment generation

Current or proposed measures

5. The ESCWA secretariat is currently preparing reports and studies on the role of technology in achieving structural transformations in development and on convening expert group meetings, as follows:

- Preparing a study on the inclusiveness of and empowerment through digital finance in the Arab region. The study identifies the enabling environment required to benefit from financial technology (FinTech) and the opportunities it provides to achieve digital financial inclusion and the empowerment through digital finance of poor and vulnerable groups, and of various small and medium projects that rely on technology and innovation in the Arab region;

- Drafting a report on the 2019 employment survey, which analyses the productivity shortfalls of private enterprises in several Arab countries, and addresses the role of innovation in increasing productivity and in identifying employment growth patterns in the private sector;

- Launching the second round of a survey on the use of geographic information systems (GIS) in statistics on the environment, land use and climate change, so as to improve the quality and integration of information available to decision makers;

- Issuing a report on fostering innovation in small and medium enterprises in the Arab region in 2018 (E/ESCWA/TDD/2018/TP.2), which tackled the status of small and medium enterprises in the Arab region and indicated the need to develop those enterprises as a lever for achieving the SDGS;

- Organizing an expert group meeting on artificial intelligence and other advanced technologies and their impact on various industrial sectors, which was held in Beirut in November 2018;

- Organizing an expert group meeting of digital technologies for development in the Arab region, to be held in early 2019;

- Organizing a training workshop on planning for population and household censuses by using technology, which was held from 24 to 27 July 2018, aimed at enhancing dialogue between the users and producers of data from population and household censuses and at improving data use in planning, research and development;

- Organizing a workshop on incorporating administrative data, big data and GIS for SDG indicators, to be held in 2019.

6. In addition to the above-mentioned studies and meetings, the ESCWA secretariat, through its activities in the field of economic modelling, will continue to provide technological tools to assist decision makers, planners and economists in developing evidence-based policies to achieve structural transformations.

7.   The ESCWA secretariat formed a team comprising staff members from various specializations to follow up on the issue of big data to assess Arab countries' readiness to benefit from them, especially in development planning and measuring progress in implementing the SDGs. This forms part of efforts by the secretariat to complement traditional statistical data with new data sources, including administrative data, big data and GIS. Expected accomplishments include building capacity to measure SDG indicators.

(c)   Raise awareness on technologies for the inclusion of youth, older persons and persons with disabilities in areas including education, employment and access to public services, and develop informative material on the role of technology in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the Arab region

Current or proposed measures

8.   The ESCWA secretariat is preparing a report to be published in 2019 on innovation and entrepreneurship to generate employment opportunities for women and young people. The report reviews education and employment levels of women and young people and their links to innovation and entrepreneurship in the Arab region. It also highlights the importance of developing entrepreneurship in the Arab region to achieve the SDGs, proposes policies to improve entrepreneurship, and suggests initiatives to stimulate entrepreneurship so as to generate new employment opportunities for women and young people.

9.   The ESCWA secretariat is preparing a study on technology as a renewed hope for gender equality in the Arab region, which develops a vison of using ICTs to strengthen the implementation of SDG 5 targets and achieve gender equality. The secretariat is also drafting a policy brief that highlights the role of ICTs in combatting violence against women in cities. The brief assesses the positive impact of technology in combating violence against women, demonstrating the importance of the issue by analysing the links between the 2030 Agenda, the New Urban Agenda and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

10.   The above-mentioned reports that the secretariat is currently working on, especially the report on digital development in the Arab region and the study on the inclusiveness of and empowerment through digital finance and its prospects in the Arab region, in addition to a study on the impact of advanced technologies on education and young people conducted by the secretariat in collaboration with the Hariri Foundation for Sustainable Human Development in Lebanon, also respond to the present request.

11.   The ESCWA secretariat will also prepare information material to raise awareness on the role of frontier technologies in sustainable development, especially nanotechnologies, biotechnology and artificial intelligence.

(d)   Share experiences and best practices in technology transfer and adaptation through North-South and South-South cooperation, building member States' capacity to access financial resources

Current or proposed measures

12.   The ESCWA secretariat will formulate policy guidelines on technology transfer, development and use at the national level, aimed at forging partnerships between universities, the industrial sector, research centres and other stakeholders to support local industry.

13.   The secretariat organized a regional workshop on open government in the Arab region, which was held in Beirut from 25 to 27 September 2018. It also organized a national training session on open government and open data in the Sudan on 29 November 2018.

14.   The ESCWA Technology Centre prepared a report on science and technology parks. The report, which focuses on the governance of science and technology parks, was discussed at a regional workshop held in

Khartoum from 22 to 24 October 2018. In 2019, the Centre will hold an expert group meeting to discuss a report that clarifies global standards for managing science and technology parks, and to continue coordinating technology parks' efforts in the Arab region.

15.   An informal Arab group on population and household censuses, supported by the ESCWA secretariat, is working on transferring expertise on the use of technology in conducting and analysing population and housing censuses and on incorporating the geographic spatial dimension in those censuses to improve data quality, since electronic questionnaires enable the validation of data at the time of collection.

(e)   Coordinate national and regional policymaking on Internet governance, promote the Arab regional perspective in the international arena and provide support in researching and defining negotiation positions on contentious Internet governance issues

Current or proposed measures

16.   Measures to coordinate regional policies and plans on Internet governance include developing the regional framework on Internet governance issues entitled "Arab roadmap for Internet governance", as mentioned in paragraph 4 of the present document.

17.   The ESCWA secretariat, on behalf of the Arab Internet Governance Forum, participated in organizing several events at the thirteenth annual meeting of the Internet Governance Forum, held in Paris from 12 to 14 November 2018. Participants adopted a document on Internet trust and security, on which the secretariat will develop a regional perspective and position.

(f)   Support in filling the legislative and regulation vacuum around unregulated frontier technology issues through policy-oriented research

Current or proposed measures

18.   The secretariat will strengthen the role of the ESCWA Technology Centre in bridging legislative and regulatory gaps, including by developing ethical rules on the use of technologies in the areas of climate, the environment, agriculture, energy and water.

19.   The secretariat has prepared a study on fostering open government in the Arab region, which was launched at the thirtieth ESCWA session. As a follow-up, the secretariat held a training workshop in Beirut in September 2018 on open government in the Arab region, which tackled the legal and legislative dimensions of open government.

20.   In December 2018, the ESCWA secretariat held an expert group meeting on the interlinkages between Internet governance and cybersecurity, aimed at examining legislative and regulatory gaps in the digital technology field through research on Internet security and trust.

21.   The secretariat will develop a general framework for national strategies on frontier technologies, which will include global best practices, and will continue providing support for member States to benefit from the framework in developing their national policies, including related legislation.

(g)   Reinforce multi-stakeholder partnerships on technology and innovation, including convening the Arab High-level Forum on the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and the Arab Internet Governance Forum

Current or proposed measures

22.   The ESCWA secretariat, in collaboration with several international organizations and regional bodies concerned with digital technology, will hold the second session of the Arab High-level Forum on WSIS and

the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Beirut in 2019. It is also organizing, in collaboration with several Internet governance stakeholders, the fifth Arab Internet Governance Forum, to be held in the second half of 2019.

23.   The secretariat is planning to hold expert group meetings in 2019 on intellectual property systems to stimulate innovation in Arab countries, and on innovation and technology to achieve the 2030 Agenda. It will collaborate in that regard with many international organizations and regional bodies concerned with innovation, technology and intellectual property.

(h)   Support member States in adopting emerging green technologies to address the main regional socioeconomic and environmental challenges

Current or proposed measures

24.   The ESCWA Technology Centre supports member States' efforts aimed at benefiting from green technologies. The Centre's work programme will focus on enhancing green technology transfer and adaptation and on broadening the scope of its use, with special attention to priority sectors for the region, especially the agricultural sector. The Centre's work programme for 2019 includes regional studies and expert group meetings on agricultural technologies, notably those related to rationalizing water use aimed at reusing wastewater, saving energy and adapting the agricultural sector to climate change.

25.   In the first half of 2019, the Centre will organize a workshop on investing in sustainable technologies and on how to attract investor in this key emerging area.

(i)   Support networking and create a participatory platform for cooperation between Arab States on frontier technology issues

Current and proposed measures

26.   Intergovernmental meetings convened or prepared by ESCWA fall under the present recommendation, including the second session of the Committee on Technology for Development.

27.   In 2019, a project will be developed to examine with donors the establishment of an interactive platform that supports documenting the use of innovative green technologies in the Arab region.

28.   The secretariat aims to promote the work of the regional communication network of national technology transfer offices in several Arab countries.

29.   The secretariat will continue holding meetings of the directors of e-government programmes in Arab States. The seventh meeting will be held in 2019.