	ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL	Distr. LIMITED E/ESCWA/C.8/2019/11 21 February 2019 ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

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

Item 12 of the provisional agenda

Digital development in the Arab region and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Summary

The present document overviews a number of activities carried out by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in the area of information and communications technologies for development. It first presents the findings of the publication entitled "Arab Horizon 2030: Digital Technologies for Development", which was issued in 2018. It then gives an overview of the national reviews undertaken by the ESCWA secretariat to assess member States' situations in terms of digital technologies and their readiness to harness those technologies for development. The review process will yield national reports, which will feed into a regional digital development report, whose first edition is to be published in the second half of 2019.

The Committee on Technology for Development is invited to take note of the contents of the present document and provide comments on the way forward.

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Introduction

1.   The access of billions of people to the Internet and the unprecedent spread of digital and other technologies creates new opportunities coupled with new risks for all countries striving to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Many of those opportunities and risks were addressed in the context of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), however links between WSIS outcomes and the 2030 Agenda have yet to be strengthened. To achieve that, in July 2018, the Secretary General of the United Nations formed the High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation, aimed at raising awareness among policymakers and the general public about the transformative impact of digital technologies across society and the economy; suggesting ways to enhance digital cooperation by identifying policy, research and information gaps, and ways to improve interdisciplinary thinking and cross-domain action on digital technologies; and presenting recommendations for effective and inclusive systems of digital cooperation among all relevant actors in the digital space.

2.   At the regional level, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has been exerting efforts in that area since 2016. It has adopted an integrated approach to information and communications technologies (ICTs), covering dimensions that include Internet governance, digital transformation and the digital economy, smart societies, cybersecurity and others, with the aim of harnessing them for development that leaves no one behind. Its activities in that field are undertaken in the framework of its programme on the Information Society and Digital Economy Hub for the Arab Region (ISDEHAR), aimed at building the capacity of policymakers and other stakeholders from the business sector, civil society and academia to adopt initiatives that contribute to the transformation towards smart and sustainable societies and strengthen digital economies for inclusive growth. The programme is built around the following four pillars: cross-cutting regional strategic frameworks and regional agendas; governance, legal and regulatory frameworks; ICT industries, production, competitiveness, and economic growth; and enterprise development, transformation, and social inclusion.

3.   In that context, ESCWA convened the first Arab High-level Forum on WSIS and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Beirut, from 8 to 12 May 2017, to examine how the implementation of WSIS outcomes can contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the closing of the Forum, participants stressed the importance of narrowing the digital divide and building inclusive information societies and digital economies that place citizens at the heart of development concerns.

4.   Building on those efforts, the ESCWA secretariat has launched a new process aimed at studying and enhancing digital development in the Arab region. The present document gives an overview of its milestones: a 2018 publication; a national review process to assess Arab countries' situation in terms of digital technologies and their readiness to harness them for sustainable development; and a regional report on digital development, to be published in the second half of 2019.

I. HARNESSING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

5.   In 2018, as part of its efforts to promote policy change in order to harness digital technologies for sustainable development, the ESCWA secretariat issued a publication entitled "Arab Horizon 2030: Digital Technologies for Development" (E/ESCWA/TDD/2017/3), aimed at discussing an array of issues related to digital technologies and lying at the intersection of the WSIS process and the 2030 Agenda.

6.   Part I of the publication provides, in chapter 1, a brief outline of the 2030 Agenda and of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, with emphasis on the role that they attribute to digital technologies and ICTs. It also discusses the 10-year review of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS+10), including the new challenges and priorities in the period leading to 2030. Chapter 2 provides an analytical framework to outline the relationship between thematic digital technology issues and the SDGs. Chapter 3 summarizes the situation of Arab countries for each of the

17 SDGs as reflected in other ESCWA publications, and highlights the potential role that digital technologies could play to address the developmental challenges faced by the region.

7.   Part II surveys the situation in Arab countries under thematic policy areas of relevance to digital technologies, namely digital strategies; the ICT sector; ICT infrastructure; cybersecurity; digital divide; e-applications; and e-government, and its impact on the SDGs. Chapter 4 addresses the general question of how public policy could enhance digital technologies for development. Chapters 5 and 6 address the ICT sector, focusing on industrial aspects of digital technologies and their impact on the economy, growth and jobs, and ICT infrastructure. Chapter 7 addresses cybersecurity. Chapters 8 to 10 focus on the use and impact of digital technologies through Internet access in various socioeconomic endeavours: chapter 8 addresses how many people use the Internet and for what purpose; chapter 9 analyses the use of digital technologies in commerce, health and education; and chapter 10 addresses the use of digital technologies by Governments to improve the delivery of public services.

8.   Chapters 4 to 10 on thematic policy areas are organized under four sections: (a) a contextualization of the thematic issue with respect to its impact on the SDGs is carried out by identifying its relationship with the WSIS action line(s); (b) prevailing policies related to the issue at hand are discussed, including current gaps compared with more advanced countries and future implications; (c) a vision for 2030 is outlined followed by policy change recommendations, taking into account resources, human capabilities and development expectations; and (d) a business-as-usual trajectory and one which takes into consideration the prescribed horizon 2030 recommendations are compared.

9.   Part III of the publication provides a summary of the vision for 2030 and a blueprint of policy recommendations for each of the seven policy areas mentioned above. Key recommendations include the following:

(a)   Develop national cybersecurity strategies centred on national computer emergency response teams, with a mission that goes beyond avoiding cyberthreats to enhancing coordination among all stakeholders, supporting the drafting of better laws to deal with cybercrime and providing national awareness and capacity-building activities;

(b)   Develop the ICT sector in the Arab region to be less reliant on imports and to better integrate Arab countries in global value chains, thus enhancing the sector's contribution to economic growth and job creation;

(c)   Develop a good quality ICT infrastructure at affordable prices and promote its use and the use of e-services and related applications for development;

(d)   Develop national and regional e-commerce platforms, together with mobile payment solutions, which could allow e-commerce to be a tool for economic transformation involving all stakeholders;

(e)   Improve national e-health strategies, with the involvement of all stakeholders, for better health outcomes, using ICT technologies and smart tele-health applications for remote health services;

(f)   Develop ICT in education, including massive open online course platforms, in association with a reform of education methods to increase access and connectivity; such actions enhance education outcomes through better monitoring and the participation of students in assessment programmes;

(g)   Improve the provision of e-government services that seek to meet local needs and priorities, and enhance the provision of open government data. Such action should engage citizens in public policymaking and decision-making and improve the effectiveness and accountability of the public service;

(h)   Adopt an inclusive approach to implementing policies that involves all stakeholders and takes into consideration the needs of women and men, and engage youth in all parts of policy development.

II. NATIONAL DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT ASSESSMENTS

10.   After issuing the above-mentioned publication, the ESCWA secretariat has engaged in further consultations with stakeholders, which identified the need for setting a baseline against which progress in implementing WSIS outcomes and harnessing digital technologies for sustainable development could be measured. The baseline would be the situation of Arab countries in that regard in 2019; it would be determined using a multisectoral toolkit devised by ESCWA and surveys on specific policy areas, which would help countries to produce national digital development reports.

11.   The toolkit specifies the national report template, and means to collect quantitative and qualitative information on national policies, initiatives, plans and measurement tools in the area of digital development. The methodology provides clear linkage between WSIS outcomes and the SDGs. Five thematic clusters are envisaged, namely (a) strategic frameworks – WSIS and SDGs; (b) the State – Infrastructure, governance, the legal environment; (c) the economy – Production, competitiveness of the ICT sector and economic growth; (d) the society – Transformation of public administration and social inclusion; and (e) Culture and media – Cultural identity, linguistic diversity and the media.

12.   The toolkit includes the questionnaire of the United Nations E-Government Survey, which used to be conducted directly by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Starting 2019, the ESCWA secretariat will be conducting the survey at the regional level, as part of its assessment exercise.

13.   Member States have nominated focal points to prepare the national digital development reports. In 2018, 10 States used the toolkit and engaged with the ESCWA secretariat on preparations for their national reports. Those preparations include the following activities:

(a)   National workshop on the digital development report of the United Arab Emirates (Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 5 February 2019): the workshop was aimed at providing help to national focal points in the preparation of the national report and discuss related challenges;

(b)   First regional meeting on digital development reports in the Arab Region (Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 6-7 February 2019): the meeting was aimed at discussing the drafts and methodologies of national reports for collecting data and information as per the guiding toolkit;

(c)   Second regional meeting on digital development reports in the Arab region (Beirut, 19-20 March 2019): the meeting, which forms part of the second Arab High-level Forum on WSIS and the 2030 Agenda, is aimed at discussing final drafts of national report.

14.   Two more States have announced their intention to join the process and use the toolkit in 2019 to produce their national reports. This will give the ESCWA secretariat sufficient material to refine it and further support States in producing national digital development reports and formulating national strategies to harness digital technologies for sustainable development.

III. THE ARAB REGIONAL DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT REPORT
AND THE WAY FORWARD

15.   National digital development reports will feed into a regional one, the first of its kind, to be issued in the second half of 2019. The forthcoming Arab Digital Development Report will provide an overview of recent shifts in digital technology trends and user behaviours at the international and regional levels. It will review progress related to WSIS outcomes in the Arab region since 2015, and present an analytic review of the situation in key thematic policy clusters, namely:

- Cluster 1: Enabling environment;
- Cluster 2: Digital economy and economic development;
- Cluster 3: Digital transformation and social inclusion;
- Cluster 4: Cross-cutting policies and key accelerators.

16.   The report will also provide an analysis of the Arab information society, adopting a development lens. It will put forward an Arab digital agenda for sustainable development, proposed by ESCWA on the basis of its 2018 publication, "Arab Horizon 2030: Digital Technologies for Development" and its analysis of national reports.

17.   National and regional assessments are not sufficient to tackle gaps in making an optimal use of digital technologies to achieve sustainable development. National plans are required, as well as new or updated national digital agendas, which should remain dynamic and subject to periodic updates. In 2020, ESCWA will undertake additional analysis and consultations with member States on lessons learned from the above-mentioned processes and new technological advancements. Updated policy proposals will then be formulated. National and regional assessments are expected to be conducted again in 2021, based on an improved version of the toolkit and in line with the themes of the 2020 and 2021 sessions of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

18.   The Technology for Development Committee is invited to make comments on the processes laid out in the present document and proposals for the way forward. Support from member States is also needed on digital development assessments, namely in assisting national focal points to engage with all government stakeholders in order to undertake the assessment, and to link digital development to sustainable development and broader national planning.