UNITED NATIONS

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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Committee on Technology for Development
Fifth session
Amman, 7–8 November 2024

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 fourth session of the Committee on Technology for Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), which was held in Beirut on 14 and 15 November 2022, especially the meeting held on 13 February 2024 and its outcomes. It also proposes a set of issues for follow-up over the period 2024–2025.

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

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Introduction

1.   In 2013, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) proposed the establishment of a platform to promote dialogue on e-government programme management in Arab countries, and to enhance coordination on e-government policies and measures at the regional level. According to the proposed design, the platform would include directors of e-government programmes in Arab States or their representatives. ESCWA would also organize activities and propose agendas for meetings.

2.   The platform's main objectives include conducting consultations on e-government challenges in Arab countries 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 countries; 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 countries. Participants approved the information note as amended. 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. ESCWA, in collaboration with the World Government Summit in the United Arab Emirates, held a third meeting in Dubai on 8 February 2016, at which it 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 countries requesting that they appoint representatives for the meetings, and communicating with countries to ensure their participation in the above-mentioned activities.

4.   A fourth meeting was held in Dubai on 11 February 2017, and a fifth in Beirut on 27 April 2017, at which participants discussed ESCWA activities related to the digital economy, open data and the GEMS Maturity Index. The sixth meeting of directors of e-government programmes in Arab States was held in Dubai on 12 February 2018, on the sidelines of the World Government Summit. At the meeting, participants discussed an ESCWA 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, a project to promote open government in the region based on technology, a proposed framework for implementing open government in Arab countries, future activities, and key expected outcomes. On 19 March 2019, the seventh meeting was held in Beirut, at which the preliminary results of the GEMS Maturity Index were presented, 12 ESCWA member States were evaluated, and the GEMS Maturity Index was compared with the e-Government Development Index (EGDI) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). Participants also discussed ESCWA efforts to transfer the GEMS Maturity Index to the international level, in collaboration with DESA.

5.   On 23 September 2020, ESCWA held a virtual meeting of directors of e-government programmes in Arab States, given the global health conditions resulting from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The meeting was divided into two parts. In the first part, directors of e-government programmes in Arab States reviewed key activities organized by the Commission in the field of digital cooperation and development, open government, digital transformation and related indicators. In the second part, the Arabic version of the E-Government Survey 2020 was launched, prepared by the Digital Government Section of the Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government of DESA, in collaboration with the Telecommunications and Digital Government Regulatory Authority (TDRA) of the United Arab Emirates and ESCWA.

6.   On 16 December 2021, ESCWA held a virtual meeting of directors of e-government programmes in Arab States, at which participants discussed key activities organized by the Commission in the field of digital cooperation and development, open government, digital transformation and related indicators, in addition to

initiatives and projects related to digital transformation and digital government in the Arab region. The meeting comprised two sessions. At the first session, directors of e-government programmes in Arab States reviewed key activities organized by ESCWA in the field of digital cooperation and development, open government, digital transformation and related indicators. At the second session, initiatives and projects related to digital transformation and digital government in the Arab region were presented.

7.   On 15 November 2022, ESCWA held an in-person meeting of directors of e-government programmes at the United Nations House in Beirut, and virtually via Zoom. The meeting comprised two sessions. In the first session, directors of e-government programmes in Arab States reviewed key activities organized by the Commission in the field of government digital transformation, indicators, open data, and digital accessibility. In the second session, initiatives and projects related to digital transformation and digital government in the Arab region were presented.

8.   The present document provides a summary of the meeting convened since the fourth session of the Committee on Technology for Development, which was held in Beirut on 14 and 15 November 2022, and an overview of the main topics discussed. It also presents proposals for future cooperation activities in the field of digital technology and digital transformation.

I. Activities

9.   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 of e-government programmes in Arab countries, 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

10.   Since the fourth session of the ESCWA Committee on Technology for Development, directors of e-government programmes in Arab States have held one meeting. The following sections present the meeting's main topics of discussion and outcomes.

Meeting held in February 2024

11.   ESCWA organized a meeting on 13 February 2024, hosted by TDRA of the United Arab Emirates, alongside the World Governments Summit 2024. The meeting comprised three sessions. At the first session, directors of e-government programmes in Arab States reviewed key activities implemented in 2023 to develop national plans, legislative and regulatory frameworks, and capacity-building in the field of digital transformation and emerging technologies, in addition to measurement indicators, especially the GEMS Maturity Index. They also reviewed ESCWA activities in accelerating the use of emerging technologies in public institutions, and in preparing, adopting and activating the Arab Digital Agenda, and discussed ESCWA activities in the field of digital inclusion. Digital transformation experiences in the following countries were

presented: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.

1. *Opening session*

12.	The meeting was opened by Mr. Mohammad Al Zarooni, Deputy Director-General of TDRA of the United Arab Emirates. He welcomed directors of e-government programmes in Arab States and their representatives, stressing the importance of cooperation and integration between Arab countries, and the readiness of the United Arab Emirates to provide support to all Arab countries in the field of digital transformation.

13.	Ms. Nibal Idlebi, Acting Director of the ESCWA Statistics, Information Society and Technology Cluster, made an opening statement in which she stressed the importance of working to enhance digital transformation, and of benefiting from emerging technologies to support government services. She noted the importance of digital government and its role in building a knowledge society, and the need to develop specific frameworks for digital government to enhance transparency and engagement with individuals.

2. *First session*

14.	The first session comprised the following four presentations:

(a)	Mr. Nawar al-Awa, ESCWA Regional Advisor on Technology for Development, made a presentation on the background of these meetings and the main topics previously discussed. He gave an overview of the previous 10 meetings of directors of e-government programmes held since 2013, which were aimed at enhancing regional cooperation and exchanging and benefiting from expertise in harnessing technology for public services. He also reviewed ESCWA activities in the field of digital transformation in relation to developing national plans, legal and regulatory frameworks, capacity-building and measurement indicators, most notably the GEMS Maturity Index. He also noted the data collection platform developed by ESCWA to facilitate the work of national coordinators and representatives of national entities in the Arab region;

(b)	Ms. Idlebi made a presentation on the ENACT project, which is aimed at expediting the use of technology and innovation for enhanced operations in Arab public institutions. She highlighted the importance of the project for the Arab region, especially in terms of its focus on promoting the use of emerging technologies in the public sector. She also noted the main concepts underpinning the project, namely responsiveness, inclusion, trustworthiness and effectiveness (RITE). She clarified the main stages of the project and key completed and future activities;

(c)	Mr. Ayman el-Sherbiny, Chief of the ESCWA Information and Communications Technology Policies Section, gave an overview of the Arab Digital Agenda (2023–2033), in terms of its preparation, adoption, activation and sustainability. He explained the basic components of the Agenda, which covered five sectors and included 35 goals, 69 targets and 85 initiatives. He also noted the partnerships with a number of regional and international organizations in preparing and implementing the Agenda;

(d)	Ms. Mirna el-Hajj Barbar, Coordinator of the Arab Digital Inclusion Platform project at ESCWA, made a presentation on the digital accessibility project, key completed and future activities, and activities related to preparing technical guidelines to empower older persons and to developing policies that verify the accessibility of emerging technologies.

15.	The floor was opened for discussion at the end of the session. The following are the main topics raised:

- The possibility of launching initiatives to strengthen the governance of emerging technologies in the Arab region.

- The possibility of financing initiatives in countries emerging from conflict.

- Mechanisms for learning about successful experiences in employing emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, in government services.

- The importance of exchanging expertise between Arab countries in the field of digital transformation.

- Continued collaboration with ESCWA to enhance national plans, build capacity, and develop indicators.

3. *Second session*

16.   The second session comprised four interventions to present the experiences and initiatives of Arab countries in digital transformation. The following is a brief description of these interventions:

(a)   Ms. Manal al-Afad, Digital Transformation Team Leader at TDRA, made a presentation on the digital transformation journey in the United Arab Emirates. She noted the various platforms that had been developed, such as Sharik and U.ae, and the extensive efforts made to develop the Digital Government Online Services Index. She reviewed the development of policies that supported digital transformation, with the aim of reaching the top three globally in EGDI by 2031. She highlighted capacity-building efforts such as the UAE Hackathon and the UAE Academy, which were established in partnership with global education institutions;

(b)   Mr. Ammar Alhussaini, Director-General of the Central Agency for Information Technology of Kuwait, made a presentation on the Masar Initiative, which was being developed in collaboration with Microsoft. He described the digital transformation road map in Kuwait, which included selecting participating entities (onboarding plan), holding workshops for different management levels in these entities, requesting that the entities discuss and approve the initiatives, and discussing the final plan with senior management. He noted the challenges and lessons learned, notably the need to bring together all officials, the commitment of senior leadership to digital transformation and their support for it, and the allocation of the required budgets for it;

(c)   Mr. Abdulrahman Almutairi, Vice Governor of the Digital Government Authority of Saudi Arabia, made a presentation on the large investments in the field of digital transformation in Gulf countries in general, and in Saudi Arabia in particular, noting that they had resulted in an advanced technological infrastructure with 100 per cent access rate for mobile phones and household Internet, mobile broadband coverage, and coverage of 4G and 5G mobile networks. He reviewed the accelerated participation of women in the labour market in his country, the enhanced access to digital services (by 75 per cent), and the launch of national indicators to measure emerging technology adoption. He indicated the use of blockchain in document management and of digital identity, and the development of a virtual hospital in collaboration with 200 hospitals in the country. He commended the establishment of virtual courts and the use of artificial intelligence to predict judicial rulings;

(d)   Mr. Abdul Raouf al-Bibas, Digital Transformation Advisor at the General Information Authority of Libya, made a presentation on digital transformation, identifying the main areas of work at the national level, namely strategies and procedures, capacity-building and legislation. He highlighted collaboration with ESCWA in preparing the digital transformation strategy, the Internet of Things regulatory framework, and the e-commerce and personal data protection law. He noted the main projects in digital transformation, such as the digitization of banks and financial technologies, and the eJraat platform for business registration, procedure simplification, and electronic payment.

17.   At the close of the session, a number of topics were discussed, including the following:

- Tools for measuring the success of digital transformation experiences.

- The impact of leadership change on the success of digital transformation initiatives.

- The need for government focus on digital transformation to ensure the achievement of its goals.

- Mechanisms for the sustainability of digital transformation projects.

- The importance of providing a national strategy for digital transformation to ensure coordination, governance and non-duplication of efforts.

4. *Third session*

18.   The third session included eight interventions to present the experiences and initiatives of Arab countries in digital transformation. The following is a brief description of those interventions:

(a) Ms. Ghada Labib, Deputy Minister for Institutional Development at the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology of Egypt, made a presentation on institutional development in view of the Egyptian digital strategy. She noted the main pillars and indicators of the digital strategy, digital capacity-building programmes, digital inclusion initiatives for citizens, and digital transformation of government institutions and public services. She focused on the importance of using artificial intelligence in some government applications to analyse data and support individuals, the role of the "leader" in ensuring the success of digital transformation, and the relationship between digital transformation and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. She reviewed some initiatives such as the Port Said digital governorate, the Egypt digital justice project, and e-waste treatment;

(b) Mr. Muhammad Ali Muhammad, Deputy Minister of Communications and Technology for Digital Transformation Affairs of the Syrian Arab Republic, made a presentation on the digital transformation strategy for government services in his country. He noted collaboration with ESCWA, particularly in developing the digital transformation strategy, the cloud computing policy, and the digital accessibility strategy. He reviewed some current projects, such as the digital government carrier, the electronic billing platform, and the government procurement platform. He highlighted the challenges facing digital transformation projects, such as human migration, financing and a technological blockade;

(c) Ms. Sameera al-Zou'bi, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship of Jordan, presented the main activities implemented in collaboration with ESCWA, such as the digital transformation strategy, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, personal data protection, blockchain technology, and digital accessibility. Mr. Rami Rawashdeh, Director of the Digital Transformation and Empowerment Department at the Ministry, presented the digital transformation that had begun in 2001 and its orientation towards citizens, and noted the enablers of digital transformation, including moving 45 per cent of government services to the cloud, and developing the Government Services Connector to link various government institutions. He highlighted the Sanad application that supported e-services, indicating that the goal was to make all government services digital by the end of 2025;

(d) Mr. Wadi Karim al-Wadi, Senior Technical Undersecretary at the Ministry of Communications of Iraq, made a statement on the importance of providing digital services at three levels: government, individuals, and institutions. He noted the efforts made in Iraq to achieve networking and prepare the necessary legislative environment for digital transformation. He highlighted key applications that had been completed, such as the electronic voter card, digital tracking of government vehicles, and e-commerce applications at the postal service. He presented a number of proposals to establish an Arab data centre to enable the exchange of data between Arab countries, employing artificial intelligence technologies in e-governance, and providing digital platforms to support all development sectors. He focused on the importance of capacity-building, and of providing competent human resources in the field of digital transformation;

(e) Mr. Fadi Morjaneh, Director-General of e-Government at the Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Technology of the State of Palestine, reviewed the e-government programme and the policies and strategies that had been prepared, in addition to laws and government decisions. He indicated the Hukumati unified portal for electronic services, and the ongoing work to develop integrated digital services;

(f)   Mr. Slim ben Salem, Director of the E-Government Unit at the Presidency of the Government of Tunisia, presented the strategic framework for digitization, specifically the Tunisia Strategy 2024. He explained the strategic directions of the plan, its components, and its objectives. He highlighted several projects and initiatives, including a comprehensive review of administrative procedures, an open data portal, an e-participation portal, measurement of digital administrative services, and an integrated administrative network. He commended the interconnection project and the digital accessibility project launched in collaboration with ESCWA;

(g)   Mr. Abdul Aziz al-Kharousi, Director of Digital Transformation and Sector Empowerment at the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology of Oman, made a presentation on digital transformation in his country. He noted the Digital Transformation Plan 2020–2030, and the discussions that had taken place with some countries during the preparation phase. He explained the importance of electronic participation in the plan, and the economic impact resulting from digital transformation at the national level. He stressed the importance of the leadership's support for digital transformation, and the need to establish an indicator monitoring unit in the Royal Court concerned with tracking the performance of government institutions by classifying them in categories ranging from gold to black. He referred to the Omani experience in electronic voting and the benefits resulting from its implementation;

(h)   Mr. Amer Syagha, Information Technology Project Manager at the Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform of Lebanon, referred to the digital transformation strategy that had been adopted and was being implemented. He highlighted the current legislative framework, and the importance of political stability and of limiting leadership changes for the success of digital transformation projects. He noted current digital divides between regions in Internet access, the importance of education and training, and current efforts to prepare the necessary human cadres through a skills platform. He presented a number of solutions and initiatives, including the importance of combining national efforts to achieve digital transformation, providing regional and international support, enhancing investment in technological infrastructure, promoting legislative reform, providing education and training, empowering the private sector, and participating in regional and international forums.

5. *Closing session*

19.   Participants discussed the next steps, and the following was agreed upon:

(a)   Strengthening collaboration with ESCWA to benefit from the various projects being implemented;

(b)   Providing mechanisms to facilitate the exchange of expertise between Arab countries in digital transformation;

(c)   Encouraging Arab countries to enhance inter-cooperation to benefit from successful experiences in the fields of digital transformation and emerging technologies.

III. Way forward

20.   ESCWA proposes continuing collaboration on digital transformation and digital government issues within the framework of the e-government programmes platform in the period 2024–2025. 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) Continuing collaboration with Arab countries in developing national plans for digital transformation, emerging technologies, and enhancing relevant legislative and regulatory frameworks;

(b) Welcoming ESCWA activities on promoting the use of emerging technologies in developing the work and services of public institutions and raising their efficiency;

(c)   Cooperating with ESCWA in implementing initiatives related to the Arab Digital Agenda;

(d)   Continuing collaboration with ESCWA in the field of digital accessibility to enable older persons and persons with disabilities to use digital applications and services;

(e)   Supporting the development of the GEMS Maturity Index and its associated platform;

(f)   Considering the possibility of launching regional initiatives to enhance the governance of emerging technologies in general, and artificial intelligence in particular;

(g)   Developing mechanisms to facilitate the exchange of successful experiences in the field of digital transformation between Arab countries;

(h)   Focusing on the importance of digital identity for the development of digital government projects, noting that a number of Arab countries have adopted this issue;

(i)   Emphasizing the importance of periodic meetings between Arab countries to exchange expertise and experiences, and the importance of Arab countries' participation in international meetings on digital transformation, digital development, technology and innovation for sustainable development;

(j)   Emphasizing the importance of enhancing capacity and skills, and developing an enabling environment for digital transformation and emerging technologies, so as to strengthen national efforts on indicators and capacity-building to develop, disseminate and use digital services.

21.   The Committee on Technology for Development is invited to discuss these proposals and comment thereon.