Pushing boundaries: Technology and AI to accelerate the SDGs in the Arab region

An HLPF 2023 side event organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) at the UN Headquarters in NY on Wednesday 19 July 2023, 8:00 – 9:30 am

Summary Report[1]

I. Key messages

- The potential of AI and other frontier technologies is immense and diverse. It has the capability to revolutionize public policy, offering transformative opportunities for substantial benefits across almost all SDGs.
- With the Arab region falling behind on many SDGs and even regressing on targets related to economic growth and youth employment, it is encouraging that most countries in the Arab region are eagerly advancing on AI, albeit at different speeds.
- The digital divide is a persisting challenge in the Arab region. To leverage the power of AI for the prosperity of all, not just a few, it is essential to bridge the digital divide, invest in advanced digital infrastructures, and elevate digital literacy.
- Like all powerful innovations, AI comes with unique challenges and risks. Mishandling AI can turn it into a double-edged sword. Issues such as privacy, cybersecurity, identity theft, and financial fraud must be carefully addressed. Moreover, unchecked algorithmic biases can exacerbate societal inequalities instead of mitigating them. Therefore, responsible, transparent, and ethical AI deployment is essential. The UN has an essential role to play.
- Weak digital Arabic content is preventing the optimal use of AI systems, which depend on and learn from published digital content. Arabic language adds further complexity to natural language processing systems.
- Arab countries need to develop risk-informed AI strategies based on an assessment of available infrastructure, data, and regulatory / institutional frameworks. Every country needs to set its priorities within the broad field of AI.
- It is crucial to anticipate the social impact of AI on youth and future generations, including in the area of education and employment. Young people must be part of the design of the future they will live in, and their engagement must be made meaningful and productive.

[1] The text did not undergo formal editing.

- Education systems in the region need to be more agile, to ensure availability of needed AI skills but also the hard and soft skills needed for the SDGs more broadly: critical thinking, multi-disciplinary studies, STEM education, data science, etc. Re-skilling and up-skilling will be needed in the short term, while adaptive / dynamic academic programs are the way for the future.
- AI can be costly to deploy; however, the benefits and savings are huge and must be factored in investment decisions.
- With AI continuously pushing the boundaries of where it can be applied, AI use cases must be documented, and country experiences shared to ease adoption and reduce costs.

II. Experiences of Member States and UN Organizations

- Digital transformation in **Egypt** was further catalyzed by the COVID pandemic. It is already contributing to better quality of life and better services through applications such as e-finance, smart agriculture, e-health, e-learning and digital government. In late 2019, a National Council for AI was established that brings on board multiple stakeholders to deploy AI in strategic sectors including smart cities. In 2023, the Egyptian Charter on Responsible AI was ratified, inspired by the OECD AI principles, which serve five main values: Human-centeredness, Transparency and Explainability, Fairness, Accountability, and Security and Safety.
- **Kuwait** is yet to develop a dedicated AI policy. It has to date adopted a knowledge economy approach to AI with focuses on developing three types of capital: human, structural and networking capitals.
- In **Saudi Arabia**, the Saudi Data and AI Authority has devised a strategy based on an assessment of national context and priorities. KSA wants to be among leading countries globally in terms of innovation, open data, and skilled labor. The private sector ecosystem is favorable, with some 300 startups operating in the field of AI and data. One example where KSA is leveraging AI is in the field of health, where virtual hospitals have visibly reduced the time to respond to medical cases and improved radiology assessments.
- In **Morocco**, an AI center of excellence operates in Mohamed VI Polytechnic university, leveraging the capacities of youth. Focus areas include AI applications in agriculture, climate action, energy, and smart cities. Morocco is keen on building regional and global partnerships in the area of AI.
- In **Qatar**, the Ministry of Labor has developed a Labor Market Information Systems (LMIS) - a data-driven platform that integrates AI technologies to collect, process, analyze, and disseminate labor market information. By analyzing market trends and anticipating skills gap, LMIS is helping optimize workforce planning with benefits to policymakers, employers and job seekers. An AI engine is also being used to analyze work contracts against violations and protect employee welfare. Collaboration with ESCWA and other partners has been instrumental in developing an AI enabled employment platform to match job seekers with suitable employment opportunities and optimize the number of national employees per firm.
- **ESCWA** has endorsed a comprehensive, government-wide approach to AI adoption in the Arab region, aiding several Arab countries in developing national AI strategies. Additionally, ESCWA actively tracks technology megatrends such as e-mobility and the metaverse and conducts

foresight analyses to assist member states to preemptively implement policy measures to maximize these trends' benefits once they're fully present in the region. Furthermore, ESCWA is improving its services and support through AI-powered tools, namely: the Data and Policy Decision-support hub offers on-demand, evidence-based policy advice; the Budget Intelligence toolkit optimizes public spending's impact on the SDGs; and the Skills Monitor prepares our youth for the future workforce by analyzing real-time labor market trends.

- **UN-Habitat** is developing international guidelines on people-centered smart cities, and a resolution was adopted in that respect at the 2nd United Nations Habitat Assembly (June 2023). A series of Expert Group Meetings will be held starting from November 2023 to contribute towards the development of global guidelines to meet the request of Member States. Habitat advocates for AI governance at the local level that protects personal data and privacy. It also supports inclusion by bridging the digital divide, as well as diversity in the debate around AI. Habitat is keen to collaborate with ESCWA in supporting a regional AI strategy that promotes coherence and experience sharing among countries to steer AI for the SDGs.

Annex. Program of the side event

Introductory remarks by Moderator – Ms. Maisaa Youssef, Cluster Leader, 2030 Agenda and SDGs Coordination Cluster, ESCWA

Speakers:

- H.E. Ms. Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary, ESCWA
- H.E. Ms. Hala El-Said, Minister of Planning and Economic Development, Egypt
- H.E. Mr. Khaled Mahdi, Secretary-General, Supreme Council for Planning and Development, Kuwait
- Mr. Hisham AlSheikh, Vice Governor of the Shared Services Sector, Digital Government Authority, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
- H.E. Ambassador Omar Hilale, Permanent Representative of Morocco to the United Nations
- Ms. Najwa Abdulrahman Al-Thani, Acting Assistant Undersecretary for Migrant Labor Affairs, Ministry of Labor, Qatar
- Mr. Neil Khor, Director of External Relations, Knowledge and Innovation, UN-Habitat

Discussion