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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 second session of the Committee on Technology for Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), especially meetings and their outcomes. It proposes a set of issues for follow-up over the period 2021-2022.

The Committee on Technology for Development is invited to discuss the present document and 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 establishing a platform to strengthen dialogue on managing e-government programmes in Arab countries, and to increase coordination on e-government-related policies and measures at the regional level. In line with the proposal, e-government programme directors in Arab countries or their representatives participate in the platform. ESCWA organizes the related activities and proposes meeting agendas.

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 following amendments. A second meeting was held in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, on 9 February 2014, at which ESCWA presented draft rules and procedures for the platform and next steps. Subsequently, 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 ESCWA 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 States requesting that they appoint representatives for the meetings, and communicating with States to ensure their participation in the above-mentioned activities. In 2017, two meetings were held: the first in Dubai on 11 February, and the second in Beirut on 27 April. Participants discussed ESCWA activities related to the digital economy, open data, and the GEMS Maturity Index. In 2018, a sixth meeting was held in Dubai on 12 February, on the sidelines of the World Government Summit. 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 indicator for Arab countries, a project to strengthen open government in the region through technology, a proposed framework for applying open government in Arab countries, upcoming activities, and key expected accomplishments.

4.   The present document provides a summary of the meetings convened since the second session of the Committee on Technology for Development, held in Beirut on 20 and 21 March 2019, and an overview of the main topics covered at those meetings. It also sets out proposals for future cooperation activities in the field of digital technology and digital transformation.

I. Activities

5.   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 measuring e-government programmes in Arab States, 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

6.   Directors of e-government programmes in Arab States have held two meetings since the second session of the Committee on Technology for Development. The following sections present the meetings' key discussion topics and outcomes.

A. Meeting held in March 2019

7.   ESCWA held a meeting in Beirut on 19 March 2019. Participants reviewed the preliminary results of the GEMS Maturity Index, evaluated the performance of 12 ESCWA member States in it, and compared the GEMS Maturity Index to the E-Government Development Index of the Department of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). They also discussed ESCWA efforts to globalize the GEMS Maturity Index, in collaboration with DESA.

8.   ESCWA presented progress in enhancing open government in the Arab region, and its intersection with the concepts of digital transformation and open data, especially at the governmental level. Participants also discussed the need to standardize terminology used in Arab countries, define national standards for open data, issue national data classifications, and focus on disseminating data to achieve the desired socioeconomic impact. They emphasized the importance of protecting personal data and establishing effective legislative and executive frameworks to that end.

9.   The meeting concluded with the following key recommendations:

(a) Urge other member States to participate in the current evaluation of the GEMS Maturity Index;

(b) Continue collaborating with ESCWA in the second evaluation of the GEMS Maturity Index, which will begin in the last quarter of 2019;

(c) Support ESCWA in applying open government concepts in its member States, especially in developing open data policies and operational action plans;

(d) Benefit from the technical support provided by ESCWA in updating legislative frameworks related to open government, open data and e-participation;

(e) Benefit from technical support provided by ESCWA to its member States in all areas of digital transformation and the use of new technology in development.

B. Meeting held in September 2020

10.   ESCWA held a second meeting online on 23 September 2020, given the global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The meeting was divided into two parts. In the first part, directors of e-government programmes in ESCWA member 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, which was prepared by the

Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in collaboration with the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of the United Arab Emirates and ESCWA.

11.   In the first session of the first part of the meeting, the representative of ESCWA made a presentation on digital cooperation and development, which covered the different stages of cooperation and the proposed activities at the regional and national levels. The representative of ESCWA also made a presentation on open government in the Arab region, with a focus on the economic and social impact of open government to strengthen investment in the Arab region. The representative of ESCWA made another presentation on technical cooperation in the field of digital transformation and related indicators, with a focus on current and proposed technical cooperation themes in the field of technology, namely digital government, digital transformation, new technology policies, innovation and technology transfer. He also noted activities implemented by ESCWA in 2020 in the field of technology for development.

12.   In the second session of the first part of the meeting, the representative of DESA stressed the need for digital transformation at the global level, especially in view of the pandemic, which had highlighted the importance of digital technology in addressing the crisis and reducing its devastating effects. He also reviewed achievements and innovations in the Arab region.

13.   In the third session of the first part of the meeting, the representatives of Egypt, Qatar, the State of Palestine and Somalia made presentations on their countries' experiences in digital transformation, especially in view of the pandemic.

14.   In the second part of the meeting, Arabic version of the E-Government Survey 2020 was launched, which was prepared by DESA and translated by the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of the United Arab Emirates and ESCWA. In the first session of the second part, following opening statements by representatives of ESCWA, DESA and the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of the United Arab Emirates, the representative of DESA made a presentation on the contents of the E-Government Survey 2020 and the Arab region's performance in the survey. The representative of ESCWA made a presentation focusing on challenges, opportunities and initiatives in the Arab region in the field of digital transformation, and noted initiatives that ESCWA had implemented, such as the GEMS Maturity Index, the Arab Digital Development Report, the Open Government Project, and the Academy of ICT Essentials for Government Leaders in the ESCWA Region (AIGLE).

15.   In the second session of the second part of the meeting, the representatives of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates made interventions on digital government initiatives in their countries.

16.   In the closing session, the representative of ESCWA made a presentation summarizing key topics and proposals put forward at the meeting, notably tackling the challenges facing the Arab region, combatting the pandemic, strengthening the Arabic language, and strengthening regional and international cooperation.

17.   Participants made the following recommendations:

        (a)   Benefit from each other's experiences and enhance regional and international cooperation in this field;

        (b)   Employ new technologies effectively to enhance public services;

        (c)   Pay adequate attention to data in the Arab region, as they are an important asset affecting economic and social development;

        (d)   Operationalize e-participation in the Arab region to ensure the development of citizen-centred services;

(e) Benefit from the opportunities provided by the pandemic for Arab governments to promote digital transformation and harness innovative applications to provide public services.

(f) Focus on the importance of the Arabic language in the field of digital transformation and new technologies, and promote it by enriching digital Arabic content to keep pace with high-speed technological developments;

(g) Continue regional collaboration on transitioning to digital government, promoting open data, developing relevant national policies, and enhancing digital indicators.

III. The way forward

18. ESCWA proposes continuing collaboration on e-government issues within the framework of the platform over the period 2021-2022. 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) Discussing the outcomes of the 2020 GEMS Maturity Index, and progress in the digital transformation of government services in the Arab region;

(b) Regional cooperation in promoting open data and open government;

(c) Technical cooperation in capacity-building and advisory services in the field of digital transformation and new technologies;

(d) Lessons learned from successful experiences in digital transformation and new technologies;

(e) ESCWA coordination between member States and DESA to build capacity in the Arab region in the field of digital government.