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**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

## **REPORT**

### **ACCESSIBLE ARAB REGION- ICT FOR ALL**

**2 DECEMBER 2021, ONLINE, 10:00 –13:00 BEIRUT TIME**

#### **Summary**

Accessible Arab Region: ICT for ALL is one of the main regional priorities for ITU and ESCWA focusing on raising awareness, strengthening capacity and developing resources in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Accessibility, as a key requirement to foster implementation and ensure digital inclusion and empowerment through ICTs for everyone, regardless of their age, gender, ability, or location in the region.

The Accessible Arab Region: ICT for ALL event aimed at sharing and discussing ongoing work and initiatives carried out to promote and support the implementation of policies, strategies and resources to ensure digital inclusion of all people including persons with disabilities in the framework of the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development, CRPD, UNDIS and other related global and regional commitments. It also provided a regional knowledge development platform for ICT accessibility, which aimed to support member States and regional stakeholders in their implementation efforts by sharing good practices and challenges; leveraging their capacity in the ICT accessibility related topics while also offering networking and partnership opportunities to facilitate the development of digitally inclusive societies in the region.

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## **Introduction**

1. Nowadays, digital connectivity plays a vital role in a wide range of activities in society. However, there is great concern that the current COVID-19 crisis has further deepened the existing digital divide. The public and private sector as well as the industry manufacturers need to be motivated to develop and deliver accessible Information and Communication Technologies, while the implementation of ICT accessibility policies and strategies need to gain top priority and be part of the global policymakers' agenda. By doing so, governments will lead by example and ensure that digital information, products, and services are available, affordable, and accessible for all persons, including those with disabilities.
2. The Accessible Arab Region: ICT for ALL event aimed to hold open, informative, and interactive discussions with all interested stakeholders on the importance on ensuring the digital inclusion of everyone and how to use ICT/digital accessibility. It also discussed global and regional implementation of accessibility to ensure that in a context of digitalization of information, services that could have an impact in the lives of all people, such as the vital information and health services provided during the COVID-19 pandemic, also consider the needs and requirements to access digital information of all people without any discrimination of age, gender, ability or location.
3. The main purpose of the event was to present good practices in digital inclusion to encourage stakeholders to join efforts in seeking solutions to eliminate barriers of access to ICTs, enabling human development and promoting accessibility policies that will improve the quality of life of all individuals, with no discrimination.

## **I. RECOMMENDATIONS**

4. Based on the conference's deliberations and discussions, several recommendations were proposed
  - a) For the first time, ITU and ESCWA are organizing this event in the Arab region to raise awareness about the importance of digital accessibility and to provide a platform for dialogue, sharing best practices, knowledge and initiatives. Both organizations hope to replicate this experience and become an annual event inviting more partners from various stakeholders to join.
  - b) A holistic multi-stakeholder's approach is needed to achieve an Accessible Arab Region.
  - c) Policymakers are encouraged to include in the regional and national development strategies policies related to digital accessibility as a catalyst for broader social and economic participation, thus reducing the digital divide and inequality between population groups and ensuring digital inclusion for all persons, including those with disabilities. Governments in the Arab region are invited to develop ICT Accessibility strategies and policies that encourage innovation, partnerships, and entrepreneurships, and to take advantage of the regional templates and tools developed by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU Academy) and ESCWA (Arab Digital Inclusion Platform) and other international and national initiatives that participated in this event.
  - d) Encourage the public and private sectors as well as manufacturers to develop and deliver digitally accessible technologies, platforms and products. Governments can lead by example.

- e) Arab policymakers are encouraged to develop/enhance their national policies and technical guidelines for digital/ICT accessibility and engage all sectors and not only those related to technology, and mainly the Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs).
- f) Need to support innovators and entrepreneurs in the Arab region to develop local solutions to empower persons with disabilities to access ICT tools and services.
- g) Organizations of Persons with Disabilities play an important role in assessing the usefulness, practicality and quality of the products disseminating the knowledge of accessible tools and services and need to be engaged in early stages of e-Accessibility policy/application development.

## **II. PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS**

5. The conference spanned over one day and consisted of three sessions. The presentations and discussions during these sessions are summarized in the following paragraphs.

### **A. Session 1: Digital Accessibility Policies**

6. ESCWA's "National e-accessibility policy template for the Arab region" was presented, which was prepared under the Arab Digital Inclusion Platform project. The template was converted into an interactive tool available online. Mada Center's work was presented. Mada's vision is to improve e-accessibility in Qatar and the world, through supporting the potential of all people with functional impairments like persons with disabilities and older persons. The Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship presented the Jordan experience in digital accessibility, where Jordan aims to ensure everyone in society has access to government services, also to unify standards to ensure accessibility.

### **B. Session 2: Digital Accessibility Platforms and Initiatives**

7. This session discussed the importance of digital accessibility platforms and initiatives. It started by reviewing the "Billion-Strong initiative" that aims to unite and empower the global community of people with disabilities to develop a positive disability identity. This session also discussed the "Knowledge Development Platform" developed by ITU Academy, which helps creating the enabling governmental, economic and technological environment for everyone and everything to connect. ESCWA's "Arab Digital Inclusion Platform" was presented; it supports policy makers in Arab countries to develop/improve their national policies and guidelines to enhance e-accessibility and therefore bridging the digital divide.

### **D. Session 3: Partnerships and Innovation for Digital Accessibility**

8. This session focused on the importance of partnerships and innovation for digital accessibility. It reviewed the "Hackathon initiative" by Alesco, which aims to support the Arab industry for mobile applications especially in the field of education. "ABLE initiative" by AUB was covered; it aims at increasing the success rates of students with disabilities, and developing accessibility to IT resources. Furthermore, "Partners for Sustainable Development" that establishes inclusive education units with e-accessibility aids was presented in addition to the "Prototype of Brail language Converter" developed by university students to help people with blindness to distinguish letters on a large hardware tool.

## **III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK**

### **A. VENUE AND DATE**

9. The conference was organized online using ZOOM platform on 2 December 2021.

## **B. OPENING**

10. Mr. Ahmed Al-Raghy, Senior Advisor at the ITU Arab regional office presented ITU's opening remarks on behalf of Mr. Adel Darwish, Director of ITU Arab regional office. Mr. AlRaghy welcomed participants to this first of its kind event, the result of a fruitful collaboration between ITU and ESCWA. The event comes as part of the "Digital Inclusion Week" which ITU organizes with UNESCO for the fifth year in a row. Mr. Al-Raghy noted that the hope from these events is to support digital inclusion in the Arab Region in collaboration with all stakeholders. In the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, digital inclusion becomes even more important to ensure social justice and equal access to services. He emphasized that persons with disabilities comprise 15% of the world population, and 80% of them live in developing countries. He noted that technology has great potential to remove the barriers that hinder the inclusion of persons with disabilities, whether in the labour market, government and financial services, health, education and communication. He then shared a video by ITU showcasing the importance of digital inclusion.

11. Mr. Haidar Fraihat, Leader of the Statistics, Information Society, and Technology Cluster at ESCWA, welcomed the partners and participants to the first "Accessible Arab Region" event, which he hopes will become an annual event. He noted that today's event is a platform for knowledge exchange, collaboration, and networking. He noted that COVID-19 has widened the digital gap and increased the need for better inclusion of persons with disabilities and all marginalized groups. He noted that persons with disabilities are 15% of the world population, a group of people we cannot leave behind. Persons with disabilities should be included in society and ensure they can reach their potential in the labour market, in communal development, in their knowledge and creativity, and in ICT. Digital inclusion is key to achieve all these things. He added that one of the main priority areas that ESCWA is currently focusing on is digital accessibility and launched a dedicated initiative called "Arab Digital Inclusion Platform" to help policy makers in the region improving / developing their national policies and technical guidelines in the field of e accessibility.

12. Mr. Michael Haddad, UNDP Regional Goodwill Ambassador for Climate Action, welcomed participants to this important event. He noted that persons with disabilities face many barriers in the Arab region leading to their marginalization, and platforms like this are important to hear their voice. He noted the important role for digital inclusion and assistive technology to remove barriers. He mentioned his own example, as someone who become paralyzed from the chest down following an accident when he was 6 years old. He lost 75% of his mobile motor functions. After years of training, he was able to stand up and walk with an exoskeleton— a feat deemed medically impossible. He emphasized that technology and innovation have great potentials and there is a need to invest in digital inclusion. Lastly, he noted that he was giving his speech from Bahrain, where he was opening the "Asian Youth Paralympic Games" and where he will be breaking a new sports record. He noted the important role sports can play is helping the inclusion of youth and persons with disabilities.

## **C. PARTICIPANTS**

13. The conference was attended by more than 100 participants, including government officials and experts who are engaged in the ICT sector and in disability policy, in addition to representatives from Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), and regional organizations dealing with disability, digital government and digital inclusion in the region. The list of participants is contained in Annex I of this report.

## **D. AGENDA**

14. The conference agenda is summarized and set forth below:

- (a) Welcome Remarks;
- (b) Keynote speech: How technology can ensure and empower the rights of persons with disabilities;
- (c) Session 1: Digital Accessibility Policies;
- (d) Session 2: Digital Accessibility Platforms and Initiatives;
- (e) Session 3: Partnerships and Innovation for Digital Accessibility;
- (f) Closing Session.

#### **E. DOCUMENTS**

15. The documents submitted to the conference are contained in Annex II.

## Annex I

### **LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

#### A. COUNTRY ORGANIZATIONS AND EXPERTS

##### **Algeria**

Mr. Bouhouia Abdeslam  
Engineer  
Ministry of Post and Telecommunications

Mr. Moumene Mimoun  
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##### **Egypt**

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Planning and Follow-up specialist  
National council for people with disabilities

Ms. Dalia Atef  
Expert and consultant, Officer of Women and  
Child Management  
National Council for Persons with Disabilities

Mr. Ayman Eltantawy  
CEO  
Kayan Association

Mr. Sameh Saad  
CEO  
Roaya Center For Visual impairment

Mr. Wael Hammam Fouad Hammam  
Planning and follow up specialist  
National council for Persons with Disability

Ms. Rasha Botros  
Cultural Manager  
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Mr. Ahmed ElRaghy  
International Affairs Director  
National Telecom Regulatory Authority (NTRA)

##### **Jordan**

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The Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with  
Disabilities

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Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship

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Disability Inclusion Officer  
Arcenciel

Ms. Zeina Bouharb  
Head of International Cooperation  
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Ms. Carole Hage  
Market & Competition Unit - Tariffs Manager  
Telecommunications Regulatory Authority

Ms. Maha Zouwayhed  
Accessibility Advocate and Innovation Support  
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### **Libya**

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Mr. Sager Alahrash  
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Mr. Saleh Alheyali  
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Mr. Abdurraouf Ali Elbibas  
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General information authority

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### **Somalia**

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### **Syria**

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Billion Strong Organization

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Mr. Bilel Amri  
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### **UAE**

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General Coordinator  
AccessAbilities Expo

Ms. Maisa Obeid  
Accessibility Technology Specialist  
Zayed University

## B. SPECIALIZED AGENCIES AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS IN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

### **United Nations and its Specialized Agencies**

Ms. Roueida El Hage  
Regional Representative  
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Mr. Michael Haddad  
UNDP Regional Goodwill Ambassador for Climate Action

### **WHO**

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Coordinator, Research & Innovation  
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## Annex II

### **LIST OF DOCUMENTS**

(a) Background Documents:

- Agenda
- Information Note

(b) Presentations:

- ADIP-Policy Template
- Qatar's achievements in the field of ICT accessibility
- The Jordanian experience in digital accessibility
- Billion-Strong Initiative
- ICT accessibility the key to achieving a digitally inclusive world
- ADIP- Objectives Overview
- ADIP Features
- Education for All