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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT
WORKSHOP ON DELIVERY OF E-SERVICES IN CIVIL SOCIETY
BEIRUT, 29 NOVEMBER 2010

Summary

Advances in online services offer many opportunities to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to streamline their operations raise new funds and have greater impact. Realizing the importance of ICT applications for building the information society in the ESCWA region, the Information and Communication Technology Division (ICTD) organized a previous workshop on Delivery of E-Services in Civil Society at the United Nations House in Beirut on 28 and 29 December 2009. To complement the material discussed in this workshop, a Toolkit for Implementing e-Commerce Services was launched to provide practical resources to assist NGOs in implementing e-commerce technologies. In follow-up, this workshop, held on 29 November 2010, brings the participants together to review their efforts, share implementation ideas, and discuss advanced applications and was organized to address specific questions and feedback from the participants on how to implement the project recommendations.

The workshop provided participating NGOs with a platform to share their experiences throughout the project duration and follow-up on questions raised in the previous session. In order to facilitate this feedback, an online forum was created on the ESCWA maintained Information Society Portal for the ESCWA Region (ISPER) where participants could discuss their progress and request assistance in implementing the recommendations from the initial workshop. While the previous session focused on the basics of e-commerce and awareness-raising, in response to feedback from the online forum and conversations with the participants, this workshop addressed several key areas: online payment processing, effective social media marketing, and the toolkit delivered as part of the project.

While traditional online services tended to focus on static web pages distributing a specific message, there are many opportunities for NGOs to benefit from social networking and building a person-centric, connected community. By making their communication more effective, this enables organizations to more effectively achieve their goals. In combination with the original recommendations on e-commerce, this workshop session provides the knowledge and practical tools necessary for NGOs to effectively raise funds and monetize their online presences.

In addition, this workshop session built on the previous recommendations regarding participation in online marketplace providers. Particularly for NGOs which are comparatively less well-equipped technically, online marketplaces provide valuable services for electronic processing of transactions. In this way, a many more organizations can receive the benefits of e-services. Specific contact information, and application processes were presented to empower the participants to pursue this option.

The workshop was attended by 8 participants from five ESCWA member countries in addition to a presentation delivered in absentia highlighting the toolkit.

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LIST OF ANNEXES

Introduction

1.   The utilization of information and communications technology (ICT) applications and e-services in the daily life of all citizens has shown promising results in recent years. Mainstreaming ICTs with traditional services greatly improves efficiency, saves time and efforts, speeds up processing, promotes better participation, enhances transparency, facilitates the spread of information and knowledge, and allows new economic opportunities. Within this context, national and regional information society conferences have called for the need to utilize and implement ICT applications and provide quality e-services for all. Most prominently, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) highlighted the importance of ICT applications and their role in sustainable development as well as fields of public administration, business, education, health, employment, environment, agriculture and science.

2.   NGOs are a major player in building the information society; their diversity and, often, hands-on approach to various related issues makes them key players in ensuring equitable and affordable access to ICTs, in particular to ICT applications and e-services, for disadvantaged members of the community. Moreover, a generally strong presence in rural areas, understanding of local cultures and the priorities of indigenous people and small businesses, are other key elements that strengthen their role for the delivery of e-services to all citizens. Through the application of emerging ICTs techniques this key community organizing role can be made even more effective by strengthening the local communication networks as well as integrating them into a larger connected community.

3.   As web technologies continue to advance, a wider variety of options are available for NGOs. While creating a static website, supplemented with e-commerce capabilities was once considered adequate, greater interactivity and networking has now become expected. NGOs which successfully implement these strategies will find themselves better positioned to differentiate themselves online. This in turn, will enable them to better achieve their goals.

4.   The significance of these ICT applications and e-services has been recognized by many NGOs in the region. However, the level of awareness, adoption, use and delivery of e-services varies enormously from one member country to another. In addition, the technical capacity of NGOs is often limited, both by available skills and funding resources. For example, NGOs which work with disadvantaged groups, rural areas, and marginalized beneficiaries are particularly likely to suffer from these limitations. Even within a given country, efforts might not be coordinated, experiences not effectively shared and e-services not implemented based on the priorities of local communities and societies.

5.   Realizing the importance of ICT applications for building the information society in the ESCWA region, the Information and Communication Technology Division (ICTD) organized, in 2009, an Expert Group Meeting on ICT Applications and E-Service in the Public Sector. During this meeting, participants discussed the challenges facing the development, adoption and delivery of e-services in the public sector. This meeting provided the public sector with an opportunity to exchange ideas and discuss ways to overcome those challenges. On 28 and 29 December, 2009, a workshop on the delivery of e-services in civil society was convened by ESCWA to integrate the viewpoints of citizens and communities. It aimed at increasing the awareness, capacities, and capabilities of NGOs in the ESCWA region to develop and use e-commerce services, based on their priorities and development needs. It provided participating NGOs with a platform to share knowledge, experiences and best practices for applying ICTs and delivering e-commerce services.

6.   Since the first workshop occurred, several follow-up activities have been taken. First, the above mentioned online collaboration tools were deployed. Second, the participants were contacted to determine what additional assistance, if any, was required to implement the workshop recommendations. Third, specific information was provided in response to participant requests, addressing areas such as trends in levels of time invested in online initiatives by NGOs and expectations for social media projects. Finally, detailed implementation information was provided on the processes for participating in selected online marketplaces.

7.   In line with the above, the follow-up Workshop on Delivery of E-Services in Civil Society was organized by ICTD at the United Nations House in Beirut on 29 November 2010. This workshop gave participants the opportunity to share their experience with each other, identify successful practices and focus on more advanced on line service applications. Both workshops are part of an ESCWA-funded project and will thus be complemented with a follow-up discussion forum and progress evaluation, both by ESCWA and participating NGOs.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.   The following is a list of the main recommendations made by the participants and discussed during the workshop:

(a) NGOs should realize the importance of incorporating social media in their online efforts, as well as adopting fundraising and e-commerce solutions focused on individual members of the public;

(b) The online presence of NGOs promotes information and knowledge collection and dissemination, provides partnerships and direct linking opportunities with other organizations, attracts donors and funds, and extends their outreach and cyber presence. Creating an active network of online affiliates can help build a fundraising network.

(c) E-commerce is positioned to create new economic opportunities at the grassroots level for organizations and local communities, and improve existing ones. However, while e-commerce is growing more quickly in the region, the benefits of e-commerce for NGOs has not kept pace; in addition, NGOs are poorly represented in already existing business-to-consumer (B2C) e-commerce portals. NGOs with either goods or services to offer are urged to benefit from these B2C portals in order to help local communities put their products online, which could positively reflect on poverty alleviation and employment creation;

(d) NGOs, with limited resources and technical IT skills, should seek to join already existing online market places which provide secure e-commerce services instead of setting up such systems themselves. NGOs should try to specialize themselves within a marketplace by providing unique services or products;

(e) Given that processing of e-payments is a particularly difficult issue in the region, organizations should seriously consider making use of the payment processing services of online marketplace facilitators and 3rd part payment processors. Diverse and secure online payment methods are available in order to meet the variety of needs in the region;

(f) E-commerce has been shown to reduce costs, increase revenues and improve efficiency. However, succeeding in e-commerce requires resources, marketing, and building a customer base and communicating with customers. Having this in mind, NGOs should:

  (i) Conduct a feasibility study to identify the locally produced goods/services which are suited for e-commerce and are most desired at the local, regional and international levels;

  (ii) Study all technical and legal aspects while planning for an e-commerce project, and, in case of barriers, seek solutions from existing resources;

  (iii) Develop e-commerce marketing strategies for their products/offerings and involve youth;

(iv) Build interest and attract customers by offering a variety of content and information adapted to the needs of users;

(v) Ensure privacy of customers and online information security when delivering e-commerce services, and be transparent about their security measures and privacy policies in order to build the trust of users;

(vi) Dedicate time to answering online queries/questions, updating information and posting new information regularly;

(g) Joining such social networking applications as Facebook and Twitter can be rewarding and useful. However, to be used successfully, these tools often require active promotional activities such as paid marketing campaigns to gain initial visibility. NGOs are encouraged to consult the toolkit for NGOs produced by ESCWA for details on implementing this type of system.

(h) The sustainability of NGOs requires innovative e-service solutions which should not only be limited to online services but extend to mobile phone applications as well. NGOs are encouraged to benefit from mobile applications in such services as fundraising and volunteering;

(i) Multi-stakeholder partnerships between NGOs, the private sector and local Government are essential, and collaboration should be encouraged in order to stimulate use of ICTs and e-commerce services for local communities;

(j) National plans, laws and regulations for building trust and security in the use of e-services should be formulated and implemented in order to secure the infrastructure necessary for the use of e-commerce;

(k) The e-commerce toolkit provided by ESCWA will be supplemented by ongoing support from ICTD staff on an as needed basis after the close of the workshop.

II. PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSION SESSIONS

A. OVERVIEW OF E-COMMERCE

9.   Sessions of the first day commenced with a presentation on an e-commerce toolkit, prepared by Mr. Alaa Karmeh and delivered by Ms. Hania Sabbidin Dimassi, Research Assistant at ICTD. Ms. Dimassi explained that the toolkit will allow NGOs to implement e-commerce services in a simple manner. The presentation reviewed the five components of the toolkit starting from the planning stage, developing the e-commerce site, and building user trust. Using metrics on the growth of e-commerce in the commercial sector, she made the case that significant opportunities await NGOs to utilize these opportunities in their work. From a practical perspective, she described the requirements for building the e-commerce site components including e-payment and the free tools and resources available online for the purpose.

10.   Mr. Matthew Perkins, IT Officer at ICTD, gave a presentation on social media, e-commerce and NGOs. The presentation began by highlighting the value that social media can bring to the online efforts of NGOs. By providing metrics on the growth of social media usage in the ESCWA region, the importance of this aspect of online activity was emphasized. Specific techniques and methodologies for promoting online social media campaigns were reviewed, with special emphasis on creation and adaptation of online marketing efforts. Techniques for facilitating fundraising at the individual and grass-roots levels were described. Emphasis was placed on the value proposition of productizing and NGO's services to facilitate e-commerce implementations.

11.   Mr. Syed T. Ahmed, Associate IT Officer at ICTD focused his presentation on fund raising, e-commerce enabling services such as intermediaries, and available online payment options. The topic of fundraising was generally divided into two sections. First, the opportunities for online fundraising extended the emphasis placed on raising money from individual sources in large numbers, rather than a few institutional donors. Second, the use of techniques such as affiliate networking and advertising to enable NGOs to co-brand their efforts in offering fund-raising opportunities was highlighted.   The value of intermediaries to enable e-commerce was stressed to provide organizations with low IT aptitude to participate actively online without needing to invest substantial resources in creating a home-grown solution. Finally, a review of the internationally available e-payment methodologies was very useful for NGOs to understand what services they could use to enable online fund collection without rising to the level of formal credit card processing overhead.

12.   Mr. Rami Zaatari, First IT Officer at ICTD spoke to the participants about the regional technical and legal situation in the ESCWA region. Among the valuable insights his data provided, was the correlation between the level of broadband availability and the levels of ecommerce experienced by the country in question. Particular success stories were seen in UAE and Kuwait, with e-commerce levels significantly higher than the baseline. In addition to these descriptions, Mr. Zaatari provided recommendations for catalyzing future growth, which included the need to harmonize and modernize cyber legislation, and providing wider dissemination of broadband technology in the region. Finally, Mr. Zaatari provided an overview of the e-payment options customized to the regional level.

B. NGO EXPERIENCES

13.   Participating NGOs were given the floor to present their work and report on in-progress e-services or plans for such services. One of the participants from Yemen, Mr. Abdullah Al-Suhaibi gave a presentation to the group relating the experiences of e-services in Attakaful Foundation in 2010. In follow-up to the previous workshop in this project, Attakaful decided to facilitate a group of young IT professionals to pursue an entrepreneurial initiative in the field of IT services. This concern has participated in activities such as ESCWA's project on "Knowledge networks through ICT access points for disadvantaged communities", and providing web site products to NGOs in Yemen.

14.   The presentation from ReefNet was made by Ms. Rudaina Al-Kindi who gave an overview of the e-services provided by the project to rural communities of Syria as well as its latest activities. Of the notable achievements was the increase in the number of local community websites from 45 to 95 in 2010. Another major achievement was the addition of an online public market for selling locally made products such as soaps and handicrafts. Ms. Nouseeba Al-Moutlak continued the presentation by focusing on the case of Yabroud in rural Syria. She described the progress achieved in e-commerce and the opportunities provided to local industries in the national Syrian market and other Arab countries.

15.   Ms. Nada Hamzeh gave a number of tips, dos and don'ts in her presentation on the use of social networking means. She gave a detailed description of selected online tools and applications. She also explained the best practices, supported by several examples, for increasing effectiveness and outreach. Her presentation ended with the ten key principles for the successful use of various social media means.

C. CLOSING AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

16.   In the final session, participants were given the floor to pose questions and deliberate all issues presented during the workshop. A list of recommendations was compiled by the ESCWA team and presented by Ms. Nibal Idlebi.

17.   As this workshop marks the conclusion phase of this project, the remaining tasks of the project are closed. The main follow-up activity will be an online discussion forum to which all participating NGOs will be invited to discuss their plans or current involvement in e-services. The forum will be moderated by ICTD

and will be hosted on the Information Society Portal for the ESCWA Region (ISPER). At the conclusion of the workshop, ICTD discussed the progress achieved with the participating NGOs to enable proper evaluation of the project. In addition, an e-commerce toolkit to provide guidance and resources for NGOs to improve their online presences will be provided on ISPER in Arabic.

II. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. VENUE AND DATE

18.   The workshop was held at the United Nations House in Beirut, Lebanon, on 29 November 2010.

B. OPENING

19.   Ms. Nibal Idlebi, Chief of the ICT Applications Section, opened the workshop, welcoming the participants and introducing its objectives. She summarized the objectives and results of the previous workshop held in December of 2009 explaining that the current one is organized as a follow-up session. She then focused on the importance of social networks in marketing, raising awareness, and outreach highlighting that many NGOs in the ESCWA region have not yet realized the potential that e-services bring to improving the efficiency of work. Many are missing out on the opportunities that ICT has to offer nowadays for a variety of such reasons as lack of adequate legal framework, the need to build user trust in e-services particularly in issues of privacy and protection, and the issue of online payment. Ms. Idlebi explained the agenda of the workshop and expected timelines.

C. PARTICIPANTS

20.   The workshop was attended by eight participants from five ESCWA member countries, namely, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syrian Arab Republic, and Yemen. Five ICTD staff members participated on behalf of ESCWA. See annex I for the list of participants.

D. AGENDA

21.   Presentations and discussions were held over three sessions. The agenda of the workshop is summarized below:

1. Opening session.
2. An overview of the Toolkit for implementing e-commerce services;
3. Social media and e-commerce technologies for NGOs;
4. Extending online services to harness e-commerce;
5. E-payment solutions for NGOs;
6. A session on NGO experiences;
7. Closing and future outlook.

E. DOCUMENTS

22.   Documents and presentations of the workshop are available online at the following URL: http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=1499E.

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* Issued as submitted.

Annex II

LIST OF DOCUMENTS

Title

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1. Documents:

    -   Agenda
    -   Information Note

2. Presentations:

    -   Toolkit for implementing basic e-commerce services for NGOs

    -   Social media, e-commerce and NGOs

    -   Extending your online services to harness e-commerce

    -   E-commerce and payment solutions in the region

    -   Attakaful Foundation e-services in 2010

    -   Reefnet: rural Syria online (*in Arabic*)

    -   Introduction to social media means (*in* Arabic)