



Expert Group Meeting on: Innovation and Technology for advancing the Knowledge-Based Economy in the Arab region

Amman, Jordan, 3-4 June 2015

Information Note

1. Background

The Information Communication Technology (ICT) revolution which began nearly two decades ago changed the global landscape of socioeconomic development. The innovation of ICTs has increased our capacity to gather and analyze information, coupled with a vast increase in data creation and information dissemination. As such, larger parts of human knowledge can now be manipulated, processed, and used by decision support systems in more fields, generating various economic values. Knowledge has emerged as a major source of value and the driving force behind productivity and economic growth in the 21st century, ultimately leading a worldwide transformation of traditional economies into knowledge-based economies, though to a different degree of sophistication.

With knowledge as its main productive factor, the transformation to KBEs starts with changes in the roles that policy makers, business managers, entrepreneurs, academia and government engage in economic activities and with each others. This new economic paradigm brought about fundamental changes whereby building on and using current knowledge is essential in the development process, creating new products, processes, and services along the way. Moreover, most countries transitioning to KBEs have exhibited a positive growth and a spill over effect to their social and environmental sectors.

Technology and innovation were the impetus behind the development of KBEs, placing data, information and knowledge in the realm of future innovators. In such economy, continuous growth requires sustained investments in research, development and innovation (RDI); knowledge is therefore not only applied, but new knowledge is also created and introduced into the innovation process.

While the ICT revolution has helped most Arab states in their transition towards information societies, the transformation from information to knowledge societies has been a regional and global challenge. Nevertheless, research evidence shows that the knowledge-based economy has been developing in some parts of the Arab region (especially in GCC), but it remained lagging behind other regions of the world.¹ On the other hand, the region has been facing tremendous geopolitical challenges since the Arab spring of 2012, coupled with dwindling socioeconomic development prospects especially in its least developing countries. High unemployment rates, especially among Arab youth, were a main factor fuelling these uprisings. Unemployment is also disproportionately high among women; and in view of recent events, the situation is likely to worsen.

Behind this bleak background, major hurdles facing the Arab region remain to be tackled before any ongoing transition extends towards sustainable, inclusive, and gender-responsive socioeconomic development. Issues such as high illiteracy rates in some countries, outdated educational systems that are incapable of delivering the appropriate skills and competencies, disconnected innovation systems, inadequate spending on RDI especially from the private productive sector, and in some cases local cultural and legal barriers make the roadmap to KBEs in many Arab states a wishful headline disconnected from reality.

¹ The World Bank, The Knowledge Economy Index (KEI) 2000-2012

Therefore the Arab region ought to place greater emphasis on creating an ecosystem more conducive to innovation, and entrepreneurship especially at the grassroots level. Starting with appropriate policies and strategies that facilitate the integration of various components into a virtuous innovation system at national level should be adopted and implemented. A fundamental element of such innovation systems is a strong human capital base, coupled with absorptive economy that provides incentives and an enabling environment to harness skilled talents at home. . These are critical steps towards developing KBEs and stable societies in the Arab region.

International discussion on development issues, spearheaded by the United Nations, has increasingly recognised the crucial role of Science Technology and Innovation (STI) in furthering development and economic growth. As such, ESCWA has been engaged with a number of UN agencies, with extensive experience in developing countries, for the aim of sharing experiences and knowledge. In this EGM, ESCWA is collaborating with UNCTAD for its long experience in Innovation Policy development.

Since its establishment in 2010, the ESCWA Technology Centre (ETC) has implemented a number of activities dedicated to fostering Innovation in the Arab region, such as the design of MENA Innovation Scoreboard and commercialization tours. These activities highlighted the dire need and the importance of supporting ESCWA member states in formulating policies and strategies which promote RDI in the Arab region. As a response to those needs, the Technology for Development Division (TDD) at ESCWA has created a new Innovation Section in 2014, dedicated to boosting the formulation and implementation of Innovation policies in the Arab region.

2. Objectives

The main objective of this Expert Group Meeting (EGM) is to explore the role innovation and technology play in building KBEs in the Arab region. As such, the meeting will compile identified needs and priorities of the Arab region and discuss viable approaches for harnessing innovation and technology for the transformation to KBEs, while examining possible linkages with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and ways for advancing the development agenda beyond 2015. The meeting's deliberations will be enriched through the presentation of selected national, regional and international experiences and practical examples from both developed and developing countries. It will also provide an opportunity to exchange knowledge on related best practices that can serve as a platform for better collaboration among different stakeholders.

The results of these discussions and analyses are crucial for ESCWA and the region alike; as they provide a better understanding of the needs of Arab states in adopting innovation and technology as main enablers of KBEs. The EGM will equally explore the role and activities which ESCWA could undertake in its future work programme in order to support member states in their advancement to KBEs and the realisation of sustainable economic and social development agenda.

3. Topics

Following is a list of topics that will be discussed during the course of the meeting:

- (1) The role of Technology, and RDI in realising equitable and gender-responsive economic development, in particular the SDGs.
- (2) Governments' policies and strategies as facilitators in the establishment of an innovation ecosystem.
- (3) Establishing an adequate ecosystem conducive to promoting cross-sectoral innovation, including intellectual property management systems, and mechanisms vital for encouraging innovation and promoting entrepreneurship.
- (4) Institutions of higher education and research and development as essential providers of skilled human capital, needed for the development of knowledge-based economies.

- (5) Assessment frameworks and benchmarking models for measuring the development status of KBEs.
- (6) Best practices in research, development and innovation (RDI) in the public and private sector especially in SMEs.

4. Outcomes

The expected outcomes of the EGM are:

- (1) Identifying the developmental priorities of the Arab region in relation to innovation and technology and their critical role in the development of KBEs and sustainable development;
- (2) Setting up a feasible action plan which harnesses innovation and technology for the development of KBEs in the Arab region;
- (3) Jump-starting regional and international partnerships in STI for more competitive local productive sectors.

5. Previous and related work by ESCWA and UNCTAD

- Competitiveness of the ICT Sector in the Arab Region: Innovation and Investment Imperatives, 2013.
<http://www.escwa.un.org/information/pubaction.asp?PubID=1374>
- The Broken Cycle: universities, research and society in the Arab Region: proposals for change, 2014.
<http://etc-un.org/PFiles/Broken%20Cycle%20Study%20-%20English%20Version.pdf>
- Impact of Selected e-Services on Socioeconomic Development in the Arab Region, 2013.
<http://www.escwa.un.org/information/pubaction.asp?PubID=1390>
- Towards a Legal Framework for Intellectual Property that Promotes Innovation and Creativity in the ESCWA Member Countries, 2012 (Arabic)
<http://www.escwa.un.org/information/pubaction.asp?PubID=1210>
- Study on Technology Transfer, Economic Models and Successes in the Arab Countries, 2012 (Arabic).
<http://www.escwa.un.org/information/pubaction.asp?PubID=1208>
- Seminar on Legal and Regulatory Requirements for Sustainable Knowledge Society in the Arab Region. 2013 (Arabic).
<http://www.escwa.un.org/information/pubaction.asp?PubID=1278>
- UNCTAD's current studies on Science, Technology and Innovation:
<http://unctad.org/en/pages/publications/Science,-Technology-and-Innovation---Current-Issues-%28Series%29.aspx>
- UNCTAD's Information Economy Report series (ICT and development)
<http://unctad.org/en/Pages/Publications/InformationEconomyReportSeries.aspx>
- UNCTAD's Technology and Innovation Report series:
<http://unctad.org/en/pages/publications/Technology-Innovation-Report.aspx>
- UNCTAD's National Science, Technology and Innovation Reviews:
[http://unctad.org/en/pages/publications/Science,-Technology-and-Innovation-Policy-Reviews-\(STIP-Reviews\).aspx](http://unctad.org/en/pages/publications/Science,-Technology-and-Innovation-Policy-Reviews-(STIP-Reviews).aspx)

6. Participation and registration

Participants in the EGM will include experts from International Organizations such as UNCTAD, the World Bank, the United Nations University (UNU), relevant ministries, private and public research centres, academia, incubators and the private sector. Participants will be nominated by ESCWA. Invited participants are requested to register for the meeting by filling out the registration form and returning it by email, to escwa-tdd@un.org before 3 April 2015.

7. Organization, format, venue and dates

The meeting is organized by the Technology for Development Division (TDD) at ESCWA in collaboration with UNCTAD. It will be held during 3-4 June 2015 at Kempinski Hotel in Amman, Jordan.

It will include a number of specialised presentations, case studies from selected ESCWA member states on the above topics, as well as discussion sessions focussing on building knowledge-based economies in the Arab region.

8. Working language

Arabic and English are the working languages of the meeting.

9. Travel and accommodation

All participants are expected to inquire on their visa requirement to Jordan and secure one ahead of their anticipated travel date. ESCWA will cover the travel and daily subsistence allowance (DSA) of invited meeting participants from selected countries, especially those coming from least developed countries.

10. Additional information

Further information and documentation is available at the following URL:
<http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=3587E>

Inquiries and request for additional information should be addressed to:

Ms. Nibal Idlebi
Chief, Innovation Section
Technology for Development Division
ESCWA
PO Box 11-8575, Beirut, Lebanon
Tel: +961-1-978540
Fax: +961-1-981510
Email: idlebi@un.org

Mr. Nael Almulki
National Officer,
ESCWA Technology Centre
Technology for Development Division
Royal Scientific Society, Amman, Jordan
Tel: +962-6-5343346
Fax: +962-6-5341092
Email: almulki@un.org

Ms. Hania Dimassi
Research Assistant, Innovation Section
Technology for Development Division, ESCWA
PO Box 11-8575, Beirut, Lebanon
Tel: +961-1-978546
Fax: +961-1-981510
Email: dimassi@un.org