UNITED NATIONS

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Expert Group Meeting on "Frontier Technologies and the 2030 Agenda in the Arab Region: Implications on Employment and Youth". Beirut, 21-22 June 2018

PRELIMINARY INFORMATION NOTE

I. BACKGROUND

Technological innovations, and today's **frontier technologies (FT)**, cause lasting change to our lives, particularly in terms of economic and social development. While convinced of its numerous benefits, the Arab region shares global concerns regarding technology's harmful effects, notably on unemployment[1] and inequality. Adequate policies and regulation can ensure that FT are optimally aligned with desired development outcomes, chiefly the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

70% of Internet users in this region are concerned with Artificial Intelligence (AI)'s potential for privacy infringement, while 46% worry that AI could cause loss of jobs[2], with robots and AI replacing human jobs on a large scale, resulting in mass un/underemployment and impoverishment. This, in a region already racked with high youth unemployment, is a formidable challenge. New opportunities in analytical and consultant roles are significant to Arab educated youth, who tend to possess relevant mathematical and scientific knowledge but are not currently engaged with FT. The mismatch of skills between market requirements and educational outcomes is widespread and severe.

Many Arab countries have already developed initiatives and policies to tackle AI. These rapidly advancing areas will require the region to develop adequate legislative tools to promote and regulate a safe eco-system for the businesses and humans involved. Governments will need to lead at critical junctions, from ethics to governance, in addition to education and retraining.

ESCWA can assist member States in promoting and drafting template policies and regulations, encouraging continuous revision of the relevant programs in education, retraining and research, highlighting the enabling roles of AI and FT in the service of SDG implementation, and promoting appropriate tax and regulatory measures such as Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) incentives.

II. OBJECTIVE & SCOPE

This meeting will ask stakeholders to explore means of accelerating the benefits of FT and innovation in local and regional development while limiting their negative impact, notably on security and youth employment. The meeting will revisit "over reported" needs and special priorities of the Arab region, considering solutions enabled by frontier technologies. Proceedings will be enriched through the presentations of selected experiences, initiatives and practical examples from across the region.

III. OUTCOMES

The expected outcomes of the meeting are:

1.   Identify the most relevant / highest impact FTs for the region over the coming decade; and

highlight the promised benefits (to sustainable development) and potential harm of these technologies.

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[1] Recent studies estimate that less than 5% of all occupations can be automated entirely, yet 60% of all occupations have at least 30% of constituent activities, which could be automated. In addition, 65% of jobs held by high school graduates or less educated individuals are automatable, while no jobs for graduate degree holders would be lost to automation, and only 1% among undergraduate degree holders

[2] Arab World Online Report 2017(MBRSG)

2. Define the leadership roles expected of key stakeholders (governments, private sector, civil society) to transform sustainable development challenges into lucrative and safe economic and social opportunities

3. Identify priority areas in reforming curricula, delivery methods and approaches to learning at all levels to benefit from exponential developments in technologies and related economies;

4. Develop a roadmap towards the realistic, locally-sensitive quantification of the impact of FT on employment, particularly among the youth.

5. Draw lessons learned and best practices from successful localized applications of FT to economic and social challenges in the region.

6. Promote general guidelines and regulatory templates, emphasizing the importance and benefits of regional coordination and policy coherence, to accelerate the productivity benefits of FT while mitigating their undesired effects.

IV. PARTICIPATION & REGISTRATION

Participants will include government officials in the fields of education, labor, industry, and trade. Representatives of civil society, the private sector and academia will also be invited to take part.

V. ORGANIZATION, FORMAT, VENUE & DATES

The EGM will take place from 21-22 June 2018 at the UN House in Beirut, Lebanon. It will include specialized presentations on the above topics, as well as moderated panel discussions focused on effectively harnessing frontier technologies and innovations in the Arab region.

VI. WORKING LANGUAGE

Arabic and English are the working languages of the meeting.

VII. CORRESPONDENCE

Correspondence and inquiries concerning the workshop should be addressed to:

Mr. Fouad Mrad, Ph.D	Ms. Manal Tabbara
Senior Program Manager	Administrative Assistant
Technology for Development Division	Technology for Development Division
ESCWA	ESCWA
Beirut, Lebanon	Beirut, Lebanon
Tel: +961 1 981 541	Tel: +961 1 981 543
Email: mrad@un.org	Email: tabbaram@un.org

For additional information, please visit the meeting website at:
https://www.unescwa.org/events/events-list