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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT

**WORKSHOP ON DELIVERY OF E-SERVICES IN CIVIL SOCIETY
BEIRUT, 28-29 DECEMBER 2009**

Summary

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are a major player in building the information society. Their diversity, hands-on approach, and presence in local communities make them key players in ensuring equitable and affordable access to information and communications technology (ICT) applications and e-services, especially for disadvantaged communities. The significance of ICT applications and e-services has been recognized by many NGOs in the region; however, the level of awareness, adoption, and delivery of e-services varies significantly from one member country to another and even within a given country itself.

Realizing the importance of ICT applications for building the information society in the ESCWA region, the Information and Communication Technology Division (ICTD) organized the Workshop on Delivery of E-Services in Civil Society at the United Nations House in Beirut on 28 and 29 December 2009. The workshop 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.

The workshop provided participating NGOs with a platform to share knowledge, experiences and best practices for applying ICTs and delivering e-commerce services in civil society. It covered the fundamentals of e-commerce, the importance of and modalities for using e-services, the latest web trends and available online tools, and the status of ICTs and e-services in the ESCWA region. It also included case studies and success stories of organizations, enterprises and entrepreneurs utilizing e-commerce facilities. The workshop accommodated sessions dedicated to sharing NGO experiences.

Discussions that took place acknowledged the positive effect that e-commerce has on reducing costs, increasing revenues and improving efficiency. However, NGOs planning to invest in e-commerce should properly assess the technical and financial requirements versus their needs and available resources. At this point, it was highlighted that NGOs should make use of free tools and applications available online to enhance their online presence. NGOs should also exert additional efforts in raising the awareness of local communities on the importance of ICTs. Since the workshop is part of an ESCWA project on the same topic, it will include a follow-up activity in the form of an online discussion forum to which all participating NGOs and experts will be invited.

The workshop was attended by 21 participants from seven ESCWA member countries in addition to one expert from Turkey currently working in Finland.

CONTENTS

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.   Non-governmental organizations (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.

3.   ICTs in general, and web technologies in particular, promote information and knowledge collection and dissemination, provide partnerships and direct linking with other organizations, attract donors and funds, and extend the outreach and cyberpresence of NGOs. In addition, e-services are positioned to create new economic opportunities at the grassroots level for organizations and citizens, and improve existing ones.

4.   The significance of 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. 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. However, the viewpoints of citizens and communities are still required.

6.   In line with the above, the Workshop on Delivery of E-Services in Civil Society was organized by ICTD at the United Nations House in Beirut on 28 and 29 December 2009. 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. The workshop is 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

7.   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 building and/or maintaining an online presence, ranging from static web pages to interactive websites;

(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 cyberpresence. NGOs are encouraged to build, update and maintain an online presence, ranging from static web pages to interactive portals;

(c)   E-commerce is positioned to create new economic opportunities at the grassroots level for organizations and local communities, and improve existing ones. However, the benefits of e-commerce have not been realized by NGOs in the region; in addition, they 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)   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;

(f)   Joining such social networking applications as Facebook and Twitter can be rewarding and useful. However, to be used successfully, these tools require regular updating and significant labour. NGOs should carefully weigh their benefits before using them;

(g)   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;

(h)   ICT applications in general and e-commerce in particular require good ICT infrastructure. In order to ensure affordable, universal connectivity, access points should be established to improve access, especially in rural and marginalized areas;

(i)   The use and adoption of e-commerce services require ICT skills. The ICT literacy skills of the public should be improved through NGO-assisted training and capacity-building programmes;

(j)   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;

(k)   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;

(l)   Diverse and secure online payment methods should be provided in order to meet the variety of needs in the region; thus innovative e-payment solutions tailored to the local context of communities should be encouraged;

(m) The benefits of ICT and ICT applications for socio-economic development, particularly e-commerce, are not well understood by NGOs and citizens alike. Awareness-raising campaigns are needed in this regard;

(n)   A dedicated curriculum on e-commerce should be included in capacity-building training provided to NGOs.

II. PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSION SESSIONS

A. OVERVIEW OF E-COMMERCE

8.   Sessions of the first day commenced with a presentation on e-commerce fundamentals given by Ms. Sukaina Al-Nasrawi, Associate IT Officer at ICTD. In her presentation, Ms. Al-Nasrawi defined e-commerce as being the use of electronic communication to do business in one of five categories: business-to-consumer, business-to-business, business processes, business-to-Government, and consumer-to-consumer. The presentation overviewed the legal issues pertaining to e-commerce in terms of contractual commitments, online conditions, and data privacy. Following a step-by-step guide on the provision of e-commerce services, Ms. Al-Nasrawi briefed the participants on the status of e-commerce in the ESCWA region indicating that additional efforts are required to promote its presence.

9.   Ms. Itir Akdogan, lecturer at Helsinki University, delivered a presentation on the means to use e-services in general for sustaining the operations of NGOs. She stressed the vitality of e-commerce to enhance the sustainability of NGOs by improving efficiency, reducing costs, promoting collective work, and encouraging community participation. E-commerce services are not far-fetched; numerous Web2.0 applications are low cost, ubiquitous, innovative and effective. They are also valuable means for fund-raising. The presentation then gave a number of case studies on the latest trends in online shopping, e-learning, environment preservation as well as examples on current social networking media. In the final part of the presentation, Ms. Akdogan gave a list of recommendations on the use of e-services; going online was highlighted as being the most important. Other recommendations included the need to: (a) properly evaluate and assess the needs and priority of an NGO before selecting and proceeding with a given e-service; (b) continuously share information; (c) gradually resort to the most recent and innovative online services and applications; and (d) make use of mobile technologies.

10.   Mr. Matthew Perkins, IT Officer at ICTD, gave a presentation on available ICT tools and applications that could facilitate the delivery of e-services by NGOs. He explained that NGOs may use such already

available online portals to market their products and services as online souks that are relatively simple to use and offer a wide variety of services and options. Some NGOs, however, may opt to build their own portals or blogs although this option may be resource-exhaustive in terms of funding requirements and skills needed. Mr. Perkins highlighted a number of sites to demonstrate the different models used for displaying and selling products.

B. CASE STUDIES AND SUCCESS STORIES

11.   Selected NGOs and enterprises participated in the workshop as successful e-commerce case studies. Fair Trade Egypt (FTE), a registered trade organization, was able to reach a considerable level of success regionally and internationally through a gradual build-up of its online presence. In a presentation on the experience of FTE, Ms. Mona El-Sayed, General Manager, explained that the organization aims to empower local Egyptian communities, namely artisans, through the application of the ten principles of fair trade. Through a two-staged process, FTE has thus far transformed its static website into a business-to-business (B2B) e-commerce portal. The textual and photographic content of the portal is produced by FTE with the help of consultants and volunteers whereas technical maintenance is done in-house. In a third upcoming stage, FTE will be working to transform its portal into a more interactive and up-to-date one. In a list of recommendations, Ms. El-Sayed highlighted the importance of keeping a record of website and sales statistics.

12.   Ms. Joumana Medlej, freelance artist and designer, described her personal venture into e-commerce. With limited technical skills, Ms. Medlej was able to make use of the potential that technology provides to young entrepreneurs and small enterprises. She gave several examples of online websites that offer free solutions and applications useful for starting and maintaining e-commerce activities. Products on display could range from handmade items to art and books. She also gave an example of an online publishing tool that allows self-publishing of an author's work. She finally stressed the importance of e-branding – having ones own brand online.

13.   Ms. Nada Hamzeh, Programme Manager of Women in Technology (WIT) Lebanon, commenced her presentation with an introduction of the WIT organization for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which aims to empower women through training in business planning, professional development and IT. She gave several examples of WIT-trained women who have been successful in establishing online blogs or launching online e-commerce businesses to sell such items as souvenirs or artisanal items. One particular example is of a 68-year old Lebanese woman who has been successful in selling hand-made products of her village to worldwide markets through online communications. A video was displayed of this lady describing her experience.

14.   Nahdet El Mahrousa was one of the beneficiary NGOs invited to participate in the workshop. Ms. Noha Sallam, Chairperson, delivered a presentation on this NGO describing its mission to engage and activate young Egyptian professionals in the development domain. An incubator of innovative social enterprises is at the core of the activities of this NGO. Other activities and programmes include a career and development entrepreneurship office, a young innovators awards, and specialized programmes on citizenship. Although not yet involved in e-services, the NGO aspires to gradually enhance its online presence and deliver e-services according to the needs of its beneficiaries. It has already paid attention to the importance of having a website and selecting a suitable domain name as part of its e-branding efforts.

15.   Mr. Ahmed Eisa, President of the Gedaref Digital City Organization (GDCO), focused on the e-agriculture project implemented by GDCO. The project utilized a global positioning system (GPS) and a geographical information system (GIS) to allow farmers to monitor and plan their agricultural produce. The project supplies farmers with online marketing options, training and the opportunity of networking with other farmers to share experiences and best practices. The project already includes a database of over 10,000 farmers in the Sudan and its website provides information on the prices of all agricultural produce on a daily basis. Mr. Eisa then explained how GDCO made use of mobile technology to deliver value-added services as

part of this project. Through a mobile phone, farmers have access to information on weather news, produce prices, fertilizers, and other items. The project has also been used in mapping and monitoring forests in Gedaref, the Sudan.

C. E-SERVICES OVERVIEW AND THE ROLE OF NGOS

16.   Sessions of the second day commenced with a presentation delivered by Mr. Rami Zaatari on E-Services Landscape in the ESCWA Region. In his presentation, Mr. Zaatari gave background information on the WSIS and its outcomes which stressed the importance of ICT applications in supporting sustainable development. He then discussed the status of ICT infrastructure in the region by displaying the most recent statistics. As to e-services, he noted that the adoption and penetration levels vary from service to service and from country to country. For example, countries with higher gross national income, namely those in the Gulf region, were seen to have adopted e-commerce faster than other ESCWA member countries. Countries also vary in the extent they have focused on facilitating e-commerce activities. For example, only half of the ESCWA member countries have issued, or are in the process of issuing, e-commerce and e-signature laws. Nonetheless, e-commerce still faces a variety of such obstacles as social and cultural resistance to ICT, low ICT literacy, and lack of consumer trust in e-services. The presentation then listed a few of the more successful e-payment solutions and e-commerce portals in the region and ended with a list of recommendations, some of which are: (a) formulation of national plans for building trust and enhancing security in e-services; (b) provision of affordable access to rural and marginalized areas; and (c) improving ICT skills.

17.   Mr. Khalil Abdel Massih, Citizenship Director at Microsoft, focused in his presentation on the Government-citizen relationship indicating that local Governments are closer to the people than federal ones. NGOs are even much closer and have a practical feel of what communities need and what resources they have to satisfy those needs. He then explained that the rise of social networking has placed more strain on e-services because of the present limitations: citizens in rural areas with limited or no access to ICT and the "non-web" generation who are unable to join the web movement. There is thus a pressing need for change and finding practical solutions. This is where NGOs have a critical role to play as a vehicle to deliver ICTs and e-services to all community strata. Mr. Abdel Massih ended with listing what Microsoft has to offer in terms of software grants, ICT literacy curricula and train-the-trainers workshops.

D. NGO EXPERIENCES

18.   Participating NGOs were given the floor to present the their work and report on in-progress e-services or plans for such services. Ms. Randa Chemaly, Marketing Manager at Fair Trade Lebanon (FTL), explained the objectives of FTL to empower small food producers and farmers in Lebanon by selling their produce on the international market under one brand name. To that end, FTL places emphasis on quality control, high standards of food production, and labelling. Ms. Chemaly described the journey of FTL in the electronic environment starting out with simple e-mails to build partnerships worldwide and seek donors. Currently, FTL maintains its own website, a blog site, and a Facebook group.

19.   Mr. Mohammad El-Akhdar, Chief Technology Officer at the Social Relief and Welfare Organization (Al Moasat), delivered a presentation describing the activities and divisions of the NGO which is located in Saida, Lebanon. The NGO aims to empower local communities through the provision of training and job opportunities. Through its educational centre, the NGO offers technical-level degrees to young women in such fields as ticketing, embroidery and IT. It includes a catering department and a nursery. The NGO also hosts a medical clinic providing services at minimal charges.

20.   Mr. Amjad Kamal, Webmaster at the Society of Inash El Usra, gave a tour of the NGO's website revealing the organization's interest in enhancing its online presence. He indicated that the ASP.NET technologies are being used to develop the website in addition to the latest trends in such web development

as the provision of RSS service, multi-view capabilities and ad rotators. Although the NGO displays some of its products online, it has not yet commenced online marketing.

21.   Reefnet, a joint project by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Ministry of Communications and Technology in the Syrian Arab Republic, has two main implementation tracks, as Ms. Rudaina Al-Kindi explained in her presentation. The first track is the establishment of community telecentres to provide training on a variety of IT-related subjects. Since its start in 2002, the project has been successful in establishing and operating 40 telecentres across the country. The second track is the development of an online community portal which has been launched in 45 towns thus far. The portal aims to promote socio-economic development through networking and knowledge sharing. It has become a repository of Arabic content including information on law, agriculture, education, and health issues. The presentation was followed by a quick overview of the Yabroud portal, given by Ms. Nouseeba Moutlak.

22.   Located and based in Yemen, the Attakaful Establishment for Solidarity and Social Care is faced with numerous obstacles when accessing ICTs due to limited infrastructural resources, low penetration rates, and social resistance to the use of ICTs in the country. Mr. Abdullah Al Suhaibi, Member of the Board, described the efforts of Attakaful to bridge the digital divide despite these obstacles. The NGO provides IT training with the help of its partners and is part of the ESCWAknowledge network.

E. CLOSING AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

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

24.   Ms. Hania Sabbidin Dimassi then gave a briefing on upcoming follow-up activities to this workshop, which is part of an ESCWA-funded project. 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. Experts participating in the workshop will also be invited to discuss suggested topics and provide advice. The forum will be moderated by ICTD and will be hosted on the Information Society Portal for the ESCWA Region (ISPER). Towards the end of the project, ICTD will evaluate the progress achieved on its part and on the part of beneficiary NGOs.

II. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. VENUE AND DATE

25.   The workshop was held at the United Nations House in Beirut, Lebanon, on 28 and 29 December 2009.

B. OPENING

26.   Ms. Nibal Idlebi, Chief of the ICT Applications Section, opened the workshop, welcoming the participants and introducing its objectives. She remarked in her opening statement 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 infrastructure, high access costs and social resistance to change. Ms. Idlebi explained the two-day programme of work and expected timelines. She then gave a general presentation on ESCWA and its mission, vision and mandate as a regional commission. The presentation continued to give an overview of ICTD and its objectives, accomplishments and activities for the next biennium.

27.   The workshop was attended by 21 participants from seven ESCWA member countries, namely, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, the Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, and Yemen in addition to one expert from Turkey currently working in Finland. Six ICTD staff members participated on behalf of ESCWA. See annex I for the list of participants.

D. AGENDA

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

1.   Opening session.
2.   Introductory session on the basics and uses of e-commerce.
3.   Beneficiaries roundtable.
4.   Presentations on success stories and selected case studies.
5.   E-commerce landscape.
6.   A session on NGO experiences.
7.   Closing and future outlook.

E. DOCUMENTS

29.   Documents and presentations of the workshop are available online at the following URL: http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=1188E.

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LIST OF DOCUMENTS

Title

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1. Documents:

   - Agenda
   - Information Note

2. Presentations:

   - Overview of ESCWA and ICTD

   - E-commerce fundamentals

   - Why and how to use e-commerce services for sustaining your NGO

   - E-services for NGOs

   - E-services: Fair Trade Egypt experience

   - Women in Technology – Case study

   - Nahdet El Mahrousa – Case study

   - Gedaref Digital City Organization: e-agriculture project (*in Arabic*)

   - E-services landscape in the ESCWA region

   - ICT enabling NGOs for e-services

   - Fair Trade Lebanon – Case study

   - Social Relief and Welfare Association in Saida – Case study

   - ReefNet – Case study

   - E-services at Attakaful Establishment for Solidarity and Social Care – Case study (*in Arabic)*

   - Delivery of e-services in civil society: upcoming project activities

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