Why Digital for Sustainable Development in the Arab States region?

The nexus between digital transformation and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) holds profound significance, notably within the Arab region. This convergence transcends strategic considerations, constituting a pathway towards global sustainable development. In a connected world, digital tools play a pivotal role in addressing disparities and fostering inclusivity, both integral to SDGs attainment. Aligned with missions encompassing poverty eradication, equitable education and healthcare, gender parity, and climate action, SDGs necessitate interconnectivity that resonates harmoniously with digital capabilities. The digital realm is now intrinsic to global advancement, where the synthesis of innovation and sustainable principles illuminates a path toward inclusivity, prosperity, and harmony. Embracing the Digital for Sustainable Development (D4SD) paradigm is crucial, particularly in the Arab region, as it has the potential to reframe narratives, elevate development opportunities, and align digital prowess with sustainable aspirations.

Arab Region Background and the Need for Digital Cooperation to Enable SDGs

Over the past two decades, the Arab region has undergone a profound digital transformation, elevating its online population to an impressive 327 million users. This substantial growth, from 28.8 percent in 2012 to 70.3 percent in 2022, underscores the region's increasing digital connectivity[1]. The momentum of this digital surge has further accelerated during and post the Covid-19 pandemic, accentuating the imperative of digital transformation. Governments across the region have promptly recognized the urgency of embracing digital technologies, leading to fundamental shifts in societal dynamics and institutional frameworks. Consequently, the traditional roles of governments have evolved, while interactions between the public and the government have been redefined.[2]

Digital metamorphosis transcends sectors, encompassing public services like telemedicine, health management systems, trade facilitation, consumer protection, smart agriculture, remote work policies, governance strategies, and, most notably, the advancement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Notwithstanding significant progress in digital adoption rates, a multitude of foundational and systemic barriers to digital transformation continue to persist across most countries in the region. These multifaceted challenges include underdeveloped infrastructures, obsolete regulatory frameworks, substantial capacity disparities, intricate layers of digital divides, fiscal constraints, legacy institutional structures, misaligned strategies and policies, inadequately conducive legislative frameworks, political dynamics like polarization, and a sluggish response to technological innovation and change, among other factors[3]. These hindrances not only impede the diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) within societies but also constitute substantial barriers to effective realization of SDGs.

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[1] ITU database - ITU_regional_global_Key_ICT_indicator_aggregates_Nov_2022_revised_15Feb2023
[2] UNDP research paper to be published.
[3] UNDP research paper to be published, ESCWA ADDR is currently under production.

Amidst the accelerated integration of ICTs across all demographic segments in Arab societies, a pivotal concern remains roughly 30 percent of the population remains offline and thereby excluded from the benefits of digital technologies. This group is disproportionately comprised of women, rural residents, older individuals, people with disabilities, and socioeconomically disadvantaged populations. The digital divide takes various forms, spanning unequal access to the internet, disparities in ICT utilization, uneven distribution of bandwidth, and demographic divides, such as gender and urban-rural disparities, alongside challenges in accessibility for individuals with disabilities. These challenges not only curtail the proliferation of ICTs but also represent significant impediments to both digital transformation and the effective realization of SDGs.

Confronting these formidable challenges and effectively bridging the digital divide signifies not just a technological imperative but a critical stride toward unlocking the untapped potential of digital transformation in advancing SDGs across the Arab region. This endeavor necessitates holistic efforts to foster inclusivity and ensure equitable access to digital technologies for all segments of society. Recognizing the diversity in digital development across the region, a tailored approach involving the categorization of countries into distinct clusters is essential.

The heterogeneity in digital development across the region necessitates categorizing countries into distinct clusters to tailor interventions to their specific needs, as follows: *1st cluster High-income Arab countries, 2nd cluster Middle-income Arab countries, and 3rd cluster: Other Arab countries (crises and least developed countries).* This categorization will serve as a crucial foundation for shaping the design and execution of the initiative. Achieving digital transformation across the region necessitates active knowledge exchange and collaboration among digital leaders from countries within the second and third clusters, in a collective effort to drive sustainable digital development.

Barriers for achieving digital for development in the Arab Region

In the Arab region, the journey toward achieving inclusive digital transformation is marked by a multitude of challenges that are intricately linked to varying maturity levels. Extensive research conducted over the span of two decades has underscored the correlation between these challenges and the impediments faced in the realm of digital governance. Notably, collaboration gaps have emerged as a significant impediment, impeding the advancement toward inclusive digital societies. Within this context, Arab nations encounter barriers to digital transformation in the following key areas:

1. **Technological Infrastructure:** Foundational ICT infrastructure is vital for national inclusion and digital economy growth.
2. **Capacity Deficit:** Scarce future-ready skills and soft skills among stakeholders hamper effective transformation.
3. **Alignment with Development Strategies:** Digital initiatives often lack congruence with national agendas, SDGs, and human rights.
4. **Legal Frameworks:** Enabling legislative frameworks are crucial for transforming legacy systems.
5. **Societal Adoption:** Low use of digital services persists due to adoption hurdles even after initial barriers are addressed.

Tackling these barriers is essential for leveraging digital progress to achieve Sustainable Development Goals and create an inclusive digital landscape in the Arab region.

Leading partners of the Call to Action

United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Arab States (UNDP RBAS): With its vast expertise in regional development, UNDP RBAS collaborates with governments, businesses, and civil society to harness the potential of digital technologies for inclusive growth and equitable progress. By fostering knowledge exchange, capacity-building, and policy formulation, UNDP plays a crucial role in supporting nations towards adopting inclusive digital strategies that align with SDGs. Through its diverse initiatives, UNDP empowers countries to leverage digital innovation as a catalyst for social and economic advancement, thus contributing to sustainable development efforts and ensuring that _no one is left behind._

Kingdom of Bahrain (Cohost country): Driven by its commitment to innovation and inclusivity, The Kingdom of Bahrain takes a proactive approach to foster digital strategies that address societal challenges and promote economic diversification. By prioritizing digital literacy, enhancing digital infrastructure, and facilitating e-government services, the Kingdom propels its citizens and businesses towards a digitally empowered future.

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA): ESCWA, as a United Nations regional commission, plays a pivotal role in promoting digital transformation in the Arab region. It provides a platform for collaboration among member countries to formulate inclusive digital strategies aligned with SDGs. ESCWA's expertise in policy formulation, research, and capacity-building supports governments in leveraging digital technologies to drive economic growth, enhance public services, and foster social inclusion.

(International Telecommunication Union): ITU is the UN specialized agency for information and communication technologies. In particular, the ITU allocates global radio spectrum and satellite orbits, develop the technical standards that ensure networks and technologies seamlessly interconnect, and strives to improve access to ICTs to underserved communities worldwide.

GSMA (Global System for Mobile Communications Association): GSMA, representing the interests of mobile network operators worldwide, plays a pivotal role in fostering digital transformation for SDGs. GSMA's initiatives, such as the Mobile for Development Foundation, focus on leveraging mobile connectivity to bridge digital divides, enhance access to essential services like healthcare and education, and promote financial inclusion. Through collaborations with governments, businesses, and other stakeholders, GSMA champions the integration of mobile technology as a catalyst for inclusive digital growth and SDG achievement.

IsDB (Islamic Development Bank): The IsDB plays a strategic role in promoting inclusive digital strategies to advance SDGs within its member countries. With a focus on sustainable development in Islamic nations, IsDB supports projects that harness digital technologies to address development challenges. By fostering partnerships, providing funding, and facilitating knowledge sharing, IsDB actively contributes to the implementation of digital solutions that enhance access to education, healthcare, and financial services, thereby driving socio-economic progress.

DCO (Digital Cooperation Organization): By harmonizing digital strategies, policies, and infrastructure development, DCO member states aim to optimize digital advancements for enabling efficient resource allocation and knowledge exchange to ensure that digital transformation uplifts all segments of society.

Existing digital strategies, initiatives, and partnerships

1- **UN SG digital cooperation roadmap:** The UN SG digital cooperation roadmap lies the foundations for sustainable digital transformation. Stemming from Secretary-General's High-level Panel for Digital Cooperation (2018-2019) and further informed by a series of roundtable discussions with key stakeholders from governments, the private sector, civil society, international organizations, academic institutions, the technical community, and other relevant stakeholders, it entails a set of key goals to be achieved for digital development to be attained. Such roadmap envisages: achieving universal connectivity by 2030; promoting digital public goods to create a more equitable world; ensuring digital inclusion for all, including the most vulnerable; strengthening digital capacity-building; ensuring the protection of human rights in the digital era; supporting global cooperation on artificial intelligence; promoting trust and security in the digital environment; and building a more effective architecture for digital cooperation.

2- **UNDP Digital Strategy:** The UNDP's Digital Strategy stands as a visionary framework that harnesses the power of digital technologies to amplify its global development efforts. Anchored in innovation and inclusivity, this strategy leverages emerging technologies to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By integrating cutting-edge solutions, data-driven insights, and digital platforms, the UNDP enhances its capacity to deliver targeted interventions, facilitate knowledge exchange, and empower communities. With a focus on enhancing access, inclusivity, and efficiency, the UNDP's Digital Strategy reinforces its commitment to leaving no one behind in the journey towards sustainable development.

3- **ESCWA Arab Digital Agenda (ADA 2023-2033):** The Arab Digital Agenda is an intergovernmental strategic framework for a long-term action plan by Arab States under the auspices of ESCWA and the League of Arab States[4]. The agenda was developed in collaboration with leading global and regional organizations in the field of digital development, including ITU, UNDP, and others with the goal of contributing to the achievement of the SDGs in the Arab region. The ESCWA Digital Development conceptual framework, which contains five clusters covering economic and social sectors, serves as the core foundation for the ADA development approach. The Collaboration and Partnerships Framework (CPF), the Measurement and Monitoring Model (MMM), and the Arab Digital Development Report (ADDR) are just a few of the implementation tools that support the operationalization of the agenda. Through these instruments, ESCWA aims to establish productive relations with all regional players in digital development in order to fulfill the agenda's goals and targets.

4- **ITU Arab Regional Initiatives:** Adopted during the World Telecommunications Development Conference held in Kigali, Rwanda in June 2022, ITU's regional priorities to spur digital development envisage: fostering sustainable digital economy through digital transformation; enhancing confidence, security and privacy in the use of telecommunications/ICTs in the era of new and emerging digital technologies; developing digital infrastructure for sustainable smart cities and communities; building capacities and encouraging digital innovation, entrepreneurship and future foresight; and developing means of digital regulation. Furthermore, in response to UAE's call for a 'COP of action', ITU, together with partners across the UN, governments, business, and civil society, are working to convene the Green Digital Action track at COP28 to ensure that the ICT community steps up its efforts in the fight against the climate crisis.

Such priorities are built on the UN Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) action lines and the SDGs to prompt meaningful connectivity and digital transformation globally. Furthermore, in an effort foster inclusivity, ITU

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[4] Officially adopted by Heads of Arab States during the Arab Summit (32) in Jeddah, 19-May 2023.

launched the Partner2Connect Digital Coalition (P2C) multi-stakeholder alliance, focusing on with a focus on hardest- to-connect communities in Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

5- **IsDB Digital Inclusion Strategy:** the IsDB Digital Inclusion strategy lies its foundations in the principle of leaving no one behind, in accordance with Sharia. As such, the strategy envisages an

inclusive approach to digital development that has the right to Internet access, also known as the right to broadband or freedom to connect, at its core. The strategy is thus well aligned with the Human Right Approach to digital inclusion was established by the UN General Assembly resolution as "the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet" that emphasizes the importance of "applying a comprehensive human rights-based approach when providing and expanding access to the internet and for the internet to be open, accessible and nurtured."

6- **GSMA:** GSMA is a global mobile industry association that works to connect everyone and everything to a better future, thereby leveraging digital transformation for sustainable development while ensuring inclusivity. The organization's digital inclusion efforts are structured around four key areas:

a) **Connecting the unconnected:** Mobile internet is connecting people to new opportunities and life-enhancing services, driving economic growth and advancing progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

b) **Driving mobile internet adoption and use:** GSMA supports driving mobile internet adoption and use by creating awareness of the benefits of the internet, developing tools and resources to help people get online, and working with partners to provide affordable and accessible internet services.

c) **Ensuring digital literacy:** GSMA works to ensure digital literacy by developing educational programs and resources, promoting digital skills training, and advocating for policies that support digital literacy initiatives.

d) **Addressing the digital divide:** GSMA works to address the digital divide by focusing on underserved populations, such as women, people with disabilities, and people living in rural areas.

7- **Bahrain's Digital Government strategy:** in alignment with the UN SG digital cooperation roadmap**, Bahrain's Digital Government Strategy** is committed to the following principles:

a) Provision of digital services for everyone (Leaving No One Behind) with specific emphasis on strategies to tailor service offerings to the needs of citizens.

b) Encouraging more constituents to interact with the Government via the digital channels of their choice.

c) Designing new public services based on a Digital First principle and concentrating on digitizing the entire chain of activities.

d) Rebuilding identified public services with digital delivery at the foundation.

e) Enabling citizens and businesses to supply certain types of data only once to a government entity.

f) Utilize advanced technologies to make more accurate predictions and smarter decisions through the analysis of vast amounts of data.

g) Consolidate government data and make them available to the public to enable greater transparency and civic engagement.

8- **DCO:** as part of its mandate, DCO works to advance an inclusive and prosperous digital economy while creating a space that promotes underrepresented groups, such as women and youth, and helping to affirm their value within the digital infrastructure. To achieve such a goal, DCO drafted its 2030 roadmap for digital transformation. As part of the roadmap,

DCO aims at increasing global collaboration to bridge the technological divide, promote common interest, advocate for advanced cooperation, build regulatory framework and business environments, and ensure the inclusive and trustworthy nature of the digital economy at local, regional, and global levels. Ultimately, the strategy aims at accelerating innovation by empowering youth, women and entrepreneurs, leveraging the transformative power of the digital economy to drive economic growth and increase social prosperity.

Areas of Actions

Pillar I: Inclusive Digital Development

Sub Pillar I: Bridge the Digital Divide

- Collaborate to ensure equitable access to digital technologies.

- Address gender, rural-urban, and accessibility disparities.

- Empower marginalized communities to actively participate in the digital revolution.

Sub Pillar II: Empower Digital Literacy

- Launch comprehensive programs for enhancing digital literacy and skills.

- Enable individuals to navigate the digital world confidently.

- Education, training, and awareness initiatives as tools for empowerment.

Sub Pillar III: Forge Inclusive Partnerships

- Establish public-private partnerships to drive digital inclusion initiatives.

- Create an ecosystem where digital benefits are accessible to all.

- Amplify impact and foster shared responsibility through collaboration.

Pillar II: Sustainable Innovation

Sub Pillar I: Leverage Emerging Technologies

- Embrace cutting-edge technologies like AI and big data analytics.

- Develop localized, impactful solutions in healthcare, education, and governance.

- Revolutionize sectors through innovative applications.

Sub Pillar II: Promote Green Tech

- Champion eco-friendly technologies for a greener future.

- Encourage renewable energy adoption, energy-efficient practices, and responsible waste management.

- Align digital endeavors with environmental sustainability.

Sub Pillar III: Support Startups and SMEs

- Nurture a vibrant ecosystem for startups and SMEs.

- Drive job creation, economic diversification, and innovation.

- Foster sustainable growth and resilience through entrepreneurial initiatives.

Pillar III: Collaborative Digital Ecosystem

Sub Pillar I: Foster Digital Collaboration

- Governments, private sector entities, and international organizations working together.
- Pool resources, knowledge, and expertise for amplified outcomes.

Sub Pillar II: Advance Policy Reforms

- Advocate for agile, future-focused policies that support digital transformation.
- Collaboratively address regulatory challenges.
- Embrace adaptive frameworks that stimulate innovation and inclusion.

Sub Pillar III: Promote Research and Development

- Invest in R&D for technology-driven solutions.
- Address pressing societal challenges through strategic partnerships.
- Accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

Impact Measurement and Management

Axe 1: Measuring & managing Impact.

- Implement robust impact measurement mechanisms to track progress.
- Evaluate the social, economic, and environmental outcomes of digital initiatives.
- Continuously adapt strategies based on data-driven insights.

Axe 2: Community Engagement.

- Empower local communities as active participants in digital development.
- Solicit input, ideas, and feedback to co-create solutions that meet unique needs.
- Strengthen the sense of ownership and sustainable impact through community involvement.