Digital Inclusion for Persons with Disabilities in Times of Crisis

Under the theme of "How digital accessibility served PWDs during the time of crisis – No one left behind" this virtual session aims to shed light on the importance of providing equal information and communication technology (ICT) access during crises, especially for persons with disabilities in the Arab region.

The ramifications of the COVID-19 crisis have been felt throughout the world including the Arab region. However, countries with enhanced and accessible digital infrastructures successfully adapted to and managed the ongoing crisis and were able to resume daily life and activities despite global social distancing restrictions.

Furthermore, the impacts of the pandemic on persons with disabilities have clearly emphasized the region's digital divide, as it experienced accessibility barriers firsthand when essential services had forced cuts or moved to be strictly only online. The shift of work, education, healthcare, shopping, and banking to operating remotely exacerbated the challenges faced by persons with disabilities. Daily life continued because of digital content available on websites, mobile applications, e-documents, social media posts , and emails, especially during such times, these must be accessible for them. Hence, solidifying the fact that digital inclusion is no longer an option.

Nevertheless, this crisis also showcased how digital accessibility services and initiatives and inclusive digital platforms in the region served PWDs during the time of crisis and helped empower them to manage and cope with the current unprecedented circumstances.

Session Format:

The session will consist of a moderated open dialogue among participants. Five speakers selected from the ICT accessibility field with expertise in the Arab region will share their efforts, achievements, challenges, and lessons learned during the COVID-19 crisis.

Session Objectives:

- **Regional overview:** Provide an overview of the states of access to information according to the UNCRPD on equal access to information for persons with disabilities.

- **Share and discuss best practices and applied approaches:** Reflect on how an accessible platform can substantially affect the right to access information in different domains. For example, in education, developing accessible learning tools to support students to continue to learn remotely and interact with teachers and classmates during the crisis.

- **Highlight challenges and opportunities:** Challenges will be discussed to show the importance of adhering to international ICT accessibility standers and best practices. Followed by highlighting opportunities in raising awareness and changing how government agencies, companies, and even individuals perceive the importance of developing accessible platforms.

- **Future action:** Identify areas where action needs to be taken to comply with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 9 – Accessibility.