ITU and UNESCO Regional Digital Inclusion Week

28 November to 2 December 2021

"Ensuring equity and inclusivity in all that we do: data, platforms and policies"

Concept Note

Overview

The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) will be organizing the 5th annual **ITU-UNESCO Regional Digital Inclusion Week for the Arab States** during the period **28 November to 2 December 2021,** under the theme "**Ensuring equity and inclusivity in all that we do: data, platforms and policies**".

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has forced the world to adopt various "new normal" behaviors, one of which is connecting remotely and digitally. This way of connecting has become a daily feature in the lives of millions of workers and students since March 2020, when many countries required citizens to adopt social distancing measures including in some cases strict lockdowns. Globally, peak internet traffic growth rate increased to 47%, significantly higher than the 28% rate predicted for 2020, and the traffic on broadband networks increased by 51%, presumably driven by the pandemic[1]. Digital connectivity has become crucial in the economy and education during this crisis permitting the continuation of key activities and functions of workplaces and schools. Moreover, digital technologies have also played a critical role to support the public health response to COVID-19, to further strengthened capacity for preparedness and resilience.

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[1] Report: Pandemic Drives a 35% Increase in Global Internet Capacity https://www.telecompetitor.com/report-pandemic-drives-a-35-increase-in-global-internet-capacity/

Nowadays, digital connectivity plays a vital role in a wide range of societies. However, there is great concern that the current crisis has further deepened the existing digital divide. These divides include differences in both physical and intangible aspects such as fixed and mobile network coverage, availability and affordability of infrastructure and digital literacy[2]. However, to achieve digital inclusion of all people regardless their gender, age, ability, or location, in addition to the availability and affordability of the Internet access and devices we also must consider the accessibility aspect of the digital information and services provided through digital platforms. When we talk about accessibility, we also refer to the usability of the digital devices and digital platforms by end users as well as to the way digital information and services are developed and delivered. We saw that in the context of an emergency or crisis, such as Covid 19 pandemic, the lack of accessibility to digital information can be vital. Therefore, it is crucial to include in the Regional political agenda implementation of ICT accessibility as a catalytic driver for wider socio-economic participation, and consequently, reduce these divides which have exacerbated other forms of social inequities among marginalized and vulnerable populations during the pandemic, and thus ensure equal and equitable access and use of technology by everyone.

Moreover, COVID-19 has emphasized the need to intensify all activities related to digital/ICT accessibility as a means to ensure Digital Inclusion of ALL people, including those with disabilities and as imperative to guarantee inclusive societies in the digital world.

In recognising the potential of ICT as a catalyst for economic and social progress particularly for women, girls, children, persons with disabilities and the vulnerable groups and communities, this open, informative and interactive Digital Inclusion Week aims to open dialogue to analyse the importance of Digital Inclusion in education, health, work and independent life of everyone. Through informative session aiming to raise awareness, present solutions and share available resources and good practices for implementation the both ITU and UNESCO aims to motivate all stakeholders in their efforts to ensure that through national, regional and global implementation of digital inclusion and equitable ICT access programmes, members states and stakeholders ensure that there is no one left behind in the digital world and inclusive communities are established.

The ever-increasing power of technology, digitalization and ICTs in today's digital age, plays a key role in nearly all aspects of life: how people access information and knowledge, work, and

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[2] Accelerating Digital Inclusion in the New Normal https://www.weforum.org/reports/accelerating-digital-inclusion-in-the-new-normal

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interact with others. For women, refugees, marginalized groups and persons with disabilities, technology opens pathways to an improved quality of life, greater social and economic inclusion, self-empowerment and independent living. Consequently, digital accessibility is instrumental in ensuring inclusiveness of all people, in the digital society.

In a common effort all UN agencies work in providing their specialized advice and support globally to Member States and related stakeholders to jointly contribute to the achievement of the inclusiveness of all people in the digital economy and the digital society of the XXI century.

ITU and UNESCO invites to reflect on the ways forward to foster implementation and mainstreaming of digital accessibility as a mean to provide innovative and equitable solutions aiming to show how technology can ensure inclusiveness and empowerment of all people, without discrimination in the digital world. Finally the Digital Inclusion week aims to will share and discuss the work and initiatives carried out in promotion for and support to the implementation of policies, strategies and resources to ensure inclusiveness of ALL people including women, children, marginalized communities and persons with disabilities in the framework of the SDG, CRPD, UNDIS and other related global commitments

In Arab states, digital disparities are reflected across a range of metrics. For example, only 55% of individuals used the internet in 2019. Internet and computer access at home in urban areas (around 70%) was twice as high as in rural areas (35%). There is also a gender gap in internet usage, with 61% of men using the internet compared to 47% of women[3]. The percentage of young people aged 18-29 who used the internet is much higher than amongst those more than 60 years old[4].

The 5th ITU-UNESCO Regional Digital Inclusion Week for the Arab States, is a response to the foregoing challenges at a time when the world is recovering from the impact of the pandemic. The week will address equity and inclusivity in the digital era, which can contribute to the Targets 2025 set by Broadband Commission for Sustain Development to "connect the other half". These ambitious targets include ensuring that by 2025 broadband internet user penetration should reach 75% worldwide and 65% in developing countries; 60% of youth and adults should have achieved

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[3] Measuring digital development Facts and figures 2020 https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2020.pdf

[4] The Arab World's Digital Divide https://www.arabbarometer.org/2020/09/the-mena-digital-divide/

at least a minimum level of proficiency in sustainable digital skills; and gender equality should be achieved across all targets[5].

Digital inclusion through data, platforms and policies

Digital inclusion can open up space to the voiceless and contribute to equity and inclusivity across multiple areas; this can advance the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Data

Alongside the rapid development of technologies, we have collected, analyzed and stored vast amounts of data. This data is diverse, but is it inclusive enough to capture the needs of the most marginalized people and support effective interventions by policy makers?

The fact is that many people are still invisible in data and the data is not always disaggregated. In July 2020, a report of the UN Secretary-General on "Inclusive development for and with persons with disabilities" indicated that only 3% of countries have data on persons with disabilities experiencing discrimination[6]. In the Arab region, according to the Arab Human Development Report (2019), only 43% of the country-level tier I global SDG indicators are available and updated, and 16% have not been calculated since 2000 for many countries[7]. Information on various aspects of inequality and polarization is very limited or even unreliable. In 2018, a preliminary research study first attempted to examine income inequality in the Middle East[8]. The result shows that the overall inequality level is one of the highest in the world, but the research also indicated that much of the data required for decision-making is inadequate. Comprehensive, disaggregated, and transparent data is urgently needed in the region. This will provide researchers, governments, citizens and other development actors with a clear social picture of what is needed, contributing to improved strategies, approaches and prospects for positive social change[7].

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[5] UN Broadband Commission sets global broadband targets to bring online the world's 3.8 billion not connected to the Internet https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/2018-PR01.aspx
[6] UN Secretary-General Calls for Inclusive Data to Support Persons with Disabilities https://sdg.iisd.org/news/un-secretary-general-calls-for-inclusive-data-to-support-persons-with-disabilities/
[7] Arab Human Development Report Research Paper https://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/library/huma_development/arab-human-development-report-research-paper.html
[8] Measuring lnequality in the Middle East 1990-2016: The World's Most Unequal Region? https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/roiw.12385

Inclusive data will help make the invisible social segments to be seen and heard rather than being pushed further toward the margins. Robust and disaggregated data that clearly captures and addresses the context of vulnerable groups, will enable policy makers to create more effective development intervention. Furthermore, these policies need to take a more inclusive approach integrating communities in their design and implementation, that is to say, in the words of the disability community, "nothing for us without us". Such inclusive policy responses are more likely to gain community ownership leading to truly sustained improvements that fight against social inequity, exclusion and which truly "leave no one behind".

Data can be most effective when it is available for public use. Open data has a huge potential to improve diversity and inclusion. Furthermore open data can promote transparency and accountability, help to identify social, economic and environmental challenges. Open data is therefore an important resource that can drive inclusive growth, foster cross-sector collaboration as well improve decision-making and impact monitoring.

Technology

We are experiencing a digital revolution built on digital technology. Digital technology provides new approaches to more affordably and effectively address, the obstinate social challenges faced by underserved and underrepresented groups. It can serve as a powerful tool for these individuals and governmental or non-governmental organizations.

One way digital technology can reduce inequity and exclusion and make progress toward the SDGs is by promoting financial inclusion. Mobile devices and digital channels are providing widespread access to mobile electronic payments and insurance, online banking services and other financial activities at very low costs. This is especially significant for underserved populations, who were previously excluded from traditional financial systems. Globally, more than 100 million adults still receive wages and transfers in cash; amongst this group, 39% of the poorest 40% of families lack a bank account[9]. For these marginalized populations, digital financial services could enable them to accumulate savings, receive funds efficiently and safely and be included in the financial system.

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[9] Igniting SDG Progress Through Digital Financial Inclusion
https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=400&nr=2655&menu=1515

This can enhance access to credit, loans and insurances that improve their financial security and broaden the socio-economic opportunities available to rural and disadvantaged communities. Furthermore, digital technology can promote economic gender equality, empowering the nearly 980 million women around the world currently excluded from the formal financial system[9]. Digital financial services give women greater control over their as well as their family's financial situation; they also provide opportunities to engage in business and other economic activities.

Open systems and architectures that support interoperability can also contribute to universal access to technology with the potential to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs. As we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, disparity and inequity has been exacerbated when it comes to receiving online education, timely health information and possibilities of remote working. Harnessing digital technology for the benefit of disadvantaged groups requires the collaboration of governments and all relevant stakeholders.

Platforms

Digital platforms can advance equity and inclusivity. Digital platforms, such as social media platforms, provide an available and affordable tool for everyone, especially for the traditionally voiceless and marginalized, to share, speak out and be heard. A statistical study found that in the Arab region, social media usage has more than doubled to 44% from 2014 to 2019 and 9 out of 10 young Arabs use at least one social media channel every day[10]. This growth aligns with the features of platform openness, which is realized by access to the platform and the autonomy of doing things on platforms. A more open platform would have fewer restrictions on users' participation and development. This will provide equal opportunities to the public to engage and harness digital platforms and make platforms become more inclusive. In parallel with platforms openness , policies measures aimed at managing public information to prevent data misuse of and protect the privacy of users.

Moreover, platform transparency can also reduce inequity and exclusion through various ways, such as disclosing the criteria platforms employ to present the search results and impact of algorithms. In the case of algorithms, many platforms select and recommend homogenized messages to their platform users based on algorithms. This may pose the risk of deepening the

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[10]Social Media in the Middle East: 2019 in Review
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338539787_Social_Media_in_the_Middle_East_2019_in_Review

biases and discrimination against certain group of people who already badly influenced in their daily life by stereotypes. Misleading methods can enlarge exclusion and impede digital diversity and inclusion. To maximize the potential opportunities for increasing inclusion and equity, we should understand how platforms work and use them in a transparent and open way.

Policies

Many Arab countries have seen a massive use of information and communication technologies (ICT). However, this wave of digital revolution brings new challenges to policy making and requires innovation on the mindset of policy makers and management methods. Under this background, redesigning policy-making processes to help the achievement of equity and inclusion through digital inclusion becomes necessary and urgent. Digital technologies can help make a more inclusive policy response possible. One-way technologies can help is to collect and use disaggregated data which is essential to develop data-driven policy making. It would be necessary to ensure the interventions address the real inequity problems and target the most needed populations. To make the result of policy desirable, data inclusion and open data should be prioritized as the first step to provide an evidence base for decisions.

Based on robust data and technologies, policy makers should ensure their agenda and mandate address equality of women, people with disabilities, the elders and poor and others in accessing online resources, improving digital literacy and building capacity in using digital tools. Developing and implementing access to information policies is an important step in realizing policy makers' commitment to ensure greater inclusivity in digital networks. Technologies can also help policy makers receive more timely feedback and through big data conduct more accurate evaluations and forecasts.

<u>Objectives</u>

The main objectives of the web dialogues that will be held during this week include:

- Holding an open informative and interactive discussions with all interested stakeholders on the importance on ensuring the Digital Inclusion of everyone and how to use the ICT/digital accessibility.
- Global implementation to ensure that in a context of digitalization the information services that could have an impact in the lives of all peoples considering their needs without any discrimination of age, gender, ability or location.

- Raising awareness, leverage capacity and encouraging Regional engagement to prioritize ICT accessibility as a high priority to ensure that everyone's Right to Communicate and be part of the digital world is fulfilled.
- Providing support for research and policy recommendations, if needed.
- Sharing information and best practices.

How to get involved

As the fifth edition of this annual event, the 2021 ITU-UNESCO Regional Digital Inclusion Week for Arab States will build on the success of the four previous ITU-UNESCO Regional Weeks for Arab States organized annually by ITU and UNESCO since 2017.

In the post-COVID world, public health remains a concern. So this year's events will be held in a hybrid format, with virtual and on site components. Adopting a multi-stakeholder approach, the week will bring together *inter alia* governments, UN and intergovernmental bodies, civil society, academia, healthcare professionals, the private sector and citizens to advance digital inclusion. The Regional Digital Inclusion Week is thus an opportunity to raise awareness, strengthen collaboration amongst stakeholders and advance efforts to combat all forms of exclusion.

ITU and UNESCO are therefore inviting stakeholders across the Arab region to organize at least one activity during this Week, to shed light on their key activities in this domain, whether at the national or regional level. Stakeholders are free to design the nature, scope and location of activities and associate them to the Week, as long they reflect the theme of "***Ensuring equity and inclusivity in all that we do: data, platforms and policies***". Please use the online form on the event website to make your event submissions **before 22 October 2021**.

Please follow us on social media under the hashtag #Digitalinclusionweek to get involved! Further information can be found on the event **website**.

For further information, please contact:

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