



Harnessing AI for Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab Region

UNDP Egypt

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[Session 525— Harnessing AI for Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab Region | WSIS+20 Forum High-Level Event 2024 \(itu.int\)](#)

Key Messages:

- This multi stakeholders' session brought together panelists representing different players to discuss the common challenges and opportunities to utilize AI to advance SDGs in the Arab region. The panelists represented the government, the development organizations, the financial institutions, the private sector and international think tanks.
- The world and the Arab Region are significantly behind in achieving SDGs. AI will affect all SDGs with a high potential to make a difference for five: Good Health and Well-Being (SDG 3), Quality Education (SDG 4), Climate Action (SDG 13), Affordable and Clean Energy (SDG 7), and Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11).
- Over the last decade, the Arab Region has experienced tremendous technological transformation and innovation. Many countries in the region took bold steps towards the development and deployment of AI. This varies among countries with some countries managed to adopt cutting-edge technology, institutions, standards, and strategies to localize and utilize AI, while others are at early stages of developing their AI strategies.
- AI can be a game changer for the achievement of SDGs in the Arab Region, with the potential that the Middle East will gain 2% of AI's total global benefits in 2030, which is equivalent to \$320 billion as estimated by PwC and a forecasted annual growth in the economic contribution of AI to reach between 20% and 34% per year.
- Egypt was presented as a case study with focus on:
 - o Highlighting country's steady steps for AI development and deployment since 2019 with the establishment of the National Council for AI.
 - o The Applied Innovation Center (AIC), which established in 2020 with the aim of Analyzing and solving national challenges, and delivering leading edge solutions using emerging ICT, in particular AI; and developing human capital through on-the-job training on real national challenges.
 - o Presenting the AI applications developed and deployed by AIC across government institutions including at hospitals and courts. Other projects were highlighted such as the Arabic Language NLP systems with the potential of deployment in other Arab Countries.
- The Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) highlighted the contribution of the financial development organizations in digital transformation and AI, with focus on the challenge encountered in implementation and deployment in Arab countries.
- The private sector represented by CISCO highlighted its vision to develop stronger defense and remediation strategy for security threats and better application performance, and discussed how

can public policy influence AI utilization for advancing the SDGs, bringing good practices from the European Union.

- As an important stakeholder, the Digital Cooperation Organization (DCO) discussed what is needed to advance AI in the Arab region from the point of view of an international think tank with focus on capacity building.

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Emerging trends, challenges, and opportunities in the implementation of the WSIS Action Lines to date

Challenges:

- **Digital Divide:** With the rapid increase of reliance on technology for providing e-public services and online access to information, the digital divide is a major concern due to the potential risk of increased social divides resulted from the inequalities in access to information due to disparities in technology diffusion.
- **Qualified Human Resources:** The lack of adequate capacity building programs, upskilling and reskilling, together with the pace of change in emerging technologies leads to the widening of the digital skills and technological gap.
- **Security concerns:** AI can be a game changer in advancing the progress towards SDGs, but it also poses complex security challenges and privacy concerns including misinformation and disinformation, and hacking.
- **Responsible AI:** AI strategies in the MENA region pays great attention to human resources and developing AI talent; and creating an enabling AI-friendly business environment, however similar attention should be paid to policies ensuring the responsible use of AI.

Opportunities

- Regional collaboration and knowledge sharing to address common challenges, including for example the development of Arabic Language NLP system and enhancing the Weak digital Arabic content, which is preventing the optimal use of AI systems, which depend on and learn from published digital content are of prime importance.
- Establish multi-stakeholder alliances and cooperation frameworks where the government develops the enabling environment for the private sector to develop and deploy the technologies.
- Create a regional framework for AI policy that prioritizes human rights, equality, and equitable access to AI advancements within the context of global frameworks.