Digital for Sustainable Development (D4SD) – UNGA Side Event

Enabling a Digital Arab States Region to Advance SDGs Agenda

Concept Note and Agenda

New York – 25th of September 2024

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UNDP Regional Bureau of Arab States

Digital for Sustainable Development (D4SD) – UNGA Side Event
Enabling a Digital Arab States Region to Advance SDGs Agenda

A regional engagement platform to drive sustainable, inclusive, and catalytic digital transformation across the Arab States

With an emphasis on Strategic Digital Portfolios Investments and Promoting Digital Inclusion

New York – 25th of September 2024

From 8:00 am to 9:30 am NY time

Conference Room #6

Digital Transformation in the Arab Region

The Arab region has witnessed a remarkable surge in its online population with internet users soaring from 28.8 percent in 2012 to 70.3 percent in 2022[1.] However, only 56% women and 42% of rural inhabitants are online.[2]The impact of digital transformation on economies and societies is profound, as the availability of digital tools and platforms enables access to new markets, generates new jobs, embraces the 4th industrial revolution, and creates new economic opportunities. It enhances information accessibility, increases productivity, and facilitates data-driven decision-making. This transformation supports sustainable business practices and expands customer reach, particularly benefiting SMEs, which are central to the economic renaissance that is needed in Arab States. Governments, in turn, can leverage digital transformation to enhance public service delivery, limit inefficient bureaucracy, and support civic engagement[3]. This potential, however, requires for the ongoing digital transformation to be sustained, to be supported by adequate policies and to be inclusive. For example, in the Arab States region only 56% women,

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[1] ITU database - ITU_regional_global_Key_ICT_indicator_aggregates_Nov_2022_revised_15Feb2023

[2] Estimates based on: ITU, *Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2021*

[3] Salem, F. (2017). Arab Social Media Report 2017: Social Media and the Internet of Things: Towards Data-Driven Policymaking in the Arab World - Potential, Limits and Concerns. Retrieved from Dubai: http://ssrn.com/abstract=2911832*0*

42% of rural inhabitants use the internet. The elderly and persons with disabilities are also disproportionately left out.[4]

On the other hand, several regional champions have helped the Arab States see impressive growth in internet use, reduced cost and pushing the region to 3rd rank behind Europe and the Americas in term of bandwidth. Qatar, UAE, Kuwait, KSA and Bahrain all rank among the top 10 countries in term of median internet speed. [5]

Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) is a new term referring to the basic capabilities that are building blocks for developing digital services at a societal scale. DPI is the intermediate layer between physical infrastructure (for example, broadband and data centers) and sectoral applications (for example, social protection and e-commerce). The most common types of DPI are platforms and systems for digital identification (ID), digital payments, and data sharing. DPI represents[6]. DPI represents is a critical enabler of digital transformation and essential to the Arab region. With a combination of (i) networked open technology standards built for public interest, (ii) enabling governance, and (iii) a community of innovative and competitive market players working to drive innovation, DPI can enable government modernization, efficient public service delivery, and economic development. DPI's potential to stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship by establishing a reliable foundation for digital ecosystems is significant. This infrastructure plays a crucial role in motivating all stakeholders to participate actively in the digital transformation of the Arab region, paving the way for a more inclusive and technologically advanced future.

To fully realize the benefits of digital transformation through DPI, Arab governments must address several critical challenges: ensuring equitable distribution of these digital advancements. This required tackling the digital divide and promoting digital inclusion, particularly for marginalized communities and digitally underserved countries. Trust and security in the digital environment are also paramount to achieving sustainable digital transformation and economic development.

While the potential of digital transformation and collaboration is clear, current efforts in the Arab region face limitations. Despite ongoing initiatives, partnerships with digital stakeholders have been primarily opportunistic, activity-based, and limited to a few countries, needing a more strategic and coherent approach. This fragmented approach risks exacerbating existing digital divides rather than bridging them. Recognizing this challenge, there is a growing call to build upon the activities already tested and develop a more comprehensive framework for future collaboration. This strategic shift is embodied in the Digital for Sustainable Development (D4SD)

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[4] Estimates based on: ITU, *Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2021*
[5] Speedtest Global Index – Internet Speed around the world – Speedtest Global Index – Retrieved 26 July 2024. Speedtest Global Index – Internet Speed around the world – Speedtest Global Index
[6] https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstreams/582c0d73-d367-423c-831d-0640814a7349/download

initiative, which aims to create a more coordinated and inclusive approach to digital transformation across the Arab region.

Digital for Sustainable Development (D4SD) Initiative[7]:

The nexus between digital transformation and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) holds a profound significance, notably within the Arab States region. This convergence transcends strategic considerations, constituting a pathway towards global sustainable development in a connected world. Digital transformation and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence offer an unprecedented opportunity for the Arab region, where the synthesis of innovation and sustainable principles can illuminate a path toward inclusivity, prosperity, and harmony.

Confident that the power of inclusive digital transformation can be harnessed to accelerate progress in the Arab States region towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), GSMA, ITU, ESCWA, IsDB, DCO, and other pertinent stakeholders**, initiated in 2023 the Digital for Sustainable Development Initiative (D4SD) to foster enhanced cooperation between international entities, governmental agencies, International Financing Institutions (IFIs), and private sector entities including Telecom Groups. This initiative aims to decisively mobilize key stakeholders within the digital community to advance digital transformation and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Arab States region.

The D4SD initiative offers a platform to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs in the Arab region by leveraging the unparalleled power of digital technology through multi-stakeholder collaboration. D4SD partners, through endorsing its call to action[8], commit to taking concrete steps together, designing programs, sharing experiences, and aligning initiatives towards a digitally inclusive region that ensures **no one is left behind**. **The initiative led a series of events to promote inclusive digital transformation in the region alongside key digital partners**

UNGA 2023: As a precursor to the implementation strategy, the ***UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS) orchestrated a digital-focused event during the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023, held in New York***. This event, co-hosted by the Kingdom of Bahrain and co-convened with GSMA, IsDB, DCO, ESCWA, and ITU, served as a platform for catalyzing engagement among chief executive officers and leaders from the digital sector alongside high-level representatives from various countries and partnering organizations.

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[7] https://www.undp.org/arab-states/digital-sustainable-development
[8] https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-01/Call%20to%20Action.pdf

A collective call to action was endorsed as a tangible outcome of this engagement, reaffirming the participants' dedication to fostering digital collaboration and cooperation.

Mobile World Congress 2024: **the UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS), GSMA, *organized*** **the Arab States Digital Day at MWC Barcelona 2024** with the presence of high-level representation from Arab countries' digital transformation leadership (14 countries ministers and public sector leaders the World Bank and the private sector).

Digital for Sustainable Development (D4SD) at UNGA 2024

UNDP and the Government of Egypt looks at the 2024 UNGA as a timely milestone to deepen partnership discussions for the Arab region and beyond to markedly push Digital Enablement to support SDG advancement with the following axes, deepening and expanding the 2023 D4SD call for action with:

1. Fostering public-private partnerships: UNDP work with digital ecosystem companies to foster public-private partnerships in the region. These partnerships can support the development of innovative business models that can help expand access to services and promote sharing experiences between companies and governments.
2. Facilitating knowledge sharing and capacity building: UNDP can work with digital partners to facilitate knowledge sharing and capacity building in developing countries. This includes promoting the sharing of best practices, providing training and support to local operators, and promoting research and development in sustainable practices.
3. Encouraging the adoption of sustainable practices: UNDP can work with digital leaders to encourage adopting sustainable practices, such as using renewable energy sources, reducing waste (and tackling e-waste), and implementing energy-efficient technologies.
4. Exploring the potential of digital financial instruments that aim to promote financial and digital inclusion across communities, ensuring equitable access to financial services and opportunities for all. By harnessing the power of digital technology, joint initiatives focusing on MSMEs' development, gender, and youth, access to services in crisis contexts can be developed.
5. Facilitating regional scaled-up advocacy campaigns focusing on the 2030 Agenda and SDGs through a digital cooperation framework.

6. In partnership with telecommunication companies, maximizing efforts to bridge the digital divide and address "the usage gap[9]" ensuring that services are accessible, create awareness, and increase adoption, **leaving no one behind.**

This year, on the side of UNGA 2024 and the Summit of the Future: UNDP Regional Bureau for the Arab States (RBAS), in partnership with the World Bank Group, envisions the 2024 UNGA and the Summit of the Future as a critical milestone to deepen partnership discussions and launch initiatives within the Arab region promoting Digitalization as an enabler to support SDGs advancement. With the generous patronage and lead hosting of Egypt and co-hosting of other Arab countries, the D4SD will emphasize the following topics:

1- **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** as the primary catalyst for digital transformation in Arab countries.
2- Navigating **funding, financing, and investing in digital transformation** through Public-Private-People partnership
3- The role of **digital transformation in fostering economic diversification** with a focus on digital SMEs.
4- The Crucial role of **digital skills in driving inclusion, growth and innovation.**
5- The importance of collaborative **digital policies and regulations** and cross-border harmonized digital policies.
6- The role of **emerging technologies** and **Artificial Intelligence** enabled by digital cooperation.
7- **Triangular and South-South cooperation** as an opportunity to accelerate countries' digitalization.

Agenda of the D4SD Side Event

Key Session Overview:

Two High-Level Ministerial roundtables: senior representatives from Egypt, UNDP and the World Bank, partners, ministers from countries, and CEOs from companies to discuss Strategic Digital Portfolio Investments and the Digital Inclusion Agena

- Interventions by Ministers aimed at articulating their respective strategies and priorities.
- Interventions by Private Sector leaders.
- Interventions by the leadership of international organisations and partners, including the international financial institutions.
- Several initiatives will be announced and launched during the event, including a digital roadmap for highly prioritized initiatives as well as an impact and measurement framework for digital transformation and the SDGs.

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[9] In a new report from GSMA Intelligence, the usage gap in mobile internet refers to the difference between the percentage of the population which has used the internet on a mobile device, and those people who are within the footprint of a mobile network but haven't used mobile internet. It is estimated at 41% of world population as of 2022. The usage gap in our region is estimated at 48%.

- In support of the corporate Strategic Plan 2022-25 and to enhance our work with the digital leader's industry, UNDP RBAS will further advance its key partnership with GSMA, IFIs, and other international organizations active in the region to achieve the initiative's goals in the Arab States region.

Time	Title	Format
8:00 to 8:12	Welcoming notes	**Opening Remarks (12 min)** - High Level Egypt Representative (minister level TBC) - **Mr. Haoliang Xu** Under-Secretary-General and Associate Administrator of the UNDP. - **H.E. Mohammed Al Mannai** Minister of Communications and Information Technology Qatar. - **H.E. Jamal bin Huwaireb** CEO of the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation and Cultural Advisor to the Government of Dubai - UAE
8:12 to 9:52 (40 minutes)	High level Roundtable Discussion on **Strategic Investments in Digital Portfolios**	Roundtable discussion Topics: - **DPI Challenges and Opportunities in the Arab States Region, the role of digital solutions in enhancing public service delivery.** *Announcement by World Bank Group and UNDP on regional initiative cooperation.* - **The role of collaborative and harmonized digital policies and regulations, and cross borders harmonized digital policies.**

		- **Navigating Funding, Financing, and Investing in Digital Transformation through Public-Private-People partnership** **Moderator: Dr. Abdallah Al Dardari**, UN Assistant Secretary-General and Director of the Regional Bureau for Arab States UNDP. Speakers and interventions: senior representatives from UNDP and the World Bank Group, IFIs, partners, ministers from countries, and CEOs from private sector companies. **Announcements and signatures:** Additional announcements on D4SD initiatives with partners
8:52 to 9:32 (40 minutes)	High-level Roundtable Discussion on **Digital Inclusion Agenda**	Roundtable discussion Topics: - **Empowering the Digital Economy: The Crucial Role of Digital Skills in Driving Inclusion, Growth and Innovation** - **The role of digital Transformation in fostering economic diversification with a focus on digital SMEs.** - **The role of Emerging technologies and Artificial Intelligence enabled by digital cooperation.** **Moderator: Joe Hooper,** Director of UNDP Global Centre for Technology, Innovation and Sustainable Development, Singapore. Panelists/speakers: senior representatives from UNDP and IFIs, partners, ministers from countries, and CEOs from private sector companies.

		Announcements and signatures: - Several D4SD initiatives with partners