

The Inaugural Meeting of the Digital Cooperation and Development Forum

3rd Arab High-level Forum on
the World Summit on the Information Society
and 2030 Agenda (Arab WSIS)

6th Conference of the Arab Internet
Governance Forum (Arab IGF)

Online, 13-23 December 2021



Background

The Advancing Digital Cooperation and Development – Arab States Action Programme (ADCD-ASAP) was launched in 2020 by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).

The aims of the second track of ADCD-ASAP include supporting policymakers and stakeholders in improving policy and practices by developing consolidated policy advocacy and policy dialogue channels. This will enable stakeholders to raise issues and exchange expertise; share status updates, progress, success stories and lessons learnt; and communicate and harmonize standpoints on global and regional digital policies.

Within the framework of ADCD-ASAP and guided by the core principles of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS); the global Internet Governance Forum (IGF); the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;¹ the United Nations Secretary-General's Roadmap on Digital Cooperation;² and the Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda report,³ ESCWA, in partnership with the League of Arab States (LAS) and a number of key actors in the WSIS and IGF processes, including the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is organizing the inaugural meeting of the Arab international Digital Cooperation and Development Forum (DCDF), to be held from 13 to 23 December 2021.

This event builds on the outcomes of three consecutive regional consultative meetings that ESCWA organized in cooperation with LAS on 11 August 2020,⁴ 3 December 2020⁵ and 27 April 2021,⁶ and on follow-up inter-organizational meetings at which participants from WSIS, IGF and the technical community shared their views and endorsed the idea of consolidating existing platforms for regional policy dialogue within the envisaged DCDF-2021.

Participants unanimously agreed to hold the sixth meeting of the Arab Internet Governance Forum (Arab IGF)⁷ in conjunction with the third Arab WSIS⁸. The aim is to align the Arab track of the WSIS Forum with the Arab track of IGF and other related tracks, so as to optimize opportunities for multilateral collaboration; maximize the mutual benefits of harnessing ICTs, the digital economy and digital transformation towards achieving inclusive sustainable development in the Arab region; and build back better in a post-COVID-19 environment.

DCDF-2021 will be conducted online over a two-week period, from 13 to 23 December 2021. It will comprise over 30 sessions encompassing several tracks, high-level segments, diverse thematic sessions, and side events. It will also bring together relevant stakeholders representing the public and private sectors, the technical community, academia, civil society, and youth and international organizations.

DCDF-2021 will provide an inclusive platform for all stakeholders to discuss priority issues in the Arab region relating to digital development and digital cooperation. Discussions will cover the Digital Future at the global and regional levels for the next decade and beyond. The dynamic format will set standards and build consensus on regional and thematic digital development issues, guided by major global and regional forums and declarations on the subject.

In addition, DCDF-2021 aims to enhance digital development and cooperation among Arab countries, and to inform regional and global forums on related issues, including the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development and the global High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.



Objectives

This inaugural meeting of the Arab international DCDF adopts a progressive approach towards consolidation that strengthens collaboration and aims to advance digital development and digital cooperation among member States and a wide range of regional stakeholders.

The event will enable engagement, dialogue and partnership among various stakeholders and experts from the Arab region on crucial issues pertaining to digital development and digital cooperation. It will provide opportunities to review and discuss interlinkages between the information society, digital economy and Internet governance under the 2030 Agenda.

The event will also build the institutional capacity of Arab countries through specialized technical cooperation tracks, advancing a safer, more equitable digital region and leading to a brighter and more prosperous future for all Arab citizens.



Partners, segments and tracks

Operating under the One United Nations (One UN) initiative, the event will engage various United Nations organizations, in addition to key regional organizations and national entities. It will involve several policy dialogues and policy advocacy platforms, including the following:

A. Third Arab WSIS

The Arab WSIS will include several special sessions, such as the following:

- 🗨️ Ninth meeting of the Arab e-government directors.
- 🗨️ Special session on the future of work.
- 🗨️ Special session on digital inclusion of persons with disabilities.
- 🗨️ Special session on technology and innovation for the transport sector.
- 🗨️ Special session on e-trade, e-commerce and digital economy.
- 🗨️ Special sessions on specific action lines of WSIS and specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda.
- 🗨️ Partners and stakeholder sessions relating to topics covered by the WSIS action lines (topics are open to all interested stakeholders).

Global WSIS process and Arab WSIS process

WSIS is a unique two-phase United Nations summit that was initiated to create an evolving multi-stakeholder platform to address ICT-related issues through a structured and inclusive approach at the national, regional and international levels. WSIS aims to achieve a common vision, goal and commitment to build a people-centric, inclusive and development-oriented information society where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information. General Assembly resolution 56/183 of 21 December 2001 endorsed the holding of WSIS in two phases. The first phase took place in Geneva from 10 to 12 December 2003, and the second phase took place in Tunis from 16 to 18 November 2005. In 2003, the number of participants was 11,000, representing 175 countries; and in 2005 the number of participants was over 19,000, representing 174 countries.

The WSIS Forum represents the world's largest annual gathering of the 'ICT for development' community. The WSIS Forum, co-organized by ITU, UNESCO, UNDP and UNCTAD, in close collaboration with all WSIS action line facilitators/co-facilitators, has proven to be an efficient mechanism for coordinating multi-stakeholder engagement in implementation processes, exchanging information, creating knowledge, and sharing best practices. The WSIS Forum continues to provide assistance in developing multi-stakeholder and public/private partnerships to advance development goals.

To fulfil its mandate, as stipulated in the Geneva Plan of Action and the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society, ESCWA as a United Nations regional commission has promoted and supported implementation of WSIS processes at the regional level since its inception in 2003. To advance WSIS, ESCWA assists member States in conducting national reviews. In addition, it periodically holds the Arab High-level Forum on WSIS and 2030 Agenda to review and follow up on the implementation of WSIS outcomes in western Asia.

B. Sixth Arab Internet Governance Forum

- 🗨️ The Arab IGF segment will encompass a number of main plenary debate sessions, as follows:
- 🗨️ Global and regional Internet governance ecosystems.
- 🗨️ Access and inclusiveness.
- 🗨️ Legal, policy and regulatory framework.
- 🗨️ Digital economy and digital transformation.
- 🗨️ Human, cultural and behavioural issues related to digital platforms.

Global and Arab IGF processes

IGF brings together various stakeholder groups, as equals, in discussions on public policy issues relating to the Internet. While there is no negotiated outcome, IGF informs and inspires policymakers in both the public and private sectors. At their annual meeting, delegates discuss, exchange information and share good practices. IGF facilitates common understanding on how to maximize Internet opportunities and address risks and challenges.

Established in 2012 by ESCWA and LAS, who serve as the umbrella organizations, the Arab IGF process is an essential mechanism for bottom-up and multi-stakeholder policy dialogue between Governments and various regional stakeholders. It contributes towards reaching a common understanding and enhancing collaboration on Internet-related policy issues.

As per the mandate of the Arab IGF, efforts were made to engage and ensure balanced representation of all stakeholders. ESCWA and LAS served as conveners, hosts and facilitators of its activities, conducting the process within the partnership framework and through the financial and in-kind contributions of international, regional and national partners. In 2016 and 2017, the Arab IGF process underwent a transformation exercise led by the joint ESCWA-LAS Arab IGF 2020 initiative. The initiative brought together representatives of different stakeholder groups engaged in Internet governance (Governments, the business sector, civil society, and the technical and academic community) from Arab countries, so as to conduct a comprehensive survey, convene consultations and analyse the following priority areas of development for the Arab IGF process: objectives, structure and mechanisms; financing mechanisms; content and outputs; and communication, media and outreach. The results were used as the basis for developing a charter for the Arab IGF, and supported the development of the Second Arab Roadmap for Internet Governance.

Since its inception, the Arab IGF has held five annual meetings, Kuwait 2012, attended by over 300 participants; Algiers 2013, attended by some 800 participants; Beirut (ESCWA) 2014, attended by over 500 participants; Beirut (Ogero) 2015, attended by 650 participants; and Egypt 2020, attended by 150 participants. The main output of these annual meetings was a set of key strategic messages to assist policymakers in the Arab region in decision-making on Internet governance.

Other related special tracks:

- An Arab IGF pre-event “ESCWA Open Forum for Digital Cooperation in the Arab Region” will be convened on 7 December 2021 as part of the sixteenth Global IGF to be held in Katowice, Poland, from 6 to 10 December 2021.
- A special session for the Chair and Vice Chairs of the United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS), comprising relevant United Nations bodies and organizations with a mandate to facilitate the implementation of WSIS outcomes. This year’s UNGIS is chaired by UNESCO, and ESCWA is one of the vice-chair members, along with ITU, UNDP and UNCTAD.
- An Arab Digital Development Experts Symposium will be held as part of DCDF-2021, dedicated to national digital development reviews, the Arab digital development report, and the Arab Digital Agenda. A platform will be dedicated to policy debate on the envisaged Arab digital agenda/ICT strategy.

C. Community engagement

In line with the inclusive and participatory nature of DCDF-2021, two open calls for submissions of session and workshop proposals are available on the event’s webpage and are open until 6 November 2021.

Call for session proposals to the Arab WSIS community

All Arab WSIS stakeholders who would like to share their digital development experiences, or engage in discussions around Arab WSIS-related thematic work or policy pertaining to digital development and/or digital cooperation as a means towards implementing the SDGs, are encouraged to participate by submitting proposals for special sessions using the online form available here.

Call for workshop proposals to the Arab IGF community

The Arab IGF community, young people in particular, is encouraged to engage in workshops around the following five thematic areas, namely: global and regional Internet governance ecosystems; access and inclusiveness; legal, policy and regulatory framework; digital economy and digital transformation; and human, cultural and behavioural issues related to digital platforms. Workshop proposals can be submitted using the online form available here.

Based on the different inputs from the Arab WSIS and Arab IGF communities, a general outline for the event, indicating the organizational layout of plenary sessions, tracks and proposed time and break slots, will be made available on the event’s webpage.

Outcomes

It is expected that this event will result in an outcome document on advancing digital cooperation and development in the Arab region, serving as a unique and streamlined multipartite regional collaboration platform.





Organization

ESCWA and partners are organizing DCDF-2021 online, over a two-week period from 13 to 23 December 2021.

DCDF-2021 is open to all stakeholders, who are welcome to join and lead on dedicated sessions to highlight their own work and achievements in the ICT for development field, and to contribute to and inform the event's core recommendations and outcomes.



Participants and registration

DCDF-2021 will bring together key stakeholders with interest in digital development and digital cooperation, including government policy and decision-making bodies, parliamentarians, representatives of the public and private sectors, civil society, the technical community/practitioners, the business sector, academia, non-governmental organizations, and international and regional organizations involved in developing the information society to achieve the SDGs in the Arab region. Registration is required through the event's official website: www.unescwa.org/events/arab-forum-on-digital-cooperation-and-development.



Languages

Arabic and English are the working languages of DCDF-2021. Simultaneous interpretation between English, Arabic French will be available.

Additional information and correspondence

A dedicated webpage will be made available on the ESCWA official website (www.unescwa.org), providing updated information on DCDF-2021. Further inquiries should be communicated to the persons listed below.

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Endnotes

- <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>.
- https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/assets/pdf/Roadmap_for_Digital_Cooperation_EN.pdf.
- www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf.
- Towards a Digital Decade of Action – through Digital Cooperation and Development – in the Arab Region, WSIS Forum 2020 Session on "Implementation of WSIS in the Arab Region: Ad hoc Multi-stakeholders Partners Consultations on potential consolidation of Arab WSIS with Arab IGF, Arab Digital Cooperation and/or other related Tracks, beyond 2020", 11 August 2020.
- Second regional consultative meeting on Arab Digital Cooperation and Development: Towards a Digital Decade of Action – through Digital Cooperation and Development – in the Arab Region, 3 December 2020.
- Third regional consultative meeting on Arab Digital Cooperation and Development – Consolidated Regional Policy Dialogue Platforms, online session as part of WSIS-2021, 27 April 2021.
- The following five meetings of the Arab IGF have been held: First Arab IGF (2012) in Kuwait. Second Arab IGF (2013) in Algiers. Third Arab IGF (2014) in Beirut. Fourth Arab IGF (2015) in Beirut. Fifth Arab IGF (2020) in Cairo.
- The following two AHLF meetings have been held: First AHLF on WSIS and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Beirut, 8-12 May 2017, <https://www.unescwa.org/events/arab-high-level-forum-wsis-and-2030-agenda-sustainable-development>. Second AHLF on WSIS and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Beirut, 19-21 March 2019, <https://archive.unescwa.org/events/arab-forum-wsis-sdgs-2019>.

