



Shared Prosperity Dignified Life



# **Accessible Arab Region: ICT for ALL**

**2<sup>Nd</sup> of December 2021**

**Preliminary Concept Note**

## 1. Background

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. Digital connectivity has become crucial not only for the economy and education but also to enable people access to vital information, products and services such as those related to health during this crisis. It ensured the continuation of key activities and functions of workplaces, hospitals, and educational institutions. Moreover, digital technologies have also played a critical role to support the public health response to COVID-19, to further strengthen capacity for preparedness and resilience.

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, digital literacy and experience the benefit outcomes of technology<sup>1</sup> However, to achieve digital inclusion of all people regardless their gender, age, ability, or location, in addition to the availability and affordability of internet access and devices we also must consider the accessibility of digital information and services provided through digital platforms.

Accessibility refers 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 mean to ensure digital inclusion of all people, including those with disabilities and as imperative to guarantee inclusive societies in the digital world.

The public and private sector as well as the industry manufacturers need to be motivated to develop and deliver accessible Information and Communication Technologies while the implementation of ICT accessibility policies and strategies need to gain top priority and be part of the global policymakers<sup>1</sup> agenda. By doing so, the governments will lead by example and ensure that digital information, products, and services are available, affordable, and accessible for all persons, including those with disabilities.

## 2. Why ICT Accessibility?

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recognizes the significant role that ICTs if provided in an available, accessible and affordable manner, can play to enable and empower persons with disabilities and support their socio-economic development and equal, equitable and effective participation in society.

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<sup>1</sup> Accelerating Digital Inclusion in the New Normal <https://www.weforum.org/reports/accelerating-digitalinclusion-in-the-new-normal>

Moreover, the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS)<sup>2</sup> provides the foundation for sustainable and transformative progress on disability inclusion through all pillars of the work of the United Nations establishing the highest levels of commitment, accountability and a vision for the UN system on disability inclusion. It provides a unique opportunity to advance the global commitment of governments and partners to the CRPD and the 2030 Agenda by ensuring the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all areas of the UN's work and at all levels, through systematic, coherent and unified actions across the system.

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 interact with others. For 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, including persons with disabilities, 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 implementation of the CRPD and ensure that persons with disabilities are fully included in the digital economy and the digital society of the XXI century.

The ITU-D work in ICT/Digital Accessibility<sup>3</sup> is developed with and for Member States and involved stakeholders as reflected through the work of *ITU-D Study Group Question 7/1: "Access to telecommunication/ICT services by persons with disabilities and with specific needs"*<sup>4</sup> (please see the final Report released in 2021<sup>5</sup>). ITU also raises awareness, provides policies guidelines and strategies advice, and develops resources<sup>6</sup> to support national, regional and global efforts in implementing and building an inclusive digital societies and communities. In support to ITU strategic goal nr. 2 "Inclusiveness" and its related target 2.9 that calls on all Member States to ensure that "*enabling environments for persons with disabilities are built in all countries by 2023*" ITU provided support to countries from the Arab region to develop their ICT accessibility policies and also developed and made available on-line self-paced training courses in topics of ICT accessibility in Arabic language<sup>7</sup>. These training courses, which are also localized for the best practices, are available and delivered through ITU Academy, free of charge and in digitally accessible format, to enable everyone including persons with disabilities follow these training courses. Finally, these trainings jointly with other informative and useful resources provided by ITU (such as the new released "*Towards building inclusive digital communities – ITU toolkit and self-assessment in ICT accessibility*"<sup>8</sup> and related video tutorial<sup>9</sup>) aim at strengthening regional capacity in the topic and to support countries and stakeholders' efforts in implementing a digitally inclusive Arab region for all people without any discrimination.

With reference to the Arab region, it is worth mentioning that although Arab countries are increasingly committed to ensuring and respecting the rights of persons with disabilities, this group is still among the most marginalized population groups, facing multiple barriers which hinder their ability to participate in society on an equal basis. In many countries in the region, persons with disabilities face significant barriers in accessing information and communication technologies, including online media, e- services, websites and other online resources. In this context, ESCWA has launched in 2020 the Arab Digital Inclusion Platform (ADIP) project to support policy makers in the Arab counties to develop/improve their national policies and guidelines for enhanced digital accessibility. This would help to bridge the digital divide and enable all society members to access and use ICT.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/content/disabilitystrategy/>

### 3. Accessible Arab Region: ICT for ALL

Accessible Arab Region: ICT for ALL is one of the main ITU and ESCWA regional priorities focusing on raising awareness, strengthen capacity and developing resources in ICT Accessibility, as a key requirement to foster implementation and ensure digital inclusion and empowerment through ICTs of everyone, regardless of their age, gender, ability, or location in the region.

Through this event, ITU and ESCWA are launching an invitation to all Member States and stakeholders to jointly identify the ways forward to foster implementation and mainstream digital accessibility, as a mean to provide innovative and equitable solutions that show how technology can ensure inclusiveness and empowerment of everyone. Moreover, the event invites participants to reflect on how from young to older persons we are all concerned by the accessibility in the digital world context. Finally, the Accessible Arab Region: ICT for ALL event aims to share and discuss the work and initiatives carried out to promote and support the implementation of policies, strategies and resources to ensure inclusiveness of all people including persons with disabilities in the framework of the SDG, CRPD, UNDIS and other related global commitments.

Accessible Arab Region: ICT for ALL, also provides a regional knowledge development platform for ICT accessibility topic that aims to support member States and regional stakeholders in their implementation efforts by sharing good practices and challenges, leveraging their capacity in the ICT accessibility related topics while also offering networking and partnership opportunities to facilitate the development of digitally inclusive societies in the region.

### 4. Beneficiaries

The target audience of this event are all the interested stakeholders including policy makers, from public and private sectors, and representatives from NGOs, Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) from the Arab region.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Digital-Inclusion/Persons-with-Disabilities/Pages/Persons-with-Disabilities.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.itu.int/net4/ITU-D/CDS/sg/rgqlist.asp?lg=1&sp=2018&rgq=D18-SG01-RGQ07.1&stg=1>

<sup>5</sup> [Access to telecommunication/ICT services by persons with disabilities and other persons with specific needs - My ITU](#)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Digital-Inclusion/Persons-with-Disabilities/Pages/ResourcesOnICTAccessibility.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> ICT Accessibility <https://academy.itu.int/training-courses/full-catalogue/ict-accessibility-key-inclusive-communication-line-self-paced-training>

Web Accessibility <https://academy.itu.int/training-courses/full-catalogue/web-accessibility-cornerstone-digital-societyon-line-self-paced-training>

<sup>8</sup> ["Towards building inclusive digital communities": ITU toolkit and self-assessment for ICT accessibility implementation - My ITU](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Video-Tutorials on the creation of accessible digital documents \(itu.int\)](#)

## 5. Objective

The objective of the Accessible Arab Region: ICT for ALL is to hold an open informative and interactive discussions with all interested stakeholders on the importance on ensuring the Digital Inclusion of everyone and how to use ICT/digital accessibility, global and regional implementation to ensure that in a context of digitalization the information, services that could have an impact in the lives of all people, such as the vital information and health services provided during the Covid 19 pandemic, also consider the needs and requirements to access digital information of all people without any discrimination of age, gender, ability or location. Therefore, we aim at 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.

The main purpose of the event is to present good practices in digital inclusion to encourage stakeholders to join efforts in seeking solutions to eliminate barriers of access to ICTs, enabling human development and promoting accessibility policies that will improve the quality of life of all individuals, with no discrimination.

Accessible Arab Region: ICT for ALL and all related activities will be held within the framework of the ITU thematic priority of the Development sector on digital inclusion that aims at bridging the digital divide and equipping all groups of society, including persons with disabilities and other groups of people with specific needs, to take advantage of ICTs, by enabling capacity building and sharing experience on how to design, develop and use accessible ICTs. In the same context, Accessible Arab Region: ICT for ALL is directly linked to “Beirut Consensus on Technology for Sustainable development in the Arab region” issued during the thirtieth ESCWA ministerial session (2018), by providing member countries with high quality advice and specific support on technology and innovation for sustainable development, with focus on the inclusion of persons with disabilities, and promoting social well-being of all.

ICTs are of vital importance for people’s empowerment and in promoting accessibility policies to make the Arab region a more inclusive society. In this context, the event will focus on further promoting the development of ICT accessibility in countries and institutions through cooperation, programs, and projects development, and generate partnerships, and training.

## 6. Proposed content and format for the ITU/ESCWA Accessible Arab region: ICT for ALL

Topics that will be addressed in this event include:

- ITU work, activities and resources made available to advance ICT/Digital Accessibility implementation.
- ESCWA efforts in ICT/Digital Accessibility.
- Arab governments strategies and policies in promoting Digital Accessibility.
- Digital Accessibility Platforms and Initiatives:
  - Arab NGOs best practices
  - Private sectors applications
- Partnerships and Innovation for Digital Accessibility.