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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Committee on Transport and Logistics
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Item 4 (c) of the provisional agenda

**Progress in the field of transport and logistics
since the eighteenth session of the Committee****Project on geographic information systems (GIS) for transport
networks between Arab countries****Summary**

At its fifteenth session, held in Rabat on 27 and 28 January 2015, the Committee on Transport considered following up on the implementation of the components of the Integrated Transport System in the Arab Mashreq (ITSAM). The Committee recommended that member States signatories to transport agreements of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) should update information contained in the ITSAM questionnaire to enable ESCWA to develop an electronic platform allowing national focal points to periodically update information themselves in the future.

The present document reviews developments and progress in establishing the electronic platform. Representatives of member States are invited to take note of the project proposal and make comments thereon.

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Introduction

1. The programme of work for the biennium 2014-2015 in the field of transport and logistics of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) contained activities that complemented ESCWA efforts to develop the Integrated Transport System in the Arab Mashreq (ITSAM), aimed at facilitating transport and trade between countries of the region.
2. At its fifteenth session, held in Rabat on 27 and 28 January 2015, the Committee on Transport recommended that member States signatories to transport agreements of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)¹ should update information contained in the ITSAM questionnaire to enable ESCWA to develop an electronic platform allowing national focal points to periodically update information themselves in the future.
3. The ESCWA secretariat proposed the establishment of an electronic platform, equivalent to a geographic information system (GIS), to follow up on the implementation of ITSAM components. The secretariat presented the proposal to the Committee on Transport at its sixteenth session, held in Cairo on 23 and 24 November 2015.² The Committee recommended the implementation of the project, and requested member States to appoint national coordinators to collaborate with the secretariat in its implementation.³

I. TRIAL VERSION IN COOPERATION WITH THE UNITED NATIONS INTERIM FORCE IN LEBANON

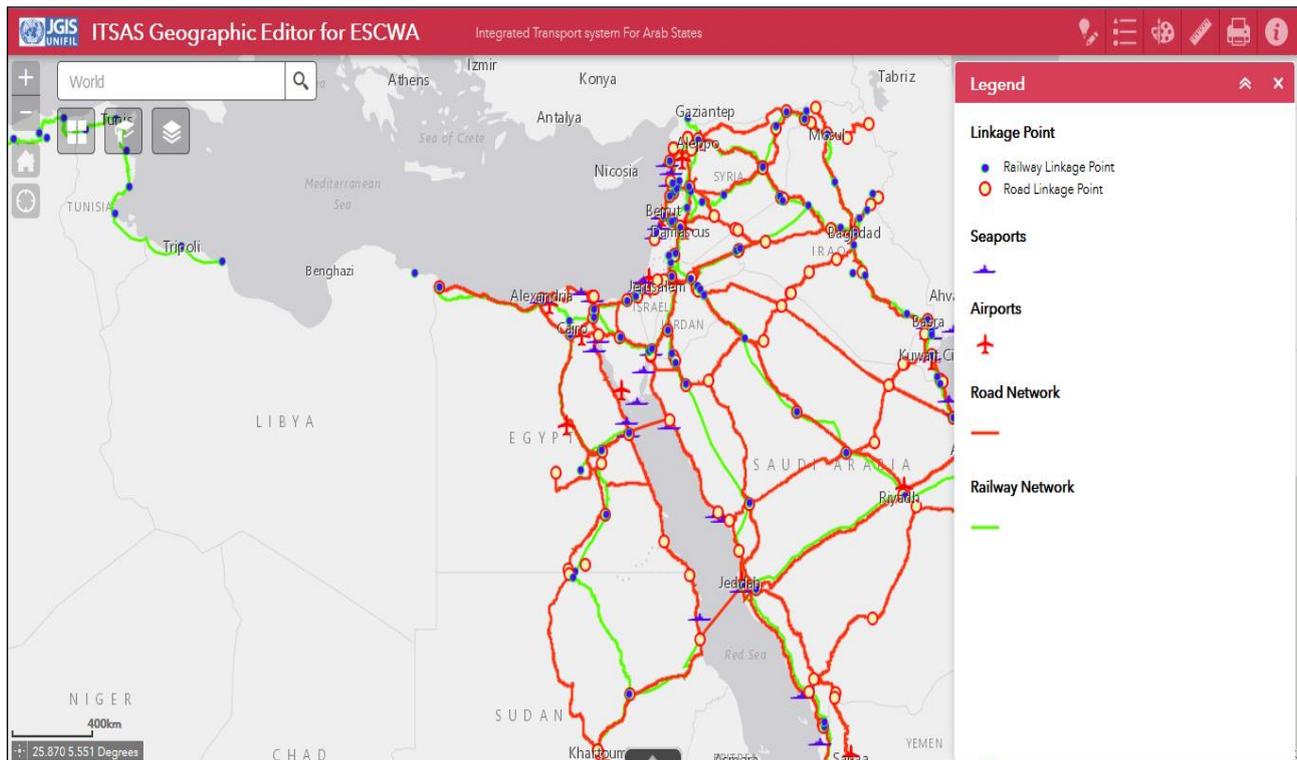
4. In 2017, the ESCWA secretariat developed a trial version of the GIS project, in collaboration with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) (figure). The secretariat benefited from GIS on the UNIFEL server, which allows users to connect to the system via the Internet. The trial version comprised the following five layers: a general information layer at the country level, a road layer, a railway layer, an airport layer and a seaport layer.
5. The trial project consisted of providing maps of road and rail networks covered by the Agreement on International Roads in the Arab Mashreq and the Agreement on International Railways in the Arab Mashreq, and of uploading airport and seaport locations in member States. The project also included a table of technical features and operational specifications of network sections, airports and seaports and definitions of those features so as to allow national coordinators to enter available data.

¹ The Agreement on International Roads in the Arab Mashreq, the Agreement on International Railways in the Arab Mashreq, and the Memorandum of Understanding on Maritime Transport Cooperation in the Arab Mashreq.

² E/ESCWA/EDID/2015/IG.3/3(Part III).

³ E/ESCWA/EDID/2015/IG.3/6/Report.

Trial version of the geographic information system for transport networks and facilities in Arab countries



Source: Prepared by ESCWA and UNIFIL in 2017.

Note: The designations employed and the presentation of material on any map in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

II. TRAINING WORKSHOP FOR NATIONAL COORDINATORS

6. On 13 April 2016, the ESCWA secretariat requested member States to appoint national coordinators for the project. It received responses from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.

7. The secretariat, in collaboration with UNIFIL, organized a training workshop for national coordinators at the headquarters of the General Authority for Roads, Bridges and Land Transport in Cairo on 22 January 2017. The workshop's goals included defining the system and its layers and data entry, providing practical training on entering descriptive features, disseminating and discussing a draft table of features, discussing a mechanism for data input and permissions, and providing user names and passwords for national coordinators to begin data entry.

8. Participants made several conclusions and recommendations that were presented to and adopted by the Committee on Transport and Logistics at its seventeenth session, held in Cairo on 23 and 24 January 2017.⁴ They stressed the importance of GIS as a platform for following up on and developing the components of the Integrated Transport System in the Arab States (ITSAS), and for assisting Arab countries and the League of Arab States' secretariat in conducting analyses and surveys for transport planning; and highlighted the need to secure financing to develop GIS uses in various economic and social areas.

⁴ E/ESCWA/EDID/2016/IG.1/7/Report.

9. The recommendations also stressed the need for member States to finalize the appointment of national coordinators and inform ESCWA of their names to allow the secretariat to provide the necessary training to all focal points. They also requested member States to support national coordinators' work to enable them to collect the necessary data to operationalize the platform's layers (general country-level statistics, road data, railway data, airport data and seaport data). They agreed to add two new data layers for inland logistics terminals and border crossings, and to incorporate them into the platform's GIS.

10. Given the limitations of the trial version on the UNIFIL server, in terms of space and permissions, in fulfilling the requirements to establish and operationalize GIS in all Arab countries, especially following the addition of the two new layers, the secretariat requested funding from the Islamic Development Bank to develop GIS in an environment that would enable the project's full implementation. On 10 December 2017, the Islamic Development Bank said that it would consider financing the project, and requested a joint technical meeting to examine the ESCWA project on GIS for transport networks as part of another project to establish an observatory to explore linking regional transport networks.

11. At the eighteenth session of the Committee on Transport and Logistics, held in Beirut on 20 and 21 December 2017, participants discussed the ESCWA project on a multimodal transport system in the Arab region. They agreed on the importance of organizing additional training sessions on GIS uses.⁵

III. DEVELOPMENTS IN 2018

12. ESCWA, in collaboration with the Islamic Development Bank, the Economic Commission for Europe and the Center for Transport Studies for the Western Mediterranean (CETMO), held a coordination meeting to collaborate in establishing GIS for transport networks and facilities in Europe, Asia, the Western Mediterranean and the Arab region (Beirut, 24 April 2018). Participants agreed on the importance of the proposed ESCWA project to link existing GIS for transport networks and facilities in Europe with the project being implemented in cooperation between the Islamic Development Bank and the Economic Commission for Europe to build transport GIS in countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation (OEC) and with GIS in the Western Mediterranean.

13. The Islamic Development Bank reaffirmed its interest in funding the ESCWA project on establishing GIS for transport networks and facilities in the Arab region and adding two new layers for inland logistics terminals and border crossings, provided that a unified table of GIS features was established combining the tables used in the three trials conducted in the Arab region, the Western Mediterranean and OEC countries.

14. The ESCWA secretariat prepared a comparative study on the three tables, which it sent to the collaborating organizations on 21 May 2018. After taking note of the organizations' comments and proposals, it developed a unified table of GIS transport features and sent it to the organizations on 3 August 2018.

15. Following the withdrawal of UNIFIL from the trial project, the ESCWA secretariat converted maps of transport networks and facilities into an open-source GIS (Q GIS), allowing communication between several users via the Internet. The system maintained the main international railway and road networks covered by ESCWA agreements, and added key transport facilities such as seaports and airports. The secretariat also confirmed the possibility of adding the two new layers.

16. Following several coordination meetings, the Islamic Development Bank agreed in principle to finance a new technical workshop to reach consensus on the unified table of features proposed by the ESCWA secretariat, and to hold a practical training session for national coordinators to mobilize information and data and take note of comments by national coordinators on the unified table, which would ensure future communication between GIS in Asia, Europe and the Arab region.

⁵ E/ESCWA/EDID/2017/IG.1/9/Report, para. 5.

17. Having reached consensus on an official formula for cooperation between the Islamic Development Bank, ESCWA and the Economic Commission for Europe, participants agreed that the date of the technical workshop and training session would be determined in early 2019.

IV. CONCLUSION

18. The Islamic Development Bank expressed its interest in funding the ESCWA project on establishing GIS for ITSAS. Upon completion, the system will link the existing GIS for transport networks and facilities in Europe with the project being implemented in cooperation between the Islamic Development Bank and the Economic Commission for Europe to build transport GIS in countries of the OEC and with GIS in the Western Mediterranean.

19. To move forward with the project, the ESCWA secretariat requests member States to complete the appointment of national coordinators for the project. It also requests Arab States that have yet to accede to relevant transport agreements to do so, and to identify roads and railway lines and their interconnections. The ESCWA secretariat urges Arab countries to collaborate with project organizers in identifying the locations of logistical land hubs and border crossings for inclusion in the system. It also urges national coordinators to provide information and data on those hubs and border crossings in the unified table of features that they will be trained to fill.
