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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT

ONLINE WORKSHOP ON E-GOVERNMENT: POLICIES AND STRATEGIES
15 JANUARY TO 12 MARCH 2007

Summary

The Online Workshop on E-Government: Policies and Strategies, which was held from 15 January to 12 March 2007, constitutes an activity under the Development Account project, entitled "Capacity-building for ICT policymaking", which is being implemented by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) in collaboration with the regional commissions of the United Nations, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

The Workshop was based on an online forum, on the web page of the ICT Division within ESCWA, and was organized over three phases as follows: (a) collecting information related to the national experiences in e-government in ESCWA member countries; (b) discussing the findings of the first phase and the challenges of e-government in the region; and (c) discussing the recommendations formulated according to the outcome of the second phase. The forum involved 15 participants from 10 ESCWA members, namely, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestine, Qatar, Syrian Arab Republic, United Arab Emirates and Yemen; and the number of transactions reached 345.

The Workshop recommended the establishment of an independent e-government entity at the national level to be charged with e-government services, and that this entity needed to have its authority from the highest possible Government office in order to be able to ensure synergies between governmental agencies and monitor the implementation of all e-government activities. Moreover, national entities must aim to develop and keep track of indicators for monitoring the implementation of activities, and adapt them to their national situation; and need to collaborate within the framework of an independent regional organization, such as ESCWA or the League of Arab States, which could develop, monitor and publish these indicators at the regional level. Additionally, in order for e-government to progress from the initial stage, referred to as INFORM, to the subsequent stages, namely INTERACT and TRANSACT, a stronger regional collaboration framework is essential for the development of better e-services, thereby facilitating the exchange of international best-case experiences and improving awareness on the importance of these more advanced e-services. Furthermore, countries must make their e-government strategies available to the public and revise them according to their priorities. Equally, countries need to develop those indicators that can influence their future developments towards the INTERACT and TRANSACT stages, which requires collaboration within the regional cooperation framework on the overall issues of e-government.

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Introduction

1.   The Workshop was held from 15 January 2007 to 12 March 2007, on the web page of the ICT Division within ESCWA, at: www.escwa.org.lb/divisions/ictd/workshop/forum/default.asp.

2.   The Workshop constitutes an activity under the Development Account project, entitled "Capacity-building for ICT policymaking", which is being implemented by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) in collaboration with the regional commissions of the United Nations, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). This project aims to provide technical assistance and advisory services to decision-makers in order to develop comprehensive and sustainable ICT policies for development, and to integrate them effectively into overall national development programmes and strategies. Its activities fall within the efforts aimed at linking the use of ICTs with the internationally agreed development goals, particularly the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

3.   The online Workshop, aims at contributing to streamlining the process of formulating and implementing e-government strategies in accordance with the goals of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), and is set to provide decision-makers with the following: (a) the challenges related to e-government development in the ESCWA region; (b) best practices of e-government application in developed countries; (c) institutional dimensions of e-government strategies and policies; and (d) monitoring the progress of e-government applications and measuring their impact.

4.   The Workshop was carried out through an online forum and was organized over three phases as follows: (a) collecting information related to the national experiences in e-government in ESCWA member countries; (b) discussing the findings of the first phase and the challenges of e-government in the region; and (c) discussing the recommendations formulated according to the outcome of the second phase.

I. BACKGROUND PAPER

5.   Discussions were based on the background and working paper, entitled "E-government: policies and strategies", which reviewed the main methodologies developed on e-government policies and strategies, and their implementation in ESCWA member countries; considered the way the United Nations assesses and measures the progress made in e-government; and highlighted the methods used to compare the results for ESCWA member countries in 2003-2005.

6.   The working paper and the forum of discussion tackled the following topics:

(a)   E-government and ICT, and development policies;

(b)   The definition of e-government;

(c)   The experiences of ESCWA member countries in formulating and implementing e-government strategies;

(d)   E-government publishing phase: using ICT to expand access to official information;

(e)   The interaction phase of e-government: broadening civic participation in government;

(f)   The transaction phase of e-government: making government services available online;

(g)   The transformation of government through e-government projects;

(h)   Challenges and opportunities for the design of e-government programmes;

(i)   The approach by the United Nations aimed at fostering, measuring and assessing progress in e-government.

7.   Participants offered their perspectives with regard to the above-mentioned topics and provided case studies from their countries.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.   The recommendations agreed upon during the third phase of the Workshop can be categorized in seven areas as set forth below.

A. DEFINING PRIORITIES FOR E-GOVERNMENT SERVICES

9.   Discussions showed a well-developed public awareness among participating ESCWA member countries on how e-government services could assist citizens and businesses. This resulted in the following recommendations:

(a) Each ESCWA member country needs to establish an independent entity charged with e-government services;

(b) Such entities could assess the national e-government needs by initiating relevant consultations with the public to define priorities and, subsequently, they could establish short- and long-term plans to implement the services that match these needs. In order to ensure success, these established entities must have clearly-defined budgets and be given the power and the adequate mandate with which to implement plans;

(c) Established plans and implemented activities need to be assessed on a regular basis; and priorities must be readjusted and redefined in accordance with monitoring.

B. SYNERGIES BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

10.   Discussions showed that the lack of collaboration among ministries and governmental agencies represents one of the main problems impeding the development of e-government services. Consequently, in order to create an efficient drive over all ministries and agencies, these entities in each ESCWA member country need to acquire their authority from the highest possible office, namely the head of Government. This direct link to the highest office encourages the definition of standards, helps to pilot inter-agency programmes, develops synergies, and promotes the monitoring and implementation of all e-government activities.

C. INDICATORS FOR E-GOVERNMENT SERVICES

11.   On the issue of indicators for e-government services, there is a need to drive and measure the development of e-services at the national level, to establish a comparative basis and consequently to foster competition at the regional level. This resulted in the following recommendations:

(a) The e-government entity in each ESCWA member country needs to develop and keep track of indicators tailored to national situations that can be used for monitoring the implementation of e-government activities according to agreed plans;

(b) A strong collaboration needs to be established between the e-government entities of the ESCWA region, which can be fostered by such independent organizations as ESCWA or the League of Arab States and that can be responsible for developing, monitoring and publishing indicators at the regional level.

D. CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT AND INTERACT E-GOVERNMENT SERVICES

12.   Participants agreed that there was a strong desire in ESCWA member countries to move e-government services that had already been implemented, referred to as the INFORM stage, towards the INTERACT and TRANSACT stages.

13. Discussions identified some of the most critical issues hindering this move, including the lack of an e-payment system, the absence of national electronic identity cards, the lack of various relevant e-government legislations, and the development of e-readiness in less-favoured areas.

14. The following recommendations were made:

(a) To establish a strong regional collaboration framework for moving e-government services to the INTERACT and TRANSACT stages. This framework could help e-government entities to develop INTERACT and TRANSACT services; to facilitate the exchange of related experience between ESCWA member countries; and to create awareness of the significance of the move towards the INTERACT stage in local and regional media;

(b) To benefit from other international best cases. Some countries have already made significant strides in the drive towards offering e-government INTERACT and TRANSACT services. ESCWA member countries could benefit from their experience.

E. E-GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES

15. In the light of the importance of well-defined e-government strategies and the need to revise such strategies on an annual basis, e-government entities in ESCWA member countries were recommended to aim at the following:

(a) To make public their e-government strategies;

(b) To hold annual seminars in order to assess the progress achieved during the previous year and to redefine short-, medium- and long-term e-government priorities;

(c) To revise e-government strategy accordingly;

(d) To publish indicators for the previous year as well as revised e-government strategy, thereby clarifying priorities.

F. INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL E-GOVERNMENT INDICATORS

16. The publication by international agencies of indicators on e-government implementations is a useful driving tool for developing e-government services in ESCWA member countries, and the annual United Nations e-government assessment is generally fair. However, at least at the regional level, there is a need to develop more detailed indicators that could influence the direction of future developments. Within that contest and the proposed framework on regional collaboration to move e-government services to the INTERACT and TRANSACT stages, specific efforts need to be dedicated towards discussing international indicators and developing more detailed indicators aimed at moving towards these stages.

G. REGIONAL COOPERATION ON THE ISSUES OF E-GOVERNMENT

17. Participants highlighted various points with regard to regional cooperation aimed at fostering e-government applications. Recognizing that the effects of comparison and competition at the regional level are a driving mechanism, there was a general consensus that such comparison was insufficient and often inefficient and that, moreover, the ESCWA region could benefit from the experience of international cases and best practices.

18. Consequently, there is a need to improve efficiency, with the collaboration framework enjoying genuine commitment of national Governments and of selected regional organizations, particularly ESCWA or the League of Arab States. Moreover, the subject matter must be well defined and include the following:

(a) Specific discussions of the steps needed to move towards the INTERACT and TRANSACT stages, and not e-government in general;

(b) Specific discussions of the activities of e-government entities;

(c) Regular monitoring of the implementation activities;

(d) Definition of problems and difficulties and identification of solutions.

III. DISCUSSION TOPICS

19. The Workshop addressed a number of subjects, including as follows:

(a) Definition of e-government used in the national e-government strategies of participating countries;

(b) Description of national experiences in formulating and implementing e-government strategies, and in addressing priorities aimed at improving the process and the target of servicing citizens and businesses;

(c) The publication phase of e-government (PUBLISH), which includes the milestones defined by the various ministries and agencies; identification of ministries and agencies that are involved in the PUBLISH stage, and those that will be involved subsequently; categorization of the posted information and its language/s; detection of the agency in charge of monitoring the PUBLISH activities and identification of the resources used for the PUBLISH activities, including internal budgets or allocated budgets of the national e-government strategy; and the frequency of information update;

(d) The interaction phase (INTERACT), which includes the identification of websites of ministries or governmental agencies that enable interaction, and the way each site handles the comments and requests received from citizens; in addition to the way Internet consultations are treated by such traditional media as newspapers, radio and television;

(e) The transactional phase (TRANSACT), wherein the participants identified the transactional services offered completely online in their respective countries, the way these services reach the targeted audience in remote areas, the pace of evolution of the online share of transactions, the budgets and resources used for implementing the TRANSACT stage, and the payment methods for the online TRANSACT stage;

(f) Transforming government through e-government projects (TRANSFORM), which described the association of e-government initiatives with the reform processes, in addition to the collaboration among governmental and non-governmental organizations for developing e-government programmes. Equally, this section sought to identify the responsibility for e-government investments and their sources of funding, in addition to the role of the political leadership in these initiatives and the way the issue of civic engagement was dealt with;

(g) Challenges and opportunities for the design of e-government programmes addressed a number of subject areas that contribute to the success of the e-government programmes, including the following: infrastructure development, legal reforms, security and trust-building, transparency, public-private relationships, workforce training, budgeting and prioritization, setting of measurable goals, and the overseeing and auditing of programme implementation;

(h) The United Nations approach for fostering and measuring e-government, in terms of fulfilling the Web Measure Index criteria, transactional e-government, e-participation in e-government programmes and e-government implementation.

IV. MAIN FINDINGS

20.   The forum discussions held during the first phase of the Workshop identified a number of findings, namely:

(a)   All countries acknowledged the importance of e-government in matters related to efficiency and modernization of public administration and services provided to citizens and companies. However, the definitions used do not stress the two other WSIS targets, namely: making public administration more transparent and democratic. Moreover, the commitment on e-government from highest authorities is rarely sufficiently strong to represent a definitive drive for accelerating implementation;

(b)   Some countries have failed to establish clear strategies for e-government with clear goals and priorities; and even when a strategy document exists, there is often a lack of visible milestones or of measurable indicators aimed at monitoring progress;

(c)   Most ESCWA member countries have progressed in the PUBLISH stage for many government agencies in Arabic and other languages, with continuous updating. Moreover, they have developed a global governmental portal to facilitate user access to the different governmental services. However, the relationship between the agency responsible for the portal and other governmental agencies is not explicitly stated in terms of operations, milestones and budget;

(d)   Some ESCWA member countries have moved to the TRANSACT stage of e-government and a payment system has been created for that purpose. However, usage statistics are rarely used for monitoring;

(e)   Few countries have progressed towards the INTERACT stage in their e-government activities;

(f)   E-government does not often drive the transformation of internal process of Government and public administration. It is only considered as an additional layer. The main challenges in that regard are as follows: (i) lack of commitment by the political leadership; (ii) absence of clear budget allocation; (iii) lack of programmes and milestones for implementation; (iv) presence of more than one e-government agency in a country; (v) lack of a clear framework of collaboration and standardization between governmental agencies; and (vi) insufficient civic engagement to boost implementation;

(g)   In most ESCWA member countries, there is awareness on the challenges for e-government development and implementation, namely: (i) infrastructure development, digital divide, e-literacy, accessibility and education are addressed, albeit in ways that are not specific for e-government development purposes; (ii) necessary legal reforms on, among others, privacy, security and payment are addressed, but the necessary laws have not been passed in all cases; (iii) the issues of trust-building and transparency are left to the initiative to each minister or agency director; and (iv) the issues of interoperability, records management and permanent availability are not typically addressed.

21.   There were no discussions on the measurement indicators of e-government and on the criteria for these indices, thereby indicating a comparatively low awareness of the importance of measurement and indicators as tools for driving the implementation of e-government.

V. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. VENUE AND DATES

22.   The Workshop was held from 15 January 2007 to 12 March 2007 on the website of the ICT Division within ESCWA, at: www.escwa.org.lb/divisions/ictd/workshop/forum/default.asp.

23.   The Workshop was conducted in three phases as follows: (a) discussion of topics set by the background paper and its framework; (b) elaboration of the main findings pursuant to the discussions made; and (c) formulation of recommendations based on the discussion of main findings.

B. PARTICIPANTS

24.   The Workshop forum included 15 participants from 10 ESCWA members, namely, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestine, Qatar, Syrian Arab Republic, United Arab Emirates and Yemen; and the number of transactions reached 345. The list of participants is contained in annex I of this report.

C. DOCUMENTS

25.   A list of the documents that were submitted and made available to the Workshop is contained in annex II of this report.

26.   The Workshop made available a number of reference reports and presentations in addition to links to e-government portals for the ESCWA region as follows:

    (a)   Bahrain, at www.e.gov.bh/pub/wps/portal;

    (b)   Egypt, at www.egypt.gov.eg/arabic/default.asp;

    (c)   Jordan, at www.jordan.gov.jo/;

    (d)   Kuwait, at www.e.gov.kw/Default.aspx?pageId=372;

    (e)   Lebanon, at www.informs.gov.lb/EN/Main/index.asp;

    (f)   Qatar, at www.e.gov.qa/eGovPortal/aboutus.jsp;

    (g)   Saudi Arabia, at www.yesser.gov.sa/;

    (h)   Syrian Arab Republic, at www.civilaffair-moi.gov.sy/sf04/index.php?lang=ar; and

    (i)   United Arab Emirates, at www.government.ae/gov/en/index.jsp, including the Emirate of Dubai, at www.dubai.ae/.

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LIST OF DOCUMENTS

Title

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1. ESCWA Background paper:

   Working paper on e-government: Policies and strategies

2. ESCWA reference presentations:
   E-government journey: from formulating strategies to implementing plans of action (Workshop on capacity building for ICT policymaking in Western Asia, 2-4 May 2006)

   UN global e-government assessment 2005 (Datamatix 12th GCC e-Government Forum, Dubai, 20-24 May 2006)

3. Reference reports/documents:
   The e-Government handbook for developing countries - A project of InfoDev and the Center for Democracy and Technology (InfoDev, November, 2002)

   UN global e-government readiness report 2005: From e-government to e-inclusion (UNPAN/2005/14)