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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT
OF THE WORKSHOP ON KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND
NETWORKING IN THE ESCWA REGION
BEIRUT, 17-19 DECEMBER 2008

Summary

The workshop on Knowledge Sharing and Networking in the ESCWA Region was organized by the Information and Communication Technology Division (ICTD) and held at UN House in Beirut on 17-19 December 2008. The workshop was held in the context of the project on Knowledge Networks through ICT Access Points for Disadvantaged Communities (DAKN), which is being implemented by the five United Nations Regional Commissions. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) is the lead agency of the DAKN project. The main objective of the project is to empower poor and disadvantaged communities by transforming selected existing ICT access points into global networked knowledge hubs.

The workshop aimed to familiarize key staff with the process of transforming their telecentres into networked knowledge hubs. This process includes a regional transformation strategy, a plan of action geared towards the implementation of the strategy and raising awareness among workshop participants on the need to better market the services of their telecentres, and the various aspects and benefits of knowledge management, with specific emphasis on knowledge collection methods and dissemination practices.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Knowledge Networks¹ through ICT Access Points² for Disadvantaged Communities³ (DAKN) project was launched in September 2006 and will be completed by September 2009. Funded by the United Nations Development Account, it is being implemented by all five United Nations Regional Commissions.⁴ The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) is the lead agency of the DAKN project. The main objective of the project is to empower poor and disadvantaged communities, women in particular, through transforming selected existing ICT access points into knowledge hubs⁵ of global knowledge networks, providing, developing, organizing, sharing and disseminating knowledge pertinent to these communities.

2. Several activities have been undertaken within the framework of the DAKN project. These activities include studies to assess the status of ICT telecentres in various regions of the world and identifying what is needed to transform autonomous centres into local, regional and global networked knowledge hubs. In September 2007, ESCWA held a regional stakeholders' meeting on knowledge network strategies, mechanisms and tools. This, and similar meetings held by other United Nations Regional Commissions, were aimed at reaching an agreement among all stakeholders on the strategies, mechanisms and tools necessary for the establishment of knowledge hubs and networks.

3. The workshop on Knowledge Sharing and Networking in the ESCWA region aimed to familiarize key staff with the process of transforming their telecentres⁶ into networked knowledge hubs. This process includes a regional transformation strategy, a plan of action geared towards the implementation of the strategy and raising awareness among workshop participants on the need to better market the services of their telecentres, and the various aspects and benefits of knowledge management, with specific emphasis on knowledge collection methods and dissemination practices.

4. The workshop was held to develop a plan of action for the implementation of the Regional Knowledge Strategy, training of participants on the use of the knowledge network portal of the ESCWA region and the development of their knowledge management and marketing skills.

5. Sixteen participants attended the workshop. The participants included managers and trainers of telecentres in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. These participants were trained by two ESCWA members of staff and five external resource persons.

¹ Knowledge networks are decentralized structures that promote cooperation between knowledge hubs through a virtual space, such as an Internet-based portal.

² ICT access points are centres that provide communities with access to technology, particularly to the Internet.

³ Communities in underserved urban and rural areas that include, among others: women; disabled persons; the unemployed; people living in poverty; youth; the elderly; immigrants; and micro-enterprises.

⁴ The five United Nations Regional Commissions are: the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA); the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE); the Economic Commission for Latin America and Caribbean region (ECLAC); the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP); and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).

⁵ Knowledge hubs are ICT access points that acquire, organize and disseminate knowledge directly related to the socio-economic development of local communities.

⁶ Telecentres are access points that are oriented towards community development. Telecentres share ICT resources in order to achieve socio-economic objectives, such as employment, poverty reduction.

II. DISCUSSION TOPICS

6. The subjects addressed during the workshop sessions are summarized below.

A. OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT ON KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS THROUGH ICT ACCESS POINTS FOR DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

7. Mr. Mansour Farah, ICT Policies Team Leader at ESCWA, presented the background and objectives of the project, its relationship to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and, specifically, the relevance of the project in the context of: (a) Goal 8 of the MDGs (develop a global partnership for development); (b) Goal 1 (eradicate extreme poverty and hunger); (c) Goal 2 (achieve universal primary education); and (d) Goal 3 (promote gender equality and empower women). A presentation was given on the current status of the project, the activities that have been completed, the steps to be tackled next and the activities that may be carried out in the future to ensure its sustainability. Mr. Farah emphasized that ESCWA will keep providing expertise and support for the development of knowledge networks beyond the projected completion date of the project in September 2009.

8. Participants suggested organizing visits to telecentres during future workshops as this would expose them to new ideas and successful practices which they could replicate.

B. REGIONAL KNOWLEDGE STRATEGY

9. Mr. Nour el Din Cheikh Obeid presented the Regional Knowledge Strategy. He drew attention to some of the issues and problems that are specific to the ESCWA region. These included: (a) a review of the status of ICT penetration; (b) identification of the main causes of the low levels of Arabic content on the Internet; (c) the use of ICT in schools and universities; (d) prevalent ICT illiteracy rates, especially amongst women; and (e) low levels of technical expertise. The presentation stressed that ICT access points will not improve ICT skills and empower the communities they serve unless they are transformed into knowledge hubs that are interconnected through knowledge networks. The transformation process suggested in the Regional Knowledge Strategy will operate simultaneously on two fronts: (a) inside telecentres by transforming them from ICT access points into knowledge hubs; and (b) outside telecentres by maximizing interaction between knowledge hubs, thereby facilitating the sharing of experience between similar centres.

10. The transformation process will seek to achieve two goals: (a) to assist the local community in integrating the use of ICT into their day-to-day activities; and (b) to bridge the gap between those who have, and those who do not have, access to knowledge. These goals may be achieved by:

- (a) Reducing illiteracy, especially among women and school dropouts;
- (b) Raising awareness on issues such as education, gender and health;
- (c) Conducting seminars on ICT use and applications;
- (d) Training on the use of ICTs as a tool for research;
- (e) Assisting individuals to make greater use of advertising and marketing opportunities on the Internet, on Websites, social networks and blogs, etc.;
- (f) Developing a library and an e-library;
- (g) Creating a knowledge database containing statistics and other data related to health, agriculture, demography and geography, etc.;
- (h) Reaching various target groups in the community by publishing periodic newsletters and training material;
- (i) Establishing a Website to give greater national and regional exposure to local communities.

11. The two goals of assisting the local community in integrating the use of ICT into their day-to-day activities and bridging the gap between those who have and those who do not have access to knowledge may also be achieved through the implementation of the following strategic activities in knowledge centres:

- (a) Building and expanding the capacity of the centres with specialized training courses;
- (b) Maximizing the benefits of ICT applications, such as e-learning;
- (c) Targeting women, the elderly and disabled persons with focused training sessions;
- (d) Providing games facilities and summer activities for children;
- (e) Organizing career orientation sessions;
- (f) Offering fast ADSL⁷ connections to the Internet;
- (g) Creating communities of practice in which experts, such as engineers, doctors, lawyers, etc., share their knowledge in public forums;
- (h) Partnering with organizations that provide e-services;
- (i) Enhancing sustainability through the adoption of a business model which accounts for funding and expenditures;
- (j) Creating websites for the centres to provide information on the services on offer.

12. To achieve a greater impact, it would be advisable to interconnect telecentres at the national level. This network would be managed centrally by a Government ministry or a non-governmental organization. Yearly coordination meetings of centre managers could be held to help them refresh their knowledge. Information and knowledge would be shared via a national Web portal. Regional and global networks could be created following the establishment of a national knowledge network.

C. SUSTAINABILITY OF TELECENTRES

13. Mr. Karim Kassem, Project Manager of the Empowering Communities through Telecentre Networking project in Egypt, spoke about knowledge sharing and networking as a tool to guarantee the sustainability of telecentres. After redefining the terms “knowledge”, “knowledge acquisition”, “knowledge management” and “social network”, Mr. Kassem introduced the different aspects of sustainability which should be tackled by telecentres. These include:

- (a) Social and cultural sustainability;
- (b) Technical sustainability;
- (c) Policy/strategy sustainability;
- (d) Human resources sustainability;
- (e) Financial sustainability;
- (f) Provision of ICT and non-ICT services.

14. Mr. Kassem discussed the experience of telecentres in Egypt and the success stories and experience that may be of benefit to other telecentres/access points engaged in the ESCWA project.

D. STATUS UPDATES ON TELECENTRES

15. Participants were requested to give an overview on the activities of their telecentres. Representatives from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen presented the:

⁷ ADSL is abbreviation for Asynchronous Digital Subscriber Line, the most commonly Internet access method in use today in homes and small offices.

(a) Type of courses being offered in their telecentres, for example the International Computer Driving Licence and Cisco Certified Network Associate certificates, which can be obtained at some participating telecentres;

(b) Type of services provided to the local community, including tutoring on Internet access and usage;

(c) Problems faced by telecentres and their solutions, with a special emphasis on funding and Internet connectivity.

E. PLAN OF ACTION FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REGIONAL STRATEGY

16. Mr. Nour El Din Cheikh Obeid presented a preliminary plan of action to transform ICT access points into knowledge hubs. The plan included a list of activities that need to be carried out by ESCWA and/or telecentres to facilitate the implementation of the Regional Knowledge Strategy. These activities include:

- (a) Establishing a Web portal;
- (b) Creating Web pages for each telecentre;
- (c) Formulating a business model;
- (d) Establishing libraries in telecentres;
- (e) Establishing an e-library on the Web portal;
- (f) Reducing illiteracy;
- (g) Offering computer courses to meet the special needs of target groups (for example, policemen, teachers, disabled persons, etc.);
- (h) Enhancing the selection of standard computer courses;
- (i) Teaching of foreign languages;
- (j) Marketing telecentre activities.

17. Throughout this workshop, participants were asked to provide suggestions and ideas which could be implemented by telecentres. Some of the suggestions proposed by participants included:

- (a) Formulating capacity-building projects aimed at disabled persons;
- (b) Organizing career orientation sessions for the youth;
- (c) Establishing technical courses for the elderly;
- (d) Developing an e-health project;
- (e) Using the Internet to promote greater awareness of natural disasters;
- (f) Marketing products on the Internet.

F. SUMMARY ON THE HANDS-ON TRAINING ON THE KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS WEB PORTAL

18. The second day of the workshop was spent training participants to use a Web portal designed to service the regional knowledge network. Ms. Nour Mounajed, an ESCWA consultant, delivered a full-day training session on how to use the portal, enter data in a database, transfer documents from and to the portal, perform minor changes and customize the template design. In addition to a complete user manual, the trainer supplied a CD to participants which contained the partially developed portal to allow them to familiarize themselves with the product, test it and report bugs, as well as send comments on how it could be improved. The training session was very well received by workshop participants and helped them to grasp the importance of implementing a regional Web portal.

G. KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT OF COMMUNITY TELECENTRES

19. Mr. Gabriel Deek, Professor at the Université Saint Joseph and General Manager of Omnisystems, gave a presentation on knowledge management. His presentation covered the following topics: (a) the definitions of information and knowledge; (b) the different types of knowledge; (c) how to identify community knowledge and information requirements; and (d) transforming individual knowledge into community-oriented knowledge. This session aimed at providing, developing, organizing, sharing and disseminating knowledge that is pertinent to targeted communities in key areas of sustainable development such as human resources, education, gender and health. Participants found the session very informative. Mr. Deek recommended that the same team should be exposed to further knowledge management training sessions, that a competition should be held between different telecentres to maximize their interaction and to provide them with an incentive to produce more, and, lastly, that telecentres need to exchange success stories and share success indicators.

H. MARKETING FOR COMMUNITY TELECENTRES

20. The session on marketing for telecentres was held at the end of the three-day workshop and was given by Ms. Joyce Sirgi, Professor at the Université Saint Joseph. This session covered the following topics: (a) how to conduct market research by telecentres in order to better understand the wider environment; (b) how to identify potential clients and their needs; (c) how to tailor the services offered by telecentres in order to match community needs and increase the number of beneficiaries; (d) how to correctly price services rendered by telecentres; and (e) how to optimize the promotion of telecentres through advertising. Ms. Sirgi recommended that participants should be given additional training in marketing to strengthen their understanding and improve their skills in promoting their telecentres and services. She also highlighted the importance of sharing experience and lessons learnt amongst the different telecentres.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. VENUE AND DATE

21. The workshop on Knowledge Sharing and Networking in the ESCWA region was organized by ESCWA and held on 17-19 December 2008 at UN-House in Beirut.

B. OPENING

22. Mr. Yousef Nusseir, Chief of the ESCWA ICT Division, inaugurated the workshop by welcoming all participants to UN-House in Beirut and to the workshop. Mr. Nusseir stressed the importance of transforming existing ICT access points into knowledge hubs as this would have a positive impact on the socio-economic status of the communities they serve. He stressed that by exchanging information and knowledge, participating telecentres will be able to learn from each other. He also highlighted the fact that the project had less than a year to achieve its remaining goals and that stakeholders need to work quickly to ensure the timely implementation of their respective projects. Mr. Nusseir closed his statement by wishing all participants every success in implementing their projects in their telecentres.

C. PARTICIPANTS

23. The workshop was attended by a total of 25 participants, mainly telecentre managers and trainers selected from six ESCWA member countries, namely Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. The list of participants is contained in annex I of this report.

D. AGENDA

24. The agenda of the workshop is set forth below:

1. Opening statement.
2. Project overview.
3. Regional knowledge strategy.
4. Knowledge and networking as tools for sustainability of telecentres/ICT access points.
5. Status updates on telecentres.
6. Plan of action for the implementation of the regional strategy.
7. Hands-on training on the knowledge networks portal.
8. Knowledge management for community telecentres.
9. Marketing for community telecentres.
10. Evaluation and closing remarks.

E. DOCUMENTS

25. A list of the documents submitted to the workshop is contained in annex II of this report, and available on the ESCWA website at: <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=925E>.

Annex I*

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Annex II

LIST OF DOCUMENTS

Title
Project Overview
Strategy for Transforming Access Points into Knowledge Hubs in the ESCWA Region (in Arabic)
Knowledge Sharing and Networking as Tools for the Sustainability of Telecentres/ICT Access Points
Sustainability Revisited: Egypt IT Clubs
Workplan for Transforming Access Points into Knowledge Hubs in the ESCWA Region (in Arabic)
Knowledge Management
A Short Course on Knowledge Management
Marketing for Community Telecentres
