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Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on Mechanisms to Advance Innovation for Inclusive Sustainable Development in the Arab Region

Promoting Collaboration and Bridging Gaps

UN House, Beirut, 1 – 2 November 2016

I. Background

The fifteen-year journey of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) started this year. Seventeen ambitious goals were set by the United Nations within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which focuses on inclusive development and "leaving no one behind". Following this historic global consensus, development should now encompass all three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental - classical development efforts are no longer an option.

Research and practice have shown that innovation, particularly in technology, is a driver of economic growth, improved productivity and efficiency, job creation, and sustainable development. Concurrently, efforts geared towards inclusive sustainable development that engages all; particularly women, youth, and marginalized groups, will provide new momentum to the innovation process. High significance and scope was given to innovation as clearly visible in the 2030 Agenda. Vertically, innovation is mentioned in several goals and targets. Horizontally, innovation gives impetus to productivity, inclusive economic growth, and job creation, as well as being a requirement for innovative implementation modalities, creative private sector solutions, and new financing schemes for development.

Realizing the potential and impact of innovation on economic growth requires different strategies and priorities. For instance, innovation could be integrated into national development plans; alternatively, strengthening innovation policy instruments that are aligned with the new sustainable development paradigm is likely to spur economic growth. For added impact, innovation policy instruments on the national level should be implemented in accordance with the local circumstances and customized to national needs and priorities. Innovation flourishes in a favourable environment where the following elements are established: a supportive enabling environment, an entrepreneurial ecosystem, and effective collaboration between different stakeholders including the public sector, academic institutions and the private sector. The roles of these stakeholders include, among others, setting legal and regulatory frameworks, building/upgrading infrastructure, building human capacities, promoting R&D, nurturing talent, providing funding, and encouraging entrepreneurship.

Numerous challenges face the Arab region in its stride to foster innovation for development including coordination gaps, policy incoherence, weak legislation and intellectual property systems, obstacles in implementation, funding shortages, and the gap between research,

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development and innovation (RDI) programmes and social and development needs¹. Innovation requirements are also different on the sub regional level depending on the country's income level and security situation. According to the 2016 edition of the Global Innovation Index (GII)², which covered 128 economies, Arab countries were absent from the top 40 list. On the regional level, the Arab region occupies the 4th position after North America (58.05), Europe (46.85) and South East Asia, East Asia and Oceania (44.59) with an average index value of 31.26 which is less than the world average of 36.73 and is a 6 percent drop from the region's average for 2015. Whereas some Arab countries have exerted efforts to promote innovation, such as formulating policies specifically for innovation or policies for science, technology and innovation (STI), the figures highlighted by the GI clearly indicate that additional efforts have to be exerted on the national level based on the priorities and needs of each country, while maintaining regional integration as a long term target.

In this regard, ESCWA has been implementing a variety of activities on innovation under an overall umbrella of work aiming to support the Arab region's transition towards economies that cater for sustainable economic growth and improved employment. These activities are in the form of meetings, studies, workshops and entrepreneurship support that address different aspects of innovation and target different stakeholders. Section V below provides a list of other relevant work by ESCWA.

II. Objectives

The main objective of this Expert Group Meeting (EGM) is to actively identify and discuss the strategic options and mechanisms that are useful for bridging gaps in the innovation arena in the Arab region in order to advance innovation for inclusive sustainable development. The EGM will further highlight the roles of various stakeholders in these mechanisms and will promote collaborative efforts for improving innovation activities within the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The EGM will examine the outcome of existing studies by ESCWA that identify innovation gaps and challenges in the Arab region. It will also feature case studies from the Arab region and worldwide to draw on the experiences and lessons learned in overcoming or addressing those gaps.

The EGM will also engage participants in discussing a draft ESCWA study on "Innovation Policy for Inclusive Sustainable Development in the Arab Region". Analysis of solicited comments will be used to enhance the final version of the study before it is published. Additional background material and papers will also be presented.

¹ Based on ESCWA studies as well as the EGM held in Amman on 3-4 June 2015 (see Section V).

² Cornell University, INSEAD, and WIPO (2016): *The Global Innovation Index 2016: Winning with Global Innovation*, Fontainebleau, Ithaca, and Geneva.

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III. Topics

The EGM will present policy options and strategic mechanisms and initiatives for bridging gaps, strengthening collaboration and promoting innovation and technology for the realisation of SDGs. The meeting sessions will address a number of topics through presentation of studies and working papers, as well as across regional and global case studies and success stories.

Following is a list of potential topics for discussion during the meeting:

- (1) Innovation landscape in the Arab region, and identification of gaps in national innovation systems based on various studies undertaken by ESCWA;
- (2) Innovation policy for inclusive sustainable development in the Arab region, and the role of governments in building/enhancing national innovation system including legal and regulatory frameworks and intellectual property systems, and supporting funding mechanisms and sources;
- (3) The capacity and practices of academic institutions, universities and schools as vehicles for scientific research, innovation, nurturing talent and providing mechanisms and practical support for linking R&D results with the industry;
- (4) The private sector as a catalyst for innovation in achieving the SDGs, and the importance of developing entrepreneurship ecosystem for bridging gaps and solving local/social problems;
- (5) Drivers of innovation such as competition, openness and funding and the importance of new technology trends in promoting innovation and entrepreneurship.

IV. Outcomes

The expected outcomes of the EGM are:

- (1) Strategic mechanisms for bridging innovation gaps relevant to the Arab region that are in harmony with inclusive sustainable development trends;
- (2) Proposal for enhancing the study "Innovation Policy for Inclusive Sustainable Development in the Arab Region";
- (3) A common understanding about Innovation landscape of the Arab region;
- (4) Identification of the role of different stakeholders: government, private sector, and academia in promoting inclusive innovation for the achievement of SDGs;
- (5) Raised awareness on the importance of innovation policies for inclusive sustainable development;
- (6) Linkages and networking between experts in the region and abroad for enhanced collaboration at regional and international levels.

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V. Relevant work by ESCWA

Expert Group Meeting on "Innovation and Technology for Advancing the Knowledge-Based Economy in the Arab Region" (Amman, 3-4 June 2015)

<https://www.unescwa.org/events/expert-group-meeting-innovation-and-technology-advancing-knowledge-based-economy-arab-region>

Project for the establishment of National Technology Transfer Offices (NTTO) in selected Arab countries

<https://www.unescwa.org/sub-site/44121/resources>

Regional Profile of the Information Society in the Arab Region, 2003 – 2015

<https://www.unescwa.org/publications/profile-information-society-arab-region-2015>

The Broken Cycle: universities, research and society in the Arab Region: proposals for change, 2014.

<http://etc-un.org/PFiles/Broken%20Cycle%20Study%20-%20English%20Version.pdf>

Competitiveness of the ICT Sector in the Arab Region: Innovation and Investment Imperatives, 2013.

<http://www.escwa.un.org/information/pubaction.asp?PubID=1374>

VI. Participation and registration

Participants in the EGM will include experts from government, research centres, academia, private sector and international and regional organizations. Participation is by invitation only.

Participants are reminded to register for the meeting before **22 September 2016** at the following URL:

<https://participant.escwa.org.lb/MeetingsReg.aspx? M=o1UeUAn9oxg=& N=N& O=N>.

VII. Organization, venue and dates

The EGM is organized by the Innovation Section of the Technology for Development Division (TDD) at ESCWA and will be held during the period 1-2 November 2016 at the UN House in Beirut, Lebanon.

It will include a number of specialized presentations, case studies from selected ESCWA member states on the above topics, as well as discussion sessions focusing on how to overcome innovation challenges for inclusive sustainable development in the Arab region.

VIII. Working languages

Arabic and English are the working languages of the EGM. Simultaneous interpretation for both languages will be provided.

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IX. Travel and accommodation

All participants are expected to inquire on their visa requirements to **Lebanon** and secure one ahead of their anticipated travel date. In this regard, ESCWA can provide assistance to Palestinian and Iraqi participants upon request.

ESCWA will cover the travel costs and daily subsistence allowance (DSA) of one participant from invited organizations; priority will be given to Least Developed Countries (LDC) in the Arab region.

X. Additional information

Further information and documentation is available at the following URL:

<https://www.unescwa.org/events/mechanisms-innovation-sustainable-development-arab-region>

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