Bridging the digital divide in Saudi: A case study of governmental initiatives to boost ICT’s literacy and awareness

The government of Saudi Arabia has embarked on a national level ICT strategy to transform Saudi Arabia into a knowledge society. The National ICT Plan (known as Tahawel) established a long term strategic goal to “bridge the digital divide by enabling all citizens from all over the country to effectively and easily interact with information and communication technologies”. The ministry of communications and information technologies has established two ambitious initiatives to contribute to such ambitious goal. The first is known as “The Dissemination of Digital Culture and Knowledge” and the second is a mobile e-Training program known as “Qawafil”.

The first program (Digital Culture and Knowledge) aims at raising the awareness of the whole community at all levels about the importance of ICT with special focus on the youth segment in particular. The program has succeeded in lecturing more than 200 thousands people including primary and high education students as well as public beneficiaries.

On the other hand, the E-CARVANS program (Qawafil) has trained more than 28 thousands people from 13 regions and 154 provinces on basic computer and internet literacy skills and knowledge. The program focuses on rural areas and low-income people and provide free basic training on the use of ICT by using five well-equipped buses “caravans” travelling all over the country every year. The program has dispatched 480 caravan trips crossing more than 250 thousands kilometers since it started 4 years ago. Each caravan is a complete mobile IT lab fully equipped with PCs, printers, projector, internet link and a backup power supply.

The two initiatives have been executed through the private sector and can be considered a successful model to be replicated by other local entities or other countries considering the spacious geographical distribution of the kingdom and its population.