

Telecommunication Development Sector INTERNATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATION UNION



**Regional Development Forum for the Arab
Region
(RDF-ARB)
Beirut, Lebanon 19 March 2019**

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MAIN OUTCOMES

1 Introduction

The Telecommunication Development Bureau (BDT) of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) organized the ITU Regional Development Forum for the Arab Region (RDF-ARB) on 19 March 2019 in Beirut, Lebanon. This year's RDF was organized as part of the activities of the Arab High-Level Forum (AHLF) on the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development from 19 to 21 March 2019 in Beirut, Lebanon. AHLF is organized and hosted by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in collaboration with the ITU Arab Regional Office. The purpose of AHLF is to promote the implementation of the WSIS and the SDGs in the Arab region.

The RDF served as a regional coordination meeting for ITU members to review its implementation of the 2018 operational plan of WTDC-17 as well as the 2019 operational plan. In addition to the strategic and future directions of the implementation of ITU regional operational plan 2019-2022 including, the proposed programs and activities for the implementation of the Arab Regional Initiatives (RIs). Moreover, it provided an opportunity for high-level dialogue between the ITU membership and other stakeholders from the Arab region to synergize efforts, seek new partnerships and agree on priority areas for the coming period.

A major aim of the RDF-ARB was to review the proposed 3-years implementation plan (2019-2021) for the five Arab regional initiatives adopted by WTDC-17 in the areas of Environment, Climate Change and Emergency Communications, Building Confidence and Security in the Use of Telecommunications/ICTs, Digital Financial Inclusion, Internet of Things (IoT), Smart Cities, and Big Data, and Innovation and entrepreneurship. The implementation plan is based on a series of proposals and commitments from Secretariat, Member States and other stakeholders.

The forum also provided an opportunity for extensive dialogue on strengthening synergies between regional initiatives and the ITU activities of ITU study groups, ITU Academy, ITU Centres of Excellence, Academia and Membership.

2 Participation

The RDF was organized as part of the Arab High Level Forum (AHLF) activities in which many sessions were arranged in parallel format and attended by more than 100 participants, 40 of them attended the RDF sessions. The participants of the RDF represented 13 Member States from the

region, Palestine (based on resolution 99), 1 recognized operating agencies, 4 regional and international organizations, 1 scientific and industrial organizations, 3 private sector entities and other national organizations and 3 UN Specialized Agencies.

3 Documentation

During the paperless RDF-ARB, 14 presentations were delivered through the various sessions. Relevant documentation, including agenda and presentations and reference materials are available at the RDF-ARB [website](#).

4 Opening ceremony

The opening of RDF was part of the opening Ceremony of the Second Arab High-level Forum on WSIS and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. H. E. Dr. Mohamed Choucair, Minister of Telecommunications of Lebanon, Mrs. Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary, UNESCWA, and Ms. Doreen Bogdan-Martin, Director, Telecommunication Development Bureau, ITU, addressed the opening session. The speeches are available on the RDF-ARB website.

5 Regional Implementation: 2019 and Beyond

A summary of WTDC-17 and Beyond 2019 was presented by Mr. Ebrahim Al Haddad, Regional Director of the ITU Arab Regional Office, provided the implementation of the operational plan 2018 and beyond 2019 for the Arab region. This summary highlighted the implementation of actions carried out by the ITU in 2018. Furthermore, results from 2018 implementation, new update from ITU PP18 Res.25 and challenges, were shared with the aim of improving the implementation of the new Regional Initiatives adopted in WTDC 2017 as well as ITU regional activities.

This session also highlighted the importance of working together to promote WSIS and SDGs in the Arab region. The session had the following panelists:

Dr. Haidar Fraihat, Director of Technology for Development Division of UNESCWA, highlighted that we finished a third of the time frame allocated for the implementation of the SDGs and tracking the progress particularly between countries of the region is of growing importance. The UN Secretary General highlighted that without technology we will fail in achieving the SDGs, emphasizing its critical importance. He concluded by stating that UNESCWA is happy to collaborate with ITU and all UN organizations and governments in the region to achieve the WSIS outcomes and the SDGs.

Mr. Mohamed Ben Amor, Secretary General of Arab Information and Communication Technology Organization (AICTO), emphasized on the importance of ICTs as a catalyst for sustainable development. Ben Amor highlighted role of emerging technologies in digital transformation in the Arab region and importance of government policies support.

Ms. Shahira Selim, Senior Manager ITU Affairs, NTRA Egypt, expressed their appreciation to the variety of activities that the ITU ARO have organized and will organize. Egypt is keen to host various activities for the ITU last of which is the Financial Inclusion Global Initiative (FIGI) Symposium. She moved on to focus on the role of technology in achieving the SDGs. Furthermore, the role of the private sector and public private partnerships in achieving the SDGs. One of the priorities of Egypt in achieving the SDGs focuses on digital financial inclusion. The private sector has a critical role in this to make sure that all citizens of Egypt are financially included. Moreover, there is a very important role in empowering youth and entrepreneurs as was exemplified in the FIGI hackathon. The private sector needs also to invest in innovation with a focus on the tracks of the SDGs. Gender equality, is also on the list of priorities of Egypt in achieving the SDGs particularly in rural areas. Again, the private sector has a very important role in this as well as in Education.

Ms. Zeina Bouharb, Head of International Cooperation, OGERO Lebanon, gave a brief overview of the role of Ogero particularly its role in developing the ICT sector in Lebanon. She indicated that they are playing a very important role in connecting the nation through deployment of FTTH at an initial speed of 50 Mgps. Through her intervention, she emphasized the importance of public private partnerships (PPP) in achieving the national goals relevant to the SDGs.

The session had interesting discussions on many strategic issues including WSIS and SDG framework for regional implementation, use of ICTs as a catalyst for sustainable development, importance of aligning national development plans with outcomes of WTDC-17, PP-18 and with SDGs to ensure their successful implementation and role of PPP for the implementation of WTDC-17, PP-18 and WSIS and SDGs outcomes.

6 Regional Partnerships for WSIS and SDGs

This session focused on the areas where different stakeholders should collaborate regionally to promote WSIS and SDGs in the Arab region.

The following contributions were presented during the session:

Mr. George Awad, CI Advisor, UNESCO Beirut Office, highlighted the role of partnerships in achieving WSIS action lines and the work of UNESCO to achieve the WSIS action plans (C5) on access to information

Mr. Awad shared the UNESCO works on ICT applications and those related to education and culture. He emphasized on the importance of Science, creativity and technology as well as access to information. He also highlighted the cooperation with ITU in reviewing smart learning policies in Sudan and hopes to continue the collaboration in other countries in the region.

Mr. Ibrahim Dajani, Program Leader for Infrastructure, World Bank, shared with participants the potential benefits of ICTs to accelerate the development of the region and highlighted digital dividends challenges and the remaining digital gap and their barriers that are keeping countries from reaping the dividend associated with digital revolution. He also highlighted the World Bank (WB) efforts and programmes to bridge the digital divide:

- Internet access for all
- Digital infrastructure initiative
- Data and indicators
- Cybersecurity
- Digital government
- Mainstreaming digital services

He underlined the WB support for the use of ICTs in education in the region as well as other cooperation channels with ITU and UNESCO and UNESCWA.

Ms. Salam Yamout, Regional Director Middle East, ISOC, explained that ICTs and the Internet are recognized as horizontal enablers to all the SDGs and ICTs can provide new solutions to development challenges, and can foster sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth, sustainable development, competitiveness, access to information and knowledge, poverty eradication and social inclusion.

Ms. Yamout highlighted cooperation with ITU in 2018 and looked further to more collaboration.

Mr. Jawad Abbasi, Head of MENA, GSMA, shed light on the opportunities of the Digital economy and shared some statistics on mobile subscribers, which reached 5 billion, and 5G expected to

have 1.2 B subscribers (40% of the global population) by 2025. Mr. Abbasi shared the following GSMA initiatives:

- Mobile Money: Case for change, Jordan
- Access to clean water: Origin Project, Egypt
- Waste IoT: Smart Cities, Dubai/UAE
- Use of big data for social good: India case

Mr. Abbasi emphasized on the importance of the telecom regulators to consult with 5G stakeholders to ensure the success of spectrum awards. He also affirmed the desire of GSMA to continue its active cooperation with ITU and government to deliver skills development and human capacity building activities.

7 Implementation of the ITU Regional Initiatives for the Arab Region

This session focused on the status for implementation of the ITU Arab five Regional Initiatives. Mr. Karim Abdelghani, Programme Coordinator, ITU ARO, provided a brief presentation on proposed operational plan of 2019-2021 for the following Regional Initiatives:

- ARB2: Confidence and security in the use of telecommunications/ICTs
- ARB3: Digital financial inclusion
- ARB4: Internet of Things, smart cities and big data

Mr. Mustafa Al Mahdi, Programme Administrator, ITU ARO, provided a brief presentation on proposed operational plan of 2019-2021 for the following Regional Initiatives:

- ARB1: Environment, climate change and emergency telecommunications
- ARB5: Innovation and entrepreneurship

A contribution of topics speakers were made as follows:

Mr. Elias Aad, Vice President MEA Government Business Leader, Mastercard, shed light on some of the country challenges related to financial inclusion. 21% of adults have bank accounts and only 6% take loans from formal financial institutions in the Arab region. This constitutes less than one third the rates in developed economies emphasizing the lack of financial access in the Arab region. He added that there are some opportunities that the region can utilize and these include the young population. He shed light on the Mastercard project with Egypt for prepaid payroll solutions in addition to a similar project in the UAE as a result of the latter project the financially included increased from 60% in 2011 to 84% in 2014.

Ms. Marianne Karam, Director of MENA Operations and Lebanon Country Director, Dot. Lebanon, shed light on digital actors mapping results report that highlights the mapping of digital actors across sectors and across countries. In Lebanon, for example, most of the digital players come from the business and innovation sector in addition to the education sector. Most investments come from the private sector and individuals. Internet penetration were the highest in terms of percentage among the five countries of the study, Tunisia, Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco and Jordan. DOT is a member of the EQUALS steering committee.

8 Activities related to ITU Study Groups (ITU-D, ITU-T and ITU-R), Centers of Excellence and Academia Membership

Three presentations were delivered by Mr. Karim Abdelghani and Mr. Mustafa Al Mahdi, with the aim of strengthening synergies between regional initiatives and the activities of ITU study groups, ITU Academy & Centres of Excellence, ITU Academia Membership as well as updating membership

on ITU Study Groups questions ongoing works, and newly selected ITU Arab CoEs Network and Academia membership.

9 Closing Ceremony

Ms. Yvonne Sleiman, Head of International Relations and Maintenance, Ministry of Telecommunications of Lebanon, delivered the closing speech on behalf of the Telecommunications Minister. She expressed her thanks to the participants of the RDF and to the ITU for the excellent organization.

Mr. Ebrahim Al Haddad, Regional Director, ITU Arab Regional Office, delivered closing remarks emphasizing on importance of partnership for better implementation of Regional Initiatives and activities and close coordination with ITU Regional Office for the implementation of PP Res. 25 on Regional Presence.

RDF19's participants and panelists were thanked for their contributions to the process of establishing the implementation plan for the Arab Regional Initiatives and ITU activities in the Arab Region.

ITU and RDF19's participants thanked the UNESCWA, the Ministry of Telecommunications of Lebanon and Ogero for hosting the RDF for the Arab Region and for the warm hospitality during their stay in Lebanon.