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Regional ICT Perspectives

By

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I would like to thank :

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It is my pleasure to speak to you today in such a unique gathering, which brings together the European and Arab innovators, on a theme towards enhanced e-Infrastructure as an effective means to accelerate progress and enable better learning opportunities for our next generation.

I am coming to Brussels from Beirut where I delivered a keynote speech at the Arab net conference under the Patronage of H.E. the President of the Council of Ministers of Lebanon, Mr. Saad Hariri. And in order to avoid repetition I will not include in this presentation the content of my Beirut comments to Arab innovators. However, if you are interested you may visit our website www.tagorg.com

The quest for knowledge and practical innovation has been a driver for creating several cooperation instruments among international communities, through which, not only cultures come closer, but also technological advancements become a reality in the developing world. ICT and connectivity are key growth enablers of knowledge and innovation in the new millennium. However, advanced ICT and connectivity still have yet to reach about one billion people worldwide. This imposes new challenges to the world leaders of today. Access and digital connectivity can provide hope to societies that are currently left-behind.

Universities in the Arab region have remained locked out of innovation and have assumed no role in bringing technology and innovation closer. It is estimated that the number of Arab citizens involved in R&D (per million people) is about 3%, compared to 14% in China, for instance. The number of patents registered in the USA, between 1976-2002, from all Arab countries was close to 650, compared to 27,298 registered by residents in South Korea alone. It is time to keep in pace with technology. It is time to leverage the world store of information and the Arab region potential to build communities in the Arab world in a broader and more inclusive knowledge context.

The quite phenomenal growth of the last decade notwithstanding, still roughly half of the world's population lives below the poverty line: the lower 50% possess less than 1% of the world's wealth. Over a billion people suffer from chronic malnutrition; three billion do not have access to clean water or proper sanitation. Along with poverty, inequality has risen dramatically and dangerously; the Gini coefficient (which measures income inequality) has quite significantly increased in all countries, both developed and developing, with, interestingly, the exception of Brazil where it has decreased. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000, were meant to solve these issues by 2015.

In my capacity as the Chair of the UN Global Alliance for ICT and Development (UN GAID), I will briefly touch base on a few topics related to UN GAID, ICT matrix for MDGs, UNESCO cooperation in developing Arab knowledge societies, and TAGorg's initiatives in promoting computer literacy in the Arab region and implementing quality assurance in higher education institutions.

Our successes in many regional projects gives us courage to launch our project for connecting research and education institutions of the Arab world in a dedicated e-Infrastructure, which I have the privilege to lead and announce its birth today in the framework of ASREN (Arab Scientific Research and Education Network).

I envision ASREN as the ONE regional network not only for Research, Education, and Development, but also for streamlining GAID initiatives for the development of our communities in the context of MDGs. I also envision ASREN to lead many of our projects with UNESCO and UN GAID towards building Arab Knowledge Societies and developing the ICT matrix for the advancement of MDGs in the Arab region with a focus on poverty eradication and job creation, education, health, governance, and entrepreneurship.

UNDESA-GAID - United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs- Global Alliance for ICT and Development (www.un-gaid.org)

UNDESA-GAID is an inclusive, cross-sectoral, multi-stakeholder platform, established to promote the use of ICT to advance the MDGs, by focusing on poverty eradication and job creation, education, health, governance, and entrepreneurship. GAID has launched flagship partnership initiatives to encourage all stakeholders to communicate and collaborate with a view to leveraging ICT in order to advance development and innovation globally and regionally.

Many developing countries have made much progress in economic development, health improvement, poverty eradication, school enrolment, agricultural productivity, and computer literacy. Progress varies among countries, and there is less likely to be progress in regions emerging from conflict or facing political instability. Several million people still live in extreme poverty, with no access to clean water, medication, or any kind of education.

Unless effective national policies are matched with increased international development assistance and technical support from the private sector, developing countries are unlikely to achieve the MDGs. The use of ICT and, in particular, access to computers and the Internet,

are innovative resources that are now recognized as vital tools for development in the technology-driven, modern and globalized world of today.

GAID also oversees many productive programmes, one of which is to develop, with the blessing of the United Nations Secretary-General, a matrix on “ICT 4 MDG”. The concept of the matrix is to provide guidance on ICT as an enabler for achieving the MDGs, on overcoming barriers to ICT access, and on a structure for ICT innovation.

“ICT 4 MDG” matrix

On the basis of current developments, there is little hope that the MDGs will be reached. It is not time, however, to give up. There must be intensified efforts. If the MDGs fail, the social, moral and economic consequences will cast a long and deep dark shadow over the century. The notion of the ICT 4 MDG Matrix emerged as a potential driver to advancing the achievements of MDGs. The matrix is driven by a belief that ICT is the true enabler that can accelerate achievement of MDGs. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon confirmed on February 8th, 2010 his support and leadership, as Honorary Chair to developing the ICT matrix to advance the MDGs as a tool for the UN System, government policymakers and business leaders. The main components of the ICT 4 MDG Matrix are:

- MDG and Basic Indicator;
- Secretary General’ key priorities;
- Leading agencies and actors;
- Key MDG policies, strategies and programmes;
- Key ICT interventions to advance MDGs;
- Barriers to ICT and MDGs;
- Financing and public-private partnerships;
- Models and best practice;
- ICT applications, tools and solutions;
- Evaluation of impact and results.

On the basis of these components, the ICT solutions Matrix for MDGs is being developed as a collaborative project between all stakeholders with the support of the Secretary General. The objective of the project is to develop a web based ICT Solutions matrix for MDGs and a Portal of Portals with ICT-MDG Knowledge Base for easy and universal accessibility, within an integrated set of solutions including:

- Computer-Aided ICT-MDG strategic planning and policy making
- Guides and support tools for assembling and customizing best practice solutions;
- Guides and support tools for Entrepreneurship development;
- Automated advisory and consultant services
- Tutorials on ICT leadership education;
- Simulations for experimentation;
- Guides and support tools for evaluation and sharing results.

The UN Secretary General graciously accepted to be the honorary chair of this project which I chair.

UNESCO – Cooperation (www.tagorg.com)

Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Organization (TAGorg) and The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have signed a partnership framework agreement towards building inclusive knowledge societies and promoting ICT to support education, science and culture in the Arab region. Both TAGorg and UNESCO have committed to mobilize partners to build Arab knowledge societies, notably by increasing access to and measuring the use of ICT in different sectors of society, enhancing teacher training, and promoting Internet Domain Names in the Arabic script. As the Arab region grows in importance, it is crucial to TAG-Org and its regional operations in the 71 offices worldwide, to provide a credible profile of data in Arabic and English on the state of the Arab countries on ICT in education, science, culture, communication, and commerce. The availability of such data will assist local governments, institutions, and international organizations to understand gaps in ICT and to take a leading role in developing ICT infrastructure and in building ICT capacity and capability for sustainment in the context of the changing global environment. Such data, collected through digital surveys, digital reporting, and digital resources, will be available on a knowledge society portal created by TAG-Org in cooperation with UNESCO.

Furthermore, TAG-Org and UNESCO are taking a leadership role in moving forward with GAID's initiative on "Education for All in the Digital Age". The initiative is a Joint Global Action Program towards better achievement of MDGs through ICT integration and innovations in Education system for 2010-2015. It is designed on the basis of the dynamics of cultural, social, and institutional changes; environmental awareness; and sustainability in the social, economic, and cultural context. Partners of the action program provide coordinated support and resources for governments in developing countries in order to create an "enabling environment" for large scale ICT integration in their education systems. The "enabling environment" combines strategic elements by recognizing the value of ICT4E and tactical and operational elements. Partners also offer policy support and resources, knowledge sharing and capacity building programs for educators and education institutions, coordinated infrastructure deployment, software and content selection and dissemination, and coordinated research.

Computer Literacy – Abu-Ghazaleh Cambridge IT Skills program (www.tagcaitc.com)

The Abu-Ghazaleh Cambridge IT Skills (AGCA) program has been established in partnership with Cambridge University, with a role to enhance computer literacy in the Arab region. AGCA offers Training and Testing for Information Technology certification in the Arabic language. AGCA certification is one of the most internationally recognized IT-skills qualification programs, and is operational in over 40 locations in the Arab countries. It has been designed in cooperation with the Cambridge International Examination Syndicate to provide professional qualifications on the usage of computers, file management, Microsoft applications, and Web applications; and to promote internet literacy and help harness ICT development for the benefit of the younger generation.

AROQA – Arab Organization for Quality Assurance in Education (www.aroqa.org)

AROQA is an international, non-profit and independent association established with the fundamental objective of raising the quality of education in the Arab world, by presenting quality assurance services and improving the levels of education, in addition to capacity building and dissemination of knowledge .

Improving the quality of education is a pressing issue and has been on the agenda of several recent Arab Summits. The proposal to establish the Arab Organization as an independent, non-for-profit was well received by the General Secretariat of the Arab League which expressed its willingness to cooperate with the AROQA in ensuring and improving the quality of education in the Arab World.

The Arab Organization's mission is to contribute significantly to promoting educational excellence in the Arab world by providing quality assurance review, qualification and accreditation services and through capacity building and the dissemination of good practices in the field of quality assurance, in collaboration with Arab, Regional and International organizations working in the field of educational quality assurance.

This mission testifies that international cooperation is a major tool in executing our mission. Consistent with its mission AROQA has signed a number of agreements and memoranda of understanding with Arab and International Organizations in line with its strategic policy to establish links and work closely with national, regional and international organizations with major interest in educational quality assurance.

AROQA has been engaged in assisting a number of higher education institutions in various Arab countries including Jordan, Bahrain and Syria, to establish quality assurance systems, in addition to accrediting a number of programs according to the international quality standards. One case in point is accreditation of the MBA Program at Talal Abu-Ghazaleh College of Business according to European Quality Assurance standard, the MBA Program was accredited by the Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA) as the first program granted the FIBAA accreditation in the Arab world. The accreditation procedure has verified and confirmed that the program has all the quality elements required by a master's degree program, including those specified in the European MBA Guidelines .

ASREN - Arab Scientific Research and Education Network

ASREN is being born as an independent and not-for-profit organization with a mission to implement, manage and extend sustainable Pan-Arab e-Infrastructures dedicated for Research and Education connecting national research and education networks (NRENs) in the Arab countries. The objective is to boost scientific research and cooperation in member countries through the provision of world-class e-Infrastructures and E-services. ASREN's roles include:

Build, maintain and consolidate regional e-Infrastructures dedicated to e-Science, research, and education across the Arab Countries:

- Developing, managing and operating a regional network that Interconnect NRENs
- Promoting harmonization of policies and standards in relevant areas
- Advocating technology amongst decision makers and stakeholders
- Contribute to create and sustain NRENs:
- Supporting NRENs to implement leading-edge technological solutions while pursuing cost-effectiveness
- Favoring exchange of expertise and best practices amongst NRENs' personnel in the Region
- Facilitate collaboration and cooperation among researchers and academics:
- Increasing availability and accessibility to knowledge resources
- Promoting development of content in Arabic
- Facilitating knowledge exchange and transfer processes across the region and with relevant partners worldwide
- Promoting the adoption and usage of e-Infrastructures and services among the scientific community
- Strengthening regional partnerships and encouraging joint scientific research

It is hoped that ASREN will have the same governance structure AROQA has and will accomplish the same success.

Already there are e-Infrastructures in the region which can become building blocks for a Pan-Arab e-infrastructure. The EUMEDCONNECT2 network has been in place since 2004 serving 7 North African and Middle Eastern partner countries. It has received 14M Euro of funding in two phases from the European Commission plus further funding from the benefitting countries. It is the only regional e-Infrastructure for research and education there and the project strongly supports the development of ASREN. Many scientific and educational projects already use the e-infrastructure of EUMEDCONNECT2, including EUMEDGRID which has set up a well-used network of distributed computing resources. The EC has yet to decide whether to fund a third phase of e-infrastructure ('EUMEDCONNECT3') from 2011. At a time when efforts to meet MDG's need to be further strengthened not lessened, I hope the EC will look favourably on supporting EUMEDCONNECT3 as part of a broader move to develop Pan-Arab e-infrastructure.

In closing,

ASREN will grow into a powerful e-Infrastructure platform connecting the Arab research and education communities to the world. ASREN will showcase top R&D programmes, best practice, and lessons learned, as well as providing advisory services, networking opportunities and support for new initiatives in technology innovations. It will advocate for and seek to demonstrate the value of higher levels of investment in Arab scientific spending and national R&D budgets. It will also represent a digital infrastructure to build a regional ICT development community in support of MDGs, and in developing ICT solutions matrix for its advancement and true realization by 2015.

I thank you for organizing such an event that brings our cultures together towards building a prosperous future for our children.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk to you on what we can achieve together to build a fair peaceful world for the unprivileged people of the developing nations within ASREN, GAID, and ICT 4 MDG context

I call on you to move from MED to ARAB

I call on GEANT to become a EURO-ARAB network

I call on EUMED CONNECT 2 to become EURO-ARAB connect

I call on EUMEDGRID to become EURO-ARABGRID.

Thank you,

Talal Abu-Ghazaleh