Evaluation Brief
The Information and Communication Technology Subprogramme

ESCWA

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

Background

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) promotes the economic and social development of the Arab region through regional cooperation and integration. In line with this mission, the Information and Communication Technology Division (ICTD), one of seven ESCWA subprogrammes, was established and mandated to narrow the "digital divide" and build an inclusive, people-centered and development-oriented information society in the Arab region.

ICTD works closely with governments and other stakeholders to provide opportunities for cooperation and regional integration in an increasingly knowledge-based global economy. On a national level, ICTD aims to increase the capabilities of Member States to harness information and communication technology (ICT) for their development and provides support in the formulation of ICT policies, infrastructure, and applications.

In 2012, ESCWA undertook an internal discretionary evaluation of the ICTD sub-programme. A team of independent external evaluators was contracted to conduct the evaluation for the period between 2006 and 2011.

Key Findings

The evaluation concluded that ICTD had been successful in the promotion of dialogue and networks in the region. In particular, the evaluation found that the Information and Communication Technology Division:

• Facilitated an effective regional platform for Member States to exchange information and experiences.

• Built the capacities of Member States in the area of ICT for development, through training courses, seminars and workshops.

• Addressed timely regional technology issues through numerous expert group meetings.

• Played a global role and ensured effective coordination of regional capacity building initiatives, that were appreciated by stakeholders.

• Received enough praise from Member States for its publications, in particular the Regional Profile, which aims to assess the status and process of the information society in Member States.

Key Challenges

The evaluation also identified areas of work that could be further improved. The Findings include:

• Service delivery modles were mostly developed for the entire region and not localized or contextualized for the particular issues being faced by each individual Member State.

• Communication and follow-up with stakeholders was at times erractic and inconsistent.

• Advocacy and promotion of ICTD regular budget outputs is severely limited due to budget constraints, especially when compared to DA and XB outputs.

• Insufficent considersation is given to non-governmental entites as partners in service delivery.

Recommendations

The evaluation emerged with a set of recommendations to ICTD that include:

• Establishing a Technical Committee for ICTD in line with other sub-programmes to ensure greater commitment and active participation of Member States.

• Positioning ESCWA as a strategic, proactive "thought leader" in the field of ICT for Development in the Arab region and advancing ICTD's leadership role in key projects.

• Setting up a mechanism to monitor new trends and developments in the changing field of ICT to keep abreast of the latest thinking on ICT trends and regional/global developments.

• Designing a more responsive and tailored approach to respond to individual needs and priorities of Member States.

• Organizing regular inter-divisional consultations to share information and promote mutual collaboration.

Follow Up

As a result of the recommendations, ESCWA's evaluation managers in conjunction with the Director of ICTD developed a two-year action plan addressing the challenges identified. The action plan, which also includes specific actions related to a previous organizational review, was signed as a Senior Management Compact between the Executive Secretary and the Director of ICTD. Progress made in the implementation of the action plan will be tracked by the evaluation managers on a biannual basis.

Some of the key outputs in the Action Plan inlcude establishing an inter-governmental Technical Committee for ICTD, developing a six year research programme in key areas related to leveraging technology for development, and setting up an internal mechanism to identify and monitor emerging technology for development trends.