

## Online Webinar

# Innovation and New Technologies in North Africa in the Context of COVID-19

November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020

3 to 5 p.m. Rabat time (UTC/GMT+1)

## Aide memoire

**Theme:** Post COVID-19 Innovation and New Technologies: safeguarding North African achievements, generating an enabling environment for innovation to seize post pandemic opportunities and facilitate job creation during and after the pandemic.

### I. Context: The new, post COVID-19 reality and necessary adjustments

COVID-19 has brought many changes across the world, disrupting North Africa's connections to global value chains and impacting strategic sources of revenue such as exports (oil, aeronautics, textile and leather, metal and mechanical industries), tourism, and remittances. Key sectors including construction, transport and catering have been considerably affected. Both bigger businesses and SMEs have been hit hard, leading to a significant increase in unemployment which provides a fertile ground for social unrest.

The new virus' impact on the global economy has caused a deep reshuffling of national strategic priorities, impacting the way economies work, accelerating the transition towards digitization, and generating a strong need for systemic change in businesses and their operating models. Social, corporate and technical innovation, and their potential, have attracted growing attention in the public debate. COVID-19 has also shed light on the strategic importance of R&D in a range of areas including pharmaceuticals, food production, and public services such as education or health.

Since March 2020, North African countries' responses to COVID-19 have been characterized by a significant increase in experimentation and innovation by governments, universities and private sector companies, especially in four main areas:

**Adapting the productive fabric to the new context** (weakened textile industries remobilized in response to the need for masks; significant increases in online purchases and payments while previously crowded, traditional marketplaces are now deemed unsafe; remote working and corporate law reforms to facilitate it; etc.)

- 1) Adapting basic public services, including education and health** (national efforts to save the 2019-2020 school year through online education; increased government support to pharmaceutical industries and research, national and university initiatives to design and produce respiratory masks; protective visors; sanitary gels; medical research and sequencing of the COVID-19 genome; etc.)
- 2) Digitizing administrative processes to facilitate business continuity** (administrative documents; digital social welfare support to families; online education; online courts; circulation permits; marriage documents; etc.).

- 3) Use of new technologies in support to the fight against the pandemic, law enforcement and agriculture** (Increased use of AI, robots, drones, 3D printers, phone applications to support doctors and police in raising awareness, enforcing social distancing measures, disinfecting public spaces, detecting COVID-19 cases, orienting patients and facilitating communication between COVID-19 patients and their families; migration and urbanization control; agricultural equipment delivery, crop and livestock surveillance, fire prevention, detection and treatment of plant illnesses when physically difficult to access).

Given the magnitude of the COVID-19 impact on global and North African countries, it appears unlikely at this stage that the discovery and wide distribution of a vaccine would restore their national economies' pre-pandemic dynamics overnight. Can North African countries maintain and accelerate the current innovation and experimentation rate, to better navigate emerging global economic trends and seize the opportunities brought by the new, global economic context?

The Economic Commission for Africa (Office for North Africa), UNESCO (Maghreb office) and the Policy Center for the New South will cover these various topics in a joint webinar, scheduled on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020. This online debate will be animated by a panel of renowned experts, with the participation of government officials, experts from various disciplines and students from across North Africa.

## **II. Main discussion topics**

Participants will discuss the following topics after an exchange between panel members and the webinar recommendations will be widely distributed.

### **Question 1: How did new technologies help North African countries mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on government services and national economies?**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented perturbations which are presently questioning the future of development models in Africa. However this global pandemic has also accelerated some sectors of the digital economy, generating new opportunities to implement Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030, with new technologies playing the role of the common denominator that has helped North Africa mitigate the impact of the pandemic and restore livelihoods. The current health crisis has coincided with an accelerated adoption of digital technologies as well as the rolling out of advanced technologies (including artificial intelligence) to facilitate basic public service operations and support the national economy. In this discussion, we will present some examples of such developments and will exchange on the lessons learned and recommended actions for countries.

### **Question 2: Given the achievements made and technologies used to provide distance learning how can countries reinvent and strengthen education systems, to make them more innovative, ingenious, and attuned to global issues on the longer term?**

Technological solutions for distance learning will not only have an impact on learning processes, but also on the social life of children, youths, teachers, parents and society in general. Significant disparities may appear between populations with access to technologies and good Internet connections on the one hand and, on the other hand, populations for whom access to remote and online education is an obstacle. However, the current crisis is also an opportunity to reconsider the education sector and seize existing, innovative and technological opportunities. Both governments and the education community should use the gains of this forced transition to distance learning to design and build more innovative and ingenious education systems that take into account existing global issues.

***Specific questions, to be discussed by the panel member:***

Given the existing experience of distance learning, what are the technologies and practices most adapted to the economic and social realities of North African countries and which can be used to introduce innovation in the education field?

What are the partnerships, processes and improvements that will enable innovative approaches to provide positive results and educative systems to reinvent themselves?

**Question 3: How can new technologies help accelerate the economic recovery of North African countries and enable them to adapt to the new global economic context?**

Can North African countries use new technologies to navigate the 4th Industrial Revolution, which is in the process of being accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic? Here, discussions will focus on countries' ambitions for new technologies in their national economies and the measures taken to make them a reality in areas such as R&D promotion but also on the institutional, legal and policy fronts.

What are North African countries' ambitions for new technologies post COVID-19? What is their present innovative capacity and how can governments improve it, especially on the R&D and intellectual property level? What kind of reforms are now required for administrations and legal systems to keep up with the acceleration caused by digitization?

Can bilateral and multilateral cooperation help North Africa make up for its existing delays in new technology development? What approaches are currently at governments' disposal and how can ECA assist member countries with the setup of follow-up mechanisms in North Africa?

### **III. Event details**

This meeting will take the format of a webinar jointly held by the ECA Office for North Africa, the UNESCO Office for the Maghreb region and the Policy Center for the New South. Exchanges between experts will take the format of panel discussions.

Participants will include representatives of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia and members of the three organisers' networks. The webinar recommendations and report and the recorded video of the webinar will be disseminated through the organisers' usual communication channels to facilitate their respective audiences' access to the meeting content and recommendations.

The webinar will take place on Wednesday 4 November 2020, from 3 to 5pm Rabat time (UTC/GMT+1) in English, French and Arabic.

#### **Moderator**

- **Khaled Hussein**, Director a.i. of the ECA office for North Africa.

#### **Opening speeches**

- **Vera Songwe**, Executive Secretary of the ECA and Under Secretary General of the United Nations. (tbc);
- **Golda El-Khoury**, Director of the UNESCO office in Rabat and UNESCO representative for the Maghreb region;
- **Bouchra Rahmouni**, Director for Research, Partnerships & Events at the Policy Center for the New South.

### Panel members:

- **Saad Badaoui**, Senior Data Scientist at the Policy Center for the New South.
- **Kais Mejri**, Director General of Innovation and Technological Development at the Ministry of Industry and SMEs of Tunisia
- **Jean-Paul Adam**, ECA director for Technology, Climate Change and Natural Resource Management

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