GCC e-governance readiness index shows progress but highlights areas of concern

ICDL calls on governments to assess current and future needs of IT literacy in society to sustain the region's socioeconomic development

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E-governance readiness in the Gulf region has been ranked at approximately 50 percent by a recent index compiled in a report by the United Nations Department of Economic & Social Affairs (UNDESA), compared to 91 percent for index leading United States. ICDL GCC Foundation, the governing body and certification authority of the International Computer Driving License (ICDL) programme in the Gulf region called for further dissemination of IT literacy that would allow greater sectors of society access to online e-government services.

Mr. Jamil Ezzo, Director General, ICDL GCC Foundation

"In order to accelerate the process of e-government readiness, countries in the region need to formulate detailed plans aimed at executing their ICT policies and strategies, and undertake new initiatives that will raise the IT literacy levels of all sectors of society, create awareness among the general public on the importance of IT, and facilitate or subsidize the purchase of a home computer and Internet connection for those who find the cost prohibitive. By laying a comprehensive infrastructure of IT literacy throughout the region, with particular emphasis on the services provided by the critical sectors such as health, education and employment, governments can lay a strong foundation for greater penetration of e-government services," said Jamil Ezzo, Director General, ICDL GCC Foundation.

The recently released UNDESA report "Global e-Government Readiness Report 2005: From e-Government to e-Inclusion" placed the UAE at number 42nd in the world in terms of e-government readiness, but number one in the GCC region. The report also indicated that the UAE had moved up 18 places from 2004, where it was ranked 60th in the world. Similarly, most other Arab countries in the region also showed positive movement in the e-government readiness rankings, with Kuwait moving up to 75 from number 100 in 2004, and Qatar moving to 62 from 80th place. Saudi Arabia also moved up from 90th global position in 2004 to 80th in 2005.

The report attributed the UAE's success to a revamped national portal that integrates easily locatable information and services through a single gateway. The report also praised Qatar's improvement of online service delivery, and

concluded that its e-government portal was regional best practice and comparable to integrated services portals elsewhere in the world. Initiatives in Saudi Arabia were considered positive, if not on par with some of the region's high performers.

However, the report compiled evidence of irregular e-government readiness in the region, with some countries doing well, but others lagging behind in the 100-160 world ranking segment. For instance, Bahrain lost ground on its 46th world ranking in 2004 and ended on 53rd worldwide in 2005.Alleviating patchy IT development will be a critical challenge for regional e-governance initiatives.

"E-governance readiness is determined not just by government initiatives aimed at making comprehensive government services available online to citizens, but also the level of acceptance and participation of the society in e-services. Assessing the current and future IT literacy needs of the society and establishing mechanisms aimed at monitoring progress of IT literacy is key to e-government readiness and essential to the acceptance of the e-government services by the general population," Ezzo added.