Local Content: an Opportunity for Underserved Regions-
IGF 2017 - Geneva

During the twelfth annual meeting of the Internet Governance Forum IGF, Maharat Foundation took part among many other organizations in presenting the subject of "Local Content: an Opportunity for Underserved Regions". Through the session, Layal Bahnam and Roula Mikhael dealt with the legal frameworks pertaining to content production and the modality of sustainable digital media platforms in the MENA region in order to promote local content creation. The interventions tackled the affecters that restrain local content creation including lack of laws and lack of reinforcement of laws pertaining to information flow, the unavailability of open access to content including content production, use, reuse and redistribution, the existence of legal restrictions on content, lack of media management skills, absence of a culture of innovation, etc. The speakers not only pointed to the problems but also called for actions that would enable a more flourishing content creation in the MENA region.

The twelfth annual meeting of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) took place at the UN Office at Geneva (UNOG), Switzerland, between December 18 and 21, 2017. Around 2,019 attendees were present on site and 1,661 stakeholders participated online to take part in the convention on the theme of *Shape Your Digital Future!* On Thursday December 21, 2017, the topic of local content in the MENA region was presented under *Local Content: an opportunity for underserved regions*, which was proposed by the Mediterranean Federation of Internet Associations (FMAI) and co-proposed by Maharat Foundation. The many interventions highlighted the reasons of the lacking local content in the MENA region from a discourse-based, economic, and social development perspective.

Layal Bahnam, program manager of Maharat Foundation, focused in her intervention "The need to improve legal frameworks in the MENA to encourage local content creators," on the free flow of information that is suffocated by non-existing or non-enforced laws in the Arab region, lack of awareness among journalist and citizens regarding them, and the complicated procedures pertaining to requesting information. Furthermore, she points out that for the main creators of local digital content (developers, researchers, journalists and bloggers) "to develop local digital content that responds to the needs of the local communities they will need access to information in order to use it, reuse it and distribute it." However, she stressed on the fact that resolving the problems surrounding free information flow and accessibility won't resolve the bigger issue of local content creation but will rather contribute to it.

> "The challenge related to legal frameworks is not limited to the access to information laws and their existence will not lead automatically to develop local digital content. Here comes another issue when governments and public administrations decide to publish their

data, are they publishing them in open formats, free of charge, thus available for others to use in an innovative way to produce local digital content that is of value?

The answer in all countries in the MENA region is no. And this is a main challenge that is not deeply tackled and that affects directly the creation of digital content, cultural, environmental, financial, economic, social, etc.

Open data will give the opportunity to content creators to analyze, use and reuse in innovative ways."

Moreover, Mrs. Bahnam brought up the diverse legal frameworks that pertain to open data and to local content creation; like the legal frameworks related to privacy and copyright in addition to online freedom of speech.

The latter was tackled by Khalid Ibrahim, executive director of The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), who promoted a knowledge-based online society that respects Human Rights and pressed for the release of imprisoned online activists that were persecuted for publishing content on social media networks. Also, he stressed on the needs to adopt progressive policies and initiatives to encourage local content creators to develop content that addresses the needs of communities.

Layal Bahnam follows up by acknowledging the failure of the local media outlets to create new local content as they are used to serve a political agenda. Hence, she emphasizes the important role of the government and calls for it to "acknowledge the importance of introducing supportive policies and incentives to advance local digital content." In addition to that, she brings the civic society as another dimension that should work in parallel with the government in order to advocate for the laws and spread awareness.

Whereas Mrs. Bahnam and Mr. Ibrahim focused on the legal and administrative factors influencing local content production, Roula Mikhael, executive director of Maharat Foundation, provided another lens in her intervention titled "Opportunities for sustainability of digital media platforms in the MENA region". Mrs. Mikhael, mentioned the startups that are producing local content in Arabic but that are facing many challenges. The challenges Mrs. Mikhael later enumerates spring from Maharat Foundation's own struggles and include "the access to information, challenges that investigative reporting face, access to the internet, the restrictive media laws, the dangerous work environments, the filtering, blocking and the shutdowns of new platforms and so on, the lack of media management skills among the new media startups as well as the lack of a culture of innovation."

She also emphasizes the role of nascent independent media outlets that create new content in arabic and help break the many taboos that non-independent media outlets do not necessarily address like public figure satire, sexuality, religion, and human rights violations.

"this new Arab content improves the few existing content, but sad to say that only few independent media platforms found a way to keep creating a good content, but not on a regular bases. Here comes the question, how can these emergent platforms, or any nascent media project, ensure their viability? And what is needed to keep them functioning and contributing to the local content in order to keep the new diversified media scenery?"

Following that, the executive director of Maharat, provides potential solutions that could improve the state of these startups and further local content production.

"In order to strengthen the capacities of these platforms, it is important to provide their leaders and managers with adequate skills to find their business models. Even so, capacity building is not enough, further aspects should be addressed: Public policies that support and encourage new media projects that will contribute in promoting diversity, good governance and accountability, along with incentives that allow them finding viable business models; Information and Media Literacy that foster the critical thinking among youths and audiences in general in order to support quality content and the role of media in informing citizens; Enrooting a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship among the young generations/ to start launching their projects to contribute in creating innovative digital content that respond to the local needs."

The general message of that session was to highlight the importance of local content production as the content that is most useful to people is the one that is produce in the local language and the one that addresses problems the local community faces. Moreover, the goal was to showcase the areas that are affecting local content production and propose solutions whose best practice would lead to a better socio-economic development.