Digital Accessibility Policy Landscape in the State of Qatar

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Abstract- Ensuring accessibility has become a crucial element in promoting inclusivity for everyone, including Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). Qatar has undergone a huge transformation in the realm of inclusive Information and Communication Technology (ICT) towards cultivating an ecosystem that promotes ICT accessibility and embraces diversity in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), to which the State of Qatar is a signatory and a ratifying party. This article delves into Qatar's dynamic policy and regulatory framework and its adaptive response to the evolving landscape of digital access technology and trends, and the proactive approach taken by the country to ensure that individuals have adequate access to digital platforms and services.

1.   Introduction

The Qatar National e-Accessibility Policy, the first of its kind document for the MENA region, promotes the adoption of international standards such as WCAG 2.1 across various digital platforms (e.g., websites, mobile applications, digital kiosks, public telephones, mobile handsets, and digital content) (Qatar National Vision 2030, n.d.). The policy outlines specific requirements for accessibility for web developers and content creators to ensure that their products and services are inclusive and comply with Universal Design Standards.

Formally launched in 2011 by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), the policy underwent an extensive consultation process to assess its potential impact on key stakeholders including persons with disabilities and the organizations representing them. Since its implementation, the policy has catalyzed advancements in ICT accessibility across various domains. Its influence has been felt not only in Qatar but also throughout the region and has been widely recognized as a best practice within the Arab world and stands as a pioneering initiative that has propelled accessibility efforts, and established Qatar as a leading advocate for digital inclusion in the MENA region.

Being at the forefront of e-accessibility initiatives in the country, Mada Center has played a crucial role in actively supporting the implementation and advancement of the national policy (Mada Assistive Technology Center., n.d.). With a keen understanding of the ever-evolving technological trends and advancements shaping the digital accessibility landscape in Qatar, Mada Center has effectively utilized its expertise and knowledge to provide valuable insights and recommendations for updating and enhancing the existing policy.

2.   Addressing Accessibility Gaps with Progressive Policy Provisions

The evaluation and results of the Digital Accessibility Rights Evaluation Index (DARE) 2020 served as a valuable benchmark for identifying the areas in which improvements were most needed within the policy (Qatar - G3ict: The Global Initiative for Inclusive ICTs, n.d.). The key improvements introduced to the policy encompass various domains, including: the incorporation of accessible procurement practices, addressing media and multimedia accessibility, and promoting the provision of reasonable accommodation in education, employment, and community settings. These specific provisions were identified as crucial areas of focus based on the evaluation and results of the DARE Index, which highlighted existing gaps and shortcomings in these domains (Qatar - G3ict: The Global Initiative for Inclusive ICTs, n.d.). The identification of these provisions as key areas of focus demonstrates a commitment to rectifying the gaps in the policy landscape. Through targeted improvements, the aim is to ensure that individuals with disabilities are not hindered by inaccessible ICT solutions, media, or environments. By addressing these deficiencies, the policy endeavors to create an inclusive and equitable society that embraces diversity and promotes equal opportunities for all.

3.   Accessible Procurement Requirements

Accessible procurement guarantees that ICT products, services, and solutions acquired by governments and organizations meet specific accessibility standards. By considering accessibility from the initial stages of procurement, barriers that individuals with disabilities face are effectively eliminated, resulting in the acquisition of ICT solutions that are usable by all. This update represents a significant step toward creating a more inclusive society.

The public sector's adoption of accessible ICT will have a significant positive impact on the national ICT accessibility landscape, leading to the provision of universal access and increased opportunities for education and employment for PWD. The integration of accessible procurement requirements within the policy aims to incentivize manufacturers and vendors in the industry to acknowledge the market demand and importance of creating solutions that comply with accessibility standards. The enforcement of such policies will serve as a strong motivation for the industry to focus on developing accessible solutions right from the early stages of their conceptualization. This approach is crucial for future success and the sustainable integration of accessibility compliance. The consistent demand for accessible ICT goods and services generated by the policy will provide greater stability for the industry to invest in and compete in the implementation and supply of accessible ICT solutions to meet market needs.

4.   Media and Multimedia Accessibility

In today's interconnected world, digital platforms serve as vital channels for communication, education, and cultural expression. Thus, addressing media and multimedia accessibility within policies is crucial in today's digital landscape to ensure that individuals with disabilities can fully engage with and benefit from digital content, including videos, audio files, and interactive media.

Media accessibility guidelines encompass various aspects to make digital content more inclusive. This includes providing closed captions or subtitles for videos to assist individuals with hearing impairments, audio descriptions to aid individuals with visual impairments, and accessible interfaces for interactive media. These guidelines consider the diverse needs of individuals with disabilities, enabling them to perceive, understand, and navigate multimedia content effectively.

5. Reasonable Accommodation within Education, Employment, and Community

Promoting reasonable accommodation in education, employment, and community settings is another significant update to the policy as per the guidance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) | Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD), n.d.). This recognizes the importance of creating an inclusive environment where individuals with disabilities have equal opportunities for education, employment, and participation in the community. "Reasonable Accommodation," is understood to mean making necessary, proportionate, and appropriate modifications and adjustments to ensure that Persons with Disabilities are empowered, in this case through ICT, to enjoy independent living, human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis.

In the context of the National e-Accessibility Policy (Qatar E-Accessibility Policy, 2011); this will mean that all public sector organizations employing or providing services to Persons with Disabilities are encouraged to make accommodations, as per the standards outlined in the policy, to the way people with disabilities interact with or use websites, web content for mobile devices, telecommunication services, ATMs and public access terminals or kiosks so that People with Disabilities are able to use these technologies on equal basis with their peers.

6. Future Expectations Towards Qatar's Digital Access Landscape

In the coming years, it is expected that Qatar will continue to invest in cutting-edge technologies, innovative policies, and infrastructure improvements to enhance digital access for its citizens. However, it is crucial to ensure that the digital accessibility policy keeps pace with the technological advancements and is adaptable to new technologies, platforms, and devices, ensuring that individuals with disabilities have equal access and usability across different digital environments.

It is worth noting that the ongoing evaluation and monitoring of the policy's implementation will play a vital role in assessing its effectiveness and identifying any further gaps that require attention. By continuously analyzing the impact and outcomes of these improvements, policymakers can refine and strengthen the policy framework, ensuring its responsiveness to the evolving needs of individuals with disabilities. Besides, meeting the objectives set out in the UNCRPD (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) | Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD), n.d.) is in fact dependent on the early implementation of policies and regulations that explicitly address ICT accessibility matters. Thus, incorporating and actively promoting digital accessibility on a national level is a fundamental step to achieve inclusivity and to act in response to the right to access information within the framework of the Convention, and to promote the

three pillars of sustainable development - economic development, social integration, and environmental protection (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1, n.d.), in line with Qatar's National Vision 2030

7.   Conclusion

The State of Qatar's Digital Accessibility Policy landscape reflects a commitment to fostering inclusivity and equal access to digital services for all citizens, including individuals with disabilities. Through the establishment of legal frameworks, collaboration with stakeholders, awareness campaigns, and training programs, Qatar has made significant progress in creating a digitally accessible environment and positioned itself as a leader in the field of digital accessibility. The impact of these initiatives is evident in the increased accessibility of government websites and services, as well as the growing awareness and understanding of accessibility principles among stakeholders which contributed to achieving 1st place globally and regionally in the Dare index 2020 (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) | Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD), n.d.). Nevertheless, to maintain its position as a leader in digital accessibility, Qatar must continue to intensify its efforts and stay abreast of the latest developments and best practices in the field.

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