Under the patronage of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Iraq

The Fourth Arab SMEs Summit

Accelerating growth and entrepreneurial success

18–20 November 2026

Concept note and agenda

E/ESCWA/ETC/2026/ASMEs/Agenda

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Background and rationale

The Arab SMEs Summit, organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in partnership with the Ministry of Planning of the Republic of Iraq, is a leading regional forum dedicated to advancing the growth, resilience and competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across the Arab region. The Summit brings together high-level policymakers, government representatives, development partners, financial institutions, private sector leaders, investors, entrepreneurs and business support organizations to foster dialogue, strengthen cooperation and accelerate policies and partnerships that support SME development across Arab countries.

Within an increasingly complex regional and international context shaped by interlinked economic, geopolitical and environmental challenges, including ongoing and worsening conflicts, heightened instability, economic uncertainty, disruptions to trade and global supply chains, and rapid technological transformation, the Arab SMEs Summit recognizes that accelerating the growth of SMEs is essential to addressing these challenges. As key engines of employment, innovation and economic diversification, SMEs are central to advancing more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable economies across the region, and to supporting long-term stability, recovery and growth in contexts of fragility.

Accordingly, the Arab SMEs Summit 2026 contributes directly to the sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly **SDG 8** (Decent work and economic growth), **SDG 9** (Industry, innovation and infrastructure), and **SDG 17** (Partnerships for the goals). While these represent the Summit's primary areas of contribution, the event also adopts a cross-cutting approach that mainstreams broader sustainable development priorities, including gender equality, youth empowerment, digital transformation, environmental sustainability and social inclusion, thereby contributing to the advancement of other SDGs across the 2030 Agenda.

Building on these regional priorities, the 2026 edition of the Arab SMEs Summit, held under the theme **"Accelerating growth and entrepreneurial success",** serves as a strategic platform to advance SME growth and entrepreneurship across the Arab region, by enhancing access to finance and markets, promoting investment and fostering private sector development. The Summit also supports regional partnerships, knowledge exchange and inclusive economic growth by empowering youth, women and persons with disabilities, while leveraging innovation, digital transformation and artificial intelligence.

The Republic of Iraq hosts the Fourth Arab SMEs Summit in 2026, in partnership with ESCWA and the Ministry of Planning of the Republic of Iraq, reflecting the Ministry's commitment to advancing entrepreneurship as well as SMEs as drivers of economic diversification, job creation and private sector development. The Summit aligns with national efforts to improve the business environment, strengthen innovation and digital transformation, and address challenges related to the informal economy.

The Arab SMEs Summit 2026 provides a platform to enhance regional economic cooperation, expand investment opportunities and connect entrepreneurs with investors and business support institutions, contributing to a more competitive, inclusive and innovation-driven entrepreneurship ecosystem in the Arab region.

Key achievements

Over time, the Arab SMEs Summit has steadily evolved into a leading regional platform for SME development. Previous editions include:

- **ASMES 2022 – Amman ("Opportunities beyond Borders"):** Convened over 650 participants and mobilized $130 million in commitments to support SME development.
- **ASMES 2023 – Marrakech ("From Resilience to Prosperity"):** Brought together more than 1,300 participants and secured $177 million in commitments, strengthening cross-border collaboration.
- **ASMES 2024 – Doha ("Navigating Digital Horizons"):** Scaled participation to nearly 5,000 attendees and generated $368 million in commitments, with a strong focus on digital transformation as a driver of competitiveness and growth.

This document outlines the objectives, approach and strategic importance of the Arab SMEs Summit 2026, setting the stage for the detailed sections and agenda that follow.

Introduction to ASMEs 2026

Building on the momentum of previous editions, the **Arab SMEs Summit 2026**, held under the theme **"Accelerating growth and entrepreneurial success",** and organized in cooperation with the Ministry of Planning of the Republic of Iraq, comes at a time when advancing SME performance remains central to strengthening resilience, productivity, competitiveness and economic diversification across the Arab region. The Summit provides a high-level platform for dialogue, knowledge exchange and partnership-building among key stakeholders from across the Arab region and beyond. Through a diverse programme of discussions, technical sessions, networking activities and collaborative engagements, it facilitates the sharing of experiences, highlights emerging opportunities and supports collective efforts to strengthen SME ecosystems.

In this context, ASMEs 2026 seeks to advance practical cooperation and regional collaboration that contribute to unlocking the full potential of SMEs as drivers of innovation, competitiveness, employment and sustainable economic development across the Arab region.

ASMEs 2026 strategic objectives

The event aims to facilitate meaningful discussions, foster collaboration and equip SMEs and startups with the tools and resources they need to address challenges and seize opportunities in today's rapidly evolving business landscape. Its objectives are to:

- **Accelerate SME growth** by enhancing entrepreneurship, productivity and enterprise expansion across the Arab region.
- **Drive digital transformation** by creating dynamic platforms for SMEs and startups to adopt and scale innovative technologies and digital solutions, enhancing competitiveness, efficiency and market readiness.
- **Build entrepreneurial capacity** by empowering startups and SMEs through comprehensive skills development programs.
- **Strengthen access to finance and investment** by improving linkages between SMEs, financial institutions and investors to support business scaling and sustainable growth.
- **Advocate for supportive policies** by championing regulatory frameworks and policy reforms tailored to the needs of the Arab region, fostering environments where startups and SMEs can thrive, innovate, and drive sustainable growth.
- **Foster collaborative ecosystems** by cultivating a culture of collaboration and dialogue among policymakers, government officials and industry representatives, addressing common challenges and capitalizing on opportunities for regional advancement.
- **Promote inclusive growth** by empowering underserved groups, including youth, women and persons with disabilities, as active contributors to SME-led economic transformation.
- **Expand strategic networking opportunities** by enabling SMEs to connect with regional and global value chains, mentors and investors to support growth, scalability and internationalization.

Event format

The 2026 event spans three days and brings together policymakers, entrepreneurs, investors, business support organizations, development partners and private sector leaders from across the Arab region and beyond. The detailed agenda is provided at the end of this document.

The Summit's main stage features high-level ministerial discussions, inspirational entrepreneur stories, startup pitching sessions, investor dialogues and thematic discussions on digital transformation, market expansion, entrepreneurship policy and emerging opportunities for SMEs. These sessions provide a platform to showcase successful experiences, discuss key challenges and opportunities, and foster dialogue among stakeholders shaping the future of entrepreneurship and SME development in the Arab region.

Through this integrated approach, the Summit aims to foster stronger entrepreneurship ecosystems, facilitate connections among SMEs and key stakeholders, and accelerate the growth, competitiveness and internationalization of Arab enterprises.

To support the achievement of these objectives, the Arab SMEs Summit is structured around **ten interconnected workstreams, as follows:**

Workstream 1: Inspirational stories

Daily sessions featuring successful entrepreneurs and SME leaders from across the Arab region who share their growth journeys, innovative business models and experiences in overcoming challenges related to scaling, market access, financing, digital transformation and business resilience.



Workstream 2: Opportunities spotlight

Sessions highlighting regional and international programmes, financing mechanisms, technical assistance initiatives and market opportunities available to SMEs. The workstream connects participants with practical resources that support business growth, innovation, digitalization, export readiness and investment attraction.



Workstream 3: Interactive workshops

The parallel workshops aim to foster collaboration and knowledge exchange among entrepreneurs, business support organizations and experts across the region. They explore key themes related to entrepreneurship and sustainable development, including renewable energy, water management and the circular economy, while also addressing digital transformation, investment readiness, e-commerce, artificial intelligence, emerging technologies and the creative economy.



Workstream 4: Policy dialogue



This regional dialogue brings together policymakers, business support organizations, private sector representatives, development partners and other stakeholders to exchange experiences and discuss reforms that strengthen entrepreneurial ecosystems, foster innovation, and support the growth and competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), with a focus on sharing best practices in developing SME-related legislation, business formalization, digital transformation of government services, startup support policies and foreign investment promotion.

Workstream 5: SMEs exhibition and bazaar



Showcasing SMEs and startups across key thematic tracks, while facilitating connections with customers, partners, investors and support organizations. The exhibition also features a dedicated bazaar for microbusinesses in the creative and cultural industries and agri-food sectors.

Workstream 6: Opportunities zone



An interactive space where development organizations, financial institutions, investors, accelerators, incubators and business support organizations present funding opportunities, capacity-building programmes, market access initiatives and support services to SMEs and entrepreneurs.

Workstream 7: Investment forum



This segment features a curated lineup of high-potential startups and SMEs pitching to a diverse pool of investors. It offers a platform to explore emerging investment trends, showcase innovative business models, and enable real-time deal-making and strategic partnerships.

Workstream 8: Entrepreneurship awards

Recognizing outstanding SMEs and startups that are driving innovation, business growth, sustainability and social impact across the Arab region. These awards celebrate businesses that demonstrate excellence in technology adoption, market expansion, creative solutions, environmental stewardship and inclusive business models, while contributing to economic diversification and job creation.



Workstream 9: Coaching, B2B matchmaking and partnerships zones

Combining one-on-one coaching with targeted B2B matchmaking to support business growth and partnership development. Through personalized guidance and curated meetings, participants connect with potential partners, investors and peers. These engagements often culminate in the signing of memorandums of understanding (MoUs), formalizing collaborations that drive innovation and long-term impact.



Workstream 10: Partner-led side events

Partner-led events that complement the main agenda, by exploring specific themes and offering actionable insights to support startups and SMEs. It brings together diverse stakeholders to explore emerging opportunities, tackle pressing challenges, and share innovative solutions.



Venue

The event takes place at the Baghdad International Fair in the capital of Iraq.



This state-of-the-art facility is purpose-built for high-level international gatherings, offering cutting-edge technology, modern amenities and a professional environment to ensure a seamless experience for all attendees.

Date

The event activities span three days:

- Opening on **Wednesday, 18 November 2026**
- Concluding on **Friday, 20 November 2026**

Target audience

The Arab SMEs Summit brings together a diverse and dynamic community of stakeholders from across the entrepreneurial and innovation landscape:

1. **Policy and governance leaders**
    - Ministries, industry regulators and policymakers.
    - Government ministries and public agencies.
    - Regional economic organizations and public institutions.

2. **Ecosystem enablers and support organizations**
    - Business incubators and development entities.
    - Entrepreneurship support organizations (ESOs).
    - Development agencies and donor institutions.
    - Venture capital firms, angel investors and financial institutions.
    - Corporate leaders and innovation-driven enterprises.
    - Academic institutions and research centres.

3. **Entrepreneurs and grassroots innovators**

- Microbusinesses, startups and SMEs and social enterprises.
- Key players in entrepreneurship in the Arab region.
- Aspiring entrepreneurs among high school and university students.
- Youth-led initiatives and early-stage innovators.

The Summit promotes the meaningful participation of women, youth and persons with disabilities across all workstreams, ensuring inclusive access to knowledge, networks, finance, markets and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Agenda

Day 1: Wednesday, 18 November 2026

Time	Event/Session
8:30–9:30	Registration and reception
9:30–10:00	Opening ceremony
10:00–11:00	**High-level ministerial Panel** From recovery to growth: towards a promising future for SME and private-sector development in the Arab Region
11:00–12:00	**Success insight panel** Accelerating growth in the digital era
12:00–13:00	Networking

Workshops and parallel activities (13:00–16:00)

Workshops	Partner-led side events	Policy dialogue (part 1)
Track 1: Emerging technologies for SME competitiveness, productivity and growth Concept note **Track 2:** Scaling beyond borders: digital trade, e-commerce and export readiness Concept note **Track 3** Driving green innovation and growth through SMEs Concept note	SMEs and the circular economy: towards a regional policy framework Concept note Investing in care: from the workplace to the wider community Concept note Building risk-informed and resilient SMEs in the Arab region (part 1) Concept note Building world-class business advisors to accelerate SME growth across the Arab region Concept note	**Track 1:** Internationalization and e-commerce Concept note **Track 2:** Formalization Concept note **Track 3:** Access to finance Concept note

Throughout the day, participants can engage in: **B2B meetings, coaching and advising sessions, media interviews, signing of MoUs, and the SME Exhibition & Opportunities Zone.**

Startup pitching sessions (16:00–17:30)

Sessions	Time
Introduction to startup	16:00–16:10
Pitch 1	16:10–16:20
Pitch 2	16:20–16:30
Pitch 3	16:30–16:40
Pitch 4	16:40–16:50
Pitch 5	16:50–17:00
Pitch 6	17:00–17:10
Pitch 7	17:10–17:20
Pitch 8	17:20–17:30

Day 2: Thursday, 19 November 2026

Time	Event/Session
9:00–10:00	Networking
10:00–11:00	**Opportunities Spotlight Panel** New financing opportunities and capacity-building programmes in specific sectors
11:00–12:00	**Artificial intelligence spotlight panel** Artificial intelligence transition: what it means for SMEs and startups in the Arab region
12:00–13:00	Networking

Workshops and parallel activities (13:00–16:00)

Workshops	Partner-led side events	Policy dialogue (part 2)
Track 1: Emerging technologies for SME competitiveness, productivity and growth Concept note **Track 2:** Driving growth in the creative and cultural economy Concept note **Track 3:** Exploring funding opportunities and selecting the right solutions for SME growth Concept note	The role of universities in driving innovation and investment in Iraq Concept note Building risk-informed and resilient SMEs in the Arab region (part 2) Concept note Advancing women's entrepreneurship ecosystems Concept note Building world-class business advisors to accelerate SME growth across the Arab region Concept note	**Track 4:** Digital and emerging technologies Concept note **Track 5:** Green economy Concept note

Throughout the day, participants can engage in: **B2B meetings, coaching and advising sessions, media interviews, signing of MoUs, and the SME Exhibition & Opportunities Zone.**

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Pitch 6	17:00–17:10
Pitch 7	17:10–17:20
Pitch 8	17:20–17:30

Day 3: Friday, 20 November 2026

Time	Event/Session
10:00–11:00	**Opportunities spotlight panel** Cross-border collaboration and market expansion
11:00–12:00	**Investors spotlight panel** Investment landscape in the Arab region and what investors look for in SMEs and startups
12:00–13:00	B2B Coaching/Advising sessions Media interviews Signing of MoUs SME exhibition/Opportunities zone
13:00–15:00	**Closing ceremony**