EU – GCC DIALOGUE ON ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION PHASE II

A Project funded by the European Union

11. ACTIVITY REPORT

New Avenues for Cooperation – Creative Industries Webinar

A project implemented by DAI in consortium with AHK and ICCS

DAI

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AHK German Emirati Joint Council for Industry and Commerce
المجلس الألماني الإماراتي المشترك للصناعة و التجارة

EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification
A project funded by the European Union

Activity Report

New Avenues for Cooperation – Creative Industries Webinar
EU-GCC Business Forum Reflection webinar series

29 October 2026, Online

I. Summary

	Description
Theme	New Avenues for Cooperation – Creative Industries Webinar from the EU-GCC Business Forum reflective webinar series under the EU–GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification II
Purpose	To revisit key findings, recommendations and partnership opportunities identified during the 9th Business Forum, assess progress since November 2025, and identify practical ways for creative businesses in the EU and GCC to access markets, form commercial partnerships and attract investment.
Date and time	29 October 2026, 14:00 Saudi Arabian time
Venue	Online (idloom, MS Teams)
Organised by	EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification
In collaboration with	Delegation of the European Union to Saudi Arabia
Format	Online (fully virtual)
Language	English
Main Target Audience	GCC government authorities, EU and Saudi/GCC institutions and regulatory bodies, EU and GCC business community, and experts.
Number of Participants	47

II. Performance Reporting

1. Event Delivery

The webinar examined how the EU and GCC can strengthen cooperation in the creative industries, with particular attention to market access, intellectual property, financing and enterprise

development. Panellists highlighted that policy ambition and cultural investment alone do not automatically create sustainable creative businesses. Effective growth requires coordinated systems linking for example culture, trade, education, investment and entrepreneurship. Experiences from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia showed that creative firms need predictable revenue, appropriate finance, stronger commercialisation pathways and practical support to enter international markets.

The discussion called for stronger and more practical cooperation between the EU and GCC in the creative industries. Participants proposed better support for creative businesses, more B2B matchmaking, opportunities for co-production and IP exchange, and improved access to finance. They also highlighted the need for clearer guidance on intellectual property, cross-border protection and the growing use of AI in creative work.

Overall, the webinar showed a clear need for a practical EU–GCC platform that connects creative SMEs and independent creators with partners, buyers, investors and international markets. Public authorities, chambers, embassies, investors and creative-industry leaders should all play a role in making this happen.

1.1 Opening and moderation

Hanna Kuula Verbaan welcomed participants and explained that the webinar would build on the 9th EU–GCC Business Forum held in Kuwait in 2025. The session was designed to examine what creative industries need in order to thrive, and how EU and GCC businesses can enter one another's markets, form partnerships and pursue investment opportunities. The format consisted of a moderated panel followed by audience questions.

Moderator, Florian Walther introduced the panellists and carried forward three lessons from the Kuwait forum: durable cooperation requires long-term partnerships rather than one-off transactions; each GCC market needs a locally tailored strategy; and investments should create in-country value by strengthening domestic talent and SMEs. He structured the panel around the enabling environment, entrepreneurial realities in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and concrete opportunities for two-way EU–GCC cooperation.

Contributor	Role	Background
Hanna Kuula Verbaan	Executive Assistant to the Team Leader, EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification Project	Hanna Kuula Verbaan is the Executive Assistant to the Team Leader, EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification Project and assist the Team Leader in all project activities. The project's overall goal is to enhance EU-GCC economic, trade, and investment relations in line with the EU's strategic partnership with the Gulf, while supporting GCC economic diversification and promoting European business engagement in the region.
Florian Walther	Country Representative for Kuwait and Pakistan, German Emirati Joint Council for Industry and Commerce	Florian Walther is Country Representative for Kuwait and Pakistan at the German Emirati Joint Council for Industry and Commerce, where he represents German industry interests toward public and private stakeholders in both markets and works to strengthen bilateral trade and investment ties between Germany and the region. He previously worked at Deloitte in audit and assurance and in management, strategy consulting.

Contributor	Role	Background
Johanna Kouzmine-Karavaïeff	Creative Economy Governance Expert, Director Creative Economy Systems, Africa Creatives Alliance	Johanna Kouzmine-Karavaïeff is an international expert in creative economy governance, policy and regulatory frameworks, and arts- and design-based cross-sector innovation, with over 20 years of experience across Europe, Africa, GCC, Asia and the Americas. She advises governments and international organisations on developing enabling environments, strengthening creative economy ecosystems and translating policy ambitions into effective implementation.
Abdulrahman Abdullah	Founder of Shado	Abdulrahman Abdullah is a Saudi communications professional and entrepreneur working at the intersection of arts, culture, audience engagement and creative enterprise development. With a background in architecture and extensive experience in cultural communications, he has contributed to major cultural initiatives in Saudi Arabia, including Noor Riyadh, working across communications strategy, editorial development, content and media relations. He is the founder of shado, a communications consultancy serving the arts and culture sector, and whatsnext, a platform connecting audiences with arts and cultural experiences across Saudi Arabia.
Manal AlGharabally	Founder of MBVISION Studios	Manal AlGharabally is an internationally award-winning Kuwaiti innovation entrepreneur, creative industries leader and international partnerships advisor with nearly two decades of experience. In 2009, she founded MBVISION Studios, pioneering one of Kuwait and the GCC's first independent, woman-led animation studios, and subsequently expanded into marketing, entertainment, education and creative capacity building. A TEDx speaker, mentor and creative producer, she has represented Kuwait's creative sector at the United Nations and developed collaborations with partners across Asia, Europe and the Gulf.

1.2. From policy ambition to functioning creative-economy systems

Johanna Kouzmine-Karavaïeff argued that strong policies and investment in the creative economy are not enough on their own. Creative businesses also need a functioning delivery system, meaning the practical network of institutions, programmes and services that helps businesses access finance, protect and commercialise intellectual property, develop skills, find partners and enter new markets. These systems matter because, without effective coordination between areas such as culture, trade, investment, education and entrepreneurship, businesses can struggle to turn available policies and support into real opportunities for growth. She therefore stressed that measuring GDP, employment, exports and innovation shows the economic contribution of the sector, but it is equally important to assess whether the institutions and support systems behind it are actually helping creative enterprises develop and succeed.

She described a **"delivery gap" affecting creative industries in both the EU and GCC**. The problem is not necessarily a lack of policies, programmes or institutions, but that the organisations responsible for areas such as culture, trade, intellectual property, investment, education and entrepreneurship do not always work together effectively. As a result, creative businesses may find

support for individual needs, but still struggle to move smoothly from developing an idea to protecting their IP, securing finance, finding commercial partners and entering international markets. Johanna Kouzmine-Karavaïeff therefore argued that the priority should be to **better connect existing public and private-sector support, clarify who is responsible for what, and make it easier for businesses to navigate the available services and opportunities**.

She also stressed that the situation differs considerably between countries in both regions, so there is **no single EU or GCC model for developing the creative economy**. Investment in cultural venues, events and creative production can stimulate activity, but this does not automatically translate into sustainable business growth. The longer-term economic impact depends on whether local creative companies and entrepreneurs can take part in these opportunities, strengthen their business capabilities, commercialise their ideas and intellectual property, and ultimately reach domestic and international markets

1.3.Kuwait: building an animation business without a roadmap

Manal AlGharabally explained establishing MBVision Studios in Kuwait in 2009 as an independent, woman-led animation studio. With no established roadmap, the early years involved trial and error in building a production pipeline, team and local client base. The company subsequently expanded from advertising animation into entertainment, education, international trade and consultancy.

International access was the central gap. Although local talent and production quality existed, the studio initially lacked institutional channels[1] into foreign markets International awards and sustained individual effort eventually opened business with clients in Korea, the United States and Europe. Her experience led to a core question: why should the next generation have to start again from zero?

She proposed a structured EU–GCC initiative bringing public and private actors together. In her model, the public sector would provide logistical support and legitimacy, the private sector would finance activity, and creative-industry leaders would guide implementation. She stressed that initiatives driven only by individuals are difficult to sustain.

1.4 Saudi Arabia: moving from cultural activity to sustainable enterprise

Abdulrahman Abdullah described the rapid expansion of cultural activity in Saudi Arabia and the opportunities it has created for programming, creative services and audience platforms. He distinguished, however, between building a cultural ecosystem and building a sustainable creative economy.

Drawing on his own businesses, he highlighted the importance of moving beyond one-off projects towards **more sustainable creative business models**. This means building a stable client or audience base, generating recurring income and creating the financial stability needed to retain talent and support long-term growth.

He identified three development priorities: financing suited to creative businesses rather than only individual outputs; commercialisation through Intellectual Property (IP), licensing, repeatable services and scalable models; and international market access through buyers, distributors, partners and investors. Saudi Arabia has created strong conditions for cultural activity, but the next step is enabling independent firms to participate, grow and compete beyond the domestic market.

[1] Established, organised ways for businesses to access support or international opportunities through public or business organisations, rather than having to rely on their own personal contacts..

1.5 Intellectual property as a complete commercial system

The discussion then focused on the legal, institutional and commercial conditions required for creative assets to earn value across borders. Johanna emphasised that IP is not merely registration. A functioning system includes ownership and contracting, licensing and commercialisation, collective rights management, royalty payments, enforcement, dispute resolution, anti-piracy measures, border controls, valuation and monetisation. It also requires coordination between copyright, industrial property and the wider culture and creative sectors.

A potential avenue for follow-up cooperation would be to develop bilateral EU–GCC pilots examining how intellectual property protection and commercialisation function in practice across selected markets. Rather than focusing exclusively on legislative comparison, such pilots could follow the commercial journey of creative works between two jurisdictions, examining rights documentation, licensing, monitoring of commercial use, royalty collection and distribution, and access to enforcement mechanisms. This would enable participating institutions and industry stakeholders to identify gaps in national delivery capacities and cross-border institutional relationships, while testing practical improvements that could subsequently inform wider EU–GCC cooperation.

At the regional and international levels, panellists highlighted the need for clearer agreements and practical cooperation so that rights can be understood, protected and enforced across jurisdictions. Manal added that international exchange opportunities can motivate creators to develop higher-quality assets. Drawing on an IP exchange with Korea, she said that different national rules make such transactions difficult and argued for stronger international frameworks supporting IP as an investable asset.

Abdulrahman urged founders to consider IP at the start of the business model, not as a legal step at the end. Value may sit in a concept, format, design, character or content, and clear ownership agreements and appropriate legal advice are essential before international commercialisation.

1.6. Closing the financing gap

The panel examined the stage at which creative firms are too risky for conventional bank finance, too small for institutional capital and too commercial for cultural grants. Abdulrahman described a missing transition between early public support and private investment. He recommended mechanisms specifically designed to help proven projects develop recurring revenue and become scalable businesses, rather than expecting one funding source to serve every stage.

Manal argued that visible public-sector participation can build private-sector confidence, while private investors need to understand that creative-sector returns may require a longer horizon. Johanna similarly called for a balance between public facilitation and private capital. She proposed investment pilots or protected sandboxes that demonstrate viable models, build trust and improve investment readiness among entrepreneurs, public bodies, investors and financial intermediaries. Diverse investment products are needed that cater from all between small family firms to becoming unicorns.

Johanna cited the EU cultural and creative sector guarantee approach, (including the InvestEU cultural and creative guarantee product,) in an example of risk-sharing support for intermediaries such as banks dealing with intangible assets and uncertain returns. Abdulrahman added that not every creative business is an investable start-up, but grants cannot solve every financing problem; different models are needed for different stages and business types.

1.7 Panellists' concrete recommendations

- Johanna: strengthen market intermediaries such as incubators, creative hubs and makerspaces. These organisations can connect stakeholders and provide cross-cutting support on IP, finance, trade and market access. EU–GCC business exchange should also focus on pre-identified commercial opportunities and potential partners.

- Manal: convert dialogues, summits and roundtables into a structured action plan and partnership that enables EU–GCC exchanges of production, IP and residencies. Creative leaders should drive the initiative and involve the next generation.
- Abdulrahman: establish a dedicated programme linking creative SMEs in Europe and the GCC with buyers, investors and markets, supported by chambers of commerce, embassies and other relevant institutions, with both commercial and social-impact objectives.

2. Audience Engagement and Follow-up

2.1 Audience discussion: access to European markets

A participant asked how GCC creative businesses could expand into Europe and whether specialist associations and diaspora communities could help. Abdulrahman noted that Saudi cultural institutions already participate internationally, including through major art events and collaborations, but argued that procurement and programme structures should make room for SMEs and medium-sized enterprises. He saw embassies as useful connectors within a more deliberate programme rather than as the sole delivery channel.

Manal referred to an initiative developed with Johanna to support the export of GCC creative SMEs and independent artists into Europe. She said it still requires public- and private-sector backing and could not yet be publicly disclosed. Johanna added that public administrations and diplomatic institutions need stronger knowledge of how art markets create value and how cultural assets can support international positioning. The exchange also underscored demand for a broader representation of everyday Gulf cultural life in European markets, beyond narrow or highly critical narratives.

2.2 Audience discussion: AI and intellectual property

A participant raised the impact of AI on creation, reproduction, ownership, licensing, exclusivity and digital likeness, asking whether GCC frameworks risk being based on outdated concepts of IP. Johanna acknowledged the importance of harmonisation while also emphasising AI's potential to strengthen creative-sector information systems, policy coordination and cultural diplomacy.

Abdulrahman said AI-based work and projects are already receiving attention and support in Saudi Arabia, but suggested that EU–GCC cooperation could help develop guidance for responsible use. Manal noted that definitions and rights relating to AI-generated IP remain unsettled internationally and described the issue as an ongoing challenge. The panel agreed that creator protection and clear guidance are needed, while recognising that many creators also use AI as part of their work.

2.3 Audience discussion: existing platforms and next steps

A further question was asked about which existing platforms, forums and spaces support EU–Gulf cooperation in cultural and creative industries. Johanna said she had seen little focus specifically on creative-economy development, as distinct from international cultural relations. Both she and Manal described a clear gap in practical platforms that connect creative businesses, finance, institutions and markets across the two regions.

An effective EU–GCC creative economy cooperation mechanism would need to combine direct business development opportunities with the institutional capacities required to sustain them. Potential activities could include targeted business matchmaking based on pre-identified commercial opportunities, partnerships between creative economy intermediaries, cross-border IP commercialisation initiatives, and cooperation on investment readiness and financing mechanisms.

Rather than establishing an additional dialogue platform alone, the emphasis should be on mobilising existing institutions, industry organisations and intermediary networks around defined functions and responsibilities. This would require coordination between relevant EU and GCC

institutions, national government agencies, chambers of commerce, business support organisations and creative industry representatives, with mechanisms for translating regional cooperation into national-level action.

In closing, Hanna observed that the strong engagement and extended discussion demonstrated a clear need for follow-up. She suggested that a future discussion should include more public-sector participation and stated that the project would explore how to advance the issues and opportunities raised.

2. Key Takeaways

- Creative-economy growth depends less on policy statements alone and more on connected delivery systems spanning culture, trade, IP, finance, investment, education and entrepreneurship.
- EU and GCC markets are internally diverse. Cooperation and market-entry support must be country-specific and grounded in local institutional and legal realities.
- Creative enterprises need support to move from commissions and one-off projects towards recurring revenue, licensable IP, scalable services and international distribution.
- IP must be treated as a commercial system and investable asset, covering ownership, contracting, licensing, enforcement, valuation, royalties and cross-border protection.
- The most significant financing gap lies between early grants or public experimentation and conventional private investment. Risk-sharing, pilots and transition finance could help bridge it.
- Public-sector participation can provide legitimacy, coordination and risk reduction, while private-sector capital and commercial expertise are needed for sustainability.
- Market intermediaries, including hubs, incubators, maker spaces, chambers, embassies and specialist associations, can connect firms to finance, buyers, partners and expertise.
- A recurring concern was the absence of a dedicated, practical EU–GCC creative-economy platform that converts dialogue into transactions, partnerships and measurable outcomes.
- Measurable outcomes and accountability: Future EU–GCC creative economy cooperation should establish clear performance indicators that go beyond participation and networking to measure tangible results, including business partnerships, commercial agreements, market entry, investment mobilised and access to enterprise support. Monitoring should also assess improvements in institutional coordination and service delivery, as well as the sustainability of partnerships and commercial relationships over time.
- AI is changing creative production and challenging established IP concepts. Cooperation should address creator protection, ownership and licensing while also using AI to improve sector coordination, more sustainable action through foreign relations, and access to information.

Annexes

Annex 2: Why Creative Industries? The Strategic Case for EU–GCC Economic Cooperation

The rapid development of cultural and creative industries across the GCC illustrates the scale of economic transformation underway. Significant investments in cultural infrastructure, creative production, entertainment and cultural destinations are generating new opportunities for enterprises, professionals and international partnerships. At the same time, this growth raises important questions about how economic opportunities are distributed, how domestic creative

enterprises participate and which institutional capacities are needed to translate investment into sustainable economic development.

Cultural and creative industries should therefore be recognised as an economic cooperation field in their own right, rather than approached primarily through the lens of cultural exchange and international cultural relations. Their development connects directly to several shared priorities for the EU and GCC:

- **Economic diversification and international competitiveness:** Cultural and creative industries contribute to GCC diversification ambitions while creating opportunities for European creative enterprises. The EU itself has considerable scope to strengthen the economic development, competitiveness and internationalisation of its cultural and creative industries. Cooperation can therefore generate mutual learning and commercial opportunities rather than operating as a one-directional exchange of expertise.
- **Cultural identity, international positioning and tourism:** Cultural and creative sectors play a fundamental role in developing, expressing and communicating the distinctive identities of countries and communities. They contribute to international positioning, cultural diplomacy, destination development and tourism competitiveness. However, sustaining these contributions requires more than investment in cultural programming or infrastructure. **Domestic cultural and creative sectors must also be economically and industrially empowered, with the financial capacities, professional structures and market opportunities needed to sustain their activities and retain value locally.** Without this foundation, international visibility may increase without generating corresponding long-term benefits for domestic creative ecosystems.
- **Innovation and cross-sector development:** Arts, design and creative practices contribute to innovation both within the creative industries and across other sectors of the economy. Their potential extends to new products, services, business models, organisational practices and approaches to complex societal and economic challenges. This makes creative industries relevant to wider innovation, entrepreneurship and economic transformation agendas.
- **Entrepreneurship, SMEs and employment:** Cultural and creative industries provide opportunities for enterprise creation, professional employment, independent entrepreneurship and the development of new business models. However, creative enterprises frequently depend on intellectual property, intangible assets, project-based production and specialised market relationships. These characteristics create financing, commercialisation and internationalisation needs that are not always adequately addressed through conventional business support mechanisms.
- **Institutional and economic cooperation:** Cultural and creative industries offer an opportunity to establish a structured area of EU–GCC economic dialogue, connecting cultural policy with trade, investment, intellectual property, entrepreneurship and innovation. Targeted cooperation could facilitate business partnerships, co-production, licensing, investment, international distribution and market access, while strengthening the institutions and intermediaries that support these activities.

An equally important consideration is the **specialised expertise required to develop functioning creative economy ecosystems**. Cultural and creative sectors are often approached as areas of general interest or cultural programming rather than as complex economic systems requiring specific professional, institutional and technical competencies. Yet sustainable development depends on understanding how creative value is generated, financed, protected, commercialised and distributed, and how the different actors and institutions involved in these processes interact.
Investment in cultural and creative sectors can be a highly effective development strategy, but its long-term impact depends on the quality of the surrounding ecosystem. This requires expertise in creative economy governance, sector-specific business development, intellectual property, financing, market access, intermediary development and institutional coordination. Building these capacities is essential if cultural investment is to generate sustainable enterprises, competitive industries and lasting economic returns.

The strategic opportunity for EU–GCC cooperation is therefore not to simply increase cultural exchange or investment in creative activities, but to strengthen the economic and institutional conditions through which cultural and creative sectors can develop, compete and create lasting value. This requires moving beyond isolated initiatives towards coordinated delivery systems that connect policy ambitions, institutional capacities, creative enterprises and international market opportunities.