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**Submissions from entities in the United Nations system and elsewhere on their efforts in 2010
to implement the outcome of the WSIS**

Submission by

ESCWA

This submission was prepared as an input to the report of the UN Secretary-General on "Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels" (to the 14th session of the CSTD), in response to the request by the Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 2006/46, to the UN Secretary-General to inform the Commission on Science and Technology for Development on the implementation of the outcomes of the WSIS as part of his annual reporting to the Commission.

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ESCWA's Contribution to the 2011 Annual Report of the United Nations Secretary-General to the Commission on Science and Technology on the Implementation of and Follow-up to the Outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society

I. Introduction

The research and writing of this report is taking place around the midpoint or the class mark that separates the Tunis phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), which took place in November 2005, and the deadline for the achievement of WSIS targets, which coincides with the deadline for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), both set for the end of 2015.

This report summarises the status of implementation in the ESCWA region of some of the WSIS Action Lines and gives examples of initiatives that ESCWA has carried out during the past year to help with their realisation. One of the sources of information used for the preparation of this summary is an ESCWA publication entitled "Regional Profile of the Information Society in Western Asia (RPIS)".¹ For the reader interested in a more complete analysis of the status of the information society in the ESCWA region, RPIS would constitute a more comprehensive reference. To delve into the history of WSIS implementation in the ESCWA region, please refer to previous reports prepared and submitted by ESCWA to CSTD in 2008,² 2009³ and 2010.⁴

It is important for the reader to keep in mind that the WSIS implementation status of a country in the ESCWA region, when assessed separately, may diverge, sometimes significantly, from that of the region as a whole. Factors contributing to regional differences are mostly tied to economic realities. In general, the more affluent countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) will score better than poorer countries or countries suffering civil strife, e.g. Yemen or Iraq.

II. Regional Plan of Action (RPoA) for Building the Information Society in Western Asia⁵

Created in 2005, the RPoA originally included 10 programmes and 38 projects. The RPoA was last reviewed and updated in 2009 during a conference entitled "Regional Follow-up to the Outcome of the World Summit on the Information Society."⁶ Attended by more than 275 participants, the conference took place in Damascus and was organised in partnership with the Syrian Ministry of Communication and Technology (MOCT), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Global Alliance for ICT and Development (GAID), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the League of Arab States (LAS), the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS), the Syrian Computer Society (SCS), the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE), Cisco, Microsoft as well as Talal Abu-Ghazaleh International (TAGI). Its main objectives were to review and follow-up on the implementation of WSIS Action Lines, the RPoA, the Arab ICT Strategy⁷ and other national strategies and plans of action and to update them in light of accumulated experiences. Its main outcomes included an update of the RPoA and the adoption of the "Damascus Proclamation for the Promotion of the Arab Knowledge Society for Sustainable Economic and Social Development."⁸

In 2006, ESCWA started development work on the Information Society Portal (ISPER).⁹ ISPER was created by the Information and Communication Technology Division (ICTD) as a follow-up activity to the outcomes of WSIS. This dynamic, bilingual (English/Arabic), database-driven, open-source application provides stakeholders with essential information on the current status of the information society in the ESCWA region and facilitates cooperation and regional integration. The portal features updated versions of

¹ <http://isper.escwa.un.org/Default.aspx?TabId=65&item=24>

² http://www.unctad.org/sections/wcmu/docs/dite_pccb_stdev0099_en.pdf

³ http://www.unctad.org/sections/wcmu/docs/ecn232009_c07.pdf

⁴ http://www.unctad.org/sections/wcmu/docs/ecn232010_ESCWA.pdf

⁵ <http://www.escwa.un.org/wsis/conference2/RPoA.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=850E>

⁷ <http://isper.escwa.un.org/RegionalActionPlans/ArabiCTStrategy/StrategyDocument/tabid/70/language/en-US/Default.aspx>

⁸ <http://css.escwa.org.lb/ICTD/850/DamascusProclamationAr.pdf>

⁹ <http://isper.escwa.org.lb>

the Regional and National Profiles of the Information Society and provides real-time discussion forums to WSIS stakeholders. It is also connected to the ESCWA Statistical Information System (ESIS) and allows users to query the database for the latest IS figures. ISPER is constantly updated and improved and is already at its third iteration. Its latest changes and or improvements include improved forum functionality, expanded support for Arabic language features, database upgrades, an updated IS indicator module as well as general improvements to the back office application.

III. Action Lines (C1 through C11)

C1: The role of governments and all stakeholders in the promotion of ICTs for development

Recognising that NGOs could play an important role in the promotion of WSIS objectives, ESCWA organised two interlinked workshops on the “Delivery of e-Services in Civil Society”.¹⁰ The first took place at the end of 2009 while the second followed a little less than year later in 2010. The workshops aimed at increasing the awareness, capacities and capabilities of selected NGOs in the ESCWA region to provide and use e-commerce services that are based on the priorities and development needs of citizens and communities. They also looked into the impact that portal technologies and e-commerce applications may have on the sustainability of NGOs. They further encouraged NGOs to use already existing e-commerce applications in order to increase economic opportunities and to expand markets and client bases. A Web-based forum complemented the workshops and was used by NGOs to discuss and assess their progress with respect to promoting and using e-commerce services, creating new economic opportunities, expanding outreach and encouraging the participation of communities.

C3: Access to information and knowledge

Over the past 5 years, the majority of ESCWA countries have worked towards improving access to information and knowledge. Problems hindering better access include political conflicts, low broadband penetration rates, high cost and/or poor-quality Internet connections and an insufficient number of multi-purpose community public access points (MPCPAP), specifically in disadvantaged remote areas.

Recognising that MPCPAPs are vital for establishing affordable access to knowledge in remote and/or poor areas, ESCWA launched in 2006, in partnership with other UN Regional Commissions and NGOs from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, a project entitled "Knowledge Networks through ICT Access Points for Disadvantaged Communities (KN4DC)".¹¹ The project was conceived to maximise the benefits of MPCPAPs by transforming them into networked knowledge hubs that could provide, develop, organise, share and disseminate knowledge which would help disadvantaged communities overcome problems in the areas of employment, education, gender and health.

During 2010, ESCWA followed up on previous KN4DC project activities (refer to previous CSTD reports for details) with the “Workshop on the Management and Sustainability of Knowledge Hubs.”¹² Its main objectives were to bring together telecentre managers in order to consolidate relationships that lead to the strengthening of knowledge networks and to train them on the establishment and management of small business ventures. Further activities included workshops in Egypt¹³ and Syria¹⁴ that ironed out issues related to the sustainability of the knowledge network beyond the lifetime of the project. A further meeting¹⁵ included an evaluation exercise that assessed the successes and shortcomings of the project, created a steering committee for the knowledge network and recommended the creation of a follow-up project that will build on the success of KN4DC.

¹⁰ <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=1188E>

¹¹ <http://www.knowledgenets.net>

¹² <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=1217E>

¹³ <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=1229E>

¹⁴ <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=1279E>

¹⁵ <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=1326E>

C4: Capacity building

In the period extending from 2005 to 2010, ESCWA countries have seen steady improvement in basic literacy rates. Some countries have started using ICT to help with the fight against illiteracy. Examples include using multi-purpose community public access points (MPCPAP) and educational CDs to teach poorer/disadvantaged communities living in the more remote areas of Egypt, the wiring of a large number of schools in Syria and Jordan or incorporating ICT into school curricula in Oman.

In November 2009 and in January 2010, ESCWA organised two complementary workshops¹⁶⁻¹⁷ that aimed at developing the capacity of member countries to establish science, technology and innovation observatories (STIOs). The workshops drew an audience of high-level decision makers and experts in STI (science, technology and innovation) methodologies and policies. Participants learned about the impact of STI on socio-economic development, the guidelines for setting up national and regional STIOs, STI indicators, identification of national agencies that could create and manage national STI observatories, the importance of establishing networks and building partnerships amongst STI policy makers in the region and of partnering with universities on technology research and transfer.

ESCWA organised during 2009 and 2010 several workshops that were aimed at promoting the importance of statistics and data collection. They included theoretical and hands-on training sessions on the creation and measurement of indicators, the use of various statistical systems with an emphasis on the ESCWA Statistical Information System (ESIS)¹⁸ - a system that was fully developed in-house – the role that data collection and analysis could play in the decision-making process and its impact on the socio-economic development of a country.

C5: Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs

Some ESCWA countries have already implemented initiatives aimed at encouraging users to integrate online transactions in their daily lives. The United Arab Emirates became a pioneer in the region when it enacted legislation intended for the protection of consumers who were willing to start using the Internet to purchase goods and services. Many countries followed suit but some, like Lebanon, are yet to enact laws that would ultimately reassure consumers. There are also severe shortcomings in the protection of personal data, privacy in the use of e-services and the development of trustworthy applications.

To entice governments to work towards building the confidence of would-be electronic transaction users, ESCWA developed and published in March 2009 a study entitled "Building Trust in E-Services in the ESCWA Region."¹⁹ In 2010, in order to propagate the findings and the recommendations of the aforementioned study, ESCWA held a workshop entitled "Building Trust and Confidence in Arabic e-Services".²⁰ The workshop aimed at raising the awareness of policymakers and sharing best practices among member countries on issues related to trust building, securing data, personal data and individual privacy as well as developing national policies to protect cyberspace applications from threats. It covered various issues related to building trust in e-services including national and legal frameworks, best practices and experiences from the ESCWA region with a special focus on the Lebanese experience in the banking sector. Recommendations revolved around the formulation of national strategies and plans of action for trust-building and security in using e-services and called for the training of judges and lawyers on the application of cyber legislations and for the launching of national and regional awareness campaigns on the methods and measures needed for the ethical interaction with and the safety of the digital environment.

C6: Enabling environment

Underdeveloped legal and regulatory environments represent a serious obstacle to the development of the information society in Western Asia. Laws and regulations relating to intellectual property rights (IPRs), independent regulatory bodies for the ICT sector and cyber legislations remain underdeveloped. Over

¹⁶ <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=1179E>

¹⁷ <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=1224E>

¹⁸ <http://esis.escwa.org.lb/>

¹⁹ <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/publications/edit/upload/ictd-09-4-a.pdf>

²⁰ <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=1246E>

the past few years, ESCWA has worked to narrow the gap between the region it serves and the developed world by helping member countries improve their legislative and regulatory frameworks.

Taking into consideration the recommendations of regional legal experts, ESCWA launched in 2009 a project entitled "Regional Harmonisation of Cyber Legislation to Promote the Knowledge Society in the Arab World."²¹ The project aims at bridging regional legislative gaps in ESCWA countries, preventing the illicit and illegal use of cyberspace and at mapping out a course of action that will foster the creation of a harmonious legislative enabling environment in the region. The enactment of legislations that are similar in nature will bring the legal and regulatory framework of most ESCWA countries closer to the realities and requirements of the information society as well as facilitate and regulate governmental, professional, commercial, cultural and social interchanges between countries. Removing current legislative barriers will also lead to an increase in cross-border transactions and will allow countries to learn from each other's experiences and best practises. During December of the same year, ESCWA organised the first meeting of the project's steering committee which consists of members from various regional and international organisations involved in the development of cyber legislation in the Arab region. Its objectives were to confer about the strategic implications and directions that are related to the implementation of the activities of this project and to select those that are most attuned with the goals of the project. During 2010, ESCWA researched and compiled reports which presented an up-to-date picture of the status of cyber legislation in eighteen Arab countries.

C7: ICT applications

Public administrations in ESCWA countries have become increasingly aware of the importance of integrating ICT in their daily work. A higher ICT adoption rate is transforming the way governments work in most countries of the region. The residents of UAE, Qatar or Bahrain have been able to use an increasing number of government transactions online. The aforementioned countries score well not only on a regional scale but also internationally.²² The utilization of other ICT applications and e-services in daily life has also shown promising results. Users are increasingly aware that the integration of ICT in traditional processes and services could have a positive impact on efficiency, promote better participation, enhance transparency, facilitate the spread of information and knowledge and create new economic opportunities.

From 2005 to 2010, ESCWA carried out regular advisory services on e-government applications to governments of member countries and contributed actively to various national and regional workshops on e-government and e-commerce.

C8: Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content

Arabic speakers constitute 5 percent of the world's population. In spite of national and regional efforts aimed at encouraging and disseminating the Arabic culture and the Arabic language over the Internet, the number of Arabic Websites and Web pages in the Arabic language is still below expectations. Policymakers, government officials, educators and content providers in the ESCWA region reasoned that an increase in the number of Arabic language offerings on the Internet would most likely encourage unilingual Arabic speakers to start using or to increase their usage of the Internet.

ESCWA is committed to ensuring linguistic and cultural diversity in the digital environment. In this respect, it has expended extensive efforts that are related to the development and promotion of an Arabic Domain Names System (ADNS). Going as far back as 2003 and extending into 2010, related ESCWA endeavours have included the formation of the Arabic Domain Names Task Force (ADNTF) and of the Arabic Script in Internationalized Domain Names Working Group (ASIWG). Over the years, ESCWA co-organized several ASIWG meetings which deliberated and adopted solutions to a number of technical and linguistic issues pertaining to the use of Arabic script in domain names.

In view of regional differences in Arabic ICT terminology and in order to enhance the readability of ICT documents written in the Arabic language, ESCWA and other international agencies and organizations,

²¹ <http://isper.escwa.un.org/FocusAreas/CyberLegislation/tabid/157/language/en-US/Default.aspx>

²² The Global Information Technology Report 2008-2009, 2009, World Economic Forum may be found at the following URL: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GITR_Report_2010.pdf

particularly ITU, have felt the need to develop a unified Arabic ICT dictionary that could be used and understood in various parts of the Arabic speaking world. During 2009 and continuing in 2010, ESCWA collaborated with ITU, the League of Arab States, the Syrian government and various other regional and international organisations in the compilation of ICT terms and submitted the compiled terms for review by language experts. ESCWA also participated in regional coordination meetings that brought together local, regional and international organizations partnering to implement the project, with ITU as the lead organization.

C11: International and regional cooperation

Many of the above-mentioned ESCWA initiatives were carried out in partnership with international and regional organizations. Collaborative efforts are coordinated primarily with the governments of ESCWA countries, non-governmental organizations, a host of stakeholders from the private sector, other United Nations Regional Commissions, UN specialized agencies and programmes and the League of Arab States.

IV. Main Themes

MT1: Internet governance

As a natural extension to its above-mentioned work in ADNS, ESCWA expanded its involvement to include Internet Governance. In 2010, ESCWA organised, in partnership with the League of Arab States, an “Expert Group Meeting on the Regional Roadmap for Internet Governance”. Discussions focused on a proposed regional roadmap for Internet governance, a proposal for a call for an Arab IGF and public consultations on proposed registry policies for two top-level domains (“.arab” and “.عرب”).

MT3: Measuring the Information Society

In accordance with the goals of WSIS to more effectively measure the information society, ESCWA has been proactively engaged in the Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development. In 2010, ESCWA provided the Arabic version of the Partnership’s publication entitled “Core ICT Indicators” as well as the Arabic version of UNCTAD’s publication entitled “Manual for the Production of Statistics on the Information Economy, 2009 Revised Edition”.

ESCWA is currently collaborating with ITU on the implementation of a project entitled “ICT Indicators and Capacity Building for ICT Measurement in the Arab Region”.²³ It aims at establishing a solid foundation for the collection of ICT statistics and at creating effective and efficient mechanisms to analyse and disseminate ICT indicators in the region.

V. Measures for further implementation

ESCWA will continue its efforts to narrow the digital divide in Western Asia and to help build an inclusive, people-centred and development-oriented information society. This will be achieved with the conceptualization and implementation of programmes related to the development of enabling environments, capacity building, ICT applications in government and education, digital Arabic content development as well as building the ICT sector. To achieve its objectives, ESCWA will assess and update existing plans of action, conduct analytical studies, convene meetings, provide advisory services and training workshops and act as a catalyst for change and innovation in policymaking. ESCWA will also continue to enhance the currently used set of ICT indicators and will encourage its adoption and use by the statistics offices and ICT authorities of member countries.

VI. Suggestions and Recommendations

The process of achieving an information society in the ESCWA region will most likely benefit from the implementation of the following suggestions and recommendations:

²³ <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/arb/ARO/2010/ICT-Indicators/>

- Advancing and applying the concept of partnership between the various stakeholders of the information society, i.e. national governments, the private sector, NGOs and international organisations, to achieve the stated goals of WSIS;
- Promoting the benefits of regional integration to national governments by drawing their attention to successful models of regional alliances and by highlighting the advantages of common initiatives such as the development of high-speed regional network backbones, the harmonisation of cyber legislations and the development of an Arabic Domain Names Systems (ADNS);
- Measuring the impact of national ICT and/or information strategies and plans by bolstering the bodies and mechanisms necessary for data collection, measurement and analysis;
- Ensuring the relevance of ICT and/or information society strategies and plans by adapting them to constantly changing realities in accordance with data collected by and from all WSIS stakeholders;
- Maximising user accessibility by lowering access prices which could be achieved through the liberalisation of the telecom sector, the fostering of competition between access providers, increased investment in the sector by the private and public sectors, improving broadband access and the implementation of inexpensive-faster-to-deploy wireless solutions in regions where telecommunication infrastructure projects would be costly and time-consuming;
- Democratising access to knowledge by increasing the number and services of public access centres in regions where ICT is not affordable and by supporting the development of local digital content that would address the needs of local communities;
- Building a knowledge-based culture by instilling awareness of the developmental role of new and traditional knowledge and by training communities on how to gather, create, store, share and use data, information and knowledge which would enhance their quality of life and help them become active players in knowledge-based economies;
- Persuading reluctant users to start using e-services by attempting to build trust in their minds and hearts with regular mass media campaigns that are aimed at debunking the false theories and tall tales that are behind their most common fears and at teaching them how to deal with and overcome real and perceived online threats, by encouraging the development of trustworthy, citizen-centric e-services and by the creation and enforcement of effective cyber legislation;
- Becoming active information society players instead of passive consumers by devising and supporting research and development initiatives, establishing science and technology parks, encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship in the ICT sector, integrating advanced ICT subjects in educational systems and curricula and by encouraging graduates and researchers not to emigrate with the facilitation of better work opportunities and the provision of better social benefits.