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Submissions from entities in the United Nations system and elsewhere on their efforts in 2014 to implement the outcome of the WSIS

Submission by

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (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 18th 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.

<p>DISCLAIMER: The views presented here are the contributors' and do not necessarily reflect the views and position of the United Nations or the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.</p>
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2015 Annual Report of the 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

Contribution of **ESCWA**¹

I. INTRODUCTION

In broad terms, the development of a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society in the Arab region is a more realistic prospect today than it was ten years ago. Most countries, the obvious exceptions being the countries that are currently experiencing severe political and social turmoil, are performing better today than they were at the time of the Declaration of Principles. ESCWA member countries have taken significant steps towards bridging the digital divide. ICT adoption and usage rates have seen dramatic increases. The usage of fixed and wireless broadband technologies is on the rise and access costs are on the decline.

This document is a non-exhaustive report that contains a summary of the status of implementation in the ESCWA region of a number of WSIS action lines. The initiatives described herein are ESCWA activities which are chiefly aimed at assisting member countries achieve the goals and objectives of the World Summit on the Information Society.

II. REGIONAL FOLLOW-UP OF THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

The *Information Society Portal for the ESCWA Region (ISPER)*² provides a collaborative platform for knowledge management. The Website integrates accessible identity management through social media-based authentication, making it easier for participants in the region to collaborate. The system currently provides information on selected themes such as cyber legislation, information society measurement and Internet governance. It provides value to ESCWA member countries by promoting the findings and recommendations of work carried out by the Regional Commission and other information society stakeholders.

III. ACTION LINES

C1: The role of governments and all stakeholders in building the information society

The implementation of e-government strategies vary between regions and between countries of the same region. All governments of the Arab region have either drafted an initial version of an e-government strategy or updated an existing one. In keeping with previous efforts to promote e-government, ESCWA conceived a study that aims at determining the implementation status of e-government strategies and initiatives in the Arab region. Entitled *Progress on the Implementation of e-Gov Strategies in the ESCWA Region*, its main objectives are to help ESCWA establish a clear path and a vision for its involvement in current and future e-government implementations and to entice governments of the region to increase their efforts to ensure a fast implementation of their e-government strategies.

C2: Information and communication infrastructure: an essential foundation for an inclusive information society

¹ Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, currently serving 17 member countries, all situated in the Arab region

www.escwa.un.org

² <http://isper.escwa.un.org>

In the developing world, poor connectivity between Internet service providers (ISPs) may result in the routing of local traffic over expensive international links. Internet exchange points (IXPs) can improve the quality of Internet services in a country or in a region by reducing the delays and reducing the costs.³ This description applies to the Arab region.

During November 2014, ESCWA organized a capacity-building workshop entitled *IXPs: The Untapped opportunity for the Arab region*. The workshop was based on a study that ESCWA developed in 2014 and that carries the same title as the workshop. The workshop covered the following areas: (a) the landscape of IXPs in general and the specificities of the Arab region; (b) various business models for IXPs whether national or regional; (c) the most common governance structures for IXPs; (d) the mode of operation regarding transit traffic; (e) selected Arab national experiences and barriers which have hindered the development of IXPs in the region; and (f) national policies that are required for the building of national and regional pan-Arab IXPs .

C6: Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs

Combating cybercrime and ensuring cybersafety are important elements in constructing a trustworthy environment needed to further the information society and knowledge-based economies in the Arab region. Building on its previous work related to the development and the harmonization of cyber legislation in the Arab region, ESCWA formulated a regional procedural framework for combating cybercrime and enhancing cybersafety in the Arab region. During 2014, ESCWA prepared a study entitled *Policy Recommendations on Cybercrime and Cybersafety for the Arab Region* which addressed important national and regional issues. On the national level, it suggested several models for procedural regulations and outlined possible national institutional structures. On the regional level, it promoted collaboration among countries while addressing challenges for international and regional cooperation as well as trans-national enforcement and national security. Emerging issues related to the cyberspace safety were also taken into consideration. Those included new forms of threats and the negative economic impact of cybercrime in the region. The results of this research will enable the governments of the region to adopt equitable, inclusive and sustainable policies towards a harmonized, culturally sensitive approach in dealing with cyber security and cybercrime that is beneficial for all stakeholders in the region.

ESCWA, in collaboration with the ITU-Regional Cybersecurity Center (ITU-RCC), also organized a capacity building workshop entitled *Promoting a Safer Cyberspace in the Arab Region*⁴. The participants of this workshop discussed the above described ESCWA regional framework on cybersafety. They also conversed about the new challenges in cybercrime and cybersafety resulting from new emerging technologies, such as cloud computing, social media and the Internet of Things. This workshop also served as a platform for the exchange of experience. Two sessions were dedicated to national experience on the formulation of cybercrime laws and on the implementation of these laws. 75 participants representing mainly government, international organizations and NGOs were in attendance.

C7: ICT applications: benefits in all aspects of life

Technology-rich, citizen-centric e-government services are increasingly used by governments in service delivery. Collaboration, interoperability and common standards are a crucial part of these cross-channel integrated services. The Arab region has made a lot of progress in the development of e-Government services, but the integration of services is still limited and cross-border services are inexistent.

³ <http://www.internetsociety.org/what-we-do/issues/internet-exchange-points-ixps>

⁴ <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=3518E>

During 2014, ESCWA created a study entitled *Integration of Service Delivery in the Arab Region: Role of Standards and Interoperability*. Its main objective was to address the aforementioned gaps. The study included a chapter on global trends and good practices in e-government service integration and another that analyzed the status of e-government services in Arab countries. It also suggested a strategic framework for e-government service integration in the Arab region that encompasses three stages: (a) back office integration that provides the basic ICT infrastructure as a building block of integrated services; (b) front office integration to provide citizen-centric services across multiple channels; and (c) the monitoring of the impact of these services on development and governance.

The number of users of mobile devices in the Arab region is higher than the number of users of classical computing devices, namely desktops and laptops. Online access in Arab countries is more likely to take place from a mobile device than from a fixed setup. Statistics show that, with regard to individual use, the fixed or wired world has already lost major ground to the mobile industry. In view of the ever-increasing number of mobile users, the effective implementation of m-government solutions would be of benefit to a large and growing number of users in countries around the Arab region. ESCWA is currently in the process of finalizing a study entitled *Mobile Government Applications in the Arab Region: Status & Future Prospects*. Its primary objective is to encourage governments in the Arab region to start implementing m-government solutions and initiatives in conjunction with, or in parallel to, their current and future e-government application development efforts.

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

During 2014, ESCWA continued its work on digital Arabic content (DAC) by implementing its initiative entitled *Promotion of Digital Arabic Content through Incubation*⁵ in three additional Arab countries. ESCWA organized capacity building workshops and awareness campaigns on the importance of the DAC industry in Egypt, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates, with about 70 participants in Egypt and around 40 participants in Tunisia and 50 in UAE. These events also featured the launch of national DAC competitions for the selection the best DAC project ideas. ESCWA, in collaboration with a local incubator, is currently incubating the selected project ideas.

During the WSIS+10 High Level Event in Geneva, ESCWA, in collaboration with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the Egyptian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, organized a thematic workshop entitled *Digital Content for Inclusive Knowledge Society*. The goals of this workshop were to explore various aspects of digital content and multilingualism, debate challenges and how to best address them in the Post-2015 Development Agenda, and share best practices and experiences from around the globe. In addition to the organizers, panellists from UNESCO, UN-ECA, UN-ESCAP, ISOC Latin America and a representative of the partnership on Measuring ICT for Development shared their experience and conversed on the main challenges for the development of local content. Identified challenges included the availability of affordable broadband, accessibility to content, hosting content locally or regionally, appropriate measurement of local content, copyright of on-line content, provision of appropriate eco-system for digital content industry and the importance of audio and TV channels for promoting local digital content.

During November 2014, ESCWA collaborated with the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT) in Egypt and the Arab Regional Office of the International Telecommunication Union (ARO-ITU) for the organization of the Second Forum on Digital Arabic Content⁶. Participants in the forum entitled *Impact of Digital Arabic Content Industry on Development*

⁵ <http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/projects/dac/>

⁶ <http://isper.escwa.un.org/Home/tabid/39/language/ar-LB/Default.aspx>

discussed various topics which included the role of government and regional cooperation for the promotion of the DAC industry⁷.

IV. MAIN THEMES

MT1: Internet governance

The rapid expansion of the Internet in the Arab region has encouraged ESCWA to pay closer attention to Internet governance (IG) issues. The Regional Commission is a significant player in the IG process having been the initiator and main promoter of the Arab Internet Governance Forum (AIGF)⁸.

The Arab Internet Governance Forum (AIGF) was established during 2012 under the joint umbrella of ESCWA and the League of Arab States (LAS). AIGF activities are managed via the Executive Bureau for Joint Coordination (EBJC) and coordinated by a central secretariat, which is hosted by the Egyptian National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (NTRA). The program of its annual meeting is set by the Arab Multistakeholder Advisory Group (AMAG), which is composed of 30 experts from various stakeholder groups in the Arab region. The forum's main activities during 2014 included five meetings of the AMAG (three physical and two virtual) and the *Third Annual Meeting of the Arab IGF (AIGF-III)*⁹. The main purposes of the AMAG meetings were to determine the priorities of the region, identify sessions and speakers and prepare the agenda of AIGF-III.

Under the title *Arab Perspective for Shaping the Future of the Internet*, AIGF-III took place during November of 2014. The event was hosted by ESCWA in partnership with the Lebanese Ministry of Telecommunications. The organization of the event brought together ESCWA, the League of Arab States (LAS) and the Egyptian National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (NTRA). AIGF-III also received generous financial contributions from various partners, namely OGERO Telecom, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the Reseaux IP Europeans Network Coordination Centre (RIPE NCC) and the Kuwait Information Technology Society (KITS). In-kind contributions from other partners were also received. AIGF-III, a two-day event, was preceded by a pre-event capacity building day. The topics addressed the following sub-themes: (a) Internet Infrastructure and Access; (b) Internet Global Public Policies, and National Policy-Making; (c) Openness: Rights and Responsibilities; and (d) Privacy and Rebuilding Trust. The three days of the meeting were extremely successful drawing a large number of participants exceeding 500 in total and bringing together Internet industry experts, the private sector, the public sector, service providers, academics and researchers, activists and the general public.¹⁰

V. RECOMMENDATION

Challenges to the emergence of an information society in the Arab region persist but are not uniform, with some countries performing better than others. The main challenges that have inhibited the emergence of a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society are listed below. It is important to note that this list is not exhaustive, but that it focuses on the challenges that are most common to the region. Addressing and finding solutions to these challenges must be foremost on the minds of policymakers making plans for the post WSIS era or the post 2015 development agenda.

- Low ICT readiness and low usage rates in the economically-disadvantaged member countries;

⁷ http://www.mcit.gov.eg/Ar/Media_Center/Press_Room/Press_Releases/3340

⁸ <http://igfarab.org/>

⁹ <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=3361E>

¹⁰ https://www.facebook.com/ArabIGF?ref=aymt_homepage_panel

- Low broadband penetration levels associated with costs that are too high to be affordable by the less affluent population segments;
- Lack of confidence in the security of ICT applications, which discourages utilization of online services, particularly those involving financial transactions;
- Underdeveloped, incomplete, and fragmented legal and regulatory frameworks;
- Restricted access to information undermining access rights;
- Electronic surveillance, and intrusive software leading to a lack of online privacy;
- Limited production and availability of digital content in Arabic, which hinders access by a large portion of monolingual Arabic speakers to effectively utilize or benefit from online offerings;
- Insufficient, inaccurate and untimely ICT statistics and measurements that hinder the development of policies and strategies which are pertinent to the needs of the region.