COMMISSION ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT (CSTD)

Eighteenth Session
Geneva, 9 to 13 May 2016

Submissions from entities in the United Nations system and elsewhere on their efforts in 2015 to implement the outcome of the WSIS

Submission by

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)

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.

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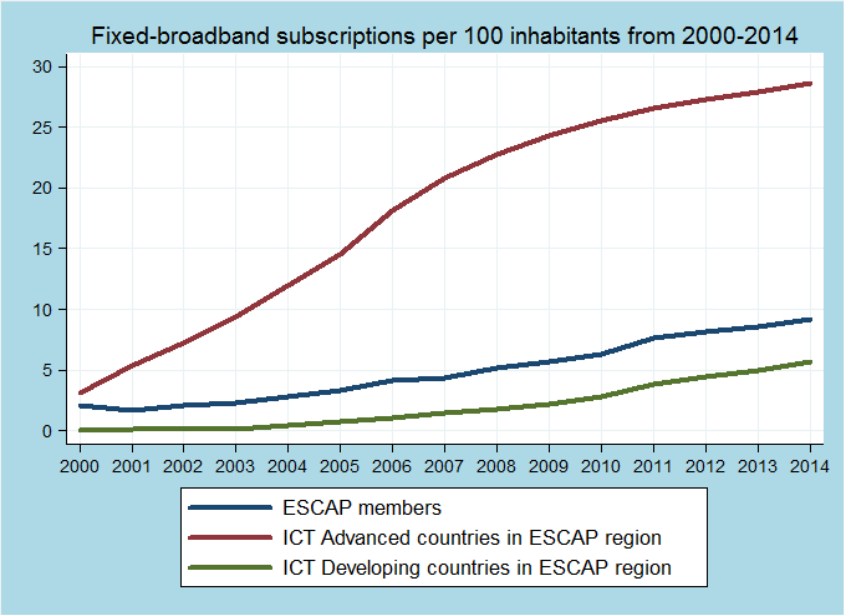
ESCAP inputs on WSIS to the report of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development

The Asia Pacific has made significant progress towards the achievement of objectives agreed at the World Summits on the Information Society (WSIS). The number of mobile-cellular subscriptions per 100 population continued to increase to 93.3 in 2014, which is just below the world average of 95.8. According to ITU estimates, there are now almost as many mobile-cellular subscriptions as there are people on Earth (6.9 billion in 2014 and 7 billion by end 2015). Of those with mobile subscriptions, more than half (3.6 billion) is situated in the Asia-Pacific region.

Despite the exponential growth in access to mobile communication among a vast majority of population in the region, the promise and potential of the Internet have yet to materialize to uplift people out of poverty and to provide them with opportunities, employment and empowerment, envisaged at the onset of the WSIS processes. Governments and businesses now require broadband Internet for essential tasks such as executing financial transactions, trade and transport facilitation, resource management, statistical data analysis, disaster risk management, just to name a few. Broadband-enabled technologies such as smart grids, intelligent transport systems and integrated water management systems have increasingly become standard applications in the ever evolving Internet ecosystem in the region. Considering the multiplier effects of broadband, a key challenge for the region therefore is that of bringing affordable broadband connectivity for all.

In the Asia-Pacific region, however, the number of fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 population showed a negligible increase, from 8.2 in 2013 to 8.7 in 2014. Furthermore, it has become one of the most digitally divided regions in the world, with some of the most ICT advanced countries and ICT developing countries among the membership, in terms of access, level of technology uptake and technological advances. Recent ESCAP analysis shows that the ICT advanced ESCAP countries have grown much faster than the rest, leaving the gap between them ever widening.



ESCAP analysis based on ITU Statistics on Fixed Broadband Subscribers per 100, 2015

The reasons for these persistent and expanding inequities across the region, and within countries, are complex and multi-faceted. The Internet is the product of different types of hard and soft infrastructure, continuous technical innovation and agreements between various parties, all of which are interlinked through business models that continue to evolve. Targeted investments and policy reforms that enhance the seamlessness of current configurations of Internet infrastructure, as well as competitive markets that allow for the efficient use of this infrastructure, would help reduce regional inequities and increase the overall development impact.

ICT innovation has also created both opportunities and risks to sustainable development. For example, ICT, and in particular data centres have come to represent a major share of energy needs in developed countries. ICT also consume a wide variety of rare minerals and natural resources. New ways need to be found and shared internationally to ensure ICT use such resources sustainably. On the other hand, ICT can allow for the development of smarter energy and transport systems and therefore prove a boon to environmental sustainability.

Furthermore, although present in the language of the Geneva Plan of Action, the gender dimension of ICT has yet to be systematically measured. The Partnership is developing internationally comparable indicators on the gender dimensions of ICT, and these could be helpful in tracking progress and establishing international comparisons. Anecdotal evidence suggests that ICT can alleviate specific gender constraints, and provide women and girls with opportunities from which they would otherwise be excluded.

Although WSIS Target 9 does make a valuable attempt at understanding and quantifying the linguistic and content component of the digital divide, this dimension probably remains understudied and neglected. This is a major problem in so far as the availability of meaningful content is essential if the Internet and ICT is to truly enhance the lives of all, for inclusive development. ICTs, including the Internet but also mobile telephony need to be made usable and understandable by all, including the illiterate and speakers of minority languages.

In view of the persistent challenges in Asia and the Pacific, activities to promote the WSIS development agenda post 2015 will need to focus primarily on Action Line C2: Information and communication infrastructure. Given the shortcomings of the existing fibre infrastructure and networks in Asia and the Pacific, interest among members and associate members to enhance the affordability, reliability and resilience of the broadband network infrastructure and access is increasing. In this context, the ESCAP secretariat was requested by its member States in ESCAP Resolution 69/10 to "[;] pursue the facilitation and coordination of the regional review of progress in implementation of the targets set out in the outcome documents of the World Summit on the Information Society". In ESCAP resolution 71/10, member countries further agreed to strengthen information and communication technology connectivity at regional level through the development of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS).

The Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS) initiative seeks to provide access to affordable, resilient and reliable broadband to populations across the Asia and the Pacific region. Drawing on cross-regional experiences, the AP-IS aims to foster a regional network that contributes to more cost-effective access to international Internet bandwidth, as well as reduced latency and improved network quality, while ensuring e-resilience and digital inclusion. By fostering the necessary environment leading to inclusive access for all, large segments of the population in the Asia-Pacific region that are still unconnected today will also be able to benefit from the vast social and economic opportunities offered by broadband connectivity.