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

Submission by

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.

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2016 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 ESCWA¹

I. INTRODUCTION

With the possible exception of some countries in the Gulf region, Arab countries still need to bridge the digital divide in order to benefit more effectively from the advantages of information, communication and broadband technologies. Since the first WSIS conference in 2003, the situation may have improved, but significant work remains to be done. It is important to note that the nature of the digital divide has changed. Newly identified gaps can be described as follows:

- (1) The low availability of broadband connectivity to the Internet, namely broadband speeds ranging from 2 Mbits/s to more than 25 Mbits/s;
- (2) The information gap between those who have access to useful high-quality content and effective electronic services and who can benefit socially and economically from ICT and those who still use technology purely for recreational or communication purposes;
- (3) The digital divide at the regional level, specifically the gap between the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the less-affluent countries of the rest of the Arab region;
- (4) The digital divide within the same country between urban and rural areas, made evident by the difficulty of access of rural citizens to the Internet in general and e-services in particular;
- (5) The digital divide that prevents people with special needs from benefiting from a digital economy and the limited availability of applications and equipment that would cater to their special needs.

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

In its seventh edition, the 2015 Regional Profile of the Information Society in the Arab Region covers the progress of Arab countries in building their information societies since the launch of WSIS in 2003. As such, the report provides an analytical representation of the status of the Arab region against a selection of action lines with highlights of recent developments. The 2015 edition evaluates specific components of the information society and the development of information and communication technology (ICT) by addressing nine WSIS actions lines that are of highest relevance to the region. The 2015 profile provides a regional and global comparative analysis. It discusses the most notable regional initiatives and programmes launched and implemented for building the information society. The roles of ESCWA and other regional organizations such as the International Telecommunication Union and the League of Arab States are detailed.

The report notes impressive improvements in the Arab region on some fronts such as the increase in mobile phone penetration rates from less than 25 per cent in 2005 to over 108 per cent in 2015. It also mentions that regional Internet penetration rates have increased from around 10 per cent in 2005 to 37 per cent in 2015. On the other hand, the broadband penetration rate in the Arab region is still at 3.7 per cent, which is lower than the world average of 10.8 per cent. It also identifies areas of the information society that are still facing challenges in the Arab region such as security and trust in cyber space, as well as the limited development and use of e-services including e-government, human capital, and the ICT sector.

The report also highlights the priorities of the region beyond 2015. It maps the aspirations of the Arab region for the use of technology and ICT to achieve WSIS+10 and SDG priorities, in line with

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

research that has shown the impact of ICT in supporting the three pillars of sustainable development: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability.

III. ACTION LINES

C4: Capacity Building

In February 2013, ESCWA started implementing a project entitled *Academy of ICT Essentials for Government Leaders in the ESCWA Region (AIGLE)*. AIGLE aims at building the capabilities of government officials and leaders in ESCWA member countries in the areas of ICT for development, through both traditional and online training systems. The ICT Academy provides policy-makers, trainers and project leaders in the public sector in Arab countries with the basic knowledge and skills to take advantage of the opportunities offered by ICT to achieve the national development objectives and bridge the digital and knowledge divides. It also seeks to enhance the capacities of national partners and pave the way for national training programmes in the area of ICT for development by promoting the adoption of AIGLE training modules.

In 2015, AIGLE produced the following four core training modules:

- (1) *Linkages between ICT and development*: This module invites readers to explore the various linkages between ICT and development with case studies of ICT applications in key sectors of development in Arab countries. It highlights key issues and decision-making points related to the use of ICT to meet development needs;
- (2) *ICT for development policies - main elements and tools for management*: This module discusses issues related to the development and implementation of ICT for development policies, the related obstacles that countries face and the practical methods to address them;
- (3) *E-government policies, strategies and applications*: This module provides an overview of e-government, including key concepts and theoretical aspects of e-government and e-governance and the means for building their strategies. It also shows how to link theory and practice with a number of case studies selected to cover a wide range of experiences;
- (4) *Internet governance*: This module provides an overview of e-government, including key concepts and theoretical aspects of e-government and e-governance and the means for building their strategies. It also shows how to link theory and practice through a number of case studies selected to cover a wide range of experiences.

In 2015, the AIGLE team also convened two regional training-of-trainers workshops, which were held in Beirut, from 8 to 12 June and from 24 to 27 August 2015. Participants in these training workshops emphasized the importance of the AIGLE project for the Arab region and confirmed the need for the training that it provides to government leaders. In addition to training activities, ESCWA has collaborated with national partners towards the preparation of national training programmes on the four modules. These efforts have resulted in the preparation of 10 national training plans for the years 2015 and 2016.

C6: Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs

Combating cybercrime and ensuring cyber safety are important elements in constructing a trustworthy environment needed to further the information society and knowledge-based economies in the Arab region. During 2015, ESCWA produced a study entitled *Policy Recommendations on Cyber safety and Combating Cybercrime in the Arab Region*². The study offers an analytical view of the situation in the region and the tools used in efforts to fight cybercrime; its main goal being to recommend a framework for the promotion of cyber safety in the Arab region. The study includes directives on the procedural aspects of

² http://www.escwa.un.org/information/publications/edit/upload/E_ESCWA_TDD_15_1_SUMMARY_E.pdf

cybercrime that could be applied by ESCWA member countries at the national and regional levels. It also proposes a guiding policy framework to enhance cyber security and build confidence in information and communication technologies and cyberspace. The framework stresses the need to develop a national strategy to ensure cyber safety and combat cybercrime and proposes legislative measures to help develop cyber security in the Arab region that include the establishment of law-enforcement bodies and cybercrime investigation offices. The framework also focuses on the importance of awareness-raising, education and specialized training; public-private partnerships to support cyber security; and regional and international cooperation, given the cross-border nature of cybercrime.

C7: ICT applications: benefits in all aspects of life

Space and satellite technologies (SSTs) play an important role in a variety of applications and in various sectors of the economy. As an example, SSTs provide widespread and affordable broadband access to remote locations, opening the door to new opportunities in various areas that include learning, education, healthcare, environment and the empowerment of women. Other SST applications include cartography; satellite imagery; remote sensing; food, water and energy security; sustainable agricultural activities; fishing; ocean monitoring; combating desertification; monitoring of arable land; urban environmental planning; disaster prevention; or the production of food in outer space to help with the sustainability of human life on earth.

ESCWA recognized the strong connection between SSTs and development, and has acknowledged that a long-term vision and a clear strategy are necessary to maximize the benefits that the Arab region can derive from space technology and its applications. ESCWA is seeking to determine the needs, opportunities and priorities of the Arab region with regard to the various applications of the peaceful uses of outer space (PUOS). For that purpose, it produced during 2015 two studies. The main aims of the first study were to: (1) identify the various SST applications that are currently in use in the Arab region; and (2) profile and classify public administration institutions, national and regional organizations, private sector entities and higher learning institutions that work in the various applications of the peaceful use of outer space technologies in the Arab region.

The main aims of the second study were to: (1) survey and report on the effectiveness of the various SST applications that are in use or on offer by the private sector and establish if they are locally produced or imported; (2) identify linkages between SSTs and knowledge-based economies and propose guidelines on how a government can employ these technologies to improve its national economy; (3) specify guidelines that will help policymakers create policies and strategies for the management and governance of the peaceful uses of outer space, create national, all-encompassing SST policies and strategies that will encourage relevant local SST research, and promote enabling environments for the fast development of a healthy SST sector; (4) determine the weaknesses in the academic sector that hinder the development of a local SST sector and suggest remedial steps and propose guidelines that will help academic institutions establish research facilities and programs that are aimed at encouraging local researchers develop SSTs; (5) propose guidelines that will help the private sector become a producer and exporter of ideas and applications that are related to the peaceful uses of outer space.

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

During 2015, ESCWA continued its work on digital Arabic content (DAC). For the third year in a row, ESCWA organized the Annual Digital Arabic Content Forum³, in partnership with the Arab Regional Office of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU-ARO), the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology of Egypt and the League of Arab States (LAS). The host and co-organizer was the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of the United Arab Emirates (TRA-UAE). The forum was held in Dubai on 19 and 20 October 2015 under the theme *Arab Content in the Era of Major Digital Transformations*.

³ <http://arabiccontentforum.org>

The main objective of the forum was to promote digital Arabic content (DAC) and explore prospects for its advancement within the context of modern technology solutions and digital transformations. The forum addressed the following topics: (1) status and aspirations of the DAC industry and its management; (2) Arabic content in the age of modern technological developments; (3) research, development and innovation (RDI) as modern pillars for developing DAC; and (4) opportunities and challenges of journalism content between traditional and digital environments. Additionally, it featured the launch of an ESCWA study entitled *Improving the Quality of Digital Arabic Content*.

The forum gathered experts from government authorities, regional/international organizations, universities, and the private sector. It concluded with a set of recommendations drawn from the sessions and discussions and targeting the role of national entities, capacity building and education, RDI, coordination and knowledge exchange, and organizational aspects of the forum itself. Some of the most notable recommendations are to: a) coordinate various dispersed efforts and activities taking place in the Arab countries; b) develop a roadmap for DAC and its industry; c) develop national strategies for DAC and complement these strategies with implementation plans; d) organize awards and competitions for innovative DAC endeavours; e) stimulate collaboration in research activities for natural Arabic language processing; f) raise awareness on the importance of citizen journalism and the need for capacity building programmes in that regard; and g) strengthen the link between academic research activities for developing DAC on one side and market needs and industrial production on the other side.

IV. MAIN THEMES

MT1: Internet governance

ESCWA is a significant player in the Internet governance (IG) process having been the initiator and main promoter of the Arab Internet Governance Forum (AIGF)⁴. During 2015, ESCWA organized a series of IG activities in partnership with the League of Arab States, the Egyptian National Telecom Regulatory Authority (NTRA) and OGERO Telecom from Lebanon (refer to table below for a complete list)

2015 Arab IGF Activities

1. Arab IGF Capacity Building - Open Consultations (Cairo, 14 June 2015)
2. Eighth Meeting of the AMAG (Arab IGF Multi-stakeholder Advisory Group) (Cairo, 15-16/6/2015)
3. Meeting of the Arab IGF EBJC (Executive Bureau of Joint Coordination) (Cairo, 17/6/2015)
4. Virtual AMAG follow-up meeting (WebEx, 11/8/2015)
5. Ninth Meeting of the AMAG (Beirut, 9-11/9/2015)
6. Fourth Annual Meeting of the Arab IGF (Beirut, 17-18/12/2015) and the Capacity-building Pre-event (Beirut, 16/12/2015)

The 2015 AIGF activities started with an overview of the existing Internet governance processes at the global level and an update on the progress made towards promoting participation and contribution of the Arab IGF community to the WSIS and IGF open processes. Open consultations engaged various stakeholders in the identification of the themes and sub-themes of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Arab IGF (AIGF-IV). Various meetings brought together new members and the established AMAG hosting subcommittee. Participants chose *Internet Economy for Sustainable Development* as the main theme of AIGF-IV. The first draft programme of AIGF-IV, which was prepared during the Ninth AMAG meeting, took into consideration the experiences and lessons learned from previous annual meetings. Two recently-formed working groups focused on the preparation of the catalogue for AIGF-IV and collaborated on the convening of the capacity building pre-event. In this context, a number of proposals were made by ESCWA with the main aim being the further development of the Arab IGF process, the enhancement of its effectiveness and the insurance of its sustainability.

⁴ <http://igfarab.org/>

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Arab region, like other regions, is developing a set of goals that would be compatible with the global priorities of the information society in the WSIS+10 era and that would be consistent with the sustainable development goals (SDGs). In simpler terms, Arab countries are looking towards building an inclusive information society which would be sustainable and be centered on human needs. Various studies and reports created by ESCWA have identified the aspirations of the Arab region for WSIS+10, which include the following:

- a) Developing a regional plan of action which would be supplemented by national action plans that aim at leveraging various technologies, in particular ICT, to achieve the SDGs;
- b) Making spending on technological research and development in the Arab region more efficient and effective, especially with regard to issues which are related to sustainable development;
- c) Taking advantage of the capabilities of science, technology and innovation (STI) to promote and develop high-value products and to facilitate the transition to digital economies and knowledge-based economies;
- d) Investing in ICT capacity-building and promoting a culture of information and lifelong learning for all;
- e) Establishing legal, regulatory and investment frameworks that are aimed at encouraging the development of technology and innovation for development, and the provision of funding mechanisms;
- f) Investing in infrastructure, especially in the field of fixed and mobile broadband telephony and taking the necessary measures to improve quality, increase communication capacity, and reduce communication costs;
- g) Ensuring universal access to information and knowledge and to information and communication technology, including education and distance-learning;
- h) Developing integrated sectoral strategies for e-services in the context of national and regional strategies;
- i) Supporting e-government services, including process re-engineering in public institutions, which would improve the delivery of services to all categories of citizens, and promote transparency and institutional effectiveness, and which would increase the involvement of citizens in decision-making;
- j) Reaching a cyber space that would be characterized by digital cultural or linguistic diversity, and that will allow the access and usage of the Internet, e-mail and search engines in an alphabet other than the predominant Latin alphabet;
- k) Providing protection to the users of the Internet, particularly children, to allow them to roam the Internet free of fear for their moral and mental health;
- l) Measuring the progress of the information society in the Arab region, and developing methods and means to perform these measurements.