Ministerial Segment

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The Sultanate of Oman’s Efforts in:
“Promoting the building of a people-centered, development-oriented and inclusive information society, with a view to enhancing digital opportunities for all people”

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Mr. Chairman
Mr. Secretary General
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for giving us this opportunity to share with you Oman’s efforts in “Promoting the building of a people-centered, development-oriented and inclusive information society, with a view to enhancing digital opportunities for all people”. I will highlight some of the actions the Government of the Sultanate of Oman had undertaken and also illustrate a good example of how ICT can be used to narrow the within digital divide.

The Sultanate of Oman has embarked upon its strive to transform Oman by harnessing Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and empowering its people to meet the challenges of the global economy. According to the World Bank report, between 1995-2006, the overall ICT sector has improved significantly in Oman and its improvement rate was even better than the world average improvement rate. Furthermore, and according to the latest analysis of the sector, the performance indicators used to monitor the sectors show continuous improvement of the sector. Despite this fact, the ICT services penetration is still poor and great efforts are needed to achieve the desired objectives.

During the World Summit for Information Society-2005, an index was created to measure the digital opportunity in three main categories to be: Opportunity, Infrastructure and Utilization. According to that index, Oman scored 0.97 for the opportunity, 0.21 for the infrastructure and 0.03 for the utilization. In general Oman was given a rank of 0.4 which is almost half way of the top ranking. This ranking give an indication of the performance of the ICT in the country and it reflects penetration of the ICT service in society.

The opportunity category indicates clearly that the Omani government has put great efforts to provide the opportunity for all people on the country to access ICT services by expanding the network coverage and improving affordability. However, the infrastructure category shows
that though the network coverage or the opportunity is high but few people have been benefiting from the provided service. This category reflects the digital divide within the nation as low percentage of households own PCs, low percentage of households have internet access and almost negligible percentage with mobile internet service. In the utilization category Oman’s score is very humble and it was 0.03 at the time the average score of the top 20 countries was 0.38. This reflects the poor or the immature usage of the ICT service.

Since the 2005 World Summit for Information Society, many initiatives were taken by the government to improve the ICT sector situation in term of availability, affordability and the quality. Furthermore, great efforts have taken place to narrow the digital divide among the citizens and to prepare them for the transition towards the digital world. These initiatives are highlighted in the Oman Digital Society Report, which was released this year and will be available at the website of the CSTD. These initietives include among others:

1. Establishing regulatory bodies for the ICT sector, namely; the Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (TRA) and Information Technology Authority (ITA);
2. Liberalizing the sector and introducing a second mobile operator;
3. Launching the Digital Oman national strategy;
4. Launching the eOman awareness campaigns
5. Developing Convergent government network infrastructure;
6. Developing a government services gateway portal (Ubar);
7. Developing a National e-payment gateway;
8. ICT capacity building in
   a. Education;
   b. Public Internet Access Centre PIAC
   c. Training programs for both government staff and for the community

A successful example of using ICT to develop an inclusive information society is the Higher education admission centre. All students at the secondary school level are trained and required to access the services through the internet or through sms through mobile telephones.
Thus, the sultanate is poised well with an ambitious strategy backed by a strong implementation commitment. Oman’s program for creating a knowledge society is steadily gaining momentum. At every milestone there are benefits awaiting the community as a whole both in terms of economic gains and better welfare. eOman is the nation’s ambitious march towards a prospective future, encompassing all the stakeholders and making collaborative efforts using technology to improve efficiency and enable easy access to information and services to all. Lead by a visionary, combined with the enthusiastic efforts of the public and private sector in harnessing technology for the progress of the nation, the future for eOman is bright and prospective.

Thank you
Appendix

Digital Oman strategy

The National Information technology Committee was set up following a decision by the council of ministers in 1998. This committee’s primary aim was to oversee the development of the Sultanate’s IT sector and work towards Oman’s e-government initiative. A thorough readiness assessment was made with international expertise and a comprehensive Digital Oman strategy was formulated in May 2003. The National IT Strategy was launched on the 7th of May 2003 and subsequently an ICT industrial cluster called – Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM) was started in September 2003 as a public-private partnership model.

Information Technology Authority

In order to implement the strategy the Information Technology Authority (ITA) was set up by the Royal Decree 52/2006 ratified on the 31st May 2006 as an autonomous body to implement the Digital Oman strategy and undertake the deployment of e-government related national projects.

The vision of this authority is to transform the Sultanate of Oman into a sustainable Knowledge Society by leveraging Information and Communication Technologies to enhance government services, enrich businesses and empower individuals.

Pioneering the implementation of eOman is the mission of Information Technology Authority (ITA). eOman comprises of a wide range of initiatives and services that are designed and created to improve the efficiency of government services, enhance the activities of businesses and empower individuals with skills and knowledge, to meet society’s needs and expectations and to direct Oman towards becoming a Knowledge-based Economy.

eOman awareness campaign

Oman is keen in working towards convergence and the narrowing of the Digital Divide. In order to increase the access to public and improve the awareness of the e-government activities and available services a nation-wide awareness campaign was launched.

After the launch of eOman in the capital Muscat, a tour to the different regions of Oman began as eOman regional road shows. The campaign consists of seminars and orientation programs as part of a nationwide campaign aimed at enlightening the public about the objectives of eOman in creating a digitally-enabled society, focusing on bridging the digital-divide. Each show focused on a particular administrative region of the Sultanate, presenting the essence of the strategy to a focus group of audience. It served as an interactive meeting point for the public face-to-face. It paved for a participative role in the use of ICT by both public and private sector in serving the citizen.
Convergent Government Network Infrastructure

Signing of the Convergent Government Network agreement ITA signed an agreement with Oman Telecommunications Company for the design, implementation and management of this Convergent Government Network which will be the premium infrastructure of the public sector. The network based on IP/MPLS network with ATM backbone being a key component for the delivery of public services seamlessly will be the first and foremost comprehensive network in terms of functionality and technicality. All government entities will use this network which will have a unified IP addressing scheme government wide. Considering the safety of the data transfers, the system will lead to achieve the high standards of security laid by the ITA in accordance with the common security framework.

Ubar – the gateway portal

Expected to be operational during 2007, the Ubar Portal is designated to be the main gateway to electronic services offered by the government. Named after the ancient Omani city of Ubar, the “Atlantis of the desert” - a main trading gateway into Arabian Peninsula, this modern web portal is designed to provide a rich, personalized, unified, and highly customizable experience to its users. Anytime, anywhere access to the portal can occur through multiple channels such as the web and mobile devices. Navigation on the portal site will be simplified through a life event service delivery model and searchable content.

National e-Payment Gateway

Government of Oman, in its e-Government strategy has identified electronic payments (e-Payment) and in particular Internet payments, as a critical shared service within the e-Government architecture. In line with this momentum ITA has signed agreements with MasterCard Worldwide and BankMuscat to launch the national e-Payment Gateway to provide an e-governance infrastructure and full e-commerce facilities that allow secure online payments (e-payments). The e-Payment Gateway which will support multiple acquiring banks will be operational in line with Oman’s forthcoming e-Government Gateway, the UBAR Portal.

This gateway will hasten e-government operations and is seen as the main enabler to online delivery of Government Goods & Services. Information Technology Authority (ITA) has taken up a strategic initiative to drive the development of e-Payments in Oman with an objective is to implement an efficient and effective e-Payment infrastructure to support these e-Government initiatives as well as move the nation to the next level transactional service oriented e-commerce development.

ICT Capacity Building

The National IT Training & Awareness Initiative is a nation-wide initiative undertaken by ITA aimed at developing ICT skills capability and increasing ICT awareness within the government and the community. In achieving its goals for furthering IT literacy and awareness levels within the society, the initiative also aims to contribute to the development of a local ICT industry and to provide increased employment opportunities for the youth of Oman.

The initiative has been divided into two key projects - Government IT Training and Community IT Training. ITA conducted a preliminary market investigation to evaluate internationally two recognised digital literacy programs (IC3 and the Cambridge
International Examinations Curriculum) and vendors to determine which programs and vendors would be suitable for these projects and is currently running a pilot to evaluate two of these programs and vendors.

The pilot is also evaluating an implementation model for national government IT training. Based on the evaluation of the pilot a national level implementation plan will be devised as a cost effective model for government IT training and awareness across the nation. The Government IT Training project aims to train and certify all civil service employees during the three-year period 2007-2010.

**Community Technology Learning Center**

Government of Oman represented by the ITA signed an Enterprise Agreement with Microsoft in June 2006. The agreement included clauses for re-investment around 6 million dollars in local projects. ITA took this opportunity to invest in Community Technology Learning Centers (CTLC) to begin with as one of the key projects that will enable the Government to bridge the digital divide within the citizens of Oman. This project is a key factor in enabling the community in harnessing information technology through government centers. A working body has been put in place with members from the stakeholders and the team is currently working based on the above key areas, identifying related activities and an implementation plan with about 6 pilot CTLCs being operational by the end of 2007.

**Use of ICT in Higher Education Admission Center**

From the initial plan of the HEAC establishment, it became apparent that the Center will not be able to operate efficiently unless it uses latest technologies. The Center is depending on the Electronic Higher Education Admission System to allow students to apply online. Every year, more than 50,000 apply online through the Higher Education Admission System. This made the registration process much easier where student can find a nearest internet access and log in to the HEAC website and start the registration process. Moreover, this year, SMS capabilities have been added for the registration process. This will allow the students to perform most of the functionalities as using the internet.