

BEIRUT DECLARATION

TOWARDS AN INFORMATION SOCIETY IN WESTERN ASIA (A DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES)

WESTERN ASIA PREPARATORY CONFERENCE FOR THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Beirut, 6 February 2003

PREAMBLE

The Western Asia Preparatory Conference for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was convened in Beirut, Lebanon, during 4-6 February 2003. Representatives of Member States of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), UNESCO Cairo Office for the Arab States, international and regional agencies and organizations, the private sector and civil society participated in the conference. They shared assessments and views on the status of information and communication technology in the Arab and Western Asia countries. Participants then continued to develop a common vision, objectives, priorities, strategies and directions for action to accelerate the move towards the information society in countries of the region.

Western Asia is characterized as a region of political instability. In the past few decades, the region has gone through several crises, disputes, and hostilities that resulted in a state of “continuous instability”. A number of countries in the region suffer severe sanctions and/or embargo on importation of technological goods and knowledge, which have been unilaterally imposed contrary to the common vision for global information society. This state of affairs has had profound effects on the pace of achievements in information and communication technology (ICT) development and innovation by countries in the region.

Under such circumstances, it is inconceivable to expect that achievements in ICTs in the Western Asia region have had much room for progress. Not many countries in the region have managed to develop a clear and effective ICT policy with a plan of action that is put in place for implementation. The figures for basic ICT indicators (density of: fixed and mobile lines, PC's, Internet users and hosts) measuring the degree of ICT penetration in the region are well below those of the world averages. Low penetration of Internet users and hosts in the region were the subject of particular attention at the conference. Additionally, the absence of broadband facilities at affordable cost was noted. Uneven distribution of ICT services and facilities between rural and urban societies, and the low utilization of the infrastructure by unprivileged segments of the society, such as women and youth, as well as rural and low-income communities, were also highlighted.

At the ICT applications level, the region's record of developing and implementing ICT applications has been, so far, modest to weak. Many governmental organizations and public administration services suffer from heavy-handed bureaucracy and low efficiency in public administration, as well as lack of transparency and accountability. This adds emphasis on the need to modernize government and public administrations through applying e-government systems. E-business applications have not taken off because of their failure to support user needs through available technologies. As for e-learning, although there is a revolution taking place in educational institutions in other regions, this region is still far behind.

Finally, the issue of Arabic content was debated. Many believed that the lack of availability of Arabic content and tools are one of the main reasons for the low rate of penetration of ICT infrastructure and applications. Web share of the Arabic content does not match the importance and spread the Arabic language enjoys in the world. Lack of standards for Arabic code and data exchange formats and reluctance by many educated Arabs to engage in communicating in Arabic for business and professional transactions have also reduced demand for the Arabic language content within the region.

As a result of all the above, Member States of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission of Western Asia (ESCWA) and UNESCO Cairo Office for the Arab States agreed on the following:

REGIONAL VISION OF THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

The untapped potential of ICTs to improve productivity and quality of life is a serious issue for many developing countries. If undermined, these countries risk being left behind. Member States are required to take far-reaching commitments and policy measures to transform the existing society into an information society. The process of transformation into an information society should be sustainable and equitable. It should also aim at achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals leading to reducing poverty and unemployment, raising levels of education, improving health services, enhancing empowerment and minimizing loss of environmental resources. The right to communicate and the right to access information for citizens and nations, as well as the recognition and application of intellectual property rights and the principle of free flow of information, should be part and parcel of human rights fundamentals. Finding ways to make the information society serve the needs of developing countries more directly is of profound importance. The regional vision aims at creating a turning point where countries will have the opportunity to harness ICTs for shaping their future without the risk of losing cultural identity. This declaration should also help them towards transforming the threats and challenges of ICTs and globalization into opportunities for development.

OBJECTIVES

- To promote a common vision for the development of an information society both at the national and regional levels;
- To formulate innovative policies and ICT strategies that benefit socio-economic development, favour the reduction of poverty and promote growth and employment;
- To attain the UN Millennium Development Goals through transforming the region into an information and knowledge society;
- To formulate an agenda for action aimed at achieving specific objectives leading to the transition into an information society, emphasizing the needs of youth, women and underprivileged groups by selecting appropriate and affordable technologies for implementation, thus bridging the digital divide;
- To promote a framework for national, regional and international partnerships with a view to coordinate efforts towards building the information society;
- To adopt modalities for policy/strategy implementation with emphasis on achieving tangible objectives.

PRINCIPLES FOR DEVELOPING AN INFORMATION SOCIETY

1. NATIONAL AND REGIONAL ICT POLICY FORMULATION, AND THE ENABLING LEGISLATIVE AND REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

- **Formulating clear national and regional policies**

Strengthening the policy-making capacity in the area of ICTs to enhance national and regional ICT policy-making processes and institutions is of utmost importance. ICTs will advance development if related efforts and programmes are integrated in a national development strategy. Governments are the primary actors, in concert with the private sector and civil society, in the pursuit of access for all to information technology for development. They need to enunciate their own national vision, galvanize the necessary political will, at the highest level, devise national strategic frameworks, establish national priorities and create an environment conducive to the rapid diffusion, financing, development and use of information technology.

- **Removing social and cultural barriers that impede transformation into the new information society**

Countries in this region have diversified social and economic characteristics ranging from countries belonging to the low-income category to countries belonging to the high-income category. Illiteracy rate and poverty levels are high. Women participation and lack of job opportunities in the regional labor market are further sticky issues. Continuous political instability, sanctions and embargo are considered main causes.

- **Reforming legal, regulatory and policy matters**

The existence of a supportive and predictable legal framework is an important prerequisite for enhancing trust in ICTs and e-business, and thus promoting its development and dissemination. Although there is a general consensus that the current legal infrastructure is generally applicable to electronic transactions, most national laws were developed in the absence of electronic systems. Review should be carried out of relevant legislation, where appropriate, with the aim of identifying and removing factors that prevent enterprises from using ICTs, particularly in e-business. In fact, e-business raises a number of legal issues, questions and uncertainties concerning the validity, legal effect and enforceability of transactions conducted through electronic means, in a legal environment based on paper. The existing requirements in national and international law for the use of written documents and manual signature in international trade transactions are considered major obstacles to the development of electronic commerce at global level. Other areas involving legal issues relevant to electronic transactions include: data protection, taxation, custom duties, security and authentication, intellectual property rights, privacy, liability of Internet service providers, illegal and harmful content, Internet governance, electronic payment systems, consumer protection, jurisdiction, applicable law and dispute resolution mechanisms.

- **Adopting standards and norms**

Governments of the region should seriously consider adopting established ICT related standards and norms, particularly those considered language dependent. Norms and standards should meet user needs for information exchange and enable straightforward search and navigation and the widest possible range in terms of access to systems.

2. ICT INFRASTRUCTURE

- **Enhancing and integrating the infrastructure to narrow the digital divide**

While technology is significantly improving and costs are decreasing, it is important to ensure that access to information will be made available to all segments of the population. This is still not the case in many developing countries. Rural communities and poor strata of the population still cannot afford information services. Through a combination of new and more efficient technologies, common and shared access, open systems, and universal service provision, information and its ensuing knowledge should be considered vital, and prioritized and delivered accordingly.

Additionally a regional ICT backbone should be implemented to facilitate exchange between countries and avoid the hub and spoke effect where information leaves the region and returns after transiting through other regions. The development of the infrastructure necessary for connectivity requires complementarities between determined government policies to ensure connectivity and private sector participation. Steps towards liberalization, privatization and competition, and the removal of excessive levels of tariffs are essential.

- **Developing appropriate ICT indicators**

It is advisable to devise ICT-specific indicators, which realistically reflect needs and performance of developing countries. Such indicators should take into account the particular conditions of developing countries where several people often share access to the Internet and a whole community may share usage of ICT equipment and infrastructure. Targets should also be set to benchmark penetration of ICT services within communities at urban and rural levels.

- **Ensuring governance of Internet and ICT resources**

The issue of Internet security is critical for the region. National and regional efforts should be coordinated, taking into consideration the importance of secure infrastructure and data flow in concordance with international standards and guidelines.

- **Securing national domain names**

The responsibility for root directories and domain names should rest with a suitable international organization and should take multilingualism into consideration. Countries' top-level-domain-names and Internet Protocol (IP) address assignment should be the sovereign right of countries. The sovereignty of each nation should be protected and respected. Internet governance should be multilateral, democratic and transparent and should take into account the needs of the public and private sectors as well as those of the civil society.

3. ICT APPLICATIONS

- **Implementing and standardizing e-government applications**

E-government empowers citizens through access to information, improves interactions with business and industry, and leads to better delivery of government services to citizens and more efficient government management. The resulting benefits can be greater convenience, improved efficiency of the economic system, increased transparency and less corruption, leading to increased possibility for developing countries to attract foreign investments and financial assistance. Basic government services should be provided online by a target date. Modest achievements have already been made in countries of the region, but many services still have limited interactivity due to lack of awareness and training of the average citizen.

Introducing concepts such as e-democracy and e-governance in the decision-making process of local and national governments is essential. Procedure for auditing government applications and monitoring performance should be in place. The development of secure and seamless access to e-government services depends on deployment and the effective use of electronic authentication means. Access to government services can be facilitated by providing multilingual content and making it available on various platforms. Initiatives regarding e-government should exist at regional, national and local levels. A great deal could be achieved in the region through the activities of UNPAN and the task force created at ESCWA for UNPAN activities. It is hoped that global standards for e-government are established by an appropriate international body to ensure accepted implementation practices by different governments.

- **Promoting e-learning programmes and projects**

Member States should ensure that all schools, universities and other learning institutions have Internet and multimedia access for educational, training, re-skilling and research purposes. Attention must be directed to the training of teachers to adapt to the new learning environment. Legal, economic and social issues that are considered as obstacles to the development of the e-learning process in the region should be identified. Learning networks offer the potential of educational opportunities to all segments of the society and present opportunities to disadvantaged groups to practice learning anytime anywhere. A change in the mindset towards management of education, curricula design, self and distance learning is required.

- **Applying e-health**

Healthcare applications over networks could provide unique opportunities for patients and practitioners alike, particularly for those from developing countries provided the infrastructure supports such applications. Healthcare is becoming information intensive. Hospital management systems need to be encouraged and the Internet increasingly used to obtain medical information. Health information networks between points of care, such as hospitals, laboratories and homes, electronic health cards and online health services have already been implemented or are being considered in many developed countries. Member States should take advantage of the success achieved in this field.

- **Restructuring for e-business**

The restructuring of business processes to make use of digital technologies is essential to the region, particularly for small and medium size enterprises (SME's) and public policies should support this process. These policies should also aim at strengthening the entrepreneurial spirit of the business community. Developing countries may focus on ICT-based trade as precursor to full fledged e-commerce. The impact of e-commerce in many countries in the region has so far been limited, with very few organizations committed to the new environment of trading over the Internet. Legislations should be reviewed with the aim of removing factors that prevent enterprises from doing business over the Internet. Banking procedures and security issues associated with payments and transaction authentication are also responsible for the present reluctance to use e-business procedures.

- **Developing e-content applications and tools**

This region is unique amongst other regions of the world in that its peoples share the same culture and language. Active steps towards encouraging the production of Arabic content should be taken. Steps involve the establishment of conditions for development of digital content and local multimedia industries including intellectual property right provisions, promotion of tools for the management of Arabic language, including Arabic domain names, as a means for promoting multilingualism and investment in projects aiming at the promotion of this objective.

- **Launching other applications**

Most economic and social sectors of the region lack applications that aid management in the decision making process and raise the internal efficiency of enterprises, thus enhancing their capabilities to produce better and more competitive products and services. Sectors such as agriculture, irrigation, industry, transportation, tourism and environment would greatly benefit from the application of effective tools and software, such as GIS, for the solution of problems facing these sectors.

4. ICT PRODUCTION AND SERVICE SECTOR

- **Developing ICT production capabilities**

The importance of the ICT sector has grown over time, especially in the developed world. However, this has had little resonance in the region, which is lagging behind in terms of ICT manufacturing capabilities, imports of embodied ICTs and, more importantly, research and development (R and D), incubation schemes and venture capital investment. The ICT sector accounts for an insignificant share of the region's production sector GDP. It is essential for governments to encourage investment in the creation of regional ICT production facilities. If the ICT production sector begins to grow more rapidly than the rest of the economy, it is anticipated to make an effective contribution to growth and productivity performance in the region.

- **Improving ICT services**

The growth in the demand for applications should spawn the dynamics for creating a favorable environment for the private sector to invest and meet the challenges that applications present in moving towards the information society. The demand created by e-government, e-learning, e-health and e-business applications should induce the introduction and development of new services.

5. ICT CAPACITY BUILDING

- **Developing human capacity through education and training**

Building and exploiting processes for education, establishing new institutional forms, including incubation schemes and technology-based business start-up support programmes as well as other enterprise promotion modalities, and creating training and technology assessment networks that specifically target educational systems, are of utmost importance. The possibility of establishing virtual schools for graduate studies and research shared by a number of universities in the region should be explored. The design, production and dissemination of ICT-based educational systems at all levels need to be actively promoted. Enhancing rational, socially and economically sustainable, as well as culturally enriching exploitation of the benefits presented by ICTs for improving education and training should be pursued seriously.

- **Building institutions**

Institutional capacities to collect, organize, store and share information and knowledge are as critically important as human capacities. In fact, they are necessary complements to human capacities and need to be developed to capture the benefits of the information society. The application of information technology in public institutions such as schools, hospitals and clinics, libraries, government departments and agencies should be pursued. Particular attention should be directed to R and D activities through the establishment of centers excellence for specific areas of technology. Programmes that develop SME capabilities to become globally competitive through ICTs should also be initiated.

ICT PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

- **ICT Policy and the creation of an enabling environment:** Formulating a practical policy through clear initiatives that take into consideration the removal of socioeconomic barriers between privileged and unprivileged segments of societies.
- **ICT Infrastructure:** Narrowing the information and communication divide and providing services at affordable cost to ensure homogeneous availability of ICTs for all.
- **E-government:** Enabling public administration reform to achieve transparency, accountability and good governance.
- **E-Business:** Enhancing intra-regional trade and export transactions through electronic networks.
- **E-learning and e-education:** Ensuring continuity and availability of information and knowledge for all, thus enhancing employment opportunities for all.
- **E-content:** Encouraging standards, presence and management of Arabic digital content on electronic media and on the Internet.
- **ICT production and service sector:** Promoting the creation of endogenous capabilities within the region to meet regional demand as well as possible export.
- **Capacity building:** Spreading awareness about ICTs and the information society amongst all citizens, and, at the same time, increasing investment in education and training with particular emphasis on quality higher education, graduate programmes and research that meet the priority needs of the region.

TOWARDS AN ICT STRATEGY

The development of a strategy entails understanding what to promote, where to promote it, and how to tailor and implement activities to achieve maximum impact. This should capitalize on existing national, regional and global efforts. At the national level nearly every country has recognized the importance of ICTs for development. Regional initiatives such as those of the League of Arab States, UNDP's Programme on ICT for Development in the Arab Region (ICTDAR) and UNESCO Regional Programme promise significant results. Global initiatives such as the UN ICT Task Force provide a clearinghouse for best practices in ICTs. Funding should aim at the regional capital markets to provide venture capital and investment funds for launching ICT companies and projects that have a regional dimension. It should also promote long-term government spending on R and D and higher education, with the aim of mastering and adapting specific ICT solutions. It should provide incentives and regulatory schemes that would enhance private sector capabilities in terms of human resource development, infrastructure and institution building. Taxation systems that provide abatements and incentives for start up ICT companies should be initiated.

Member States should ensure that all stakeholders' needs are taken into consideration in the process of transformation to the information society. The strategy should take into consideration the specific requirements of varied communities and should serve the objectives of the national economy of the Member States. Quantitative as well as qualitative means should be deployed using indicators, target dates and other effective measures for monitoring performance. Regional strategies should encourage the creation of larger markets, providing a viable and competitive environment for regional investment and cooperation.

Information technology is the critical determinant of the processes of globalization and interdependence as reflected in the emergence of a networked knowledge-based global economy. Building partnerships among all stakeholders, developed and developing countries (particularly amongst developing countries), the public and private sectors, as well as civil society/non-governmental organizations is essential. Efforts aimed at successfully integrating developing economies into the global economy, increasing employment, eradicating poverty and ensuring sustainable human development must take full account of the role of information technology as the driving force of this new economy. International aid and partnerships are particularly

important for the development of the vertical ICT sector. Such aid should be encouraged provided minimum or no strings attached.

Organizational approaches that combine most effectively, the skills and resources of both the public and private sectors to bolster investment should be adopted, including exemption from taxation for export and import of ICT products and services. In considering the development of an institution capable of carrying out an investment promotion strategy, both the institutional framework of the agency, its internal structure, and capacity and marketing skills, should be taken into account. In developing an investment promotion strategy, it is necessary to determine the short- and long-term objectives of investment promotion and to find the appropriate balance between various investment promotion activities, taking into account important factors such as the investment environment, the comparative advantages of the country and the region, and global developments, recognizing the change of these factors over time.

FOLLOW-UP

In addition to being submitted to the second meeting of the WSIS Preparatory Committee (PrepCom2) as a regional contribution to the WSIS process, this declaration should provide guidelines and directions for Governments and the private sector in their endeavor to formulate policies and to take necessary actions in order to ensure the proactive inclusion of the region in the information age.