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**REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY
ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE COMMISSION****FOLLOW-UP TO IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED
BY THE COMMISSION AT ITS TWENTY-SECOND SESSION**

*The formulation of a regional plan of action for an information society:
resolution 246 (XXII)*

Summary

At its twenty-second session, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) adopted resolution 246 (XXII), dated 17 April 2003, in which the secretariat is requested to formulate a regional plan of action for building an information society (IS) that respects the particularities and linguistic and cultural priorities of the Arab region.

Pursuant to that resolution, the secretariat undertook a number of activities, which included the organization of three round tables aimed at gathering views and coordinating positions in preparation for the formulation of such a plan. A proposed regional plan of action for IS building was prepared and presented at the Second Regional Preparatory Conference for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), which was held in Damascus on 22 and 23 November 2004. With a view to ensuring effective participation in the implementation of that plan, ESCWA coordinated its work with member countries, the League of Arab States and regional and international organizations.

This report contains a brief review of the activities that have been undertaken by ESCWA pursuant to resolution 246 (XXII).

I. ACTIVITIES RELATED TO PREPARATION OF THE PLAN

A. ORGANIZATION OF ROUND TABLES

1. In 2004, ESCWA organized a series of round tables as part of its formulation of a regional plan of action for building IS and in the context of the preparations for the second phase of WSIS, which will be held in Tunis from 16 to 18 November 2005. The aim of those round tables was to discuss important issues related to the plan and to take into consideration the particularities of the region. Set forth below is a synopsis of their proceedings, in chronological order:

(a) Round Table on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as an Enabler for Economic Development, 29 and 30 April 2004, attended by delegates from the public and private sectors in member countries. The basic opportunities available for becoming an IS were identified, and the general lines of a stakeholder partnership initiative for ICT use in economic development in the region were formulated;

(b) Round Table on Strategies and Plans of Action for Building the Information Society in Western Asia, 21 and 22 June 2004. At this meeting, agreement was reached on the foundations of a regional plan of action for IS building in the region, and national and regional activities were identified through discussion of a preliminary plan of action for IS building that was formulated by ESCWA in December 2003;

(c) Round Table on Information Society Indicators and Profiles in Western Asia, 4 and 5 October 2004, of which the aim was to propose a set of basic indicators that would both be consistent with the internationally used indicators and respect the particularities of ESCWA member countries. A further aim was to propose a joint strategy and appropriate methodologies for collecting and preparing statistics for the evaluation of the progress made towards IS. The regional plan of action for IS building took into account all the outcomes and recommendations of those round tables.

B. THE STATUS OF THE REGIONAL PLAN OF ACTION FOR IS BUILDING

2. The ESCWA ICT Division formulated a proposed regional plan of action for IS building in the Arab region on the basis of the outcomes and recommendations of the first phase of WSIS. The plan of action built on the Arab Strategy for Communications and Information that was adopted by the Arab Summit held in Amman on 28 March 2001 and the global Plan of Action (PoA) that was adopted at the first phase of WSIS, held in Geneva from 10 to 12 December 2003. The outcomes and recommendations of the three above mentioned round tables also constituted basic inputs to the proposed plan, which represented joint efforts exerted at the regional and international levels, and took into consideration future challenges, the efforts required in order to build an IS that is sustainable and promotes integration at the regional level, and the need to incorporate those challenges into specific programmes and projects within a strategic framework that includes the principle plans of action.

3. The proposed plan of action was designed to be open-ended, flexible and decentralized. It includes a mechanism for partnership characterized by cooperation and transparency and allows for disengagement from projects when they are mature, in accordance with specific standards. The plan includes a mechanism for follow-up and monitoring of project implementation. Many stakeholders in the region took part in preparing this plan and, in particular, formulating the programmes and projects. They included Government institutions, private companies, civil society institutions and regional and international organizations.

4. On 21 November 2004, ESCWA held the Partners' Forum in Damascus, at which the programmes and projects proposed as part of the regional plan of action were discussed. A total of 30 projects constituting nine programmes were considered as the basic components for the development of a regional IS. ESCWA successfully brought together a large number of regional and international stakeholders who represented the public and private sectors, civil society, non-governmental organizations and funding bodies. The plan of action as a whole was further discussed at the Second Regional Preparatory Conference for WSIS, which was held immediately after the Forum, with the slogan "Towards partnership for building the Arab IS".

5. The outcome of that Conference was the Damascus Call: Towards Partnership for Building the Arab IS, which called upon all stakeholders to promote endeavours to build an Arab IS that would contribute to sustainable economic and social development, and to cooperate and exert all possible efforts to implement the regional plan of action for IS, through a mechanism for partnership at the national, regional and international levels. It also called upon regional and international organizations, including ESCWA and the League of Arab States, to exert efforts to coordinate progress and assist in establishing a fund to finance plan projects that would contribute to the development of the ICT sector.

6. On the basis of Conference recommendations, ESCWA officially submitted the plan to the League of Arab States and to ministries concerned with ICT in member countries, with a view to obtaining their opinions. An Internet forum was established for the discussion and development of the regional plan and related programmes and projects, and ESCWA received a number of suggestions, in addition to the remarks and suggestions put forward at the Conference.

7. In late December 2004, ESCWA prepared an amended version of the regional plan of action for IS building that was based on the views and remarks that it had gathered during the Conference and through official communications, discussion forums and other discussions with Arab delegations. The plan assumed its current form, which contains 38 regional projects comprising 10 programmes, a strategic framework, the main work plans, and a detailed description of mechanisms for work, follow-up and partnership.

II. COORDINATION AT THE REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

A. COORDINATION WITH THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES

8. ESCWA participated in the Arab Caucus Meeting that was held in Damascus on 24 and 25 November 2004 in preparation for WSIS, immediately after the Regional Preparatory Conference. The team commended the contribution made by ESCWA to the preparations for the second phase of WSIS and, in particular, the proposed regional plan of action. It recommended that plan projects should be transferred for consideration to a team responsible for formulating an Arab communications and information strategy. That recommendation was adopted by the executive office of the Arab Telecommunications and Information Council of Ministers at its sixteenth session, which was held in Damascus on 25 and 26 November 2004.

9. ESCWA also took part in the meeting of the team responsible for formulating an Arab communications and information strategy, which was held in Cairo from 31 January to 2 February 2005 in order to review and consider projects for the regional plan for IS building. That meeting led to the recent adoption by the strategy team of a large number of the projects proposed in the plan.

10. At the end of December 2004, the Arab Caucus prepared a document entitled "Towards activation of the Geneva PoA: a regional vision for the initiation and development of IS in the Arab region". That document was based on the regional plan of action for IS building that ESCWA had formulated, and included most of the projects put forward in that plan.

B. REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COORDINATION

11. ESCWA forwarded the regional plan of action to the WSIS Preparatory Committee as its input to that body's second session, which was held in Geneva from 17 to 25 February 2005. At that meeting, ESCWA presented a report on the Second Regional Preparatory Conference for WSIS, in which it focused on the regional plan of action and its mechanisms and follow-up methods.

12. In the context of cooperation between the United Nations regional commissions, ESCWA presented a report on the regional plan of action as a model for turning principles into action at the WSIS Africa Regional Preparatory Conference, which was held in Accra, Ghana, from 2 to 4 February 2005. At a workshop which was held before that Conference, ESCWA also presented the outcomes of the Round Table on IS Indicators and Profiles in Western Asia and, in particular, two sets of proposed IS basic indicators, the first for adoption at the international level, and the second, supplementary, set for regional adoption. The

identification and collection of those indicators is an important component of the regional and global plans of action. The first set of indicators was introduced at the technical meeting that was held in Geneva from 8 to 10 February 2005 in order to agree a basic global set of such indicators as part of the global partnership for measurement of ICT for development. In that context, in June 2005 ESCWA, in cooperation with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics, will hold a training workshop on IS indicators and ways of measuring them, intended for national statistics offices and statistics units in ICT-related ministries.

13. ESCWA has begun implementation of certain regional plan projects, including one aimed at establishing local centres to empower all sectors of the community, in remote and impoverished areas in particular, to use ICT to improve their standards of living. Such centres will also provide employment opportunities for youth and assist in the establishment of small and medium-sized enterprises in rural and remote areas.

14. Action is currently being taken to form a partnership nucleus involving United Nations organizations and their regional offices and, in particular, ESCWA and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Office in Cairo, the regional office of ITU, and the United Nations Development Programme Information and Communication Technology for Development in Arab Region office, with a view to cooperation in implementing the projects of the joint plan of action. The first meeting held in order to launch that regional cooperation was held in Beirut on 28 January 2005, and it was decided to support the League of Arab States in its IS-building plans and to give priority to activities related to creating Arabic digital content and its uses and to extending the use of the Arabic language on the Internet.
