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**PROGRESS ACHIEVED IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TUNIS
AGENDA FOR THE INFORMATION SOCIETY**

Summary

This document reviews the activities and outputs of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in the field of information and communications technology (ICT). It focuses on the implementation of a number of action lines and themes adopted by the World Summit on the Information Society in the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society (2005).

The initiatives and activities described are mainly aimed at assisting ESCWA member States in achieving the goals of the Summit.

Introduction

1. The development of the information society in the Arab region has different facets and is related to many variables. Most member States of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) have taken significant steps towards bridging the digital divide: the rates of adoption of information and communications technologies (ICTs) are higher while the related costs are lower, and the spread and use of broadband are on the rise. A wider array of ICT applications and e-services is available. The public and private sectors are working together to better integrate local communication networks both regionally and globally.

2. This document is a non-exhaustive report on the status of implementation in ESCWA member States of a number of action lines and themes developed in the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society, adopted by the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2005.¹ The initiatives described herein are ESCWA activities chiefly aimed at assisting member States to achieve the goals and objectives of WSIS.

REGIONAL FOLLOW-UP ON WSIS

3. During 2013, ESCWA published the latest edition of the *Regional Profile of the Information Society in the Arab Region* (E/ESCWA/ICTD/2013/6). The publication measures the progress made in building information societies in the Arab region and compares its performance with that of other regions and the rest of the world. The publication uses WSIS action lines as a basis; it reveals that the region has taken significant steps towards achieving WSIS goals and objectives.

4. ESCWA regularly updates the Information Society Portal for the ESCWA Region (ISPER).² ISPER provides a collaborative platform for knowledge management. The website integrates accessible identity management through social media-based authentication, making it easier for participants in the region to collaborate. The system currently provides information on selected themes such as cyber legislation, information society measurement and Internet governance. It provides value by promoting the findings and recommendations of work carried out by ESCWA and other information society stakeholders.

1. *WSIS action lines*

(a) *C4: Capacity-building*

5. The constitutions of all ESCWA member States guarantee free public education and make it compulsory at the primary education level. Additionally, most national ICT policies put emphasis on ICT capacity-building.

6. One of the main mandates of ESCWA is to support and guide Arab countries in their move towards knowledge-based economies. Such a move cannot be achieved without capacity-building. Decisionmakers and decision facilitators should become familiar with the ever-evolving concepts of e-government; e-governance; government information leadership; models of information sharing; and interoperability. In this context, the United Nations University, ESCWA and the Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform of the Government of Lebanon jointly organized a training workshop, which took place in Beirut in November 2013. Its main themes were e-governance policies, infrastructure and measurement. The five-day event was attended by 30 senior Lebanese civil servants who showed a keen interest in the subject matter.

¹ WSIS-05/TUNIS/DOC/6(Rev. 1)-E, available from <http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/6rev1.html>.

² <http://isper.escwa.un.org>.

7. In October 2012, ESCWA organized a capacity-building workshop on Cyberlegislation in the Arab Region, in collaboration with the United Arab Emirates University College of Law. Sessions included a presentation and a discussion of international models for the protection of children online, as well as a detailed account of ESCWA activities on the development and harmonization of cyberlegislation in the Arab region. During November 2012, similar activities took place in Algeria and the Sudan.

8. In February 2013, ESCWA began implementation of a project entitled Academy of ICT Essentials for Government Leaders in the ESCWA Region. The main objectives of the project are to create awareness and build the capacity of decisionmakers with regard to the utilization of ICT for sustainable development. The project also aims to build the skills needed for the planning, management and funding of development projects. The first project activity is an assessment of the capacity-building needs of the Governments of ESCWA member States related to ICTs. The assessment will identify the main topics of the training modules that will be created and implemented within the framework of the project.

9. ESCWA also prepared a study entitled Impact of ICT on Arab Youth: Employment, Education and Social Change (E/ESCWA/ICTD/2013/Technical Paper.3). This study examines the changes that have contributed to shifts in areas such as economics, social life and education. It identifies key pivot points and provides recommendations for maximizing the positive effects of ICT on the lives of Arab youth. It also highlights the impact of ICT on the global competitive landscape and the attendant impact on the labour market for youth, showing that ICT has reduced the number of “middle-class jobs”, while creating more jobs at both the high-skill and low-skill edges of the spectrum. Its main recommendations focus on the positive impact of ICT on the educational systems of countries in the Arab region.

(b) *C6: Enabling environment*

10. Cyber legislation is an essential element of an enabling environment for an effective information society. For ESCWA member States and as of the writing of this report, Yemen was the only country that had adopted a law on the right of access to information. The main objectives of this law are to facilitate access to information, expand freedom of expression and enhance transparency.

11. During December 2012, ESCWA organized a seminar on Legal and Regulatory Requirements for a Sustainable Knowledge Society in the Arab Region. The event brought together more than 50 ICT and legal experts representing the public and private sectors, non-governmental organizations and international organizations. The main objective of the seminar was to discuss the legal and regulatory frameworks of a knowledge society in the Arab region. The seminar included discussions on emerging trends in mobile money, cloud computing and cybercrime, as well as the protection of personal data.

12. ESCWA has a long history of helping member States develop their national cyberlegislation and providing related advisory services. During 2013, the Ministry of ICT in Algeria, the Ministry of Communications in Iraq and the Prime Minister’s Office in Yemen were beneficiaries of advisory services which focused on the enhancement of their respective national cyberlaws.

13. ESCWA also developed a cyberlegislation policy note to aid the various stakeholders involved in the legislative processes related to cyberspace (E/ESCWA/ICTD/2013/Technical Paper.2). The policy note highlights the importance of cyberlegislation in building an effective knowledge society in the region. It aims at setting the needed legal frameworks and focuses on the major challenges and obstacles facing the region in the formulation and adoption of cyberlaws. The note also reviews the efforts and research activities of ESCWA aimed at harmonizing cyberlegislation and promoting regional integration. It ends with a set of recommendations categorized according to the target audience or scope of work, on the following topics: (a) formulation of cyberlegislation; (b) legislative procedures and processes; (c) implementation of enacted laws; (d) regional perspective for cyberlegislation; (e) education and capacity-building.

(c) *C7: ICT applications*

14. During 2013, the process of improving e-government services continued in most ESCWA member States. However, countries facing political instability suffered setbacks and, in certain cases, some of their services failed and data collection for monitoring became more difficult.

15. ESCWA renewed its interest in e-governance and e-government applications with the Regional Workshop on e-Government Best Practices (Amman, 3-5 December 2013). The workshop was jointly organized by ESCWA, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Jordanian Ministry of Information and Communications Technology. It brought together directors of e-government programmes from the Arab region, project managers of e-government applications, experts from international and regional organizations and representatives of renowned relevant consulting firms. The main research material for the workshop was an ESCWA study on e-government strategies in Arab countries (E/ESCWA/ICTD/2013/Technical Paper.4). Participants reviewed regional e-government achievements and areas for enhancement; they also identified areas for cooperation and deliberated on the establishment of a council of directors of Arab e-government programmes. The workshop recommendations included the following: (a) enhancing e-government plans to provide better integrated services and increase the participation of citizens to achieve better governance on the local and national levels; (b) ensuring the application of international standards for government portals and services; (c) developing initiatives to build the capacity of government employees and transform Arab societies into knowledge societies; (d) encouraging the establishment of a regional platform for e-government programmes, such as an Arab council of e-government directors.

(d) *C8: Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content*

16. The Arabic language is the principal language of communication throughout in the region. For the past few years, and in keeping with the spirit of the eighth WSIS action line, ESCWA has undertaken several initiatives aimed at enriching and enhancing the quality of online digital content in Arabic.

17. Digital Arabic content (DAC) offers numerous opportunities for businesses and investments and has only recently started receiving attention from the private and public sectors in the region. Realizing the importance of DAC, ESCWA published a study on Business Models for Digital Arabic Content during 2013 (E/ESCWA/ICTD/2013/Technical Paper.1). The study identifies five potential areas of development, namely education and learning; content aggregation and curation; public services; entertainment and gaming; and social media. It also focuses on a number of business models suitable for the DAC industry including: (a) the advertising model, which is an extension of the conventional advertising model of the media industry; (b) the manufacturer model, which is also called the direct sales or direct model; (c) the subscription model, which offers paid premium content that is not accessible by other means; (d) other models, such as brokerage, infomediary, merchant, affiliate, community, utility and venture capital fast-growth models.

18. The second phase of the project on Promoting the DAC Industry through Incubation was launched in 2012. The project is implemented in partnership with several technology business incubators in the region. The related 2013 competition was launched in Palestine in collaboration with the Palestinian ICT Incubator; in Yemen in collaboration with the Science and Technology Centre of the University of Aden; and in Lebanon in collaboration with Berytech. Further competitions are planned for Egypt, in collaboration with the Technology, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Centre, and in the United Arab Emirates, in collaboration with Abu Dhabi University. The competition will unlock the potential of entrepreneurs and university graduates who aspire to build novel DAC applications and products. Winners are granted an incubation period of 6 to 12 months with a partner, which will provide them with coaching, business advice, office facilities and guidance on establishing a competitive start-up company.

(e) *C11: International and regional cooperation*

19. In November 2012, the ESCWA Technology Centre and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs organized a regional consultation process in support of the 2013 annual ministerial review on innovation, science and technology for sustainable development.

20. In collaboration with the Union of Arab Banks and the Government of Tunisia, ESCWA organized the Arab Forum on the ICT Sector (Hammamet, 7-10 May 2013). Participants included experts and stakeholders from the public and private sectors, civil society and academia. Discussions focused on strengthening the financing and investment mechanisms, the promotion of business initiatives and the development of a competitive ICT sector in the Arab region.

21. Two consecutive events constituted the forum, namely the Expert Group Meeting on Investment, Research, Development and Innovation in the ICT Sector and the Conference on Investment and Finance of the ICT Sector in the Arab Region. The first event aimed at reaching a vision and setting recommendations for the development of a competitive ICT sector in the region. The second event aimed at promoting financing, investments and business entrepreneurship in the ICT sector. Discussions were based on an ESCWA study entitled *Competitiveness of the ICT Sector in the Arab Region: Innovation and Investment Imperatives* (E/ESCWA/ICTD/2013/4). The forum concluded by stressing the role of Governments in the promotion of the ICT sector, the development of legal and organizational frameworks and legislation, and the provision of a supportive infrastructure. Participants highlighted the need for universities and research centres to develop incentives for researchers, and to focus on applied research and knowledge transfer in addition to theoretical research. It also invited the banking sector to increase its financing of the ICT sector and to establish better connections and cooperative mechanisms with it.

22. During 2013, the ESCWA Technology Centre prepared a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis on science, technology and innovation (STI) in Arab countries. The study was based on a survey completed by five countries, namely Jordan, Oman, Palestine, Qatar and Yemen, complemented by desk research covering the remaining countries of the region. It analysed the situation of STI in each ESCWA member country and suggested new partnerships in the field. The chief aim of the suggested partnerships was to identify and promote regional complementarities. The study served as a background paper for a regional workshop that took place in April 2013 on the same topic.

2. *Main WSIS Themes*

(a) *Internet governance*

23. The Arab Internet Governance Forum (AIGF) was established in 2012 under the joint umbrella of ESCWA and the League of Arab States. Its activities are coordinated by a central secretariat, which is hosted by the Egyptian National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority, and are managed through the Arab Multistakeholder Advisory Group, which is composed of 34 experts from various stakeholder groups in the Arab region.

24. During 2012, partners in the AIGF convened two meetings and a public consultation (Cairo, 18-19 June, and 4-6 September). These activities mainly aimed at paving the way for the First Annual Meeting of the Arab IGF (Kuwait, 9-11 October 2012) which has held under the theme "Better Internet for a Better Arab World". The first annual meeting of the AIGF drew 350 participants and witnessed the birth of several coalitions, including one on regional peering, another on the domain names industry in the Arab region and the third on child online protection. AIGF activities held during 2012 constituted a learning process for the various stakeholders of the process.

25. The main activities during 2013 consisted of preparatory meetings and the second annual meeting of the AIGF. The three preparatory meetings included one open consultation and two meetings of the Arab

Multistakeholder Advisory Group. They aimed at setting the programme and focus areas of AIGF-II. A coordination meeting also brought together the main partners of the process and resulted in a document that set a reference framework for the AIGF structure and components, covering the functions and work mechanisms of AIGF, and in establishing the Executive Bureau for Joint Coordination (EBJC).

26. Under the slogan “Partners for Development”, the main AIGF activity for 2013 was the convening of AIGF-II in Algeria. The meeting took place under the high patronage of the President of Algeria. More than 800 people attended the meeting, including 14 Ministers from various Arab countries. The main topics discussed during AIGF-II included internet access and infrastructure; critical internet resources; security and privacy; openness and content; and internet and youth. The meeting included 12 thematic workshops organized by various institutions covering the following themes: (1) the ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) strategy to promote DNS (Domain Name System) in the Middle East and adjoining regions; (2) 4G networks in the Arab region; (3) Internet peering and exchange points in the Arab region; (4) child online protection in the Arab region; (5) Internet governance challenges and opportunities for law enforcement agencies; (6) information security and privacy; (7) human rights and internet governance; (8) community networks for education, research and health sectors; (9) living labs and internet governance in the Arab world; (10) innovation for economic development; (11) innovation engines and mindsets; (12) education, employability and entrepreneurship.

(b) *Measuring the Information Society*

27. In accordance with the goals of WSIS to more effectively measure the information society, ESCWA produced during 2013 an output, and carried out a related activity. The first was a publication entitled *Impact of Selected e-Services on Socioeconomic Development in the Arab Region* (E/ESCWA/ICTD/2013/2). The study assesses the availability, maturity and status of selected e-services in the Arab region through available indicators and frameworks that aim to measure the impact of e-services on socioeconomic development. The study concludes with a recommended framework dedicated to the process by which e-services impact socioeconomic outcomes. It further suggests policy initiatives that exploit the transformation potential of ICT, as well as innovation in e-services, both made possible by technological advances and the increasing pervasiveness of ICT.

28. The related activity carried out during 2013 was an expert group meeting on the Role of ICT in Socioeconomic Development (Beirut 9-10 April 2013). Its main objective was to examine the role of ICT in selected, high-impact sectors, such as governance, economic competitiveness, social relationships and education. Participants identified the actions needed to enhance the impact of ICT on socioeconomic development in the region.
