



Organizers

WSIS Lead Facilitators

## **Regional Follow-up to the Outcome of the World Summit on the Information Society Damascus, 16-18 June 2009**

### **Preliminary Information Note**

#### **1. Background**

The two phases of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) took place in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005. The main objectives of the WSIS were to bridge the digital divide between developing and developed countries and to promote the creation of an equitable and all-inclusive Information Society. The Geneva phase adopted a "Plan of Action" (PoA) that defined its objectives as follows: "to build an inclusive Information Society; to put the potential of knowledge and ICT at the service of development; to promote the use of information and knowledge for the achievement of internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration; and to address new challenges of the Information Society, at the national, regional and international levels"<sup>1</sup>. The Geneva PoA also included 11 action lines – numbered C1 to C11 – which aim at promoting: (1) The role of governments and all stakeholders in the promotion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for development; (2) Information and communication infrastructure; (3) Access to information and knowledge; (4) Capacity building; (5) Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs; (6) Enabling environment; (7) ICT applications; (8) Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content; (9) Media; (10) Ethical dimensions of the Information Society; and (11) International and regional cooperation.

The Tunis phase reviewed the progress made since the first phase and re-affirmed the participants' commitment to build a people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society. The "Tunis Commitment"<sup>2</sup> focused on key subject areas and their related issues, mainly Internet governance and financial mechanisms, in addition to universal access to information and knowledge, democracy, sustainable development, freedom of expression and the free flow of information. The document also raised awareness of the benefits that ICTs could bring to humanity and the manner in which it can transform and improve people's activities, interaction and lives. The "Tunis Agenda for the Information Society"<sup>3</sup> stressed that the implementation of the WSIS at the international level should be organized in accordance with the themes and action lines originally set in the Geneva PoA, and that, when appropriate, it should be moderated or facilitated by United Nations agencies. Participants in both phases of the WSIS agreed that efforts to build the Information Society must not stop with the conclusion of the summit and encouraged the adoption of national and regional plans of action for developing the Information Society.

In Western Asia, ESCWA has played a leading role in the WSIS process since its inception. In early 2003, before the Geneva phase, ESCWA organized the "Western Asia Preparatory Conference for WSIS". The conference promoted the understanding of what constitutes the Information Society and identified key issues as well as national and regional needs and priorities. During the latter part of 2004, in preparation for the second phase of the WSIS in Tunis and in line with the recommendations of the Geneva phase, ESCWA

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<sup>1</sup> WSIS-03/GENEVA/DOC/5-E, Para.4, (12 December 2003).

<sup>2</sup> WSIS-05/TUNIS/DOC/007-A, (15 November 2005).

<sup>3</sup> WSIS-II/TUNIS/DOC/6(Rev.1)-A, (15 November 2005)

organized the "Second Regional Preparatory Conference for WSIS - Partnership for Building the Arab Information Society" (E/ESCWA/ICTD/2004/4), which resulted in the production of the "Regional Plan of Action for Building the Information Society". The Regional Plan of Action (RPoA) defined: (a) The components and programmes needed for the creation of a sustainable Information Society in the region; (b) Projects aimed at fulfilling the objectives of the WSIS; and (c) Partnerships and funding mechanisms aimed at producing the desired impetus towards the realization of the Information Society in Western Asia.

In parallel to and in conjunction with the efforts mentioned above, several local and regional organizations are in the process of implementing various Information Society initiatives. In 2005, the Arab Telecommunications and Information Council of Ministers, working with a group of partners that included ESCWA, selected and targeted for implementation 19 WSIS-related projects. In 2007, the Arab Council of Ministers revised and updated the "Arab ICT Strategy for Building the Information Society," a document that was prepared before the Geneva phase and originally adopted in 2002. Similar strategies exist at the national level in various countries of the region.

In order to propel the WSIS momentum forward and to accelerate the implementation of the Geneva PoA, the Tunis Agenda and the RPoA, ESCWA will be holding, between 16 and 18 June 2009, a conference entitled "Regional Follow-up to the Outcome of the World Summit on the Information Society".

## 2. Objectives

The conference would act as a forum where various WSIS stakeholders in the ESCWA region meet to present, discuss and review the progress made towards the implementation of the eleven above-mentioned action lines, as well as of the execution of the RPoA for building the Information Society and of similar regional strategies and plans of action. Following are its main objectives:

1. Reviewing and following-up on the implementation of WSIS outcomes, the RPoA for Building the Information Society in Western Asia, the Arab ICT Strategy and other national strategies and plans of action; this follow-up activity comes 5 years after the Geneva phase and 3 years after the Tunis phase;
2. Identifying new projects<sup>4</sup> for inclusion in the RPoA and in other plans of action, including the updated Arab ICT Strategy;
3. Updating the RPoA<sup>5</sup> and making recommendations for the enhancement of ICT strategies and plans of action, in light of accumulated experiences.

## 3. Topics

The topics of the conference are directly related to the recommendations, resolutions and action lines of the WSIS and of similar national and regional strategies and plans of action. They include:

1. Progress made in the formulation, adoption and implementation of national and regional ICT strategies;
2. Development of information and communication infrastructures across the ESCWA region, particularly broadband;
3. Promotion of the digital Arabic content industry and the online Arabic cultural heritage;
4. Development of the ICT sector in the region and the deployment of ICT applications in Arabic;
5. Development of an enabling environment for the Information Society at the national and regional levels;
6. Progress and prospects on the Arabic Domain Names;
7. Building security and confidence and trust in ICT and its applications;

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<sup>4</sup> To propose new projects that fulfill the WSIS objectives and are in line with the RPoA programmes (refer to Chapter III of the RPoA document), kindly fill out the attached [Project Proposal Form](#) for each and return it by e-mail to: [escwa-ictd@un.org](mailto:escwa-ictd@un.org)

<sup>5</sup> For the lead organizations implementing the projects currently listed in the RPoA (refer to Annex III of the RPoA document), kindly use the attached [Project Update Form](#) to update us on the progress of each project and return it by e-mail to: [escwa-ictd@un.org](mailto:escwa-ictd@un.org)

8. Regional achievements in the area of ICT capacity building;
9. Using ICT to empower women and youth;
10. Increasing access to ICT and deploying community telecentres;
11. The latest developments in issues related to Internet Governance;
12. Measuring the digital divide and the progress made towards the development of an equitable and people-oriented Information Society, through internationally agreed core indicators.

During the Conference, the Arab Region Network of the Global Alliance for ICT and Development (GAID) will be launched. GAID is an initiative that aims at finding innovative ways of harnessing the power of ICT for development. It started in 2006 under the auspices of the Secretary General of the United Nations. The regional networks of GAID, already in existence in other parts of the world, bring together experts and stakeholders to address ICT problems at the regional level and to identify and disseminate best practices.

#### 4. Outcomes

The main expected outcomes of the conference would be:

1. A progress report highlighting the implementation activities related to WSIS outcomes, the RPoA and the Arab ICT Strategy and will include lessons learned and success stories;
2. An updated version of the RPoA containing a list of new projects targeting the needs and realities of the Information Society for the period extending from 2009 to 2015;
3. A roadmap for the implementation and follow-up of future WSIS-related activities;
4. The creation of the aforementioned GAID Arab Region Network.

#### 5. Organization

The conference is organized by the ICT Division of ESCWA, under the patronage of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, in collaboration with the two leading facilitators of the WSIS, i.e. the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and in partnership with the League of Arab States (LAS), the Global Alliance for ICT and Development (GAID), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Cisco, Microsoft, the Syrian Computer Society (SCS), the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE), the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS) and Talal Abu-Ghazaleh International (TAGI).



The conference will take place at the Umayyad Congress Palace in Damascus between 16 and 18 June 2009.

#### 6. Participants and registration

The conference will include ministers, policy- and decision-makers who are directly involved in the implementation of WSIS action lines and regional and national plans of action in ESCWA member countries. Experts in ICT policies, applications and services, as well as representatives of the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), regional and international organizations will also be in attendance.

ESCWA hereby invites local, regional and international experts who are involved in the implementation of WSIS outcomes and related national and regional ICT strategies to submit papers for possible inclusion in the conference. The deadline for submitting the title and summary of a paper to be presented during the conference is 18 May 2009. The submitters of papers selected for the conference will be notified before 22 May 2009. The complete version of a selected paper must be submitted to ESCWA before 1 June 2009.

Participants may register for the conference by completing a registration form and submitting it, before 18 May 2009, to [escwa-ictd@un.org](mailto:escwa-ictd@un.org). The registration form is downloadable in word format from the following Web address: <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=850E>.

## **7. Languages**

Arabic and English are the working languages of the conference. Simultaneous translation from English to Arabic, and vice-versa, will be provided during plenary sessions.

## **8. Additional information and correspondence**

The above-mentioned Web page provides the latest information on the conference. For additional information, please write to:

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