



**Second Regional Preparatory Conference
for the
World Summit on the Information Society**

Partnership for building the Arab information society

Damascus, 22-23 November 2004

PRELIMINARY INFORMATION NOTE

1. Introduction:

The first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), held in Geneva during 10-12 December 2003, adopted a Declaration of Principles (DoP) and a global Plan of Action (PoA), setting the stage for international cooperation to close the existing digital divide between developing and developed countries while involving all stakeholders in building an inclusive information society. A key goal was set to develop universally accessible, equitable and affordable information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and services; and it was recognized that only through creating an enabling environment based on clear policies, laws and regulatory frameworks and building trust and confidence in ICT, that access can become truly universal.

The PoA attempted to set a roadmap to build such an environment and to make it sustainable, through planning for capacity building activities, including educating populations, establishing research, development and innovation practices as well as promoting ICT enterprises. Women as well as marginalized and vulnerable groups were looked upon as important constituents of the sought global information society, and in need of empowerment. The development of a multilingual, diverse and culturally appropriate content on the Internet, as well as the independence and pluralism of the media were considered essential for a global and inclusive information society. Actions were also suggested to share knowledge while respecting intellectual property rights to spur innovation and creativity.

The two issues that remained unsolved, however, were the global Internet governance and the funding of development projects. The United Nations Secretary General formed a Working Group on Internet Governance and a Task Force on Financial Mechanisms to study and make recommendations on both issues. The outputs of both groups should feed into the preparatory process for the second phase of WSIS, leading to appropriate decisions and actions.

As decided in the first Preparatory Committee meeting (PrepCom-1), the second phase of WSIS, to be held in Tunis during 16-18 November 2005, will focus on the “follow-up and implementation of the Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action by stakeholders at national, regional and international levels”¹. Preparations will be carried at the regional and global levels through regional, sub-regional and thematic conferences, the outcomes of which will feed into the (global) Preparatory Committee meetings, to produce draft documents to be adopted at the Tunis Summit. The Second Regional Preparatory Conference for WSIS, focusing on partnership for building the Arab information society, is part of the preparatory process for this second phase of the WSIS. While the Western Asia Preparatory Conference for WSIS, held in Beirut (February 2003), produced the Beirut Declaration, providing regional input to the Geneva DoP and PoA, this Conference should produce a Regional Plan of Action, taking into account regional needs for building a sustainable Arab information society.

¹ “Decision of PrepCom-1”, WSIS Executive Secretariat document: WSIS-II/PC-1/DOC/5-E, 26 June 2004.

2. Objectives:

The Second Regional Preparatory Conference for WSIS will follow up on the outcome of the first phase of the Summit, held in Geneva (December 2003), and will launch regional preparations for the second phase in Tunis (November 2005). Since the Tunis Summit will focus on the implementation of a global PoA, this Conference has the following objectives:

- Review of actions taken by Arab countries to reduce the digital divide in light of the outcome of the Geneva phase of WSIS;
- Adoption of a Regional Plan of Action, based on the Arab Strategy for Communications and Information, adopted by the Arab Summit in Amman (March 2001) and the global PoA adopted in the Geneva Summit;
- Active promotion of partnerships among the various stakeholders of the information society, including Government, private sector, non-governmental and international/regional organizations, in order to implement the Regional Plan of Action;
- Launching key regional projects that have the necessary funding and partnership to insure a high rate of success.

3. Issues:

The main issues to be dealt with at the Conference consist of those raised in the global DoP that are of primary concern to the region, particularly:

1. National ICT strategies and plans – lessons learned and regional coordination;
2. Regional Plan of Action for building the information society – towards the advancement, coordination and implementation of national and regional ICT activities for socio-economic development;
3. National and regional profiling – developing and sustaining the process;
4. Measuring the information society – collaboration in the specification of appropriate indicators, timely data collection/dissemination and building a regional framework for monitoring progress;
5. Priority ICT projects for the region – scope, partnership and financing;
6. Internet governance and the Arabic Domain Names;
7. Capacity-building, knowledge sharing, and innovation;
8. Empowering women in the Arab information society;
9. Enabling marginalized and disadvantaged communities;
10. Reaching the Millennium Development Goals in building the Arab information society.

4. Outcomes:

The most important outcome of the Conference will be the Regional Plan of Action, which will encompass major activities to be carried out at the regional and national levels, and which consists of:

- **A strategic framework** containing ten areas addressing a multitude of issues for building the information society and contributing to the creation of adequate endogenous capabilities for harnessing information and knowledge, thereby promoting socio-economic development in the region;
- **Action lines** aimed at streamlining actions at the regional level and at promoting the development of national capacity for achieving significant changes in the areas of the strategic framework and at a number of levels of intervention, with a view to serve women, youth, elderly, and special segments of the population such as impoverished communities and the disabled;
- **Programmes** aimed at triggering high-level partnerships and inducing interactive participation from a broad base of stakeholders, through serving the main areas of the strategic framework and identifying and developing a number of regional projects;

- **Projects** aimed at fulfilling the objectives of the programmes and at instigating fruitful partnerships and securing the necessary resources to proceed with implementation, thus acting as the building blocks for developing the information society;
- **Partnership and funding mechanisms** aimed at producing the desired impetus to migrate towards the information society in the region.

A “Call for Partnership” will also be launched during the conference in order to provide the momentum for a regional multi-stakeholder collaboration, enabling the successful implementation of projects and leading to the building of solid foundations for the Arab information society.

5. Organization:

The Second Regional Preparatory Conference for WSIS will be held under the patronage of H.E. Eng. Mohammad Naji Otri, Prime Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic, at the Umayyad Congress Palace, during 22-23 November 2004. The Conference is jointly organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Cairo Office and the Syrian Ministry of Communications and Technology (MoCT). It will be held in collaboration with other international and regional organizations and prominent civil society and private sector institutions.

Preceding the Conference, a Partnership Forum will be organized on 21 November 2004, with the aim of bringing donors, technical experts and beneficiaries together in order to discuss and agree on a number of projects and form partnerships for their implementation.

6. Participants/registration:

Governments, businesses, civil society institutions, regional/international organizations, media as well as individual experts in ICT policies, applications, and services, concerned with building the information society in the Arab region, are invited to actively participate through papers, presentations and discussions on the above topics related to ICT and the development of the information society.

Registration can be performed on-line at: <http://www.escwa.org.lb/wsisis/conference2/>. Since a username and password are required for registration and to allow updating of information in the participants central database, an application form should be submitted first, electronically at the above location in order to provide you with login information.

7. Language:

Both Arabic and English languages will be the working languages at the Conference. Therefore, simultaneous translation from Arabic to English and vice-versa will be provided during the sessions.

8. Additional information:

The Web page <http://www.escwa.org.lb/wsisis/conference2/main.html> provides the latest information on the Conference. Submissions, inquiries and requests for additional information should be addressed to:

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