ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT

OF THE CONFERENCE ON REGIONAL FOLLOW-UP TO THE OUTCOME OF THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY DAMASCUS, 16-18 JUNE 2009

Summary

The main objectives of the World Summit on the Information Society (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 Summit took place in two phases, Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005. The Geneva phase adopted a Plan of Action (PoA) that advocated the use of information and knowledge for the achievement of internationally agreed development goals, while the Tunis phase reviewed the progress made and re-affirmed participants' commitment to building a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society.

In Western Asia, ESCWA took a leading role in the WSIS process since its inception. In preparation for the Summit, ESCWA organized two regional conferences, the Western Asia Preparatory Conference for WSIS in early 2003 and the Second Regional Preparatory Conference for WSIS – Partnership for Building the Arab Information Society, during the latter part of 2004, which resulted in the production of the Regional Plan of Action for Building the Information Society (RPoA).

The Conference on Regional Follow-up to the Outcome of WSIS was held in Damascus, from 16 to 18 June 2009, at the Umayyad Congress Palace, and was organized by ESCWA, under the patronage of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, in collaboration with the two leading facilitators of the WSIS, namely the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and in partnership with several leading Arab and international organizations.

The main objective of the Conference was to provide a forum where various WSIS stakeholders in the ESCWA region could meet to present, discuss and review the progress made towards the implementation of the eleven WSIS action lines and the execution of the projects within the RPoA and other similar regional strategies and plans of action. The Conference resulted in updating the RPoA projects, launching the Global Alliance for Information and Communication Technologies and Development (GAID), Regional Arab Network, and adopting the "Damascus Proclamation for Strengthening the Arab Knowledge Society for Sustainable Socioeconomic Development".

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Introduction

1.   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 information and communications technology (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."[1] The Geneva PoA also included 11 action lines which aim at promoting: (a) the role of governments and all stakeholders in the promotion of ICTs for development; (b) information and communication infrastructure; (c) access to information and knowledge; (d) capacity-building; (e) building confidence and security in the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs); (f) enabling environment; (g) ICT applications; (h) cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content; (i) media; (j) ethical dimensions of the information society; and (k) international and regional cooperation.

2.   The Tunis phase reviewed the progress made since the first phase and re-affirmed the participants' commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society. The "Tunis Commitment"[2] 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"[3] 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.

3.   In Western Asia, ESCWA took 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 and national and regional needs and priorities. During the latter part of 2004, in accordance with the recommendations of the Geneva phase and in preparation for the second phase of the WSIS in Tunis, ESCWA organized the "Second Regional Preparatory Conference for WSIS – Partnership for Building the Arab Information Society", which resulted in the production of the "Regional Plan of Action for Building the Information Society".[4] 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.

4.   In order to propel the WSIS forward and to accelerate the implementation of the Geneva PoA, the Tunis Agenda and the RPoA, ESCWA held the conference, subject of this report, entitled "Regional Follow-up to the Outcome of the World Summit on the Information Society" at the Umayyad Congress Palace in Damascus, from 16 to 18 June 2009. The conference was organized by the Information and Communication Technology Division (ICTD) of ESCWA, under the patronage of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, in collaboration with the two leading facilitators of the WSIS, namely, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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[1] Plan of action (WSIS-03/GENEVA/DOC/5-E), Para. 4.

[2] Tunis commitment (WSIS-05/TUNIS/DOC/007-E).

[3] Tunis agenda for the information society (WSIS-05/TUNIS/DOC/6(Rev.1)-E).

[4] Regional plan of action for building the information society (E/ESCWA/ICTD/2004/4).

(UNESCO), and in partnership with the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS), the Arab Administrative Development Organization (ARADO), Cisco, the Global Alliance for Information and Communication Technologies and Development (GAID), the International Development Research Center (IDRC), the League of Arab States, Microsoft, the Syrian Computer Society (SCS), Syrian Telecom Establishment (STE) and Talal Abu-Ghazaleh & Co. International (TAGI).

5.   The three days of the conference encompassed 24 thematic sessions distributed across three ICT-related tracks, namely, strategies, applications and development, and included panels on ICT financing, building ICT research capacity and new project proposals for consideration in the RPoA. The GAID Regional Arab Network was launched and the RPoA was updated, closing completed or terminated projects and adding new ones. The conference culminated in the "Damascus Proclamation for the Promotion of the Arab Knowledge Society for Sustainable Economic and Social Development".

I. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.   As a result of discussions of the meeting, participants agreed on the following:

(a)   The production, by ESCWA, of an updated version of the RPoA, which will contain a list of new projects targeting the needs and realities of the information society for the period extending from 2009 to 2015 and which will contribute to the implementation and follow-up of future WSIS-related activities;

(b)   The establishment of the GAID Regional Arab Network and its steering committee;

(c)   The adoption of "Damascus Proclamation for the Promotion of the Arab Knowledge Society for Sustainable Economic and Social Development" which:

    (i)   Calls on Arab governments:

        1. To accelerate the implementation of national and regional strategies and create an enabling environment for developing the information society and the ICT sector specifically;

        2. To encourage foreign direct investment in the ICT sector and increase national budgets for ICT-related programmes and scientific and technological research targeting socio-economic development;

        3. To stimulate cooperation between ESCWA member countries in the implementation of socio-economic development programmes and increase shared expertise and lessons learned from other member countries;

    (ii)   Calls on non-governmental organizations (NGOs):

        1. To actively participate in the implementation of national and regional action plans, with the aim of accelerating the development of the information society in the ESCWA region;

        2. To raise awareness and conduct trainings on issues such as Internet security, protecting children from online exploitation, and promoting digital Arabic content;

        3. To participate in programmes focused on empowering women, youth and marginalized groups in the utilization of ICTs.

(iii) Calls on the private sector:

1. To implement regional ICT infrastructure projects, with the aim of increasing connectivity between member countries, and participate in technological development and the development of the ICT sector in alignment with regional needs;

2. Collaborate with the public sector in the implementation of national and regional strategies for building the information society, and take an active role in introducing the latest technologies as required.

(iv) Calls on international and regional organizations, specifically ESCWA, ITU, UNESCO and the League of Arab States:

1. To continue to coordinate efforts and increase cooperation between them in order to implement regional plans for building the information society;

2. To provide technical support to member countries and continue to host regional conferences and workshops on topics of importance to the region, such as broadband services, promoting the ICT sector and promoting digital Arabic content (DAC);

3. To follow-up on the implementation of national and regional projects with various stakeholders within the ICT field;

4. To unify efforts in issues of global importance such as e-governance and Arabic Domain Names System (ADNS);

5. To increase capacity-building efforts focused on implementing regional projects related to creating an enabling environment, improving e-services and measuring the information society.

(d) Regarding the thematic sessions, the recommendations were:

(i) To focus on ensuring universal access and better ICT services for member countries and creating a vibrant and competitive ICT industry in the region, at the heart of regional ICT strategies;

(ii) To improve ICT survey and data gathering tools, and unify WSIS indicators, while still taking into consideration factors such as disparities in levels of development and national circumstances across the region that can often skew indicators;

(iii) To promote the ICT sector through telecommunications liberalization and the creation of a competitive broadband market, which can stimulate economic growth and bridge the access gap for under-serviced areas;

(iv) To advocate multilingualism on the Internet, the creation of ADNS and the reservation of the generic Top Level Domain (gTLD) .arab and   .;

(v) To promote ICT training and capacity-building, with a focus on Free and Open Source Software (FOSS), and to encourage the full utilization of ICTs by citizens and organizations to allow them to move towards the information society;

(vi) To build trust in e-services through legislative and technical frameworks and awareness campaigns and the continued improvement of e-services;

(vii) To continue raising awareness among all stakeholders (civil society, academic institutions, public and private sector) of the potentials of digital Arabic content (DAC) for job creation and global trading, and the need to create a collaborative environment and a comprehensive strategy to tackle its development;

(viii) To harmonize cyber legislation across the region in order to effectively tackle cyber crime and protect online privacy;

(ix) To develop a regional consensus on Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) laws in order to protect these rights, strengthen copyright and content industries and subsequently boost economic development in the region;

(x) To involve youth early on in the planning stages of ICT for development (ICT4D) projects, whether to promote entrepreneurship, community development or job creation;

(xi) To continue utilizing ICT tools to empower women, focusing on networking between different projects and stakeholders to avoid overlap, and emphasizing the importance of financial sustainability, partnerships and proper management to ensure the success of the projects;

(xii) To promote the use of social media (Web 2.0 and Web 3.0) in community development, taking into consideration user training needs to address obstacles such as language barriers and the ever-growing number of tools.

II. DISCUSSION TOPICS

7.   The subjects addressed during the conference sessions are summarized in the sections below, and were distributed over three ICT-related tracks, namely, strategies, applications and development.

TRACK 1 (STRATEGIES)

A. REGIONAL ICT STRATEGIES

8.   The session on 'Regional ICT Strategies' included presentations on regional ICT strategies across the ESCWA member countries, covering strategies developed by the League of Arab States, the Arab Business Forum for ICT and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), on building the information society and following up on the WSIS actions lines. The session also included an overview of the RPoA and an update on the status of its projects.

9.   The session highlighted the importance of utilizing ICTs to build an Arab information society that could promote sustainable development. It emphasized the need to ensure universal access and better ICT services for member countries and to create a vibrant and competitive ICT industry in the region – with a focus on business process outsourcing and its potential for the region. The session also illustrated the need to improve the survey tools and data gathering processes and unify WSIS follow-up indicators, an issue that ESCWA is working on in conjunction with the League of Arab States and ITU, among others.

B. ICT SECTOR

10.   The session on 'ICT Sector' covered the following topics: Arab telecom, broadcast and Internet broad band markets; public private partnerships (PPPs) and their role in corporate social responsibility; the promotion of the ICT sector through incubation; and the importance of the liberalization of telecommunications in order to promote regional development.

11.   The session mainly used the case of Lebanon to highlight different issues pertaining to the ICT sector in the ESCWA region, alluding to Berytech, Lebanon's premier business incubation facility, and the Partnership for Lebanon, which aims to help the people of Lebanon find stability and long-term economic growth through PPPs. Lebanon's telecom sector was used to illustrate the stagnating effects of telecom monopolies and regional disparities in telecom penetration within the country. Liberalizing telecom markets and creating a solid strategic framework with a focus on creating a competitive broadband market was offered as a way to provide better telecom services, bridge the access gap for under-serviced areas and stimulate general economic growth.

C. ICT INFRASTRUCTURE

12.   The session on 'ICT Infrastructure' took a look at ICT infrastructure from several different perspectives. Various presentations illustrated the role of ITU as facilitator and stakeholder through its flagship initiatives in the development of ICT infrastructure; Next Generation Networks and the evolution of the consumer experience; the convergence of ICT and media; telecom infrastructure in the Syrian Arab Republic; and the Iraqi experience of implementing government-wide ICT infrastructure.

13.   The session highlighted not only the developments in ICT infrastructure across the ESCWA region, whether in terms of increased fixed line penetration and increased access to broadband, but also the evolution of its users (with a shift towards consumer-generated content) and the advancements in the applications and services provided through this infrastructure.

D. INTERNET GOVERNANCE/ADNS

14.   The session on 'Internet Governance' focused on important issues related to Internet governance and ADNS, including Top Level Domains (TLDs), generic TLDs (gTLDs), country code TLDs (ccTLDs), Domain Name System Security Extensions (DNSSec) and Internet Protocol version 6 (IPv6). The evolution of the Internet and its governance over the years was detailed. The role of the ITU and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) to facilitate and build consensus in coordinating the Internet's unique identifiers and ensuring the stable operation of their systems was outlined. A brief overview of the history of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) was also presented, along with information on the upcoming IGF '09.

15.   The session stressed that international management of the Internet should be multilateral, transparent and democratic, with the full involvement of Governments, private sector, civil society and international organizations. Participants also called for multilingualism and the reservation of the Arabic gTLD .arab.

E. NATIONAL ICT STRATEGIES

16.   The session on 'National ICT Strategies' surveyed several information society strategies across the ESCWA region, in light of the WSIS outcomes, namely those of Egypt, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Sudan and Yemen.

17.   Common themes that were touched on include upgrading ICT infrastructure (including broadband), access to ICTs and the proper training and capacity-building needed for people to utilize them, trust and security, an enabling environment, developing and refining information society indicators, and promoting the ICT and DAC industry. Overall, the presentations highlighted the importance of fully utilizing ICTs by citizens and organizations to allow them to move towards the information society.

F. MEASUREMENTS/INDICATORS

18.   The session on 'Measurements/Indicators' dealt with the measurement of ICT indicators across the ESCWA region. It highlighted such dissemination and capacity-building tools as ESCWA's Information Society Portal for the ESCWA Region (ISPER)[5] and the ESCWA Statistical Information System (ESIS).[6] Statistical irregularities occur in data gathering at the regional level, due in part to the absence of a holistic framework for measuring the impact of ICT indicators.

19.   Participants noted the need for consolidated indicators, gender-disaggregated indicators, and field surveys to measure Internet user habits. Insufficient consideration of varying levels of development and differing national circumstances across the ESCWA region often skew these indicators, as was also noted by the participants.

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[5] See: http://isper.escwa.un.org.

[6] See: http://esis.escwa.un.org.

G. SECURITY AND TRUST

20.   The session on 'Security and Trust' covered issues of safety and trust in the utilization of ICTs. It underscored security best practice, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) guidelines for the security of information systems. Security policy was identified as the most pressing regional need. Presentations also addressed the creation of an e-safety agenda in the region to benefit youth and families and highlighted the Tunisian experience in implementing cyber security. Building trust in e-services was also a main point of discussion, relying on an ESCWA study on the issue.

21.   Information security and software security are two regional issues that need to be addressed. Three pillars of cyber security were outlined: technology, methodology, and social behaviour. The obstacles to building user trust in e-services were found to be: persuading users of added value of migrating to a digital platform; ICT infrastructures that are susceptible to infiltration; legal loopholes in the digital environment; and a weak legal framework for information security. The ESCWA study outlined a five-pronged strategy to overcome these obstacles encompassing legislative, technical and national frameworks, awareness-raising and improving e-services.

H. ICT IN EDUCATION

22.   The session on 'ICT in Education' covered the uses of ICT in higher education, life-long learning and distance learning. The case of the Arab Open University was presented, as was that of the Syrian Virtual University.

23.   The session addressed the readiness (or lack thereof) of universities in capacity-building and moving the region towards the knowledge society, and the importance of networking universities. It also highlighted the role of ICTs in creating a shift in educational models towards learner-centred learning. Participants agreed that ICTs can act as a catalyst in reshaping higher education and making use of economies of scale to meet growing demand. The creation of Arabic educational content was also high on the list of priorities in promoting ICT in education, and several challenges were pointed out, including accessibility, connectivity, bandwidth and speed and adapting to a new culture of virtual- and self-learning.

I. CAPACITY-BUILDING

24.   This session further elaborated the role of ICT in capacity-building, providing educational and training tools and generally building human capacity for development through ICT. Areas of capacity-building included human resource development, ICT enterprises and R&D. Special attention was made to FOSS applications, with regional examples such as Ma3bar.org and national examples such as the Jordan Computer Society's initiative to train and employ graduates. The experience of the United Nations Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development (UNAPCICT) was touched on in creating an inclusive and participatory approach to ICT training by developing the Academy of ICT Essentials for Government Leaders.

J. ICT APPLICATIONS

25.   The session on 'ICT Applications' focused on areas such as commerce, government, public administration and governance. Frameworks for developing e-government specifically were presented by the United Nations University and the Egyptian Government, promoting the concepts of reform and e-readiness, and outlining necessary steps such human capacity-building and organizational capacity-building.

26.   Participants agreed that e-commerce and e-government are not merely IT applications, but they require a fundamental change in business environment, legal and regulatory frameworks and social culture and the promotion of the 'e-citizen' through ICT training and education.

K. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

27. The session on 'Legal Framework' tackled the needs and obstacles to the creation of a comprehensive legal framework for ICT in the Arab world. Cyber legislation plays an important role in protecting personal information, online privacy and intellectual property. It also facilitates electronic transactions, electronic signatures and e-commerce and helps limit cyber crimes.

28. Participants reviewed the current cyber legislation situation in the ESCWA region; findings included a lack of cyber laws in general and slow legal procedures due to bureaucracy and the large number of involved agencies. Unifying and harmonizing cyber legislation across the region was deemed as the most pressing need.

L. INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS

29. The session on 'Intellectual Property Rights' addressed intellectual property rights, copyright industries and copyright protection. Protecting intellectual property was hailed as an incentive for innovation and a tool for economic development, giving a competitive edge to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and emerging markets.

30. Participants noted that laws in the Arab region are too general and rarely prevent copyright infringement since it's not considered a punishable crime. It was recommended that ESCWA member countries reach a regional consensus on intellectual property rights and incorporate it into their cyber legislation

TRACK 3 (DEVELOPMENT)

M. ICT FOR DEVELOPMENT

31. The session on 'ICT for Development' dealt with the utilization of ICT in bridging the digital divide and promoting sustainable development. It addressed the fact that ICTs can help bridge the gap between the 'have's and the 'have-not's in several areas, such as trade. Regarding the latter, Jordan for example, has chosen e-commerce as the platform to allow SMEs to enter into new markets, recruiting the Amman Chamber of Commerce to help break down any barriers, provide necessary training and support, and most importantly, raise awareness of the benefits of e-commerce to vendors. E-commerce was also highlighted as a tool to build the information society in Palestine, along with building the ICT industry, promoting the DAC industry, and using ICTs for capacity-building and educational services.

32. ICTs were also discussed as a tool for creating jobs, especially for the poor and illiterate. Because of their pervasiveness in underdeveloped areas, mobile technologies can play a great role in social networking, knowledge dissemination and transferring money, among other things. Moreover, with the rise of youth unemployment, ICT can play an important role either by creating ICT-related jobs, or as a tool for the facilitation of training, capacity-building, job-seeking, and linking skilled people to potential jobs. Common threads in the discussions were: the need to address poverty, illiteracy and education when creating strategies for development; the importance of instilling a framework to promote entrepreneurship in youth and SMEs; and the need to address demand for content created in Arabic and translations of content in other languages.

N. DIGITAL ARABIC CONTENT

33. The session on 'Digital Arabic Content' gave an overview of the field and the importance of promoting it. Currently, the presence of Arabic content on the Internet is weak, and strengthening it would pave the way towards the development of an Arabic content industry with potential for significant job creation in the region and the ability to market and trade the region's products globally. Obstacles facing DAC industry, include the following: lack of adequate Arabic search engines; the need to raise awareness among stakeholders (civil society, academic institutions, private and public sectors) of the importance of DAC; and the importance of creating a collaborative environment and a comprehensive strategy to tackle its development.

34.   Such projects as ESCWA's 'Promoting DAC through incubation', UNESCO's "Memory of the Arab World" (which documents, safeguards and disseminates Arab heritage, thus boosting DAC) and tools to develop research related to DAC from the Higher Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology (HIAST) are all part of the regional effort to promote DAC.

O. COMMUNITY TELECENTRES

35.   The session on 'Community Telecentres' addressed their role in community development, including presentations on the Telecentre.org project and its implementation in the ESCWA region. The global project 'Knowledge networks through ICT access points for disadvantaged communities' is being implemented by all five United Nations regional commissions. The Connected Communities and Business Initiative sponsored by Partnership for Lebanon, Knowledge Stations in Jordan and telecentres in the Syrian Arab Republic and the Sudan were also discussed.

36.   It was agreed that a telecentre is generally defined as a community centre with access to ICT, which serves local communities with a focus on rural and underprivileged areas. Its main goals are social and community development, job creation and economic growth, and ICT training and capacity-building. Telecentres in the ESCWA region have offered applications such as e-agriculture, telehealth, and ICT for disaster control. Some of the challenges facing telecentres are the cost of infrastructure, low speed Internet and high fees (especially in rural areas). The difficulty of ensuring the sustainability of telecentres was seen as the biggest challenge, involving social, financial, technological and institutional aspects that need to be taken into consideration.

P. EMPOWERING YOUTH

37.   The session on 'Empowering Youth' covered two main themes: empowering women and youth through the use of Internet and ICTs and protecting children from Internet exploitation by promoting safe behaviour. Projects presented on empowerment included 'Women and Children's Rights through Access to Information and Responsible Arab Citizen (Resp-Act)' of ICT for Development in the Arab Region (ICTDAR). Two IDRC projects were presented, the Massar 'I Can, We Can' project in the Syrian Arab Republic, which promotes youth involvement in ICT-based volunteering and 'Youth in Technology for Community Development in Yemen', which aims to enhance the utilization of ICTs by youth and NGOs in Yemen. Lebanon's Ministry of Social Affairs and Himaya, Lebanon, each presented strategies on keeping the Internet safe for children and users in general.

38.   There was a general consensus that children and youth should be involved at the planning stages of projects and strategies, by raising awareness of problems and dangers of the Internet, helping them address and solve these problems, and focusing on the positive uses and benefits of ICTs and the Internet for themselves and their communities.

Q. WOMEN IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

39.   The session on 'Women in the Information Society' emphasized the role ICT can play in empowering women by combating illiteracy, stepping up awareness through educational, nutritional and health programmes, improving women's economic standing through income-generating programmes and reducing unemployment through job creation and capacity-building, specifically building skills in business, professional development and entrepreneurship.

40.   Projects presented included: UNESCO's project on the eradication of rural illiteracy in the Arab States, currently being implemented in the Sudan and Yemen; an overview of the work of the regional NGO, Women in Technology and the Lebanese NGO, Women in IT, both of which empower women and enhance their role in society through cutting-edge training in ICT; and the experience of the UNESCO Chair for Communication Technology for Women in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Some recommendations that were agreed upon include networking between different projects and stakeholders to avoid overlap; creating a preparatory committee for the upcoming Women's World Summit; promoting the use of open learning; and the importance of financial sustainability, partnerships and proper management to the success of these projects.

R. NETWORKING FOR DEVELOPMENT

41.   The session on 'Networking for Development' focused on the uses of ICTs in social networking, with emphasis on interactive Web technologies like Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 that allow for more novel and effective one-to-one experiences and have changed how users interact with content. The shift has been towards information sharing and collaboration among users, which in turn has led to the development and evolution of web-based communities such as social networking sites (like Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube), wikis, and blogs.

42.   Presentations highlighted the uses of social media for NGOs and social practitioners, in particular their effectiveness in disaster recovery, such as the aftermath of the 2006 war in Lebanon and their role in networking rural communities in the Syrian Arab Republic. Challenges reported in using social media to connect local communities include literacy and language barriers (including the time-consuming nature of translation to Arabic), sustainability and the ever-expanding number of tools that need to be learned.

PANELS

S. GROUP DISCUSSIONS

43.   Each track contained a panel on a thematic subject: Investment in ICT Financing; Building Research Capacity in ICT4D in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region; and the GAID Regional Arab Network.

44.   The first of these panels 'Investment in ICT Financing' addressed a theme that reoccurred throughout the sessions: the fact that ESCWA member countries as a whole are predominantly ICT consumers rather than producers. Major questions were raised on how to connect capital and the workforce and how to link universities to labour markets thus strengthening the ICT industry. Moreover it was agreed that the legislative environment for the ICT industry is weak, as is funding. Venture capital was lauded as a good funding mechanism, as it encompasses project management and administration. Incubation was also hailed as a great tool to foster and promote entrepreneurship. Lack of funding, particularly for smaller projects between $100,000 and 1 million, was pointed out as one of the main reasons for not implementing several of the RPoA projects. The point of view in the ESCWA region of not accepting failure was also criticized for inhibiting entrepreneurial efforts.

45.   The current economic crisis was seen as a factor in ICT sector's lack of growth in the ESCWA region. Several recommendations were made regarding the promotion of the sector, including: prioritizing the ICT sector when formulating development strategies; promoting innovation and entrepreneurship; providing the right legal and regulatory framework; liberalizing the telecom sector; supporting ICT incubators and venture capital; and establishing scientific parks to take over when the projects have moved out of incubation phase.

46.   The second panel 'Building Research Capacity in ICT4D in MENA Region' started with a thematic presentation on ICT4D Research in Mediterranean Arab Countries, and was followed by a discussion on building research capacity in the use of ICT4D in the MENA region. The main presentation defined ICT4D in the region as "Using the unique characteristics of ICT to improve the effectiveness and/or efficiency of developmental interventions", and gave stakeholders' analysis of the region's ICT4D research and guiding principles to respond to the prevailing issues of mismatch between ICT tools and development efforts. Discussions addressed the difficulty that the region faces in linking research to development, and the reliance on international sources rather than local research data in addressing the subject. The affordability of Internet access was considered critical for inclusion in research programmes, as lowering the cost of access to networks is a subject of research and project replication to enhance the quality of life of rural people. Furthermore, the link between the user and programmer of ICT applications was emphasized, to ensure participation at the planning rather than implementation phases.

47.   The last of these panels 'GAID Regional Arab Network', gave an overview of the experience of the GAID in user-based on-line platforms and introduced the Regional Arab Network and its steering committee.

GAID was established as a bridge between the Millennium Summit and the WSIS outcomes and its mission is to provide an inclusive global forum for cross-sectoral policy dialogue and advocacy promoting the use of ICT for the achievement of internationally-agreed development goals.

48.   The panel outlined the four areas GAID aims to develop through ICT: education, health, entrepreneurship and governance. Activities within these areas take place in the form of flagship initiatives, communities of expertise, stakeholder networks and regional networks. The GAID Regional Arab Network (GAID RAN) was launched within the conference. The panel then presented the terms of reference for GAID RAN steering committee and took a vote on its membership.

T. New regional projects for the RPoA

49.   Each track also contained a panel proposing projects for inclusion in the revised RPoA. These projects were filtered by relevance to each of the tracks themes as follows:

Track 1: (Strategies)	- Establishment of a Domain Name Registry for the ".arab" and " ." gTLDs; - Promotion of the ADNS – Phase II; - Unification of Information Society Measurements; - Electronics Disassembly, Refurbishment and Recycling Centers; - ESCWA Excellence Award for the Best Achievement in Building the Information Society.
Track 2 (Applications):	- Implementing the e-Safety Agenda in the Region; - A Classification Framework for Economic Industries and Activities; - Enhancing Distance Learning and Educational Content in Arab Universities; - Harmonization of Cyber Legislation; - Strengthening the ICT Capacity of Government Leaders in the ESCWA Region.
Track 3: (Development):	- ICT for Development – People with Disabilities; - Women in Technology; - Promotion of DAC Industry through Incubation – Phase II; - Knowledge Networks through ICT Access Points for Disadvantaged Communities; - Linguistic and Technical Standards for DAC.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. Venue and date

50.   The conference was held from 16 to 18 June 2009, at the Umayyad Congress Palace in Damascus.

B. Opening and keynote speeches

51.   The meeting was formally opened by H.E. Dr. Imad Sabouni, Syrian Minister of Communications and Technology in the presence of Mr. Badr Omar AlDafa, Executive Secretary of ESCWA, who delivered the welcome speech on behalf of the Commission. This was preceded by opening statements delivered by Mr. Sami Al-Basheer Al-Mourshid, Director of ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau, Mr. Talal Abu Ghazaleh, Chairman and CEO of the parent organization over TAGI and Mr. Abdelaziz Abid of UNESCO.

52.   After the opening session, keynote speeches were delivered by partners and sponsors, namely the League of Arab States, STE, IDRC, ARADO, Microsoft, Cisco, SCS, AITRS in addition to ESCWA.
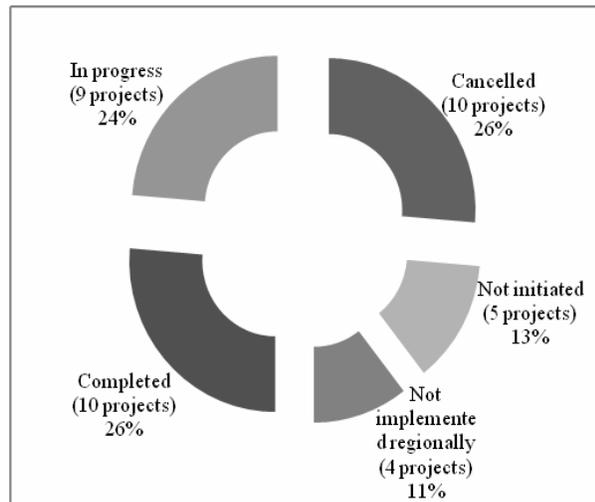
53.   The plenary session preceding the Conference closing was utilized for the official launch of the GAID Regional Arab Network, by Mr. Yousef Nusseir, Chief of ICTD, ESCWA, and an update of the status of the RPoA project implementation, provided by Mr. Mansour Farah, Chief of the ICT Policies Section at ESCWA.

54.   The launching of the GAID Regional Arab Network included the naming of its Steering Group members, including:

Chairman – Mr. Bader Omar AlDafa, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ESCWA.
Ms. Hessa Sultan Al-Jaber, Secretary-General, Supreme Council of ICT, Doha, Qatar (hessa@ict.gov.qa).
Mr. Abdulrahman A. Mazi, Managing Director, National Information Systems, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (aamazi@hotmail.com).
Mr. Ahmed El-Sherbini, Deputy Minister for International Affairs, Ministry of CIT/NTI, Cairo, Egypt (sherbini@mcit.gov.eg, sherbini@nti.sci.eg).
Mr. Farouk Kamoun, Director of Laboratory Research, Manouba University, Tunisia (frk.kamoun@planet.tn).
Mr. Mohamed Bachir Al Mounajed, Chairman, Softcad Company, Former Minister of Communications and Technology, Damascus, the Syrian Arab Republic (softcad@wanadoo.fr).
Mr. Nasser Khalaf, Director-General, National Information Technology Center, Amman, Jordan (nasser.k@nitc.gov.jo).
Mr. Ali Shraydeh, General Manager, Central Agency for Information Technology, Kuwait.
Mr. Yousef Nusseir, Chief, ICTD, ESCWA, Beirut, Lebanon (nusseir@un.org).
Mr. Akram Al-Rayess, Executive Director, TAG Consultants, Beirut Office, Beirut, Lebanon (arayess@tag-consultants.com).

55.   The status of RPoA projects was updated for all the projects, and the chart below shows that of the 38 projects, 10 were cancelled, five were not initiated, five were not implemented at the regional level, with 10 projects completed and nine in progress. Following the update on projects and considering the newly proposed projects within the RPoA, participants agreed to the production of an updated version of the RPoA, including the list of new projects, targeting the needs and realities of the information society for the period extending from 2009 to 2015 and which provides a roadmap for the implementation and follow-up of future WSIS-related activities. Participants also agreed on the need to draft a progress report highlighting the implementation activities related to the outcome of WSIS, the RPoA and the Arab ICT Strategy, including lessons learned and success stories.

56.   The participants were of the opinion that regional conferences such as this one are highly important in order to follow-up the implementation of the Geneva Plan of Action and Tunis Agenda. In general, the discussions over three days fostered connections and improved understanding of the issues related to further developing information societies and promoting knowledge-based economies in the region.

57. Deliberations also welcomed the establishment of the aforementioned GAID Regional Arab Network and its steering group, and adopted the "Damascus Proclamation for Strengthening the Arab Knowledge Society for Sustainable Socioeconomic Development". Following the final session of recommendations, the Conference was closed by H.E. Mr. Imad Sabouni, the Syrian Minister of Communications and Technology, who thanked all the participants and ESCWA for their efforts in making the conference a success.

D. PARTICIPANTS

58. The conference involved 275 participants, including 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 and representatives of the private sector, NGOs, regional and international organizations were also in attendance.

E. AGENDA

59. The agenda of the conference is summarized and set forth below:

1.	Opening ceremony and keynote speeches.		
2.	Track 1 (Strategies):	(a)	Regional ITC Strategies;
		(b)	ICT Sector;
		(c)	ICT Infrastructure;
		(d)	Internet Governance/ADNS;
		(e)	National ICT Strategies;
		(d)	Measurements/Indicators.
3.	Track 2 (Applications):	(a)	Security and Trust;
		(b)	ICT in Education;
		(c)	Capacity-building;
		(d)	ICT Applications;
		(e)	Legal Framework;
		(d)	Intellectual Property Rights.
4.	Track 3 (Development):	(a)	ICT for Development;
		(b)	Digital Arabic Content;
		(c)	Community Telecenters;
		(d)	Empowering Youth;
		(e)	Women in the Information Society;
		(d)	Networking for Development.
5.	Panels:	(a)	Investment and ICT Financing;
		(b)	Building Research Capacity in ICT4D in MENA Region;
		(c)	GAID Regional Arab Network;
		(d)	New Regional Projects for the RPoA.
6.	Plenary:	(a)	Launching GAID Regional Arab Network;
		(b)	Updating the RPoA.
7.	Closing Session: Damascus Proclamation.		

F. DOCUMENTS

60. A list of the Conference documents is contained in the annex of this report, and available on the ESCWA website, at: http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=850E.

LIST OF DOCUMENTS

Outcome
Damascus Proclamation for Strengthening the Arab Knowledge Society for Sustainable Socioeconomic Development
Track 1 - Strategies
Regional ICT Strategies (Chair: Bachir Mounajed)
Khaled Foda (League of Arab States): Arab ICT Strategy - Building the Information Society Until 2012
Mohamed Abdel Wahab (Arab Business Forum for ICT - Egypt): Arab ICT Strategies for ICT Services
Mansour Farah (ESCWA): Regional Plan of Action (RPOA) - Part 1
Racha Mourtada (ESCWA): Regional Plan of Action (RPOA) - Part 2
Mohamed Timoulali (ECA): Implementing the WSIS Action Lines in Africa: Analysis of Country Reports
ICT Sector (Chair: Gabriel Deek)
Jawad Jalal Abbassi (Arab Advisors Group - Jordan): Overview of the Arab Telecom and Internet Broadband Markets
Paulette Assaf (Partnership for Lebanon - Lebanon): PPP Model - Partnership for Lebanon
Nicholas Rouhana (Berytech - Lebanon): Promoting the ICT Sector through Incubation: The Case of Berytech
Maroulla Haddad (TRA - Lebanon): Liberalization of Telecoms - A Catalyst for Regional Development
ICT Infrastructure (Chair: Sami Al-Basheer Al-Mourshid)
Jaroslaw Ponder (ITU): Roadmap for ICT Infrastructure Development
Mohamed Mohsen (Cisco - Lebanon): Next Generation Networks and the "Need to Connect"
Robert Madi (Mindshare - Lebanon): Convergence of ICT and Media
Marwan Hanna (STE - Syrian Arab Republic): Telecom Infrastructure in Syria
Mahmood Sharief AlShaikhli (Ministry of Science and Technology - Iraq): Government-wide ICT Infrastructure
Internet Governance/ADNS (Chair: Ahmed El-Sherbini)
Marco Obiso (ITU): International Public Policy Issues Related to the Internet and the Role of the Government
Baher Esmat (ICANN): The Latest Developments in Issues Related to Internet Governance
Ibaa Oueichek (STE - Syrian Arab Republic): Arabic Domain Names: Regional Issues and Activities
Charles Sha'ban (TAGI): Update on the Internet Governance Forum (IGF)
Mohammad Fathi (MoCIT - Egypt): Preparations for IGF Sharm El-Sheikh 2009

Panel: New Regional Projects for the RPoA (Chair: Mansour Farah)
Ibaa Oueichek (STE - Syrian Arab Republic): Establishment of a Domain Name Registry for the ".arab" and " ." gTLDs
Mansour Farah (ESCWA): Promotion of the ADNS - Phase II
Rami Zaatari (ESCWA): Unification of Information Society Measurements
Hania Sabbidin Dimassi (ESCWA): Electronics Disassembly, Refurbishment and Recycling Centres
Mansour Farah (ESCWA): ESCWA Excellence Award for Best Achievement in Building the Information Society
National ICT Strategies (Chair: Amr Armanazi)
Ahmed El-Sherbini (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology - Egypt): Egypt's Information Society Strategies in Light of WSIS Outcomes
Tania Zaroubi (OMSAR - Lebanon): Lebanon: On the Road to the Information Society
Wael Obeid (MoCT - Syrian Arab Republic): Follow-up on the Implementation of Syria's ICT Strategy and Policy
Yahya al-Rewi (Aden University - Yemen): Yemen and WSIS Outcomes
Akram Ahmed (Ministry of Science and Technology - the Sudan): Sudan's Efforts in Implementing WSIS Outcomes
Measurements/Indicators (Chair: Bassel Khechi)
Rami Zaatari (ESCWA): ICT Measurement - A Regional Perspective
Abdul Kader Kamli (Madar Research - United Arab Emirates): Statistical Irregularities Facing ICT Research in the ESCWA Region
Salma Abbasi (The e Worldwide Group - United Arab Emirates): Holistic Framework to Measure the Impact of ICTs
Eman Yassin (CAPMAS - Egypt): Measuring the Impact of Communication Technology Towards Building the Information Society
Sukaina Al-Nasrawi (ESCWA): ISPER / ESIS for Measurement and Knowledge Sharing
Track 2 - Applications
Security & Trust (Chair: Marco Obiso)
Mohammed Fathy (MCIT - Egypt): Towards an e-Safety Agenda in the Arab World
Belhassen Zouari (NACS - Tunisia): Tunisian Experience in Establishing the First CSIRT in Africa
Nibal Idlebi (ESCWA): Building Trust in e-Services in the ESCWA Region
Saleem Zoughbi (ESCWA): Implementation of Sound Security Practices - Regional Analysis
ICT in Education (Chair: Nashat Mansour)
Fairouz Sarkis (AOU - Lebanon): IT Systems to Support Learning at the Regional Level
Adel Rizk (GamaLearn - United Arab Emirates): Implementing e-Learning in Arab Universities - Challenges and Expectations
Najib Abdel Wahed (MOHE - Syrian Arab Republic): ICT in Higher Education in Syria

Pierre Gedeon (AU - Lebanon): Learner-Centered Learning: Personal Lifelong E-Learning
Youssef Monsef (LU - Lebanon): WSIS and Readiness of Universities in the ESCWA Region
Capacity-building (Chair: Ghassan Assi)
Hyeun-Suk Rhee (ESCAP): An Inclusive Approach in ICT Human Capacity-building for Development
Marwan Tarazi (BU - Palestine): Regional Network for Learning Innovation in the Arab World
Walid Karam (BU - Lebanon): The Arab Support Centre for Free and Open Source Software
Rafiq Daas (JCS - Jordan): Graduate Internship Programme
Hanna Kreitem (BU - Palestine): Role of Universities in ICT Capacity-building
ICT Applications (Chair: Sarbuland Khan)
Abdelaziz Abid (UNESCO - HQ): World Digital Library from an Arab Perspective
Fadi Abdulhamid (TAGI): e-Readiness Framework for e-Government and e-Commerce
Tomasz Janowski (UNU): Electronic Government Development Framework
Ahmed Kamal (MOSAD - Egypt): From e-Government to e-Governance
Shimah Ayed AlEnezi (MOEW - Kuwait): Integrated Systems of Civil Service and the Arab e-Citizen
Panel: Building Research Capacity in ICT4D in MENA Region (Chair: Anas Tawileh)
Marwan Tarazi (IDRC): ICT4D Research in Mediterranean Arab Countries
Panel: New Regional Projects for the RPoA (Chair: Mirna Barbar)
Mohammed Fathy (MCIT - Egypt): Implementing an e-safety Agenda in the Region
Raed Zahrawi (MICT - Jordan): A Classification Framework for Economic Industries and Activities
Adel Rizk (GamaLearn - United Arab Emirates): Enhancing Distance Learning and Educational Content in Arab Universities
Mirna Barbar (ESCWA): Harmonization of Cyber Legislation
Mirna Barbar (ESCWA): Strengthening the ICT Capacity of ESCWA Government Leaders
Legal Framework (Chair: Fawzi Khamis)
Younis Arab (ALG - Jordan): Evaluation of ICT Legislations in the Arab Region
Yousef Nusseir (ESCWA): Development of Cyber Legislation in the ESCWA Region
Sami Al-Sharaf (COM - Kuwait): Surmounting Legal Obstacles in the Information Society
Mona Jabbour (LU - Lebanon): Legal Informatics Center and Access to Legal Information
Intellectual Property Rights (Chair: Talal Abu Ghazaleh)
Farid Jabbour (LU - Lebanon): IP Protection on the Internet in the Arab World
Aly Harakeh (Microsoft - East Med): IP Creates Opportunities for All
Jean Akl (ALP - Lebanon): Protection of IP in ICT According to Arabic Legislation
Track 3 - Development
ICT for Development (Chair: Ibrahim Badran)
Ibrahim Badran (Philadelphia University - Jordan): Remarks on the Digital Divide

Nadia Hegazi (MCITechnology - Egypt): Job Creation in the Information Society
Jamil Zagharneh (MOT - Palestine): Palestinian Information Society Development 2003-2009
Krikor Ajemian (Amman COC - Jordan): The Role of Chambers of Commerce in Bridging the Digital Divide
Digital Arabic Content (Chair: Nadia Hegazi)
Nabil Ali Abdul Aziz (Pico Advanced Multilingual Systems - Egypt): DAC Industry - A Future Perspective
Mirna Barbar (ESCWA): Promoting the DAC Industry through Incubation
Mohamed El-Sharkawi (CDCNH - Egypt): Memory of the Arab World
Oumayma Al-Dakkak (HIAST - Syrian Arab Republic): Tools for Arabic Language Processing
Ammar Kheir Beik (SCS - Syrian Arab Republic): Summary of the Recommendations of the Damascus DAC Conference
Community Telecentres (Chair: Abdul Aziz Abid)
Nasser Khalaf (NITC - Jordan): Community Centres for Sustainable Development
Paulette Assaf (Cisco - Lebanon): Connected Communities Business Initiative Model in Lebanon
Noureldin Cheikh Obeid (UNDP - Syria Office): Syrian Telecenters and their Contribution to Development
Georges Younes (ESCWA): Knowledge Networks in Disadvantaged Areas
Ahmed Eisa (Gedaref Digital City Organization - the Sudan): Impact of Telecentres on Development
Karim Kasim (MCIT - Egypt): Telecentre.org: A Platform for Collaboration and Cooperation
Empowering Youth (Chair: Marwan Tarazi)
Ziad Haddara (UNDP-ICTDAR): Engaging Youth in Local Development through Responsible Citizenship
Safa Rawia (Youth Leadership - Yemen): Youth in Technology for Community Development
Dana Derani (Syria Trust for Development - Syrian Arab Republic): Empowering Youth through ICT
Elie Mikhael (MOSA - Lebanon): Protection of Children from Internet Exploitation
Joyce Kawkabani (Himaya - Lebanon): Empowering the Lebanese Society to Adopt Safe Internet Practices
Panel: GAID Regional Arab Network (Chair: Yousef Nusseir)
Sarbuland Khan (UN-GAID) United Nations Global Alliance for ICT and Development
Yousef Nusseir (ESCWA) GAID Regional Arab Network Steering Committee
Panel: New Regional Projects for the RPoA (Chair: Nibal Idlebi)
Nabil Eid (SCHR - Syrian Arab Republic) and Moussa Charafeddine (FOTD - Lebanon): ICT4D: People with Disabilities
Nada Hamzeh (Women in Technology - Lebanon): Women in Technology
Nibal Idlebi (ESCWA): Promotion of the DAC Industry through Incubation - Phase II
Georges Younes (ESCWA): Knowledge Networks for Disadvantaged Communities

Fadia Souliman (SCS-Syria): Linguistic and Technical Standards for Digital Arabic Content
Women in the IS (Chair: Salma Abbasi)
Fatima Abdel Mahmoud (UST - the Sudan): Using ICT to Empower Women
Paulette Assaf (WIT - Lebanon): Using ICT to Empower Women and Youth
Nada Hamzeh (Women in Technology - Lebanon): Women Empowerment through IT in Lebanon
Reem Obeidat (UNESCO): Critical Connections of Professional Women in ICT
Networking for Development (Chair: Raja'a Al-Behaisi)
Jawad Jalal Abbassi (AAG - Jordan): Overview of the Arab Telecom and Internet Broadband Markets
Fadi Sabbagha (Born Interactive - Lebanon): Web Platforms and Technologies as Enablers for the Information Society
Nour Mounajed (ICT4Dev - Syrian Arab Republic): ReefNet Heritage, Wiki and Collaborative Content
Jessica Dheere (Social Media Exchange - Lebanon): Strategic Use of the Internet for Social Change
Bassem Chit (Lebanon Support - Lebanon): Lebanon's Civil Society Portal