ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

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SELECTED ISSUES OF IMPORTANCE FOR THE FUTURE OF THE ESCWA REGION

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT

1.   Information and communications technology is both an effective tool and an incentive for economic and social development. Its importance is increasing in all fields of development with the rise in and spread of knowledge-based digital economic activity. The building of the technological capacities necessary for member States to exploit the potential of such technology is a main focus of interest for the United Nations organization as a whole. This interest has, in recent years, been revealed in a number of ways, most notably the taking by the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly of a series of initiatives aimed at supporting the endeavours of member States to acquire appropriate information and communications technology and coordinating the efforts of United Nations agencies to assist these endeavours, using the limited resources available[1]. This concern has become apparent, in particular, in a series of brainstorming sessions, meetings of experts and coordination meetings between United Nations bodies, all of which focused on the importance of this information and communications technology and the role which it can play in expediting and guiding sustainable social and economic development.

2.   It was against this background that the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) organized the Expert Panel on Information Technology and Development Priorities[2], which was held on 15 and 16 May 2000. It was attended by representatives from the relevant United Nations bodies, high-level experts, and representatives from national and regional institutions working in information and technology development fields and other enterprises that are working to promote information and communications technology and related products and services. The meeting produced formulas for activating the pivotal role played by information and communications technology in granting the business enterprises sector real capabilities for developing its competitiveness and productivity within the global economic context, which is increasingly knowledge-based, and for supporting public education and health organizations, facilitating links between the Government and the people and encouraging the involvement of women in economic and social development using appropriate information and communications technology capabilities.

3.   In November 2000 ESCWA also organized a meeting that was the first of its kind in the region, namely, the Expert Group Meeting on Coordination of Technology Policies to Increase Productivity and

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[1] This concern is closely connected with a number of international initiatives, including the initiative that was the outcome of the meeting of industrialized countries in Japan held at the end of 2000, which laid the foundations for close cooperation between the industrialized States and the United Nations with the aim, in particular, of promoting information and communications technology.

[2] English-language copies of the report of this meeting have been submitted for distribution during the Session. The report is currently being translated into Arabic and will be made more widely available to the relevant institutions in member States.

Competitiveness within the Global Context: Capacity-building Initiatives for the Twenty-first Century. The meeting considered a number of mechanisms that had been adopted and introduced with a view to building technological capabilities in the countries of the developing world, and made recommendations regarding the practical aspects of initiatives aimed at establishing technology parks and incubators, centres for the updating of technology and industrial groupings built on capabilities which exploit, as one of the principal new technologies[3], information and communications technology.

4.   The member States of ESCWA are not an exception to the rule that it is of the utmost importance to acquire capabilities in information and communications technology, which is essential for improved competitiveness and productivity in the knowledge-based world of today (and tomorrow)[4]. There is no question but that the majority of ESCWA member States are currently manifesting a great deal of interest in building their own capabilities with regard to this technology and in formulating national strategies for the coordination and mobilization of their efforts in this field[5]. However, it is clear that greater efforts are required, and ESCWA has plans to follow up the endeavours that it exerted in the past decade (and, in particular, with regard to the medium-term plan for the period 1998-2001) by performing a series of activities aimed at supporting the efforts of member States in this field. Such activities include the provision of technical cooperation in the formulation of national strategies for the acquisition of effective capabilities in information and communications technology, and the adoption of practical initiatives for implementing those strategies. This support will be provided through a number of activities that have been studied and approved by ESCWA, as well as through the consultancy services provided by the ESCWA regional advisers to the relevant parties in member States. It will also be provided through field studies and activities currently being conducted by ESCWA, which include surveys, training, technical consultancy, the preparation of documents for proposed programmes and reference frameworks for exploiting and benefiting from technology in the field of information and communications technology. These studies and activities have dealt with the following:

(a)   The information and communications technology infrastructure in member States;

(b)   Activities aimed at supporting the infrastructure through the acquisition of new technology;

(c)   The research and development endeavours necessary to make domestic use of and adapt technology developed outside the Arab region, and

(d)   The institutional and legislative structure and the systems and measures that must be adopted in order to gain the greatest and widest benefit from information and communications technology.

5.   In undertaking these studies, ESCWA will concentrate on the need to use information and communications technology to serve comprehensive and sustainable development and take into account the circumstances and aspirations of member States in determining the policies and mechanisms to be formulated in this regard. It will also study the negative effects of employing that technology, from the social point of view in particular, and the scope offered by this technology for creating new employment opportunities and improving the competitiveness and productivity of the production and services sectors in member States.

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[3] These include new materials technology and bio-technology.

[4] Also in order to achieve greater harmonization with environmental conditions and to rationalize the consumption of dwindling resources.

[5] One of the most obvious examples of this is the action currently being taken by Egypt, Oman and Saudi Arabia and the endeavours being made by Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic in this regard.