

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA (ESCWA)

**REGIONAL PROFILE OF THE INFORMATION SOCIETY
IN WESTERN ASIA - 2011**

Background

The *Regional Profile of the Information Society in Western Asia – 2011* is published by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) within the framework of follow-up activities to the outcome of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). It describes the current situation and progress made in the ESCWA region over the last two years towards building the information society. The 2011 edition is the fifth in a series of such profiles, the first having been published in 2003 and subsequent editions in 2005, 2007 and 2009.

Objective

It is crucial for ESCWA member countries to build the information society if they are to lay the foundations for sustainable economic and social development, and promote the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The *Regional Profile* therefore sets out the status of information societies in the ESCWA region, measures the progress made in building such societies, examines the current status in member countries, and provides a comparative evaluation with other regions and the rest of the world, thus assisting decision makers in their planning and enhancing national capacity for realizing the information society. Moreover, it enables national authorities to compare their status with that of other countries in the region, thereby promoting opportunities for cooperation and regional integration in an increasingly knowledge-based economy.

Information society areas addressed by the report

The various aspects of the information society profiled in the report are based on the WSIS action lines, supplemented by other areas of special interest to the ESCWA region. Each chapter is dedicated to a specific theme, providing situational analysis, evaluation and recommendations covering all ESCWA member countries, substantiated by case studies and best practice from the region.

Comprehensive analysis is provided on the following:

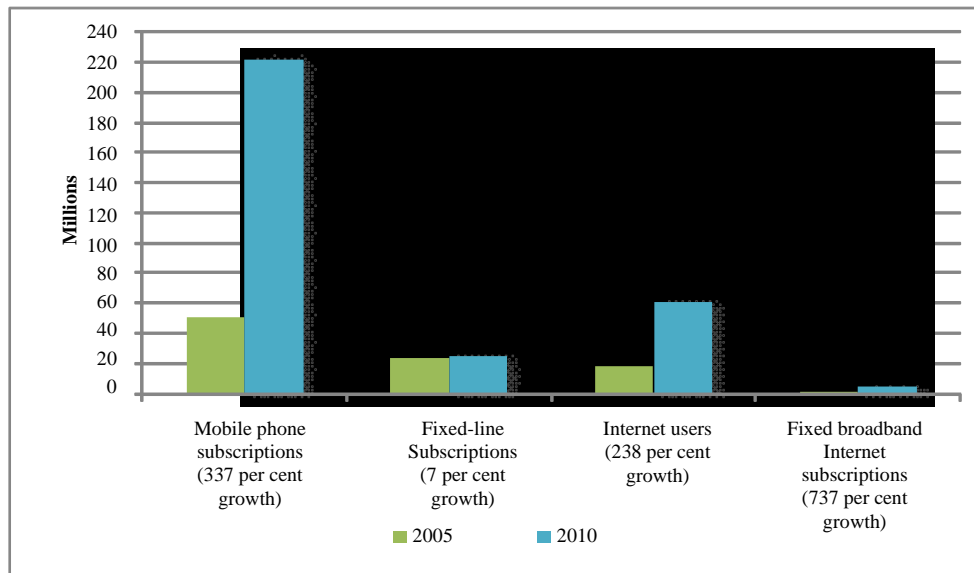
- Role of Governments and stakeholders
- ICT (information and communications technology) infrastructure
- Access to information and knowledge
- ICT capacity-building
- Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs
- Enabling environment
- ICT applications
- Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content
- Media
- Regional and international cooperation
- MDGs
- Building the ICT sector

Findings

The development of the information society in the ESCWA region encompasses many facets. The broad trends are hopeful and most member countries are performing better now than six years ago. The rates of ICT adoption and use are higher, costs are lower and greater attention is being paid to the sector.

It is clear from the 2011 edition of the *Regional Profile* that ESCWA member countries have taken significant steps towards bridging the digital divide and building the information society. The prominence of ICT throughout the region has grown, telecommunication penetration rates have increased dramatically and the adoption of broadband technologies is on the rise. As a consequence, the region has witnessed higher levels of adoption and use of ICT applications and e-services, and greater participation of Governments and stakeholders in building the information society.

ICT growth, ESCWA region, 2005-2010



In addition, significant investment is underway to increase integration with regional and global communication networks. These efforts will make it easier for ESCWA member countries to address issues such as access to information and knowledge, capacity-building, regional integration and the increase in digital Arabic content.

Recommendations

While there has been some progress towards realizing the information society in the region, it is clear from the *Regional Profile* that such progress has been patchy, with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council having made greater strides than other member countries. Nevertheless, considerable efforts are required by all ESCWA member countries, including the most advanced, if they are to reach the levels attained by developed countries in this regard.

The traditional applications of ICT for socio-economic development must be supplemented by creative solutions if the MDGs are to be achieved. For a number of reasons, including conflict and high population growth, the percentage of people living below the poverty line has increased in the ESCWA region over the past fifteen years. While ICT has a key role to play in creating job opportunities and alleviating poverty, the difficulties of development in conflict-prone areas preclude any role for ICT in development, and require

different priorities and focus. While much remains to be done, realistic options exist for making concrete improvements throughout the ESCWA region.

The findings and analysis set out in the 2011 edition of the *Regional Profile* provide a potential basis for a variety of projects and initiatives which could be launched with a view to reducing the existing digital divide between rural and urban areas, between ESCWA member countries, and between the region and the more developed regions of the world. Within this context, ESCWA is therefore supporting a number of important regional projects through its Regional Plan of Action for Building the Information Society. The Plan has already been adopted by ESCWA member countries in their recognition of the vital need to work collaboratively and synchronize efforts in order to reduce the digital divide and press ahead towards the information society.

