



Regional Seminar on "The role of ICT in protecting Man and Environment: How to limit the impact of its use"



Cairo, Egypt, 4-7 October 2004

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Report

The Regional Seminar on "The role of ITC in Protecting Man and Environment: How to Limit the Impact of its Use" was held at the Headquarters of the League of Arab States Secretariat, in Cairo, from 4-7 October 2004. The Seminar was opened by H.E. Eng. Maged George Elias, Minister of Environment in Egypt and H.E. Ambassador Abderrahman Sehebani, Assistant Secretary-General of the League of Arab States. During the inauguration session, statements were made on behalf of the Minister of Health and Population and the Minister of Communications and Information. Statements were also made on behalf of the organizing and collaborating agencies, including ITU, WHO and UNEP.

The Seminar was organized by the ITU Arab Regional Office in Cairo, in cooperation with the Secretariat of the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for Environmental Affairs in the League of Arab States. It was held under the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation signed in Geneva in February 2003 between the League of Arab States and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

The following United Nations agencies cooperated and participated in the Seminar: ITU, WHO, UNEP, UNIDO, and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).

From the League of Arab States side, three specialized ministerial councils participated and cooperated in the Seminar, covering the areas of environment, ICT, and health. A number of specialized Arab agencies also participated.

About 180 participants attended the Seminar representing decision makers, telecommunication regulators, ICT companies, mobile phone companies, telecommunication operators, scientific organizations, researchers, professors and scientists in the fields of environment, health and ICT, representatives of diplomatic missions and mass media, from 18 out of the 22 Arab countries. In addition there were some 60 technical, administrative and supporting staff, including translators, the media and the secretariat staff (See annex 2 for list of participants).

Also represented in the meeting were the Chairmen of the Global Disaster Information Network (GDIN), the Mobile Manufacturers Forum (MMF), the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP), and the International Union of Radio Science (URSI/Commission K).

The Seminar had before it 40 working papers. Some 35 speakers addressed the meeting, mainly experts and distinguished scientists from the Arab region, Belgium, Brazil, France, Italy, Switzerland and the United States of America. The Seminar held 12 working sessions, and three panel discussions. The agenda of the Seminar is attached in annex 1.

The following subjects and issues were tackled by the Seminar:

- The role of ICT in the protection of man and the environment,
- Impact of the use of ICT appliances especially the impact of mobile telephony, electromagnetic fields and radio frequencies,
- Safe disposal of ICT waste,
- International standards and guidelines,
- E-health and telemedicine networks,
- Disaster networks for the mitigation of the impact of environmental natural disasters,
- Environmental management systems,
- Partnerships and international and regional cooperation,
- Tampere Convention on the Provision of Telecommunication Resources for Disaster Mitigation and Relief Operations,
- Montreal Protocol on Substances That Deplete the Ozone Layer,
- Environmental information
- Review of the activities of non-governmental organizations working in the field of environment.

II. Recommendations

The Seminar calls upon the Arab States:

- To adopt, at the national level, the implementation of pilot projects in partnership with the public and private sectors, research agencies and the civil society, with a view to establishing an integrated system for the disposal of particular sectors of ICT waste, such as: different kinds of batteries, CD's, diskettes, magnetic tapes, refill cards, electronic cards, display screens, etc.
- To disseminate the results of national studies and experiences in the field of monitoring the levels of non-ionizing radiation, especially those emitting from mobile phone relay stations, and make the best benefit of such studies and experiences,
- To issue the necessary legislation to regulate the sites of mobile transmitting stations and determine safe radiation levels,

- To consider adopting the international guidelines of WHO and ICNIRP in the formulation of national standards and regulations,
- To work with other partners, including manufacturers and NGOs, to develop information programmes that provide the public with answers to their concerns in that regard,
- To consider participation in the International EMF Project of WHO to keep abreast of the latest developments in this area, including research and updating of standards, and participation in the meetings of the International Advisory Committee of the International EMF Project,
- To collect accurate and up-to-date information from around the world on the scientific evidence of such hazards. This can be done through regional seminars and active participation in international meetings and activities,
- Given the public concern about the usage of mobile telephony, it is important to provide authoritative and clear information in the form of fact sheets and short handbooks developed locally by Government and independent agencies, in the Arabic language, to explain the facts and issues at the national level,
- To use appropriate means of information, including sign boards, to inform and warn residents in the neighbourhoods where there are mobile telephony stations of the existence of such stations and of any related risk,
- To harmonize standards with other Arab states. This would be achieved by adopting common standards based on the ICNIRP guidelines. It is vital to achieve consistency of standards across borders and that these standards be elaborated on scientific basis. Governments could consider help from WHO within the framework of its harmonisation process.
- To adhere to the Tampere Convention on the Provision of Telecommunication Resources for Disaster Mitigation and Relief Operations,
- To urge information departments to cooperate and coordinate with departments of environment, health and telecommunications, and with non-governmental organizations, to support the dissemination of environmental information in all its forms: reading material, radio and television, the internet, etc. with a view to keeping people informed of the health and environmental impact of using ICT equipment, and of the means of minimizing the resulting risks.
- Not to import any devices or equipment that do not meet proper standards, and not to accept foreign grants in the form of used or discarded computers or similar equipment in view of the hazardous waste involved.

Calls upon the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States/Secretariat of the Council of Arab Ministers for Environmental Issues:

- To support the implementation of integrated programmes for processing and safe disposal of ICT waste in the Arab region, to establish the supporting institutional and legal frameworks for this purpose, and to consider the implementation of such programmes on a priority basis,
- To coordinate with UNEP and its Regional Office for Western Asia (ROWA), and other specialized international agencies and organizations with a view to organizing training courses and workshops for training of Arab officials on techniques used in waste reduction and recycling, waste processing in the environmental management systems, cleaner production, risk management and disaster precautionary planification, and lessons to be learned from their experience.
- To coordinate with international donor organizations and donor countries and manufacturers the financing of a project for a comprehensive study of the quantity and characteristics of ICT waste in the Arab region, in coordination with the Arab Group on Environmental Agreements Involving Hazardous Waste and Chemical Materials.
- To organize a regional seminar at the beginning of 2006, in coordination with appropriate Arab organizations and UN specialized agencies, to examine and discuss the results of the studies currently conducted at the international level on health and environmental impact of ICT equipment, which are expected to be completed by the end of 2005.

Calls upon the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States/Secretariat of the Council of Arab Ministers for Health:

- To coordinate with WHO and its East Mediterranean Regional Office (EMRO) to follow up on the International EMF Project of WHO,
- To designate, in each country, one single agency as the national focal point for all matters related to EMF and health, that would be authorized to represent public authorities in international forums and meetings. Such reference agency should have a website for disseminating information, research results and other relevant material, and should be able to respond to queries online and coordinate with similar Arab and international websites.

Calls upon WHO and its East Mediterranean Regional Office (EMRO):

- To consider, in coordination with the Arab Council of Ministers of Health, the implementation of a research project to identify and evaluate exposure and occupational hazards related to ICT activities in the Arab countries, as has been done or is being contemplated for other regions.

- To consider hosting a regional reference site on the website, in Arabic for the Arab region, for disseminating results of environmental and health research in the field, and providing responses by scientific authorities to queries received online. It would be useful, in launching the site, to coordinate with other appropriate agencies, including the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States, UNEP/ROWA, ITU and its Arab Regional Office in Cairo, etc. Financing the project would come from contributions from mobile and telecom companies and other ICT organizations.
- To adopt the precautionary principle in matters related to the health and environmental impact of ICT equipment, and to coordinate with appropriate agencies in the Arab region responsible for health and safety with a view to disseminating information and safety guidelines, in Arabic, for the benefit of ICT users of different age categories
- To include the Arab States in the WHO International EMF project.

Calls upon ICT administrations, corporations, and regulators in the Arab Region:

- To ensure that all workers in ICT activities are covered by regular medical check-up, and calls upon medical insurance companies and occupational insurance schemes to secure such coverage.
- To urge ICT equipment manufacturers to adopt sound environment management systems and cleaner production techniques, with a view to improving productivity and waste control, thus limiting related environmental hazards.
- To urge ICT equipment manufacturers to use safe materials and alternatives to hazardous materials as freon and halons used in refrigeration and fire-fighting equipment, which are detrimental to the Ozone layer.
- To apply modern techniques of safe waste disposal of ICT equipment.
- To urge ICT manufacturers, in coordination with scientific institutions, to include with their ICT equipment adequate information in the form of a warning, to alert users about any hazards and inform about safe use, especially for children and people with health problems.
- To ensure that workers in the field of ICT design, installation and maintenance work in a healthy environment, and use personal safety gear, and to provide medical facilities for those who may complain from sickness in the work place.
- To initiate programmes that ensure that safety and prevention measures are being applied to control exposure to occupational and environmental risks related to the work with ICT equipment are in place and implemented.
- To produce and disseminate scientific periodicals, in Arabic, focusing on health and environmental risks associated with ICT.

- To invite Mobile companies in the Arab Region to contribute to financing research work in the field of radiation measurement and assessment of other risks associated with the use of mobile telephony, including the impact of transmitter and relay stations.
- To invite Mobile companies in the Arab region to contribute to financing the launching of Arabic websites that would make available to users the results of research on the health and environmental impact of ICT, including mobile telephony.

Calls upon Arab universities and research institutions:

- To give special attention to research on health and environmental impact of ICT, including the Internet and mobile telephony.
- To direct part of their research work to health and environmental impact of ICT on living organisms, including micro organisms, especially the effect of such impact on the ecological balance and human beings.
- To encourage the use of remote sensor technology and geographical information systems in such fields as:
 - The study of the spread of certain diseases and their relation to electromagnetic fields caused by ICT equipment and networks, including mobile telephony.
 - Elaboration of national plans for reduction of risks.
 - Strategic health and environment planning.
 - Disaster management.

General Recommendation:

The Secretariat of the Council of Arab Ministers for Environmental Affairs is invited to bring the Final Report and Recommendations of this Seminar to the attention of all concerned Ministerial Councils, including the Council of Arab Ministers for Health, Council of Arab Ministers for Information and Communication, Council of Arab Ministers for Environmental Issues and other appropriate bodies.

Closing of the Seminar:

Gratitude and appreciation were expressed to the League of Arab States for its generosity in hosting this event. The organizers of the Seminar, namely, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), its Arab Regional Office in Cairo, and the Secretariat of the Council of Arab Ministers for Environmental Issues, were appraised for their efficient and accurate organization and management. Collaborating agencies such as WHO, UNEP, UNIDO and ESCWA were thanked for their valuable contribution to the success of the Seminar. Gratitude was also expressed for the contribution of sponsors, including Mobinil, Telecom Egypt, MTC-Vodafone Bahrain and the Egyptian TEDATA Company.