

**Western Asia Preparatory Conference
for the
World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)**

Beirut, UN-House, 4-6 February 2003

PRELIMINARY INFORMATION NOTE

1. Introduction:

The global economic environment is changing rapidly with the dissemination of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in all walks of life. Tomorrow's information society holds a multitude of opportunities for developing countries by increasing their competitiveness, for individuals by improving their quality of life, and for institutions by increasing their efficiency. These new technologies are driving the world towards the digital economy and the global information societies through a variety of applications such as: facilitating new approaches to learning, helping women combine work and home responsibilities, assisting persons with special needs and enabling positive change in production and service institutions.

Consequently, the developing countries are facing enormous challenges. In particular, the Arab countries face a significant knowledge gap, which will continue to grow unless effective action is taken to bridge the digital divide. The Arab region has the lowest level of ICT access with only 0.7% of the population registered on the Internet, while personal computer penetration is limited to 1.8% according to latest International Telecommunication Union figures.

Most of the Arab countries have not yet formulated national policies to facilitate the move towards the information society, nor did they plan for concrete steps to enhance national capacity in ICTs, including research and technological development. Furthermore, initiatives to disseminate ICT applications in priority areas and provide access to information and knowledge for all remain at a very primitive stage.

This situation prevails in the majority of developing countries. Hence the need exists to harness knowledge and technology for promoting development and achieving the Millennium Development Goals. It is therefore imperative to address at the highest political level the wide range of issues relevant to the information society. It is also of prime importance for all nations to collaborate in striving towards the development of a common vision and understanding of the information society and its socioeconomic implications. Therefore, the convening of a World Summit becomes of greatest importance.

2. The World Summit on the Information Society:

The United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/56/183, adopted in 2001, endorsed the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) proposal to hold a World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) at the highest possible level and under the high patronage of the United Nations Secretary-General. The main objective of WSIS is to develop a common vision and understanding of the information society and the adoption of a declaration of principles and a plan of action for implementation by governments, international institutions and all sectors of civil society.

The Summit will be organized in two phases; the first phase will be in Geneva during 10-12 December 2003 and the second phase in Tunis in 2005.

WSIS will offer a unique opportunity for the world community to discuss and give shape to the information society by bringing together key players: governments, international organizations, private sector, civil society/NGOs. It will address the central issues raised by the information society and related to policy formulation, socioeconomic development as well as cultural, ethical and technological concerns, which include:

- Building the ICT infrastructure;
- Universal and equitable access to the information society;
- Services and applications;
- User needs;
- Developing a framework for building the information society;
- ICTs in education.

The ITU has taken the leading managerial role in the preparatory process, while regional United Nations organizations and host countries have taken the initiative to organize regional preparatory conferences with the aim of producing regional perspectives for the knowledge-based society. The regional organizations, civil society institutions and NGOs are expected to contribute to, and actively participate in, the preparatory process and in the Summit.

3. Western Asia Preparatory Conference:

Regional preparatory conferences constitute important milestones in the preparatory process. They are organized to review the regional status and harmonize the views of the countries while developing specific proposals for the information society in the region.

Therefore, the Western Asia Preparatory Conference for WSIS will carry out the following tasks:

- Assess the current status of ESCWA member countries in relation to the information society, mainly reviewing ICT policies, infrastructure, applications and services at the national and regional levels;
- Identify national and regional needs, priorities and key issues to tackle;
- Forge an understanding among countries in the region on the information society;
- Develop a vision, strategies and plans to reach the knowledge-based society;
- Establish a platform for dialogue between major stakeholders of the information society in the ESCWA region;
- Identify initiatives leading to national and regional projects that aim at developing ICT infrastructure and services, enhancing ICT capacity of member countries, increasing employment opportunities and disseminating ICT applications;
- Agree on the modalities of participation in the WSIS for countries of the region.

Consequently, the main themes that the Conference will focus on in its working group sessions will be:

- Infrastructure development for the information society: aiming in particular at providing universal access and disseminating the benefits of ICTs;

- ICTs for socioeconomic development: focusing on the Millennium Development Goals, particularly on generating employment and alleviating poverty through ICTs;
- Capacity building in ICTs: including human resource development, education and training, research and development, as well as manufacturing;
- Promoting ICT applications for all: particularly e-learning, e-health; e-government, e-commerce, and e-business;
- Policies and strategies for building the information society: including regulatory frameworks for the digital economy, international rules and agreements (e.g. WTO, WIPO, ITU, etc.);
- Partnership among stakeholders of the information society: in order to accelerate the launching, implementation and financing of information society projects while benefiting from regional and international initiatives;
- Cultural identity and Arabic digital content in a knowledge-based society;
- Regional collaboration in building the information society.

4. Organization:

The Western Asia Preparatory Conference for WSIS is hosted by the Lebanese Government, represented by the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications, in close collaboration with ESCWA and ITU. Cooperation and support for the Conference is also expected from UNESCO, the World Bank, UNDP, and UNCTAD.

The Conference will consist of plenary and parallel sessions, including panel discussions, designed to facilitate and enrich its deliberations. The plenary sessions, scheduled during the first and last days include the following:

- First day
 - The opening session
 - Election of officers and adoption of the agenda
 - Overview of the information society in the ESCWA/Arab region
 - Ministerial debate
- Last day
 - Submission of the sessions' reports
 - Discussion and adoption of the final Conference document

Parallel sessions for the thematic working groups will include presentations, debates and roundtables covering the main themes listed above. They are scheduled during the first and second days of the Conference.

5. Participants:

The Conference will be attended by Ministers and high-level decision makers from the ESCWA member countries who are engaged in building the information society. Prominent experts in ICT policies, applications and services will also participate as well as NGOs/civil society institutions, regional and international organizations and private establishments involved in the information society. A total of 300 participants are expected to attend the Conference.

6. Outcome:

The formulation of proposals for adopting policies, alleviating obstacles and launching initiatives to promote the development of the information society in the region will be a major output of the Conference, which should result from Ministers addresses, country papers, ESCWA regional overview on the information society, and thematic presentations and discussions. These proposals, relating to both national and regional issues, should accelerate the move towards knowledge-based societies in the ESCWA/Arab region.

The final document adopted at the Conference will comprise its main recommendations regarding policies, preliminary plans and initiatives that address the key issues and tackle the identified problems in building the information society. This document will be presented at the second intergovernmental Preparatory Committee meeting (PrepCom2) in Geneva, 17-28 February 2003, which will discuss the Summit Agenda and elements to be incorporated into the final document for the WSIS.

7. Language:

Contributions would be in either Arabic or English languages with an adequate summary in the other language. Simultaneous translation, from Arabic to English and vice versa, will be provided during the sessions.

8. Date and Venue:

The Conference will be held from the 4th to the 6th of February 2003, at ESCWA, UN-House, Beirut, Lebanon.

9. Additional information:

The Conference Web site is: www.escwa.org.lb/wsis/

Any inquiries and requests for additional information should be addressed to:

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