Cairo Declaration

Pan-Arab Document
Towards an Arab Information Society
"Common Action Plan for Collaborative Work"

<u>Cairo, June 18th, 2003</u>

Representatives of Arab States have gathered in Cairo for the Pan-Arab Regional Conference to prepare for that summit on information society. The conference convened from 16th to 18th of June 2003, and has witnessed the participation of 19 Arab states. The conference was also attended by 9 African states as observers, and Secretary General of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) Mr. Y. Utsumi, a number of internationally prominent figures in the field of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), in addition to representatives of international and regional organizations, business sector, and civil society.

Participants have declared their determination to take up the challenge to build an information society, and their commitment to fulfill that end within the framework of comprehensive and sustainable development. Participants have also emphasized the pivotal role of knowledge in formulating the new human society "society of knowledge economy" and which differs from all previous societies. The human element stands here as one of the main pillars on which that society relies, and represents the most important axis for information development. Building an information society requires harnessing all resources with a view to bridging the continuously expanding digital divide between the developed world and the developing one. This shall lead to the establishment of a more well fare and secure information society. ICT helps achieve that goal, and helps in illiteracy eradication, poverty and hunger alleviation, improving conditions of women, eradicating social and economic discrimination, and promoting the ability to compete to create job opportunities and an active business sector active in community development.

Participants have also stressed that regional integration and mobilization of Arab resources is the only way to move to knowledge economy and to build the infrastructure necessary to spread Arab information applications. Participants have also discussed the possible ways to achieve the aspired goals, and stressed on the importance to act on a number of axes, as follows:

Infrastructure Development:

- Establishing the regional backbone for an Arab high-capacity telecommunication network; in order to exchange information through high-capacity broad bands guaranteeing the optimum ways for linking the Arab states. The backbone would utilize the already existing fiber-optic network in a number of Arab states. Planning should start as soon as possible, to be finalized by the year 2010.
- Providing several levels of access and linking to information networks to ensure availability to low-income brackets of the society, and providing alternative ways for linking to the internet.
- Providing a minimum level of universal services of communications for all brackets, by giving the support necessary to fulfill them, in such a way as to provide access to services to 60% of Arab population by the year 2008, and to 80% by the year 2010.
- Increasing the flow of information among Arab states, and eliminating areas of bottlenecks by getting group capacities from international linking means.
- Monitoring websites disrespectful of Arab traditions and customs.
- Establishing a task force under the League of Arab States for securing Arab information networks, and protecting Arab consumers whether individuals or institutions against cyber crimes and violation of personal privacy, and information pollution exemplified in inaccurate, faked, and misleading information.
- Conducting adequate studies to evaluate the current situation of communication infrastructure in Arab states in order to identify the steps required to move to the next generation of broad band networks by the year 2005.
- Providing all Arab requirements of addresses and domain names related to the internet and supporting the trend to coordinate, plan, and manage internet resources by neutral international organizations.
- Providing personal computers (PCs) and internet at low cost, and adopting innovative ways for payment, funding, and installments.
- Expanding in community telecenters, and establishing national and regional networks to link these telecenters.

Human Capital Development:

- Optimum utilization of the potentials offered by ICT whether in media and in education for speeding up the process of illiteracy eradication.
- Expanding the introduction of ICT in curricula of schools and universities, and exchanging experiences among Arab states, in addition to focusing on pivotal concepts and developing basic skills.

- Considering the Arabic language and its electronic processing a main approach to achieving Arab integration from the field of information, nd the preservation of national identity and cultural particularity, and to make use of the competitive edge offered by the unity of language in the Arab World and to establishing a strong Arab strong content industry capable of competition internationally.
- Conducting intensified training courses by specialized educational and training institutions to qualify individuals. Such a process should aim at meeting market demands in framework of the knowledge economy and the expansion in using internet for continuous self training.
- Constant monitoring of available information services and the demand, and how to activate the cultural Arabic discourse over the internet.
- Establishing knowledge banks as depositories for brain ware.

e-Government
- Conducting regional training for government managers to create awareness about the multiple aspects of e-government and the requirements for its implementation.
- Governments of Arab states should support the efforts to enhance government performance by using e-government
- Expanding in providing e-services for citizens to all sectors covered and providing services for remote areas and marginalized brackets by the year 2010.
- Promoting the participation of business sector in developing the work of government institutions in order to accelerate the transformation from traditional paper ways to electronic ones.
- Reaching unified standard forms, for unclassified governmental documents, and removing the constraints against their circulation.
- Removing or decreasing custom duties on electronic transactions in order to encourage electronic usages.

Establishing an Industry for Arabic Content
- The establishment of infrastructure should run parallel with founding a strong Arab content industry, while providing innovative and practical means for funding projects of that vital industry which stands as the basic pillar for building the information society.
- Monitoring and surveying the updated content produced in both paper and electronic forms, while urging for depositing electronic copies of this content and digitizing old sources of heritage, literary and artistic works, Arabic media production, and preservation of those sources by e-archiving.

- Paying attention to issues related to intellectual property and acceding to international agreements in this field, while ensuring removal of obstacles against providing the necessary technology for concernec authorities.
- Providing new non traditional specializations necessary to content industry, and encouraging schools and universities to contribute to content production and utilization.
- Revisiting Arab sectoral strategies in the fields of education, media, and cultural activities to ensure coordination and focus on content.

e-Commerce
- Providing an appropriate environment for the spread of e-commerce by issuing the necessary policies and legislations, promoting regional mechanisms to increase commercial exchange electronically among Arab states, and removing obstacles against flow of commercial transactions.
- Establishing regional institutions authorized to authenticate e-signature as the basis for e-commerce.
- Spreading e-commerce in parallel with improving transportation and shipping services in order to facilitate movement of goods among Arab states.
- Adopting unified legislations to protect rights of consumers and producers, and establishing mechanisms for conflict resolution.

Scientific Research
- Linking Arab research centers via a high-speed network, and turning them into centers of excellence for content industry and other products of informatics.
- Promoting the establishment of startups, building technology incubators, seeking the biggest support possible from international and regional organizations and international funding agencies, and offering appropriate ways or funding in cooperation between governments and businesses.
- Paying the utmost attention to research in processing Arabic language electronically, bioinformatics, e-learning, and security of information networks.

Community Partnership
- Encouraging diverse partnership patterns among business institutions, with public institutions, private sector and multinationals in order to accelerate the usage of ICT in Arab institutions.

- Offering civil society organizations the chance to contribute to propagating for the information society, the development of local demand, and strengthening digital solidarity.
- Offering numerous, creative alternatives for e-business resulting from the partnership between public and business sectors.
- Facilitating procedures and increasing incentives of regional and foreign investments in order to accelerate the process of establishing infrastructure and founding Arab industry of content.
- Providing and periodically updating the information essential for investment, in addition to providing such information for regional and international communities, in addition to encouraging investors and donors to refer to local partners.

Regional Cooperation
- Activating the role of Arab specialized organizations under the supervision of the League of Arab States with a view to developing Arab cooperation in the field of ICT.
- Activating the Arab Business Forum for ICT established by the Arab Summit in Amman 2001 with a view to increasing the contribution of the business sector in ICT development efforts.
- Benefiting from the experience of international and regional organizations, and most importantly the ITU, ESCWA, UNESCO, and UNDP, in order to utilize ICT for development.
- Following the best practices in light of the experiences of different countries in information development.

Conclusion
ICT, if best utilized, represents an invaluable opportunity to accelerate the efforts of comprehensive and sustainable community development in the Arab World which does not lack the resources to occupy an outstanding position on the geo-informatic landscape, and to bridge the digital divide between the Arab World and the developed one, among Arab states, and within each of them. This mission requires in the first place an effective regional cooperation at both levels of establishing infrastructure and spreading diverse applications of informatics. Governments of the Arab States are also required to propagate for information society and provide the appropriate political and legislative environment in order to increase the contribution of business sector, develop self capabilities, encourage initiatives of individuals to establish companies where intellectual creativity is the most important element. Arab States need to achieve the balance required to include both traditional economy, knowledge economy,

and building a strong industry for Arabic content in order to build the society of information and knowledge.