

**Speech of the Executive Secretary of the  
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)  
At PrepCom2  
Geneva, 17 February 2003**

Mr. Chairman,

The United Nations initiative of calling for a world summit on the information society in 2003 and 2005 is a turning point in the history of global conferences of the organization. This initiative lives up to the expectations of developing countries to expedite socioeconomic development and bridge the digital divide. ESCWA, the Economic and Social Commission of Western Asia values highly this initiative. Indeed such an initiative will be recorded in the annals of history as the corner stone in changing human society. We recognize the importance of information and communication technology (ICT) in the transformation of socioeconomic development. The restructuring process that ESCWA went through in 2002 recognized this fact and established a new division for ICT.

Western Asia is characterized by a state of continuous instability due to several crises, disputes and hostilities. A number of countries in the region suffer severe sanctions and/or embargo on importation of technological goods and knowledge, which have been unilaterally imposed contrary to the common vision for global information society. This state of affairs has had profound effects on the pace of achievements in information and communication technology (ICT) development and innovation by countries in the region. ICT penetration rates in the region are well below average and an uneven distribution of ICT services and facilities exists between rural and urban societies, as well as low utilization of infrastructure by unprivileged segments of the society, including women, youth, and low-income communities. However, regardless of all these impediments, there exist several success stories that some countries in the region initiated, such as the provision of free Internet access to the public at no cost, and the creation of Internet cities with high powered infrastructure to provide an enabling environment for ICT sector development.

The Western Asia Preparatory Conference for WSIS was held in Beirut, Lebanon during 4–6 February 2003. It was hosted by the Government of Lebanon under the high patronage of the President of the Republic, General Emile Lahoud, and was organized by ESCWA, supported by regional and international agencies (UNESCO, World Bank, UN ICT Task Force and the League of Arab States). Several ministers and senior executives from 18 Arab countries attended the conference. The Conference had also a high representation from the civil society institutions (22), the

private sector (30), academic institutions (14) and other international and regional organizations (18).

Moreover,, on 7–8 February ESCWA hosted the fourth meeting of the Arab WSIS Preparatory Task Force at the request of the League for Arab States to ensure better coordination. In the meeting, a unanimous support was given to the Beirut Declaration.

The Beirut Declaration, now posted on the WSIS Web page at both ITU and ESCWA Web sites, consists of six sections; a preamble, a regional vision, a set of objectives, the main principles for action, their priorities and strategy.

The regional **vision** states that the process of transformation into an information society should be sustainable and equitable. It should aim at achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals leading to reducing poverty and unemployment, raising levels of education, improving health services, enhancing empowerment and minimizing loss of environmental resources. The right to communicate and the right to access information for citizens and nations, as well as the recognition and application of intellectual property rights and the principle of free flow of information, should be part and parcel of human rights fundamentals. Finding ways to make the information society serve the needs of developing countries more directly is of profound importance.

The **objectives** agreed upon for building the information society in Western Asia are:

- Promoting a common vision;
- Formulating innovative policies and ICT strategies that benefit socio-economic development, favor the reduction of poverty and promote growth and employment;
- Facilitating the attainment the UN Millennium Development Goals;
- Formulating an agenda for action aimed at emphasizing the needs of youth, women and underprivileged groups by selecting appropriate and affordable technologies;
- Promoting a framework for national, regional and international partnerships;
- Adopting modalities for policy/strategy implementation.

The main **principles for action** adopted in the Beirut Declaration for developing an information society consisted of 5 major areas, each divided into several tracks or directions:

1. **National and regional ICT policy formulation, and the enabling legislative and regulatory environment;** removing social barriers that impede transformation into the information society; governments being the primary actors, in concert with the private sector and civil society, in the pursuit of access for all to ICTs for development;
2. **ICT infrastructure enhancement and expansion** to reach all segments of the population and be affordable to them; ensuring proper governance of Internet and ICT resources, including security issues; and developing appropriate ICT indicators that realistically reflect needs and performance of developing countries;
3. **ICT application dissemination:** Implementing and standardizing e-government applications, resulting in increased efficiency and transparency, reduced corruption, and introducing concepts such as e-democracy and e-governance in the decision-making process of local and national governments; promoting e-learning, e-health and e-business applications and tools; promoting digital content in Arabic, through the adoption and enforcement of standards related to Arabic language use in ICTs, and better management of Arabic digital content;
4. **Developing ICT production and services sector:** This sector is essential since the region lags behind in terms of manufacturing capabilities, research and development, incubation schemes and venture capital investment in ICTs.
5. **ICT capacity building** through education and training, building institutions to collect, organize, store and share information and knowledge, with particular emphasis on quality higher education, post-graduate and research programmes that meet the priority needs of the region;

Regional **priorities** as far as Western Asia is concerned focused on the specific areas indicated in the principles for action.

Finally, the Beirut Declaration suggested elements of a **strategy** to ensure well-defined modalities for implementation. At the national level nearly every country has recognized the importance of ICTs for development. Regional initiatives such as those of the League of Arab States, UNDP's Programme on ICT for Development in the Arab Region (ICTDAR) and UNESCO Communication and Information Programme promise significant results. Global initiatives such as the UN ICT Task Force provide a clearinghouse for best practices in ICTs. Funding should aim at the regional capital markets to provide venture capital and investment funds for launching ICT companies and projects that have a regional dimension. It should also promote long-term government spending on R and D and higher education, with the aim of mastering and adapting specific ICT solutions.

Mr. Chairman,

The societal transformation towards information is a multidisciplinary and comprehensive process that involves all stakeholders and players. To this end, ESCWA is determined to play a proactive role to forge partnerships amongst stakeholders in the context of a regional action plan. ESCWA secretariat is keen and stands ready to assist countries in the region to harness ICT for socioeconomic development. We view WSIS as a powerful vehicle for ESCWA Member Countries to embark on a collaborative endeavor that could reduce ICT disparities and minimize the digital divide. However this role can only bear fruit within an international conducive environment that brings peace and security to the region.

Thank you.