



United Nations
Economic and Social Commission
for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Speech of

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Under-Secretary-General
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In the

World Summit on the Information Society

Geneva, Thursday 11 December 2003

20:00 – 21:00 hours

Mr. Chairman,
Your Highnesses,
Your Excellencies,
Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) I congratulate both the Government of Tunisia for having proposed the holding of a summit on the information society and the international community for approving that proposal, and offer thanks to the Government of Switzerland for the assistance it has provided in holding this summit.

This summit represents the beginning of a new dawn: the dawn of the age of the information and knowledge-based society. The information and communications revolution has wrought radical changes in our traditional concepts of time, place and distance. It has also introduced tremendous possibilities for disseminating knowledge, increasing productivity and creating new employment opportunities. At the same time, however, it poses major challenges that could increase the gap between north and south and between the social strata within a State if better use is not made of the possibilities offered by that revolution.

It is therefore vital to exploit the information revolution in order to overcome many development problems and achieve the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

All means available, including the regional dimension and regional integration, must be employed with a view to making the benefits of the information revolution equally available to every region and make a closer match between national needs and global requirements in informatics.

The Arab region has suffered from low levels of growth in general and a failure to keep pace with the information revolution in particular, largely as the result of the prevailing lack of political stability. The region has for the last 50 years continued to suffer from wars, disputes and occupation.

In general, the countries of the region continue to require considerable endeavours, given the disparities between them with respect to the formulation of national policies and strategies and legislative and organizational environments favourable to research and development and, consequently, opportunities for innovation and export. Furthermore, basic infrastructure is in need of development and the Arabic content on the Internet is still at a low level.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year, ESCWA has taken a number of initiatives aimed at improving the situation and narrowing the digital divide in the region. Those initiatives include the following:

1. **The identification and annual updating of the national and regional profiles of the information society in Western Asia:** ESCWA has published several studies that give a current picture of the national and regional profiles of the information society in Western Asia, and intend to update these studies on an annual basis, in order to follow-up developments and the growth of that society.

2. **The establishment of a regional database of information society indicators, to be periodically updated:** this is the first step towards the development of the quantitative indicators necessary to identify the digital divide in our region. It will be updated in order to meet international standards in this respect.

3. **The launching of a regional initiative to increase and improve Arabic content on the Internet and establish an Arabic Domain Names System on the Internet.**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With regard to future plans for the Western Asia region, ESCWA will cooperate with the relevant parties in the region in applying the declaration of principles that will be adopted by this Summit, and in 2004 ESCWA will hold a regional conference in order to allocate roles and adopt plans that will be based on the following:

1. The creation of the appropriate enabling environment for the dissemination of information and communication technology and its applications.
2. The building of an information and communication technology sector in the countries of the region, with a view to changing these countries from consumers of various applications into countries capable of producing and exporting such applications.
3. Focusing on institutional and human capacity-building.

ESCWA is hopeful that such endeavours will contribute to the narrowing of the digital divide and strengthen dialogue between north and south, while placing information and communication technology at the service of good governance and the improved management of crises and struggles and, consequently, help to reduce the incidence of war and strengthen peace.

Thank you for your kind attention.