

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

**ESCWA CONTRIBUTION TO THE THIRD PREPARATORY
COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE
INFORMATION SOCIETY (WSIS)**

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) is pleased to submit its comments on the Draft Declaration of Principles¹ and Draft Plan of Action² to the World Summit on the Information Society third preparatory conference. This document builds on preparatory activities for WSIS carried out by ESCWA and their outcome. These activities started with the Western Asia Preparatory Conference for WSIS, resulting in the Beirut Declaration. This was followed by preparing National Profiles of the Information Society for the 13 ESCWA member countries, which were analysed and integrated in a Regional³, to be updated annually. An expert group meeting focusing on the digital Arabic content resulted in the elaboration of an Arab Content Initiative⁴ to promote the establishment of a content industry in the region.

I. COMMENTS ON THE DRAFT DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES

ESCWA proposes the following comments on the WSIS03/PCIP/DT/4(Rev.3)-E Draft Declaration of Principles:

1) The section on capacity building (Section I [30] and [31]) needs to stress the important role of building the capabilities of decision makers in developing countries. As a preliminary step, it is necessary to raise awareness of decision makers from a cross section of both public and private sectors on benefits of ICTs and on new opportunities offered by the Information Society. With the proper understanding of the variety of ICT applications, such as ICT-based government applications, these decision makers will develop a vision and policy to enable the transition of their countries to the Information Society. In addition, raising awareness of decision makers will act as a catalyst that will eventually bring together the private and public partnership.

¹ WSIS03/PCIP/DT/4(Rev.3)-E

² WSIS03/PCIP/DT/5

³ To be launched on 18 October 2003 in a side event to Dubai-GITEX 2003.

⁴ To be launched on 16 October 2003 in a side event to Dubai-GITEX 2003.

- With the above in mind, ESCWA proposes to add the following statement in section I before point [30]: *Building decision makers' capabilities is the common denominator and driving force behind the establishment of solid inter-agency coordination, active political leadership, effective policy changes, and adequate allocation of financial resources and human efforts in order to streamline the transition towards the Information Society.*
- 2) Regarding the Media (Section I [51]), it is important to note the ability of the media to reach a wide audience in promoting the Information Society and the vital impact of providing reliable information.
- Therefore, the media section should refer to these two notions and the second sentence reformulated as follows: “Consequently, concentration in the ownership of media should be limited *while increasing the reach of reliable information to a wider audience*, and unhindered access by individuals and communication media to information sources shall be ensured and strengthened in order to promote the existence of vigorous public opinion as a pillar of civil responsibility in accordance with the UN declaration of Human Rights and other international and regional instruments dealing with human rights”
- 3) Section I [52] on the “Ethical dimensions of the Information Society” should explicitly refer to protecting the youth from harmful information. The Internet is allowing the youth to access a vast array of material that unfortunately could expose them to inappropriate information.
- It is proposed to reformulate the second sentence to become: “All actors in the Information Society should seek to promote the common good, protect privacy, and prevent abusive uses of ICTs; *particularly, by avoiding the exposure of youth to harmful information while avoiding unnecessary restrictions for disseminating Internet usage.*”
- 4) While the Draft Declaration of Principles refers to facilitating technical and financial assistance (section I [53]), there is need to emphasize the huge costs associated with capital market liberalisation especially in a developing country; thus ESCWA suggests to include explicit reference to the fact that developing countries should mitigate the risks incurred by debt building ICT projects through partnership with private sector and international organizations.
- It is suggested to add the following statement (section I [53]) just before the sentence starting with “to this end”: *Developing countries should mitigate the risks incurred by debt building ICT projects through partnerships with private sector and international organizations.*

II. COMMENTS ON THE DRAFT PLAN OF ACTION

ESCWA is pleased to observe that the new draft Plan of Action, namely WSIS03/PC-3/3-E has considered having “clear objectives, which are prioritised and have associated actions and timeframes with realistic and achievable objectives”⁵. It also favours maintaining a genuine link between the Draft Declaration of Action and the Draft Plan of Action in order to confer a parallelism between these two documents.

⁵ “Extract from Draft Plan of Action”, WSIS-3/PCIP/DT/7-E, 18-7-2003

With the above in mind, the following comments on the WSIS03/PC-3/3-E Draft Plan of Action are submitted:

5) Section B [10] entitled “Vulnerable communities and countries” contains actions would be better moved under section C, entitled “Action Lines”, just after paragraph 14 or merged with paragraph 14. It is also suggested to reformulate section B, entitled “Objectives, goals and targets”, to mainly include the general objectives of the draft Plan of Action document.

- Suggested objectives to be added at the beginning of Section B:

The Draft Plan of Action is an evolving document that aims at three strategic objectives:

- *Developing the Information Society and providing an ongoing monitoring mechanism based on cooperation and coordination of efforts among all stakeholders;*
- *Ensuring that efforts to build the Information Society are of added benefit to local communities;*
- *Promoting social inclusion and increasing the social and economic potentials of developing countries and of vulnerable communities.*

6) Section B [8], the Plan of Action does not provide a holistic view on the implementation process. In fact, the implementation process is as much as important as the Plan of Action itself. It is recommended to add to point [8] a statement that highlights the overall implementation process, the details of which could be tackled in another document after adopting the Plan of Action.

- It is suggested to add the following to section B just after point [8]: *Different areas of the Plan of Action can be launched simultaneously at the start of implementation. Changes in emphasis will, naturally, be introduced to take into account specific national conditions and priorities. Additionally, the centre of gravity will shift from one area to another during implementation as dictated by progress and specific national priorities. The different areas of the Plan of Action will have several commonalities and will be designed and implemented with a view to achieving optimal coordination.*

7) Section B [9]-bullet “h” could be reformulated to include a complementary milestone making sure that all school graduates are computer literate.

- The recommended modification for this indicative target is: “All primary and secondary school curricula to be revised to meet the challenges of the Information Society by 2006 and to enable all school graduates to become computer literate by 2010.”

8) The draft Plan of Action (section C) can be improved by producing a pragmatic and quantifiable document that will guide and allow monitoring the progress of work of member countries, especially during the second phase of WSIS. The suggested changes pertain to the structure of the action plan table; it proposes to map each set of actions with their corresponding objective and assign for each action a timeframe.

- It is proposed to add two new columns in the actions tables; the first, entitled objective and preceding the actions column, will describe the objective behind each set of actions; the second, entitled timeframe and located between actions and level columns, will assign a time frame for the complementation of the relevant action.

9) ESCWA recommends linking the Plan of Action to comparative key indicators and to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). The Plan of Action should include as much as possible comparative key indicator in order to provide a number of measurable milestones, be it qualitative or quantitative. The proposed timeframe will be in alignment with the United Nations' MDG. Once the Plan of Action is adopted, a second document with an exhaustive list of milestones associated to the actions could be produced, thus allowing for measuring progress of the implementation.

- Sample milestones are illustrated below:

Sample milestone

- *Target to reach 4,000 Internet users per 10,000 inhabitants in least developed countries by 2015.*
- *Reduce illiteracy rate within the range of 15% for all population by 2015.*
- *All vulnerable communities and countries to adopt an action plan in partnership with international, regional and local organization as well as with private and public institutions by 2008.*

10) ICTs underpin present business practices and continue to be a driver of change. Our lives are increasingly dependent on ICTs and the need to minimize the repercussions of ICT systems failure should be attended to. Section C [29] tackles Internet governance but does not deal with ICT governance.

- The following action should be added in section C [29]:

Actions	Level
<i>- Develop policies, directives, and handbooks on ICT governance for the public and private sectors</i>	<i>R, N</i>

11) More and more countries are joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) and are adapting their legal and regulatory systems to the demands of the WTO treaties, and particularly those related with the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). However, a major issue that is still infringing the implementation progress is the lack of enforcement mechanisms in developing countries. This issue should be recognized and proactive actions taken in order to align enforcement mechanisms with legal systems. Additionally, reduction of IPR processing fees or financial subsidies should be made available to LDCs and vulnerable communities in order to facilitate their transition to the Information Society.

- The following two actions should be included in section C [30]:

Actions	Level
<i>- Streamlining enforcement processes to become more efficient and effective, as far as IPR and cyber crimes are concerned.</i>	<i>R, N</i>
<i>- Reducing or subsidizing IPR processing fees in such a way to enable LDCs and vulnerable communities to participate in the Information Society.</i>	<i>I, R, N</i>

12) Throughout the section on ICT applications (section C [32], [33], [34], and [35]), the prefix “e” is referring to the integration of Internet technology to the respective applications. It is only a matter of time that this prefix will be Therefore, it is proposed to use the expression “ICT-based government applications” instead of e-government, and similarly for the other ICT applications.

13) The ICT applications in section C [32], [33], [34], and [35] could be enhanced by adding indicative targets. It is proposed to adopt a four-phase model allowing the move from simple presence on the Web to a full-fledged transformation of the organization and its processes. The aim is to make sure all stakeholders abide to these indicative indicators while executing the essential actions.

- The following should be included to cover section C [32], [33], [34], and [35]:

All stakeholders need to respect the following phases:

- *Presence phase: it ensures the provision of a Web site that contains static information (to be completed by 2005);*
- *Interaction phase: it provides needed information and the electronic forms that can be filled electronically or printed and then transmitted by mail (to be completed by 2010);*
- *Transaction phase: it automates government functions and has more streamline capabilities (to be completed by 2015);*
- *Transformation phase: it transforms existing structure, laws, and procedures and paves the way for a new virtual organization (to be completed by 2020).*

14) With regard to section E [48], it is necessary to endorse public-private partnership and to emphasize government's contributions for maintaining and implementing the Plan of Action during the second phase of the WSIS.

- Adding the following statement is valuable to section E [48]: *The Plan of Action will be executed in the spirit of public-private partnership. Governments' contributions are of the essence, in creating a nurturing environment and in ensuring a level playing field. Through the process of information dissemination and dialogue among countries, the Plan of Action needs to be updated to reflect implementation changes and to cater for new ICT innovations.*