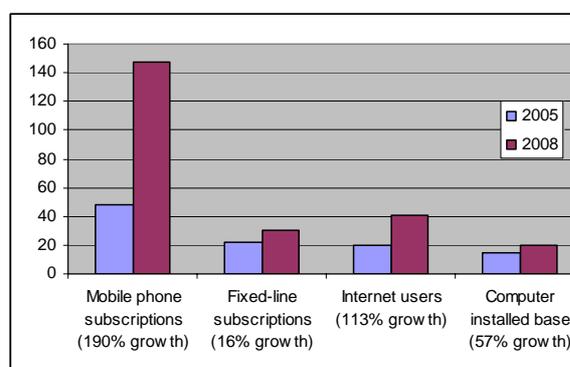## INFORMATION SOCIETY IN THE ESCWA REGION

The development of the information society in the ESCWA region encompasses many different facets and variables. Broad trends are very hopeful. Most countries are performing better now than four years ago. Information and communication technology (ICT) adoption and use rates are higher, costs are lower and more attention is being focused on the ICT sector and its enabling environment.

The ESCWA region has taken significant steps towards bridging the digital divide and building the information society. The prominence of ICTs has grown across the region, with dramatic increases in telecommunications penetration rates and mounting adoption of broadband technologies. Consequently, the region has witnessed an increasing adoption and use of ICT applications and e-services, and a greater participation of the governments and all stakeholders in building the information society.

Growth of the ESCWA region in ICTs, 2005-2008

Significant investments are underway to increase integration with regional and global communication networks. These efforts will make it easier for ESCWA member countries to address such issues as access to information and knowledge, building capacity for regional integration and the availability of digital Arabic content.

While bright spots have been observed in realizing the information society in the region, GCC countries have made greater strides than other ESCWA member countries in building information societies. Nevertheless, all ESCWA member countries, including the most advanced ones, still need to exert considerable efforts before reaching the levels attained by developed countries in this regard.

The percentage of people living in poverty has increased in the ESCWA region over the past 15 years. While ICT has a key role to play in creating job opportunities and alleviating poverty, the difficulties of development in conflict prone areas preclude any role for ICT for development, and require different priorities and focus. While much remains to be done, realistic options exist for making concrete improvements throughout the ESCWA region.

The ESCWA Role

To support ESCWA member countries in their efforts in building the information society, and to address above challenges and capitalize on opportunities, ESCWA/ICTD has provided a credible regional platform bridging national, regional, and global efforts. To realize this role, ESCWA used

several vehicles to achieve its goals. These vehicles include meetings, publications, advisory services as well as online presence and field projects.

1. Meetings

ESCWA organized, during June 2009, a conference entitled "Regional Follow-up to the Outcome of the World Summit on the Information Society" in Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic, attended by more than 275 participants. This all-encompassing gathering provided a forum for various Word Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) stakeholders to discuss and review the progress made towards the implementation of the 11 WSIS action lines, the Regional Plan of Action (RPoA), the Arab ICT Strategy as well as national ICT strategies and plans of action. The main outcomes of the conference included an update of the RPoA and the adoption of the "Damascus Proclamation for the Promotion of the Arab Knowledge Society for Sustainable Economic and Social Development."

ESCWA and the League of Arab States have jointly organized an Expert Group Meeting on "Regional Roadmap for Internet Governance" in Beirut, during 25-26 October 2010. The meeting aimed at promoting the role of the Arab region in Governance of the Internet and enhancing its capacities in shaping Internet global public policies, and at strengthening results-based cooperation of the various Arab stakeholders for the period 2011-2015.

In May 2010, ESCWA held a workshop entitled "Building Trust and Confidence in Arabic e-Services". The workshop aimed at raising awareness and sharing best practices among member countries on issues related to building trust, cybersecurity, data privacy and data governance, awareness raising towards building culture of security and trust, as well as developing national policies to protect the cyberspace and its applications from threats.

ESCWA, in collaboration with the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), organized a training workshop on "Measuring ICT Indicators." The workshop, provided theoretical as well as hands-on training on data collection of the core list of ICT indicators including indicators on ICT infrastructure, access to and use of ICT by households and individuals, use of ICT by businesses, as well as on trade in ICT goods.

As a part of ESCWA's commitment towards building the information society and knowledge economy in Western Asia, and responding to the directives of the Tunis Agenda concerning the need to develop new and innovative mechanisms for Financing ICT for Development, ESCWA organized in 2009 a workshop on "Investment in the ICT Sector." The main objective of the workshop was to raise the awareness of member countries and to increase their understanding of policies, mechanisms and modalities that promote ICT investment and entrepreneurship in the region.

Following up on its previous multi-faceted work on cyberlegislation, ESCWA organized during 2008 a workshop entitled "Cyberlegislation and its Implementation in the ESCWA Region." Participants were trained on the use of a cyberlegislation template which had been previously prepared by ESCWA for the purpose of speeding up the drafting and adoption of cyber laws and regulations.

ESCWA organized, during July 2009, an Expert Group Meeting entitled "ICT Applications and e-Services in the Public Sector." Participants at the Meeting discussed the national, regional and global challenges facing the development and adoption of ICT applications as well as the problems inherent in the delivery of e-services in the public sector. The Meeting focused mainly on e-government, e-payment, e-health and e-learning.

In December 2009, ESCWA organized a workshop that focused on the "Delivery of e-Services in Civil Society." The workshop aimed at increasing the awareness, capacities and capabilities of selected non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the ESCWA region to provide and use e-commerce services that are based on the priorities and development needs of citizens and communities. It also looked into the impact that portal technologies and e-commerce applications may have on the sustainability of NGOs. A follow-up workshop, on the same topic, was organized in November 2010 to assess the experiences of the NGOs and to discuss further development and new techniques for improving these e-commerce solutions.

2. Publications 2009/2010

ESCWA published in 2009 a study entitled "Internet Governance: Challenges and Opportunities for the ESCWA Member Countries." The study aims at increasing the knowledge and understanding of Internet governance issues while promoting the role of Arab countries in the global Internet society.

ESCWA produced in 2009 its biennial publication entitled "Regional Profile of the Information Society in Western Asia." The publication evaluates the progress made towards building an information society in each ESCWA member country and is based mainly on information collected and submitted by member countries in the 2009 edition of "National Profiles."

ESCWA produced a study entitled "Impact of ICT on Community Development in ESCWA Member Countries." This publication addresses the difficulties of selecting indicators which effectively measure the results of ICT related projects. In addition, the study suggests methodological frameworks for the development of new indicators which will better address the complexities of ICT for development activities.

To address cybersecurity and trust challenges in the region, ESCWA developed and published in March 2009 a study entitled "Building Trust in E-Services in the ESCWA Region." The study identified the various levels of cybersecurity, reviewed relevant national and regional policies, mechanisms and modalities and shed light on the legal elements that need to be developed in order to build the trust and confidence of ICT users and to encourage them to use e-services. The study also included a model set of laws and procedures that may be used to enforce information and infrastructure security at the institutional and national levels.

3. ISPER

During 2008-2009, ESCWA continued to maintain and update its Information Society Portal (ISPER) which was created and developed to serve as a regional online tool for following-up on the RPoA as well as various other WSIS issues. The Arabic and English portal features updated versions of the Regional and National Profiles of the Information Society and provides real-time discussion forums to WSIS stakeholders. It is also connected to the ESCWA Statistical Information System (ESIS) and allows users to query the database for the latest updated figures. ISPER, in its new form, encompasses focus areas related to the ICT sector, namely cyberlegislation, Internet Governance and promoting the ICT sector.

4. Advisory Services

As the information society develops into multi-facetted aspects of technology applications, advisory services and technical cooperation have been essential for the assistance in this development. In this regard, technical services covered several aspects, among them are the following:

- Measurement of the information society, which included training on indicators and measurement for ICT in governments, businesses, households, education, etc.
- Assessment of strategies, policies and ideas and action plans for development.
- Technical assistance in the aspects of e-government initiatives on the national level.
- Providing guidelines for practical planning on chief-information officers' actions, structuring and reengineer IT departments in the government.
- Review of progress reports of ongoing projects of ICT vis-à-vis the planned action, and impact assessment on the society.

5. Projects

ESCWA implemented the project, entitled "Knowledge Networks through ICT Access Points for Disadvantaged Communities", as a lead agency along with the other four regional commissions of the United Nations. In the ESCWA region, a regional knowledge network was established to plug in 13 knowledge centres in six ESCWA member countries namely, Jordan, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Lebanon, Egypt and Yemen. Through several workshops organized in most of these countries between 2007 and 2010, leaders of knowledge centres have been trained on how to move from a technological community centre to a knowledge centre and take advantage of this regional network to transfer knowledge to local communities and contribute to the upgrading of their economic and social levels. In addition, the project launched a regional knowledge portal to serve the leading knowledge centres in the ESCWA region. This portal is being expanded to include the portal knowledge networks of the regional commissions, as well as other global knowledge networks to accommodate the requirements of knowledge centres and local communities.

The project on "Promotion of the Digital Arabic Content Industry through Incubation" which was launched in 2007, represented ESCWA's contribution to the growth of the digital Arabic content (DAC) industry in Western Asia and through which the Commission sought to support and promote the development of DAC applications in ICT incubation facilities. The project was composed of two tracks. The first track consisted of publishing of three studies: a) A Survey on Digital Arabic Content: Software, Applications and Needs Assessment; b) Models for Business Plan, marketing and Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships for the Digital Arabic Content Industry; and c) Hardware and Software Incubation Requirements and Training Needs. The second track of the aforementioned project has mainly focused on implementing a number of DAC related projects through the utilization of ICT incubators facilities in Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. For the selection of these projects, ICTD organized and implemented national competitions including awareness campaigns in collaboration with selected incubators and Universities in the concerned countries. The winners were awarded one year of incubation that offered working space, training and business support.

The project on Development of ADNS Phase II aimed at continuing efforts to overcome the language barrier on the Internet through the development of an ADNS that is inter-operable with the global Internet name resolution scheme. Supporting the League of Arab States initiative, ESCWA and other partners moved into a more practical stage for acquiring the Arab TLDs and accordingly establishing the Registry associated with their management. The main activities achieved were: 1. Publishing a "Request for Comments" IETF document. 2. Publishing the Preliminary Feasibility study on Establishment of the Domain Name Registry for the ".arab" and ".عربي" Generic Top Level Domains. 3. Formation of a Dot Arab Steering Committee (DASC). 4. Designing and launching a Request for Information (RFI) exercises to solicit information for Domain Names Industry players. 5. The Arab TLD Charter - A strategic Framework for defining, implementing and managing the Arab gTLDs (2010-2014). 6. Initiating the development of the ICANN Applicant Guidebook.

The main objective of the project on Regional Harmonization of Cyberlegislation to Promote the Knowledge Society in the Arab World is to assist in the development and implementation of a harmonized legal and regulatory framework for cyberlegislations in the ESCWA region. Modern and harmonized cyberlegislations will strengthen the foundation of a nascent ICT enabling environment and will accelerate the use of ICT applications in the region. In turn, this will lead to growth in the region's economy, particularly in the ICT sector. This project is expected to: (a) raise the awareness of policy and decision makers on cyberlegislations and the essential role they play in building the Information Society. It will develop a reference guide to cyberlegislation directives that aims at building the capacity of ESCWA member countries to draft, enact and implement said legislations. Workshops and other activities will also highlight, to the project's users, the importance of various other related topics ranging from the protection of personal data to freedom of expression; and (b) the harmonization of the legal and regulatory frameworks of cyberspace in the ESCWA region. The harmonization of the region's cyberlegislations is of importance to both the public and private sectors. It will foster the development of integrated regional markets which would be better able to compete in today's globalized economy.