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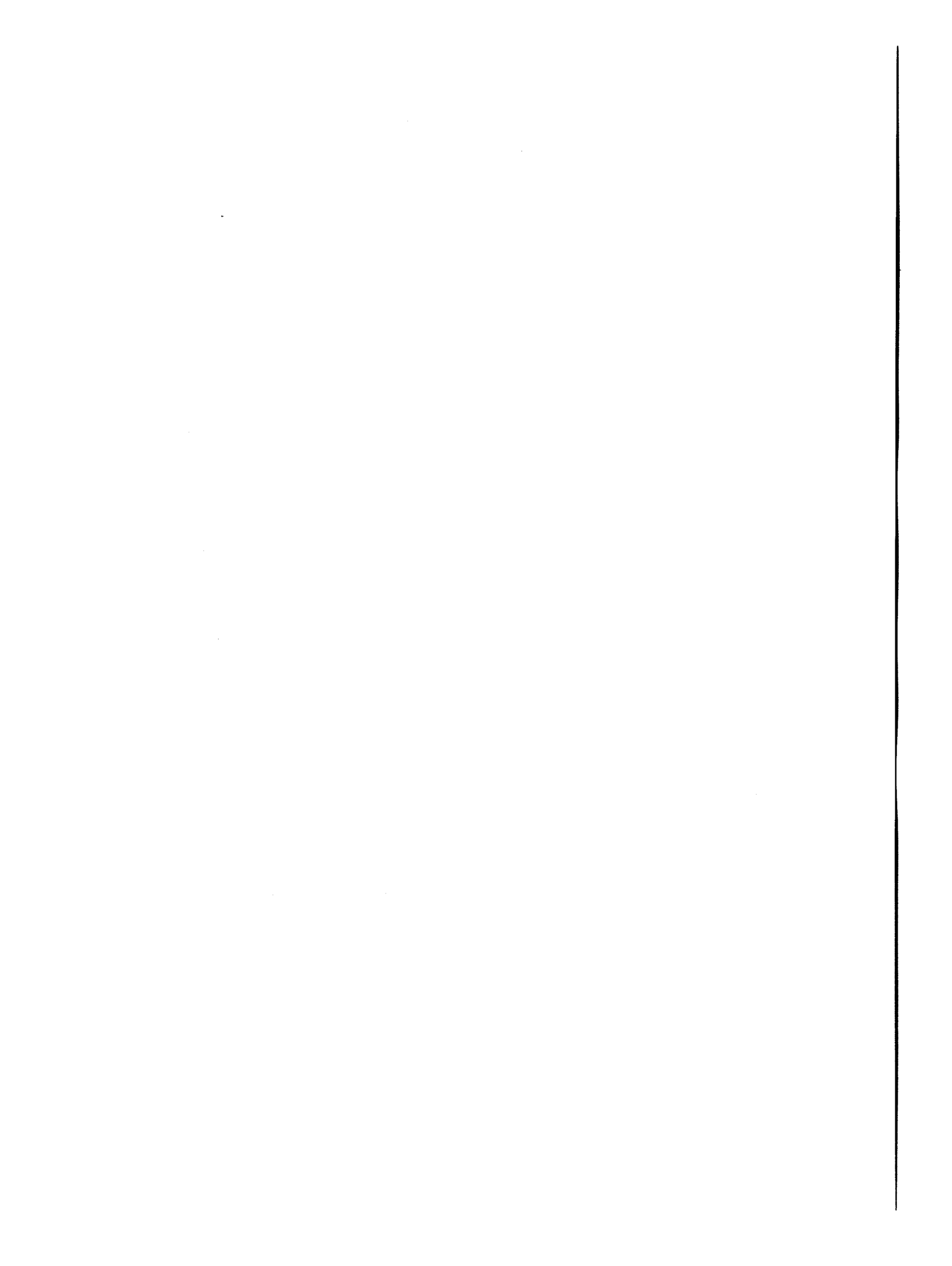
**DELINEATING ROLES FOR PARTNERS IN THE DEVELOPMENT
OF THE INFORMATION SOCIETY:
A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
Introduction	1
I. The roles of the different stakeholders	2
A. Government's role.....	2
B. Private sector's role	3
C. Role of non Governmental Organizations (NGOs).....	3
D. The role of the education sector and research and development institutes	4
E. Role of international and regional organizations.....	5
II. Partnership between governments and the private sector	6
III. Plan of action	7



INTRODUCTION

This paper reviews the benefits that collaboration among the concerned partners could have for the development of the Information Society (IS). Discussions about the IS typically encompass the public sector and its role. However, it is also important to consider other social and economic entities, both profit and non-profit oriented. Among others, governments, the private sector, NGOs, the education sector, research and development institutes and regional and international institutions play a significant role.

In order to take concrete steps towards the IS, development strategies should promote the collaborative development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)¹, effective social policies, and a motivating business environment.

For the effective development of IS through collaboration, partners will have to pay special attention to the structures of economic, political and administrative authorities to manage a country's ICTs at all levels.

Though IS gives rise to many social and economic issues, this paper will concentrate on new technologies related to the IS as a central enabling factor in the transition towards the IS. The reason for this is that the promotion of new technologies has a significant short-term impact in societies with a relatively small amount of effort and resources, thus accelerating integration among the ESCWA countries and with the global community. There is no doubt that new technologies are good facilitators for social change. In Kofi Annan's words, "ICTs can serve as an engine for development in the 21st century. They are an effective instrument to help us achieve all the goals of the Millennium Declaration"². These concerns are conveyed below in Box 1.

Box 1. The United Nation's concerns for IS

"The majority of the world's population has yet to benefit from the new technology. That is why the Millennium Summit recognized the key role of partnerships involving governments, development agencies, the private sector and other stakeholders in putting ICTs in the service of development. That is why I launch an appeal to governments and to the private sector to support the ITU initiative to convene a World Summit on the IS. This global gathering will be a unique opportunity for all key players to develop a shared vision of ways to bridge the digital divide and create a truly global IS"³.

"In order to define a common and shared vision of the new IS, it is necessary for all the components of our societies to come together. Accordingly, I appeal to all stakeholders, governments, civil society, the private sector and intergovernmental organizations, to participate actively, each within their own sphere"⁴.
"The Summit is expected to produce a shared vision among world leaders, the private sector and the NGO community on how to bring about sustainable development through ICTs"⁵.

Development of the IS will only be achieved through intensive partnerships. This necessitates two requirements: First, that each partner has a clearly defined role in the collaborative efforts. Second, that there be very clear criteria to prioritize and harmonize the main activities to be undertaken.

¹ In terms of infrastructure as well as a sector in its own

² where poverty, employment, equality, etc become the United Nations objective for the people during the next 25 years

³ Kofi Annan's message to the WSIS PrepCom1.

⁴ Mr. Adama Samassekou, President of WSIS PrepCom.

⁵ Mr. Yoshio Utsumi, ITU Secretary-General

Another factor that favors partnership is that in the IS “knowledge” is the major resource for development⁶ and it can only be successfully created and disseminated in collaborative environments. Of course, while capital and labor are still highly appreciated assets for development, it is knowledge that is deemed the new and valuable resource. It is in this respect that partnership is crucial for the transition into the IS.

I. THE ROLES OF THE DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS

This part of the paper discusses the roles of the different IS partners. Each has to identify its role and devise a strategy to play it successfully. Further, for truly dynamic and synergistic development, each partner must do this in collaboration with the others.

A. Governments’ role

The governments’ main mission is to create an enabling and motivating environment for innovation. This would include actively supporting ICTs through legislation, providing incentives for private enterprises, enforcing standards, and applications at the national level, e.g. e-business, e-commerce, e-health, e-learning, and e-governance. Box 2 highlights areas in which governments in the ESCWA member countries need to be involved.

Box 2. Governments’ role

Governments would need to be heavily involved in:

Formulating national and ICT policies and strategies to support the ICT sector;

Supporting modern ICT infrastructure building, both directly and through adopting and disseminating measures to facilitate national, regional and international investment;

Ensuring national, regional and international interconnectivity and interoperability of telecommunication networks and protocols through relevant coordination bodies;

Introducing reforms to provide tax abatements and incentives for ICT start-ups in order to encourage their participation in national and international bids;

Reducing the cost of telecommunication services, levels of taxation, and import duties on ICT products and services;

Developing and implementing national plans for ICT applications in the social services and commercial practices, including e-commerce and e-banking;

Introducing ICTs in public administration reforms and e-government applications;

Adopting international best practices to resolve disputes related to online transaction trade and taking part in the continual evolution of such practices.

Source: Report of the Forum on Technology for Employment and Poverty Alleviation in the Arab countries. ESCWA and ILO. Beirut. 16-18 July 2002.

In order to create an environment for innovation, continuous improvement of legal and regulatory issues is needed. The protection of Intellectual Property Rights (patents, trademarks, etc.) is one of the issues. Foreign Investment law⁷ is another area where governments are working and where outcomes will be critical. Governments also need to look at improving administration of organizational frameworks since efficiency is key for their success. Throughout the world, private organizations are generally recognized as more efficient

⁶ Knowledge for development. World Development Report 1998/99

⁷ Foreign direct investment and sustainable development Financial Market Trends; Paris; Jun 2001; Anonymous

than public companies. This is too broad an area to be discussed in detail here, but it is beneficial to apply ICT tools and certain management techniques such as human resource management, knowledge management and project management to the public sector.

B. PRIVATE SECTOR'S ROLE

The private sector's mission is the creation of wealth and innovation as well as the provision of products and services to citizens and to other organizations in a cost effective way, competitive way.

Within the private sector, joint ventures and alliances with international and industry leading companies are often seen as a generator of technology transfer, innovation and technology development. However, new technology start-ups should be emphasized in the IS, since they will play a very relevant role at the country level. First, most of the innovation will happen there. Second, start-ups would create a large proportion of the employment in the sector. Third, their ownership structure is local, very well balanced and stable for the survival of the new technology markets. Fourth, start-ups are expected to flourish. Comparing the rates of growth of companies in developed economies, by far, the highest rates belong to the sectors where start-ups are frequent.

Productivity depends on having workers who are educated, safe, healthy, decently housed, and motivated and the availability of skilled and motivated employees. Also, the efficiency of the local infrastructure including roads and telecommunications; the size and sophistication of the local market; and the extent that governmental regulations give the ability to succeed and be profitable. Though private sector organizations need to be profitable, they also need to serve society in a way that goes beyond financial issues. All business corporations are chartered by the state, and, in that sense, are created to serve social welfare. They already do it, improving society in significant ways such as creating jobs, prosperity, customer satisfaction, and important innovations.

C. ROLE OF NON GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOS)

Formally, NGOs can be defined as a collection of organizations that are private, non-profit-distributing, self-governing, and voluntary⁸. NGOs' mission in the ICT development is one of solidarity, specifically, the development of employment and poverty alleviation. NGOs are generally geared to strengthen the IS values, contributing to the social acceptance of the ICTs.

A growing number of non-governmental organizations have sought to rectify situations by acting as intermediaries between private or public initiatives and the citizens⁹. NGOs and civil society institutions can actively represent citizen groups. It is today the most effective way to open up channels of communication between citizens and the government (for example, new legal needs) or the private sector (for example, customer satisfaction).

All over the world, NGOs have played important roles in ICT development. Even in some of the ESCWA member countries, national computer societies and professional associations have been exceedingly important in the initial stages of ICT dissemination. Box 3 gives several areas that NGOs in the ESCWA member countries need to be involved in.

⁸ Defining the non-profit sector: Germany. Helmut K. Ankeier and Rutgers University and The Johns Hopkins University and Wolfgang Seibel University of Konstanz. 1993

⁹ The role of NGOs in the development of civil society: Europe and the Arab countries. Arab Forum and Bruno Kreisky Forum

Box 3. NGOs areas of involvement

There are several areas in which NGOs would be especially effective:

- Promoting the adoption of adequate standards, norms and regulations
- Facilitating the dissemination of ICTs;
- The protection of intellectual property rights;
- Safeguarding privacy and the rights of the individual;
- Introducing and disseminating ICT applications in areas where governments and the private sector might not be prepared or able to devote the required degree of attention;
- Providing assistance in national and local computer literacy programmes;
- Implementing programmes to promote the re-employment of qualified women in ICT related fields;
- Facilitating the use of ICT services, including e-commerce and e-government services, by disadvantaged groups
- Learning about available grants and funds

Source: Report of the Forum on Technology for Employment and Poverty Alleviation in the Arab countries. ESCWA and ILO. Beirut. 16-18 July 2002.

Within the IS, citizens are especially vulnerable and therefore, it is essential for both the governments and the private sector companies to facilitate the NGO's role. Reviewing best practices from other countries, NGOs also play a crucial role in career planning and in professional education, helping workers to adapt to the new IS.

D. THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATION SECTOR AND RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTES

The development community is rapidly coming to understand that knowledge is central to development, that, in effect, "knowledge is development"¹⁰. The educational sector's mission is to contribute to narrowing the knowledge gap, not only by disseminating knowledge, but also by creating it and making it accessible and applicable.

Governments need to improve strategies designed to promote ICT knowledge in the education system. By enhancing certain types of knowledge, it is possible to see improvement in related sectors of the economy¹¹. Since ICT education is very specialized, it is important for the future of the IS to have an efficient system that can train a substantial number of persons. The main skills to acquire are technological, managerial and human.

In the IS, human resources are the most important factor for success, from specialists (business people, scientists, regulators) to basic end users. This requires an ambitious and innovative approach in capacity building, taking advantage of technology in some cases.

Research and development (R and D) centres' prerogative is also the creation of knowledge. Their role is also to reduce the "brain drain" and to improve what is called the "absorptive capacity" of the country for technology transfer.

¹⁰ Knowledge for development. World Development Report 1998/99

¹¹ Partnership and networking in science and technology for development. Noholas S. Vonortas. UNCTAD. Division on Investment Technology and Enterprise Development, 2002

E. ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

The mission of the United Nations and other relevant organizations that serve as catalysts for IS development in the region can be described as:

- Facilitating network cooperation;
- Sharing knowledge;
- Providing support to capacity building initiatives;
- Creating awareness of inequalities, i.e. gender differences in computer literacy;
- Improving quality of life.

It could be summarized in one sentence: To facilitate knowledge sharing. With this objective, there are a number of successful web-based initiatives launched by international and regional organizations. For instance, box 4 describes Development Gateway. There, users can access information, resources and tools and they can also contribute their own knowledge and experience. To complement and leverage existing efforts of the development community, international and regional organizations are taking collaborative initiatives to build portals involving public and private sectors and civil society groups.

Main services will be as follows: online training modules, research findings, case studies and best practices, procurement services, information on development projects, funding, commercial opportunities, product reviews, news, job announcements and directories. All of these services will be arranged according to the needs of specific audiences, such as community leaders, policy makers, local government officials, private investors and academics.

Box 4. Some initiatives for knowledge sharing

Development Gateway¹² is a portal web site on development issues. The Gateway is currently funded by the World Bank, but later it will be transferred to the Development Gateway Foundation, an independent non-profit organization dedicated to reducing poverty and helping to bridge the digital divide by promoting development-related ICT initiatives (www.developmentgateway.org).

Global Development Network (GDN) is a policy research partnership designed to build research capacities in developing countries by supporting and linking research and policy institutes involved in development. It focuses on generating and sharing knowledge (www.gdnet.org).

Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP) is committed to sharing information, experiences and resources to promote broad access to and effective use of knowledge and information for sustainable development (www.globalknowledge.com).

Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP) is a catalytic initiative to support networking in developing countries and to help people develop and share information and expertise relevant to sustainable development (www3.undp.org).

Source: ESCWA, Jan, 2003

The United Nations also leads some global knowledge and learning networks initiatives, with the goal of sharing experience, encouraging debate and supporting national and regional action: They serve as mechanisms not only for information exchange but also for alliance building. Some of the initiatives are described in box 4.

¹² Partnership for development. The WorldBank. 2000

Assistance in bridging the digital divide is one of the most important areas in which cooperation can help people to improve their lives. Some examples of shaping the Information Society through ICT cooperative initiatives are described in box 5.

Box 5. Cooperative initiatives involving the United Nations

Here are some other examples of cooperation between UN bodies, non-governmental organization and/or private sector:

The **Global Digital Opportunity Initiative** was launched in 2002 as a partnership between the UNDP and the Markle Foundation and the International Partners Group, and consists of business, non-profit and international entities. The initiative is committed to providing countries with pro bono expertise and resources to create e-strategies and solutions that advance development goals.

Satellite is a non-profit organization that employs satellite, telephone and Internet technology to empower health professionals in developing countries. Satellite reaches its objectives through the creative use of ICTs and the establishment of partnerships and/or funding arrangements with intergovernmental bodies like WHO, UNDP and the World Bank's *infoDev* programme (www.satellite.org and www.healthnet.org).

The **Digital Partnership** initiative has planned to mobilize used ICT equipment from major companies to develop integrated and networked e-learning centers in disadvantaged schools and community settings and also provides location-specific training and content development (www.iblf.org/digitalpartnership).

World Information Transfer, Inc. (WIT) is a non-profit organization that was formed in recognition of the pressing need to provide accurate, actionable information about the deteriorating global environment and its effect on human health to opinion leaders and concerned citizens around the world (www.worldinfo.org).

Digital Partners is a non-profit organization that aims to support innovative revenue-generating efforts in education/literacy, health care, micro-enterprise and other forms of economic empowerment. The key aim is to link established entrepreneurs in the ICT sector with social entrepreneurs and start-ups that are experimenting with the use of digital technology for empowerment of the poor (www.digitalpartners.org).

Source: ESCWA, Jan, 2003

II. PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN GOVERNMENTS AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Although IS development in the ESCWA region involves a number of different partners, two of them are particularly important: the governments and the private sector.

Both need each other¹³. First, ICT development requires the participation of key economic actors in society, especially the government and the private sector. On the one hand, without government commitment and capacity to provide growth-oriented economic policies and institutional arrangements, the private sector would not invest up to its potential. On the other hand, without private investment, government policies do not create new jobs and more goods and services.

The question is: what kind of partnership should the two parties seek in order to ensure sustainable economic development? Today's challenges constitute a situation in which a new realignment of the roles could be needed.

¹³ Partners for development: new roles for government and private sector in the Middle East and North Africa. Samiha Fawzy and Ahmed Galal (ed.)

Privatizing the telecommunications infrastructure is a visible event of the new partnership. It is fundamentally a process of redrawing the boundaries that define the ownership and management of productive ICT assets.

Demonstrating the major trends, the World Bank's PPI Project Database shows that there is a strong and steady growth in private participation in telecommunications.

III. PLAN OF ACTION

WSIS "must be an opportunity to develop specific solutions and tools and adopt a realistic and viable plan of action"¹⁴. It was suggested, "based on the priorities identified, to focus on a limited number of issues in order to reach the critical mass in the actions to be launched"¹⁵. With this in mind, some recommendations are made for teamwork collaboration between partners.

First, to continue encouraging entrepreneurship in order to drive the knowledge-based economy and promote ICT companies.

Second, since intellectual property protection is essential for the IS, it is also recommended that all stakeholders continue working together to amend patent laws. A balance needs to be struck between excessively strong and excessively weak property rights.

Third, it is important to continue creating the appropriate conditions for promotion of ICT based FDI in the region.

Fourth, new technology ICT companies have to maintain or improve social conditions in a way that goes beyond financial benefits. They could improve society in significant ways: creating jobs, prosperity, customer satisfaction, and important innovations.

Fifth, though throughout the world, private companies have proven to be more productive than public organizations, it is beneficial to promote the private sector and to apply more private sector best practices and certain management techniques such as human resource management, knowledge management and project management to the public sector.

Sixth, knowledge gaps are continuously narrowed through improving the education system and promoting R and D.

Seventh, more collaborations are needed. New and creative ways of partnership and collaboration should be explored. A number of schemes are proposed for collaboration among the different stakeholders that need to happen in the ESCWA region:

- Financing, fund raising and Foreign Direct Investment;
- Research and Development;
- Business Incubators;
- Business Associations;
- Definition of Standards (Quality Management, Technical Standards...);
- Education.

The challenge for the region is the collaborative development of knowledge, effective social policies, and a motivating business environment to create a new IS with less inequality and a narrowed digital divide that takes into account the cultural wealth and the Arabic language.

¹⁴ Kofi Annan's message to WSIS

¹⁵ Conclusions of PrepCom I

