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REPORT

WESTERN ASIA PREPARATORY CONFERENCE FOR THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY Beirut, 4-6 February 2003

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## Introduction

1. The changes brought about by the global movement towards the information society affect all aspects of life. Such changes arise from the new developments affecting the role played by and attitudes towards information in society. The bases for economic growth have changed and new opportunities and challenges for social and economic development have been created which have an impact on every production and service sector. Administrative and operational bases have also changed, and processes have been initiated for Government restructuring.

2. As the movement towards the information society proceeds, the progress made in that respect by developed countries, in particular, has distanced them from the developing countries. There is a further distance between those who have access to and exploit information, and those who do not, which is known as the 'digital divide'. That divide exists at all levels, separating one country from another, cities from rural areas, men from women and one culture from another.

3. In consideration of the widening over time of the digital divide, on 21 December 2001 the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 56/183 concerning the World Summit on the Information Society. It welcomed the resolution adopted by the Council of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) at its 2001 session, in which the Council endorsed the proposal of the Secretary-General of ITU to hold the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) at the highest possible level in two phases, the first in Geneva from 10 to 12 December 2003 and the second in Tunis in 2005.

4. The Summit represents a unique opportunity for the world community to discuss issues related to the information society and formulate a concept for working towards such a society by involving the key players in countries, international organizations, private sector institutions and civil society. WSIS will address the central issues of significance in building the information society and relating to policy formulation, economic and social development and cultural, scientific and technological activities. Such issues include the following:

(a) The establishment and development of information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure;

(b) Universal and equitable access to sources of information;

(c) Applications and services;

(d) User needs;

(e) The development of a framework for building the information society;

(f) The use of ICT in education.

5. In order to prepare for the Summit, four of the five United Nations regional commissions, in cooperation with one of their member countries, and at their invitation, organized regional preparatory conferences that were held on the dates set forth below:

(a) The Economic Commission for Africa: at the invitation of the Government of Mali, the conference was held in Bamako from 25 to 30 May 2002;

(b) The Economic Commission for Europe: at the invitation of the Government of Romania, the conference was held in Bucharest from 7 to 9 November 2002;

(c) The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific: at the invitation of the Government of Japan, the conference was held in Tokyo from 13 to 15 January 2003;

(d) The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean: at the invitation of the Government of the Dominican Republic, the conference was held in Bavaro from 29 to 31 January 2003.

6. Against this background, the Government of Lebanon decided to organize a conference, with technical support from the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), to be attended by the countries of Western Asia. The goals of the conference were to review the regional situation; harmonize the views of the participating countries; adopt a declaration of principles; and propose a specific initiative for building the information society in the region, with a view to preparing the countries of Western Asia for participation in the Summit. The most important goals of the conference are set forth below:

(a) To assess the current status of ESCWA member countries with respect to the information society and, in particular, to review the status of infrastructure and ICT applications and services at the national and regional levels;

(b) To identify the key issues, needs and priorities that must be addressed at the national and regional levels;

(c) To forge a common concept of the information society;

(d) To develop a vision, strategies and plans that will enable the countries of the region to establish a knowledge-based society;

(e) To establish a platform for dialogue between the major stakeholders of the information society in the ESCWA region;

(f) To identify initiatives that will lead to model national and regional projects aimed at developing ICT infrastructure and services, strengthening the capacities of member countries to harness such technology for development, increasing related employment opportunities and disseminating ICT applications in all aspects of life.

## **I. ORGANIZATION OF WORK AND PARTICIPANTS**

### **A. VENUE AND DATE OF THE CONFERENCE**

7. In cooperation with ESCWA, the Government of Lebanon issued invitations to the Western Asia Preparatory Conference for the World Summit on the Information Society in Beirut from 4 to 6 February 2003.

8. The Conference was held under the aegis of His Excellency General Emile Lahoud, President of the Lebanese Republic, who was represented by Mr. Jean Louis Cordahi, Minister of Telecommunications of Lebanon. Ministries interested in the information society in ESCWA member and other countries were invited to attend. The date for this Conference, in common with all the other regional preparatory conferences, was set in order to precede the Second Intergovernmental Preparatory Committee meeting, to be held in Geneva from 17 to 28 February 2003.

9. The Conference was sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), ITU, the Information for Development Programme of the World Bank (InfoDev), and the United Nations ICT Task Force.

10. It was also agreed with the League of Arab States that the Fourth Arab Preparatory Meeting of the World Summit on the Information Society should be held at United Nations House, Beirut, immediately subsequent to the Western Asia Preparatory Conference for the World Summit, namely, on 7 and 8 February 2003.

### **B. PARTICIPANTS**

11. The some 300 participants at the Conference included representatives of all the interested sectors of society, namely, Governments within and beyond the Arab region, international organizations, non-

governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society institutions and the business community, in addition to numerous experts.

### C. OPENING

12. Ms. Mervat Tallawy, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of ESCWA, made the inaugural statement. She described the mechanism adopted in preparing for the Summit and reviewed the three main focuses of the Preparatory Conference and the desired outcomes. Those outcomes included a declaration of principles and a draft regional initiative for the information society in Western Asia. She noted that the summary record of the Preparatory Conference would be submitted to the Second Preparatory Committee meeting, in order to ensure that it was taken into account in the final WSIS documents.

13. The Executive Secretary noted the speed of scientific and technological progress and its impact on the information society and on various aspects of economic and social development. The most recent applications had given rise to a wide range of possibilities in many spheres, including training and education, the provision of health and general services to rural areas and new employment opportunities for graduates. Given the transparency afforded by trade and administrative transactions conducted by computer, those applications had also expanded to include such other fields as the eradication of corruption. As a result, the knowledge-based digital economy had developed.

14. Ms. Tallawy remarked that such developments had produced a digital divide between producers and consumers of knowledge. That divide represented a significant challenge to the countries of the developing world in their attempts to avoid marginalization and backwardness. She added that the challenge faced by the developing countries that were attempting to move towards a digital economy did not lie in the paucity or otherwise of knowledge but, rather, in its inadequate dissemination and exploitation. In the age of globalization and the widespread concept of ever-increasing global commodity, service, capital and labour flows, the dissemination of knowledge resources, including ideas, information and technology, was effected through individuals, societies and States, and must become a driving force for increased productivity, competitiveness and export promotion.

15. The Executive Secretary said that if ICT were to be harnessed for economic and social development in the Arab region, a comprehensive approach would be needed that was not limited to investment in expanding the infrastructure and providing Internet connections. National and regional policies and strategies would also have to be formulated and various applications developed that were appropriate to the particularities of the region. Arabic content would also have to be increased. Institutional and human capabilities would therefore have to be enhanced using suitable programmes and by developing the information and communication sector, given that it was the sector producing both hardware and software. Greater efforts would have to be exerted and complementary roles adopted by Government, civil society institutions and the private sector and regional cooperation intensified.

16. Ms. Tallawy commended the achievements realized by certain member countries, which could be expanded to benefit all the countries of the region, given the political will and the appropriate environment for the dissemination of knowledge and the effective participation of the private sector, civil society institutions and the media, and provided that such political will was accompanied by rational policies for establishing the appropriate legal and organizational frameworks. The Executive Secretary concluded her statement by thanking the host Government, namely, Lebanon, and the organizations that had supported the Conference.

17. On behalf of the WSIS Executive Secretariat, Mr. Charles Geiger made a statement entitled "The World Summit on the Information Society: the challenges ahead", in which he reviewed the various stages of preparation for WSIS. The process had begun with the adoption by the General Assembly of resolution 56/183 and was continuing with the preparations currently being made for the first phase, to be held in Geneva at the end of 2003. The final stage would be the holding of the second phase in Tunis in 2005. He recalled the Secretariat's three goals for WSIS, namely, to disseminate awareness of the information society; to reduce the digital divide in respect of information and applications; and to conduct international

negotiations with a view to formulating an appropriate global legislative and political framework. He then gave further information on those goals and on means of working to achieve them and overcoming obstacles thereto.

18. Mr. Geiger summarized the main items on the agenda of the Second Intergovernmental Preparatory Committee meeting, which is scheduled to be held in Geneva from 17 to 28 February 2003. Those items included the review of both the declarations of principles adopted by each of the regional preparatory committees and the report of the second subcommittee, that was formed as an outcome of the first meeting of the Preparatory Committee, on the issues to be submitted to the Summit. A further item was the discussion of more than 80 working papers presented by various sectors throughout the world. The aim of the meeting was to formulate a draft declaration of principles and a draft platform for action for submission to the Summit. Mr. Geiger concluded his statement by stressing the importance of formulating a realistic platform for action for reducing or eliminating the digital divide by means of constructive initiatives, programmes and projects.

19. The Minister of Telecommunications and representative of the President of Lebanon, Mr. Jean Louis Kordahi, made a statement in which he said that the Western Asia Preparatory Conference for the World Summit on the Information Society was a challenge, in view of a possible war that would introduce serious complications into the region. He discussed the information and communications revolution and the importance of a fundamental change of approach to that sector: rather than being a strategic support for military and security stability, as in previous decades, it should be viewed as a basis for disseminating information, modernizing production, diversifying national revenue, developing human resources, working towards globalization and moving towards a knowledge-based economy. Against this background, he referred to the efforts exerted by Lebanon with a view to making progress towards the information society and, in particular, in the preparation of laws and regulations designed to liberalize the communications sector and encourage competition and investment.

20. Mr. Kordahi enumerated some of the challenges faced by Arab society, including lack of sufficient investment in infrastructure to meet needs and keep abreast of technological developments; the lack of an overall educational vision or the suitable personnel for moving towards the information society; the need for plans for the establishment of research and development centres; the need for sectoral policies and systems that meet the demands of innovation and competition; the fact to identify the role of the State in administering and developing the information and communications sector in order to contribute to the improvement of the economy; and the insistent need to identify and work towards achieving a standard, comprehensive vision.

21. He urged that due consideration should be given to the huge discrepancy between the economy and State protection aimed at ensuring stability, and economic development and its relation to ownership and private sector investment, given that such protection was linked to levels of productivity and the fiscal regime. Mr. Kordahi also raised questions with regard to the possible contribution to be made by the harmonization of the rules governing the sector and the development of a permanent partnership between the public and private sectors in finding the best solution for the region. He stressed that, in building a sound economy and social justice, it was important to balance the technological power of globalization and human particularities. It was also vital to unite around the United Nations with regard to information and communications and to resolve conflicts and crises in accordance with that organization's resolutions and precepts. Mr. Kordahi concluded his statement by expressing his confidence that the dialogue of cultures would result in the transfer of knowledge and the bridging of the gulf between peoples.

#### D. ELECTION OF OFFICERS

22. At a meeting of heads of member country delegations, His Excellency Mr. Jean Louis Kordahi, Minister of Telecommunications of Lebanon, was elected as Conference Chairman; His Excellency Mr. Khalid Ibn Muhammad Al-Angari, Minister of Higher Education of Saudi Arabia, was elected as Deputy Chairman; and Ms. Nadia Hegazy, consultant to the Minister of Telecommunications and Information Technology in Egypt, was elected as Rapporteur.

## II. PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND DISCUSSION

23. In the course of several Conference meetings, a number of papers were presented. This part of the report contains a summary of those papers.

### A. KEYNOTE PAPER: "THE INFORMATION SOCIETY IN WESTERN ASIA"

24. The ESCWA paper was presented by Mr. Muhammad Mrayati, regional adviser on science and technology. In it, he noted the principal issues that would be addressed by the Conference, the most important changes taking place in the world as a result of the growing importance of the role of information and knowledge in all economic, social and cultural activities, and the impact of such changes on national, regional and international integration and governance. He also reviewed national policies with respect to the information society and the measures that would lead to implementation of those policies.

25. The situation of the information society in the Arab region was reviewed with regard to the economic and social applications of ICT; infrastructure; the ICT sector in Arab countries, including software, Arabic digital content and electronic equipment production; administrative, legal and security strategies and frameworks; standardized ICT Arabic language use; the importance of the prompt adoption of certain Arabic specifications in that field; the role of ICT in Arab regional integration; and the importance of establishing Arab Internet infrastructure. A brief analysis was given of the most serious issues to be dealt with by ESCWA member countries and the Arab countries in moving towards the information society. The paper concluded with an overview of the prospects for Arab action in that regard, and methods of dealing with issues of special concern to the region and supporting Arab regional action through national and Arab initiatives.

### B. STATEMENTS MADE BY THE SPONSORING BODIES

26. Mr. Abdul Waheed Khan delivered to Conference participants a message from Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, in which he referred to the importance that the organization attached to WSIS, and the need to ensure that its agenda includes discussion of major intellectual and moral issues. In addition to the technological issues and those relating to infrastructure, the changes involved have cultural, political, social and institutional dimensions that should be discussed. He mentioned the four basic principles on which the UNESCO Observatory on the Information Society focuses, namely, equal access to educational opportunities, freedom of expression, guaranteed access to information for all and respect for cultural diversity throughout the world, including multilingualism.

27. Mr. Khan said that UNESCO was focusing on the Western Asia region, which has common historical, cultural and social characteristics, as well as many political and social differences. The process of building information societies would inevitably narrow the digital divide and diminish economic and cultural disparities throughout the world.

28. He also reviewed the new challenges facing the region, namely, globalization and the movement towards a knowledge-based economy; the ongoing challenges to security and peace; poverty and the increase in population; and the lack of appropriate human capacities and technical skills in many countries of the region. Those challenges made it vital to take prompt measures in the fields of education, culture, science and ICT, and to evaluate the moral dimensions of technology and its applications with respect to the societies of the region. The capacities of member countries should be strengthened in order to develop systems of education and distance learning, and in order to improve training in the use of communication tools and information technology.

29. Mr. Mustafa Nasereddin made a statement on behalf of the United Nations ICT Task Force, in which he stressed the need to eradicate poverty and focused on sustainable development and the United Nations Millennium Goals. He further stressed the need to strengthen local and regional cooperation in order to achieve tangible and sustainable results in using ICT for development. He said that the establishment of regional networks, including an Arab network, would be an effective method of expanding use and increasing the participation of developing countries in the development and strengthening of ICT initiatives.

30. Mr. Muhsin Khalil made a statement on behalf of the World Bank, in which he said that the Bank believed that the establishment of an information society in the Western Asia region was part of the process of bringing peace, prosperity and stability to the region and towards using ICT as a tool for the eradication of poverty and a means of achieving economic and social development.

31. Mr. Khalil proposed that the forthcoming Summit should formulate a vision for the development of the information society that was based on the principles of inclusion, participation and empowerment and took into account the need to introduce ICT, given that they are the principal tools for achieving the United Nations Millennium Goals. A practical and ambitious programme of action should be developed in order to deal with the challenges faced in this field by developing regions.

32. He also focused on the importance of the interchange of information, cooperation between Arab countries and the need to establish a solid Arab infrastructure that would enable the countries of the region to develop an information society and confront the related challenges, which include the low level of Arab gross domestic product by international standards; the small number of Internet users compared with the rest of the world; lack of competitiveness; inadequate Internet infrastructure; high access costs and low usage rates; low rates of ICT use in commerce, State administration and education; and the scarcity of Arabic digital content.

33. Mr. Ibrahim Kadi, Head of the ITU Arab Regional Office, made a statement in which he addressed the developments that have led to the burgeoning of modern methods of communication and their use in various areas of life. As a result, there will be continual change in the administration and execution of services and a change in ways of thinking, cooperating, undertaking action and monitoring outcomes. He also reviewed some of the challenges faced by the Arab region in moving towards the information society and reducing the divide separating it from developed countries.

#### C. INTERVENTIONS BY PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES

34. Mr. Rida Qaluz, President of the Arab Summit Preparatory Committee and consultant to the Tunisian Minister of Information and Communication Technologies, presented a paper on behalf of his country and it should be noted that in 2005 Tunisia will host the second phase of WSIS. Then, Ms. Nadia Hegazy, consultant to the Egyptian Minister of Telecommunications and Information Technology, delivered her country's paper.

35. His Excellency Mr. Ahmad Murtada Ahmad, Minister of Transport and Communications, made a statement on behalf of Iraq, while Ms. Nibal Idlebi, Deputy Minister of Communications and Information Technologies, presented the paper of the Syrian Arab Republic.

#### D. THE THREE MAIN FOCUSES FOR DISCUSSION

36. Conference papers were discussed under three main headings, for each of which a working session was held. The papers were distributed to participants and posted on the Conference site on the Internet. They will also be issued in the form of a compact disc (CD).

##### 1. *Applications and content*

37. The first theme was addressed in the course of three meetings which dealt with ICT applications and content. Consideration was given to a total of 15 papers, which focused on the applications of technology in the fields of commerce, Government, health and education; Arab digital content; and the use of the Arabic language in Internet addresses.

##### (a) *Applications*

38. As a result of the discussions on the importance and means of disseminating applications in the countries of Western Asia and the Arab countries in general, the following recommendations were adopted:

(a) The Governments of member countries are urged to disseminate forthwith applications that further the information society in economic, social and cultural fields and, in particular, education, health, commerce, administration, culture and tourism, and to adopt for that purpose national initiatives that will produce programmes and projects that are clearly defined with respect to finance and time-frames;

(b) Governments are urged to adopt a plan of action for the promotion of electronic (e)-government and e-commerce applications and to take the necessary measures to that end, including the adoption of national subscriber lines and the issuance of credit and cash-withdrawal cards. They should also provide citizens with easier access to Government procedures, by adopting customer relations techniques;

(c) In view of the significance of new trade laws that impact on global e-commerce and, in particular, with respect to exports to developed countries, member countries are urged to join the World Trade Organization;

(d) Health care applications should be supported and organized. Such applications include the development of a national register of infectious diseases and chronic illnesses and the organization of procedures for reducing the cost of health sites and online doctors.

(b) *Arabic digital content*

39. Participants endorsed the principles of multiculturalism and multilingualism in the information society and emphasized the need for ESCWA member and Arab countries to adopt practical measures to increase Arab digital content on- and offline and the number of Arab Internet sites. Pursuant to the discussion, it was recommended that the following action should be taken:

(a) Legislation and executive laws, including laws on the protection of intellectual property, should be promulgated with a view to promoting the establishment of an industry devoted to Arabic content;

(b) Technology incubators should be established for content-making companies and financial mechanisms for their support should be found;

(c) National initiatives should be adopted for the digitization of national libraries and publishing companies, State institutions, universities and civil society institutions. The establishment of Arabic databases should be encouraged;

(d) Internet applications and services should be Arabized in order to facilitate their use by all levels of society;

(e) Universities and companies should be encouraged to undertake research in dealing with native languages;

(f) Arab university students should have access to academic studies on the Internet;

(g) The Arab press, which is currently responsible for much Arabic digital content, should be involved in action directed towards the Arab information society.

(c) *Standardizing Arabic language use*

40. The standardization of Arabic language use in various ICT fields is an issue of particular concern to the Arab region. Discussion resulted in the following recommendations:

(a) Support should be provided by Governments and the private sector;

(b) There is a need to standardize encryption and electronic signature systems throughout the Arab region, in accordance with universal specifications;

(c) The most important ICT standardization instruments should be Arabized;



(d) Arabic language Internet use should be standardized, particularly in the titles of web sites, e-mail and browser applications;

(e) The Arabic encryption system (PKI Arabic) should be standardized in line with international specifications.

## 2. *Infrastructure and capacity-building*

41. The second focus for discussion was related to regional ICT infrastructure issues, security, the building of local capacities and the development of the sector. A total of 13 papers on those issues were considered.

### (a) *Infrastructure*

42. It was stressed during the Conference that it was important to establish appropriate infrastructure and make it accessible to the public at reasonable cost. The need was also emphasized for a competitive environment in which to establish and use infrastructure. The measures that were recommended included the following:

(a) The development of national Internet backbone and servers;

(b) The improvement of fixed and mobile telephone networks and an increase in the number of users;

(c) The provision of such broadband telephone line services as digital subscriber lines (DSL);

(d) The reduction of telephone and Internet use costs and of taxes and customs on information and communication equipment and software;

(e) The modernization and development of laws governing communications, regulation and competition;

(f) The adoption of national initiatives to encourage the purchase of computers on instalments, jointly or by other means;

(g) The establishment of ICT community centres;

(h) The encouragement of projects for "smart" villages and cities in future plans.

### (b) *Security and ICT*

43. In view of the fact that many information society applications cannot be executed unless they are secure, participants at the Conference affirmed the importance of improving security with regard to information and networks and e-commerce and e-government, as well as with respect to the privacy of individuals. As the outcome of the discussions, the following proposals were made:

(a) A public key system should be established in every country;

(b) It should be made easier to establish trusted third parties in initiatives carried out over the Internet and for a framework for practical applications to be formulated;

(c) The use of encryption and e-signature systems should be simplified;

(d) Secure servers should be encouraged;

(e) Encouragement should be provided for the establishment of security technology companies.

(c) *Building local capacities*

44. One of the most important issues in the ESCWA region is the building of local capacities with respect to knowledge and technology in general and, in particular, with respect to ICT. Participants underlined the importance of building such human and institutional capacities, especially in the areas set forth below:

(a) The establishment within the universities of the Arab world of faculties specialized in the sciences relating to the information society;

(b) Support for institutes, laboratories and research and development teams in the fields required for the information society, taking into account the particularities of the region;

(c) The launching of national initiatives for training human resources in ICT and their applications and, in particular, an international certificate in computer use, as a standard training and testing tool;

(d) The transfer and adjustment of ICT, including electronics, and adoption of national time- and financial resource-specific initiatives in that regard;

(e) The launching of initiatives and implementation of projects to increase quantitative and qualitative local demand for ICT specialists, with a view to reducing the Arab brain drain.

(d) *The ICT sector*

45. The ICT sector includes the production of software, hardware, content and electronics. Participants stressed the need to develop that sector in Arab countries, because it is so vital to the information society. The aim of such development would be to diversify the Arab economies, find genuine new employment opportunities and increase national revenues. Pursuant to the discussions, the following recommendations were made:

(a) A vision for the sector must be formulated and specific national initiatives adopted for its development;

(b) Government investment in ICT should be linked to modernization of the sector and encouragement for the establishment of local companies therein;

(c) Technology incubators should be established for new ICT companies;

(d) Adventure capital funds should be established for technology projects;

(e) Strategic alliances should be forged with international companies working in the various branches of this sector.

3. *Policies, the administrative and legal framework and partnerships*

46. A total of 11 papers were discussed on this issue, covering the formulation of policies and national ICT strategies for building the information society; the necessary administrative frameworks; cooperation or partnership between Governments, NGOs and the private sector; the role of each of those parties in the information society; and regional cooperation. Each of those issues is of fundamental importance to the countries of Western Asia in their movement towards the information society.

(a) *Policy formulation*

47. Conference participants were of the opinion that some of the most urgent issues for the region were the adoption by each Arab country of a national vision for the information society, the formulation of national policies to realize that vision and the adoption of means to implement such policies. The participants stressed that such policies should be comprehensive, covering all aspects of the information society, and that they should be dynamic and periodically reviewed. The following suggestions were the outcome of the discussions:

(a) Policies must be drawn up and strategies formulated to enable every citizen to access ICT services. Research must be carried out into economic stratagems that make it possible to make such services, considered a human right, accessible to all sectors of the community;

(b) It is vital that information technology is developed in the region. Education must be oriented towards the building of the information society and ICT should be used in eradicating corruption;

(c) The public and private sectors and civil society all have an important role to play in the movement towards the information society. Those parties must be innovative and perform their role in building that society;

(d) National committees responsible for information and communications, in which the relevant parties are involved, must be established.

(b) *The development of laws*

48. The participants considered preparations for the legal environment necessary in order to establish the information society, and recommended the following measures:

(a) Laws must be developed and the necessary administrative frameworks established for good governance of information technologies;

(b) The principle of the free transfer and circulation of information, in accordance with accepted precepts, must be adopted;

(c) Legislation relating to ICT and their applications must be promulgated, in the following fields in particular:

- (i) The interchange of information-related commodities and services over the Internet;
- (ii) Guarantees for intellectual copyright and related implementation procedures;
- (iii) Information-related crimes and violations;
- (iv) Internet encryption;
- (v) Electronic signature and the regulation of the work of trusted third party or certification authorities.

(c) *Regional cooperation*

49. Participants recommended that ICT should serve Arab regional integration, given that they are an effective means of moving towards the Arab information society, and that there should be an Arab strategy in that regard. They further recommended the following measures:

- (a) The establishment of an Arabic Internet infrastructure or backbone;
- (b) The coordination between countries of directives governing ICT (legislation comparable to that employed in Europe);
- (c) The coordination and standardization of the Arabic language used for ICT purposes;
- (d) The funding of such projects at Arab level as an Arab electronic university, an Arab cultural portal and projects to increase content;
- (e) National portals and networks relating to various economic, social and cultural fields;
- (f) The roles of the private sector and civil society should be activated, and they should participate nationally and regionally in the move towards the information society;

(g) Laws and legislation in the Arab region should be harmonized in order to establish a standardized legal framework.

#### E. ADOPTION OF THE DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES AND BEIRUT INITIATIVE

50. On the third day of the Conference, a plenary meeting was held at which the document entitled *Towards an Information Society in Western Asia: Declaration of Principles* was discussed and adopted. The draft regional initiative was then submitted for discussion and comment, with a view to its subsequent adoption as a framework for a regional programme of action. Finally, the draft Conference report was distributed for comment before being prepared in its current form.

51. The participants recommended that the Beirut Declaration should be submitted to the Fourth Arab Preparatory Meeting of the World Summit on the Information Society, which was held at United Nations House, Beirut, immediately subsequent to the Western Asia Preparatory Conference for the World Summit, namely, on 7 and 8 February 2003.

### III. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

52. The outcome of the three main focuses for discussion was a number of general recommendations of importance in directing the countries of the region towards the information society. Those recommendations are set forth below:

(a) The developed countries must assist the developing countries in closing the digital divide and transferring knowledge and technology;

(b) Arab, regional and international initiatives should be coordinated in moving towards the information society. Attempts should be made to maximize the benefit to member countries of such initiatives;

(c) The global character of the information society should be stressed and unilateral measures taken with a view to moving towards that society should not be obstructed;

(d) Multiculturalism and multilingualism is important to the information society and should be strengthened;

(e) The role of ICT in economic and social development and national, regional and international integration should be emphasized;

(f) An international organization or agency similar to ITU should be established to deal with information society-related issues, set the standards for the development of that society and measure the digital divide at national, regional and international level, using standard indicators. A resolution to that purpose should be adopted at the Second Meeting of the Preparatory Committee for WSIS, which will be held in Geneva from 17 to 28 February 2003;

(g) The period between the two phases of WSIS should be devoted to greater in-depth research into the issue of the information society with the aim, during the second phase, that is to be held in Tunis in 2005, of achieving the following:

(i) The adoption of a mechanism for ensuring the move from the information society towards the knowledge society;

(ii) The adoption of a long-term programme of work, covering the first quarter of this century, for the development of the information society, the closure of the digital divide and the fulfillment of development needs in that field.

Annex I

**LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS IN PRESENTATIONS, PAPERS AND  
MODERATING SESSIONS**

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Annex II

**ORGANIZATION OF WORK**

Tuesday 4 February 2003

10 - 10.30 a.m.      Opening session  
11 - 11.30 a.m.      First plenary session  
11.30 a.m. - 2 p.m.      Second plenary session

**Parallel sessions**

3 - 6.30 p.m.      First session  
*ICT applications for socio-economic development (part I)*

                            Second session  
*ICT infrastructure development*

                            Third session  
*Strategies, policies and regulatory frameworks*

Wednesday 5 February 2003

9 a.m. - 1 p.m.      Fourth session  
*ICT applications for socio-economic development (part II)*

                            Fifth session  
*Capacity-building in ICT*

                            Sixth session  
*Role of Government, NGOs and the private sector*

2 - 5.30 p.m.      Seventh session  
*Arabic digital content: promotion and development*

                            Eighth session  
*Development of the ICT sector*

                            Ninth session  
*Regional cooperation*

Thursday 6 February 2003

11 a.m. - 1.30 p.m.      Third plenary session  
*General discussion and adoption of the Conference outcome*

Annex III

**LIST OF DOCUMENTS**

1. Keynote paper presented by ESCWA to the Conference

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/11

مجتمع المعلومات في غربي آسيا

2. Papers prepared by the Conference Secretariat

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/2 ICT capacity-building in ESCWA member countries

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/5 البنية الأساسية لتكنولوجيا المعلومات والاتصالات بمنطقة الإسكوا (المشرق العربي)

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/7 Promoting e-health applications towards an information society in ESCWA member countries

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/8 Promoting e-government applications towards an information society in ESCWA member countries

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/18 Delineating roles for partners in the development of the information society: A collaborative approach

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/19 Development of e-commerce sectors in the Arab region

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/20 محتوى الإنترنت العربي: الحالة الراهنة ومقترحات للتطوير

3. Papers prepared for the Conference by ESCWA consultants

(a) *Country studies*

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/4

مصر ومجتمع المعلومات

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/6

مجتمع المعلومات في الأراضي الفلسطينية

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/9 Bahrain and the information society

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/12 Jordan's information society - A fast growing sector for a transforming nation

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/16 واقع مجتمع المعلومات في الجمهورية العربية السورية

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/17 Information/knowledge society: The case of the UAE

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/21

مجتمع المعلومات في الجمهورية التونسية

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/22 Morocco and the information society

(b) *Thematic papers*

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/3 Promotion of development-oriented ICT applications for e-learning

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/13 Financing investments in the Middle-Eastern information and communication technology (ICT) sector

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/14 Road maps towards an information society in Latin America and the Caribbean (short version)

E/ESCWA/ICTD/2003/WG.1/15 E-government: A strategy for modernizing governments