Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

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MANAGEMENT ISSUES

PROPOSAL FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INTERGOVERNMENTAL COMMITTEE ON INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT

Summary

This document contains a proposal for the establishment of an intergovernmental committee on information and communications technology for development, which was prepared by the secretariat of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and is presented to the Commission at its twenty-eighth session.

The proposal contains a draft resolution on the subject. The Commission is invited to consider the draft resolution and make a decision thereon.

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Introduction

1.   In today's rapidly changing world, countries' competitiveness is determined by the human, financial and natural resources available to them, as well as knowledge, innovation and modern systems. The Arab world therefore has a great opportunity to utilize modern technologies through a new development model founded on information, knowledge, innovation and intellectual capital, so as to reach its desired goal: improving citizens' quality of life in an inclusive manner. Nevertheless, member States of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) face challenges that hamper their transition to a knowledge economy and good governance, which are two main ESCWA priorities. The aim of subprogramme 4, entitled "Information and communications technology for regional integration", is to support member States in overcoming those challenges and facilitate their transition.

2.   The performance of most Arab countries in the field of information and communications technology has improved over the past years, given that the use of such technology and its applications and the introduction of electronic services has become more widespread and less costly. It has therefore become increasingly necessary to develop the information and communications technology sector and the Arab region has taken important steps to bridge the digital divide and build an information society. The importance of information and communications technology increased in the region with the spread of telecommunication services and broadband technology. Mobile phone prevalence reached 105 per cent in 2012, up from 73 per cent in 2009. The number of Internet users reached 124 million in 2012 (a prevalence of 34.8 per cent), up from 52 million in 2009 (a prevalence of 21 per cent).

3.   Through subprogramme 4, ESCWA has strived to increase support for key regional programmes and projects by preparing and implementing the Regional Plan of Action for Building the Information Society, aimed at building national capacities to utilize information and knowledge for development, thereby contributing to building the information society and enhancing productive capacities and development in the region. The support provided by ESCWA to the League of Arab States in developing the Arab Strategy for the Information Society is a recognition of the urgent need for concerted efforts to bridge the digital and knowledge divide, so as to progress in building an information and knowledge society.

4.   ESCWA is currently striving to stimulate economic and social development in the Arab region; enhance cooperation and interaction within the Arab region and with other regions; encourage information exchange on experiences, good practice and lessons learned; achieve regional integration among member States; and inform other countries of the situation of Arab countries and their needs.

I. TWELVE YEARS IN THE SERVICE OF TECHNOLOGY

A. ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE ON SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

5.   The Consultative Committee on Scientific and Technological Development and Technological Innovation was established in 2001, pursuant to resolution 225 (XXI), adopted by ESCWA at its twenty-first ministerial session (10-11 May 2001), and approved by the United Nations Economic and Social Council at its 2001 session. The resolution provides that the Committee shall be composed of distinguished experts in the field and that it shall hold its meetings at least once every two years, with effect from 2002.

B. ESTABLISHMENT OF THE INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY DIVISION[*]

6.   The ESCWA Information and Communication Technology Division was established in 2002 to bridge the digital divide in member States and assist them in building an information society in the Arab region, in accordance with the Secretary-General's bulletin ST/SGB/2002/16 concerning the organization of the

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[*] The ESCWA Information and Communication Technology Division was renamed Technology for Development Division. However the precious name of the Division is used in this document which covers a period prior to the name change.

secretariat of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. Since then, the Division, through subprogramme 4, has succeeded in assisting member States in achiving those goals despite the absence of an intergovernmental mechanism, consisting of member State representatives, that sets out countries' priorities in that regard. The Division also assisted member States in recognizing the importance of information and communications technology as a tool for building a knowledge society, bridging the digital divide and supporting economic and social development. Nevertheless, new challenges have emerged, namely those related to knowledge, technology and innovation gaps. Some member States, including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have established an information and communications technology sector as a stand-alone economic sector, which has allowed those countries to diversify their economies by strengthening that sector.

7.   On a global scale, the World Summit on the Information Society was held in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005. Its work and strategies have developed with time, becoming more consistent with the Millennium Development Goals and promoting the prominent role of information and communications technology in achieving those Goals, in collaboration with United Nations Member States and organizations. New key issues have arisen, such as Internet governance, electronic government applications, electronic services, Internet openness, privacy, security, cyber safety, electronic participation and modernizing public administrations. More importantly, the concept of "information society" has grown globally, leading to the development of other concepts such as "knowledge society", "knowledge economy", "smart communities" and "peaceful uses of outer space".

C. Establishment of the ESCWA Technology Centre

8.   Over the past decade, the United Nations showed great interest in enhancing science, technology and innovation in member States, under the auspices of the Social and Economic Council and the Commission on Science and Technology for Development. The ESCWA Information and Communication Technology Division was tasked with networking technology in the Arab region. The ESCWA Technology Centre was therefore established in Jordan in 2011 to assist ESCWA member States in achieving technological parity with other regions. The Centre was established pursuant to Economic and Social Council resolution 2010/5, with its own intergovernmental mechanism, namely the Technology Centre Board of Governors, which reviews the implementation of the Centre's programme of work and its administrative and financial situation.

D. Servicing two fields: Information and communications technology; and science, technology and innovation

9.   By supporting ESCWA member States through subprogramme 4 in the two fields: information and communications technology; and science, technology and innovation, the Information and Communication Technology Division has achieved the following successes in the Arab region:

   (a) Developing the Regional Plan of Action for Building the Information Society;

   (b) Supporting the Arab Strategy for the Information society;

   (c) Launching cyber legislation guidelines;

   (d) Launching and supporting the Arab Internet Governance Forum;

   (e) Promoting an Arab identity on the Internet by designing, launching and supporting generic top-level domains, such as ".arab" and "عرب.";

   (f) Developing an international document on language guidelines for using Arabic in Internet domains;

   (g) Increasing Arabic digital content and developing the industry;

   (h) Supporting information society measurement in the Arab region;

   (i) Supporting the establishment of science, technology and innovation observatories.

10.   The Information and Communication Technology Division also supports other ESCWA divisions to achieve their various development goals. It works with the Statistics Division on the ESCWA Statistical Information System and the Google Public Data Explorer; the Sustainable Development and Productivity Division on the green economy project and the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of the Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region; the Emerging and Conflict-Related Issues Division in the areas of governance and participation; and the ESCWA Economic Development and Globalization Division on a project to rehabilitate infrastructure in the Syrian Arab Republic and on development plans in Saudi Arabia.

II. EVALUATING THE CURRENT SITUATION

A. RENAMING SUBPROGRAMME 4

11.   The above information highlights the need to continue implementing subprogramme 4 "Information and communications technology for regional integration" and broaden its range, especially following the increase in the Information and Communication Technology Division's responsibilities after it was tasked with the ESCWA Technology Centre, so as to implement activities aimed at assisting member States in transitioning towards a knowledge economy, which requires a revision of the goals of subrogramme 4. The ESCWA secretariat therefore presents the Commission with a proposal to reorganize the subprogramme and review its vision, mission and strategy.

12.   From this premise, the secretariat stresses **the need to change the title of subprogramme 4 to "Technology for development and regional integration**" taking into consideration the following facts:

    (a) The convergence between the fields of science, technology and innovation, information and communications technology and peaceful uses of outer space at the global level; and the need to reflect this phenomenon at the regional level;

    (b) The economic and social developments in the region following the global financial crisis and the growing role of technology in social movements;

    (c) The developments in the field of information and communications technology and its role in economic and social development in Arab countries;

    (d) The need to create greater synergies between subprogramme 4 and other United Nations entities;

    (e) The need to benefit more from the human and financial resources available to the Information and Communication Technology Division;

    (f) The current focus on the importance of innovation in general, and information and communications technology in particular, in social and economic development, as required in the post-2015 development agenda;

    (g) The need to increase integration between the ESCWA Technology Centre and the other sections of the Information and Communication Technology Division.

B. INTERGOVERNMENTAL COMMITTEES OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

13.   The ESCWA Technology Centre Board of Governors is the intergovernmental mechanism for science, technology and innovation. However, the work of ESCWA in the field of information and communications technology for development has been carried out without an intergovernmental mechanism and was only guided by the Consultative Committee on Scientific and Technological Development and Technological Innovation. Given that the Committee comprises non-governmental experts, its role has been limited to

providing guidance to the secretariat, a fact that has rendered the role of subprogramme 4 more difficult in identifying the priorities of member States.

14.   Several other ESCWA subprogrammes have government subcommittees that assist in providing better services to Governments, including the following:

(a)   The Statistical Committee;
(b)   The Committee on Social Development;
(c)   The Committee on Energy;
(d)   The Committee on Water Resources;
(e)   The Committee on Transport;
(f)   The Committee on Liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization;
(g)   The Committee on Women.

15.   Those committees were established to assist ESCWA in identifying priorities and conducting consultations regarding the formulation of the programme of work, each in their own specialized field. Several ESCWA divisions operate with one or two intergovernmental committees, namely the Sustainable Development and Productivity Division which has the Committee on Energy and the Committee on Water Resources; and the Economic Development and Globalization Division which has the Committee on Liberalization of Foreign Trade, Economic Globalization and Financing for Development and the Committee on Transport.

16.   It should be noted that the technology divisions of other United Nations regional commissions have several intergovernmental committees, such as the Information and Communications Technology and Disaster Risk Reduction Division of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific which has two intergovernmental committees, namely the Committee on Information and Communications Technology and the Committee on Disaster Risk Reduction.

17.   ESCWA conducted a comprehensive evaluation of subprogramme 4 during the biennium 2012-2013, on the basis of reviews carried out by stakeholders in member States. The evaluation commended the role of the Information and Communication Technology Division and requested more resources to implement the Division's programmes. It also set out several recommendations, including to establish an intergovernmental committee on information and communications technology for development, similar to the committees affiliated with other subprogrammes, so as to ensure greater committment and effective participation of member States in the activities of subprogramme 4.

18.   The above information indicates **the need to establish an intergovernmental committee on information and communications technology for development**, similar to other intergovernmental committees.

III. ACTION REQUIRED OF THE COMMISSION

19.   The Commission is invited to consider the draft resolution on the above issues and make a decision thereon. The draft resolution calls for the following:

(a)   Changing the name of subprogramme 4 from "Information and communications technology for regional integration" to "Technology for development and regional integration";

(b)   Establishing an intergovernmental committee on information and communications technology for development to guide the work of ESCWA under subprogramme 4, instead of the Consultative Committee on Scientific and Technological Development and Technological Innovation.

IV. DRAFT RESOLUTION

Establishing an intergovernmental committee on information
and communications technology for development

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia,

Referring to the 2005 World Summit Outcome in which the United Nations Member States recognized that science and technology, including information and communication technology, are vital for the achievement of the development goals; Economic and Social Council resolution 2004/68 of 5 November 2004 concerning science and technology for development; and goal 8 of the Millennium Development Goals which includes a target on making available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technology,

Recognizing the importance of increasing the participation of ESCWA member States Governments in identifying priorities and planning and improving the ESCWA programme of work in the field of information and communications technology for development,

Recognizing also the need to enhance coordination and integration between ESCWA and Arab regional organizations regarding technology-for-development policies and programmes, including information and communications technology, to meet the needs of member States and develop this technology to achieve inclusive development in the Arab region,

Taking note of the recommendations resulting from the evaluation undertaken by ESCWA of its working mechanisms, including a proposal to establish a committee on information and communications technology for development,

Stressing the importance of the role of the ESCWA Technology Centre in enriching science and technology knowledge in major economic sectors in member States and reaffirming the role of its Board of Governors as its intergovernmental mechanism,

Guided by the work of other United Nations regional commissions regarding the establishment of specialized committees on technology, including information and communications technology for development,

1. *Supports* changing the name of subprogramme 4, from "Information and communications technology for regional integration" to "Technology for development and regional integration";

2. *Decides* to establish an intergovernmental committee to be named "Committee on Information and Communications Technology for Development", comprising representatives from member States with experience in the field, which would replace the Consultative Committee on Scientific and Technological Development and Technological Innovation and would undertake the following:

(a) Participating in identifying priorities of the ESCWA programme of work and medium-term plans regarding information and communications technology;

(b) Monitoring the progress achieved in the field of information and communications technology in member States, and formulating recommendations to strengthen their technological development;

(c) Following up regional and international conferences and the participation of member States therein, and coordinating regional efforts to implement decisions and recommendations of those conferences;

(d) Identifying focal points in member States to liaise with the secretariat in coordinating and implementing activities on information and communications technology;

3. *Also decides* that the Committee on Information and Communications Technology for Development shall hold its sessions once every two years, with effect from 2015;

4. *Requests* the Executive Secretary to submit a report on the implementation of the present resolution to the Commission at its twenty-ninth session.