United Nations
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

Towards a
Regional Information Society

>>>>>>>> WSIS
2003

TOWARDS A REGIONAL INFORMATION SOCIETY
DRAFT INITIATIVE

This regional information society initiative is presented by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), Geneva, December 2003.

In its final form, the proposed Initiative will constitute a comprehensive Action Plan indicating how the Arab countries in the region might approach the transition into the information society, both individually and collectively.

Full use will be made of the WSIS preparatory process for refining the present Initiative and broadening its basis to include all other Arab countries in cooperation with concerned regional and international organizations.

The emerging global knowledge-based economy presents the region today with many challenges and a limited number of opportunities. In principle, new technologies possess enormous potential for accelerating economic growth and enhancing social development. Information and communications technologies (ICTs), in particular, have been shown to improve national as well as firm competitiveness and productivity, support social inclusion of marginalized groups, generate new employment opportunities, as well as accelerate the development and dissemination of other new technology inputs in many spheres of application, with even wider socioeconomic benefits.

> **"...new technologies possess enormous potential for accelerating growth and enhancing social development..."**

Making use of the opportunities offered by new technologies in the region[1] is in urgent need of a range of policy, legislative, regulatory and institutional changes, to help ensure capabilities that are presently absent or inadequate in most countries. Within legislative and regulatory frameworks, schemes for Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) need to be emphasized in order to encourage creative technology inputs.

In their totality, these changes will essentially entail transition by the countries of the region into the information society, with subsequently greater capabilities for mastering their own socioeconomic development and fulfilling global initiatives, such as the Millennium Declaration.[2]

THE REGIONAL INFORMATION SOCIETY INITIATIVE: PRIMARY OBJECTIVES AND ORIENTATION

This Regional Information Society (RIS) Initiative aims to promote transition of the countries of the region into the information society of their choice.[3] It is also envisaged as a means of fulfilling the Millennium Declaration goals[4] as well as the outcomes of the World Summits, in 2003 and 2005, and those of other relevant international Summits and conferences concerned with new technologies and sustainable development.[5] More specifically, the RIS Initiative will target efforts designed to[6]:

- secure adequate and widespread understanding of a future information society in the region;
- promote a common future vision of the information society in the region, both at the national and regional levels;
- formulate commensurate national innovation policies and ICT strategies;
- outline an agenda for action aimed at attaining specific objectives leading to the transition into the information society, emphasizing the needs of youth and women;

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[1] Particularly novel ICTs.

[2] The United Nation Millennium Declaration emphasized the importance of ICTs in achieving socioeconomic development goals and affirmed the need to ensure that the "benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies, are available to all."

[3] The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 56/183, on the World Summit on the Information Society.

[4] The United Nation Millennium Declaration (General Assembly Resolution 55/2) emphasized the importance of ICTs in achieving socioeconomic development goals and affirmed the need to ensure that the "benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies, are available to all."

[5] For example, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, September 2002.

[6] The objectives targeted by this Initiative are also reflected in the Declaration to be presented in the WSIS Preparatory Conference.

- provide a framework for, and conclude national, regional and international partnerships, helping coordinate the countries' evolution and implementation with a view to specific application areas and outcomes;
- evolve modalities for policy/strategy implementation with emphasis on achieving tangible objectives.

Regional integration, linguistic and cultural commonalities will be invoked in relation to each one of these objectives.

> **"…the Initiative will promote socioeconomic and innovation policies conducive to the creation and upgrading of effective physical ICT infrastructures…"**

Approaches adopted in the design and implementation of the RIS Initiative will generally aim at mainstreaming ICTs into development with emphasis on:

- creating new opportunities in production and services sectors;
- educating and training local populations, particularly youth and women, and enabling them to access technology-based employment opportunities;
- enhancing prospects for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to innovate, compete, grow and create new employment opportunities;
- establishing new partnerships at the local, national, regional and international levels.

Emphasis will be placed upon capacity building in ICTs. This is due to the central role that may be played by these technologies in sustainable development, as highlighted by recent experiences in many developing countries and by numerous international initiatives around the world.[7]

AGENDA FOR FUTURE ACTION: PRIORITY ISSUES AND DELIVERABLES

Specific components of this Initiative will be designed with particular emphasis on promoting proactive approaches to the acquisition and development of new ICTs as essential tools in the transition to the information society. With this in mind, the Initiative will promote socioeconomic and innovation policies conducive to the creation and upgrading of effective physical ICT infrastructures as well as universal, secure and affordable access to ICT networks and priority applications. Content creation and human

resource development will feature prominently in programmes incorporated in the RIS Initiative. Moreover, online privacy and security are imperatives for a range of ICT applications. Specific interventions will be designed and implemented to disseminate new technologies and related skills with accent on the role played by SMEs in technology acquisition, development, dissemination, employment creation and poverty reduction. See Frame 1 on page 3.

The RIS Initiative will seek to institute regional capacity in selected new technologies, emphasizing modern ICTs as an essential step in attaining smooth and effective transition towards a regional information society. Activities to be carried out through the RIS Initiative will include:

- conducting national and regional exercises aimed at elucidation of future visions at the national and regional levels;
- implementing surveys,[8] technology audits, specific substantive activities and planning studies[9] aimed at the formulation of national innovation policies and the design of ICT strategies;
- reviewing and implementing capacity building measures in selected application areas including the design of specific regional, national and local programmes aimed at endogenous capacity building in selected technology areas;[10]
- convening expert panels to identify and discuss modalities for innovation strategy design and implementation;
- initiating pilot schemes, including community access centers and technology incubators leading to the development of start-up enterprises, new job creation and poverty reduction;[11]

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[7] See for example, the Florianopolis and the Seoul Declarations.

[8] Essentially of development and technology needs at the national and sectoral levels.
[9] Including pre-feasibility and full-fledged feasibility studies aimed at the implementation of specific programmes and projects within the framework of national and regional initiatives.
[10] Substantive studies conducted in this regard will pave the way to policy formulation and strategic action through marrying technology and development needs as well as matching policies and strategies to national and sectoral particularities.
[11] Such schemes might include, for example, initiatives by public and private sector enterprises with a view to reviving traditional industries. They could also examine, evaluate and emulate initiatives designed to promote employment

- establishing new institutional forms such as technology parks and incubators, centers of excellence and technology/industry clusters, etc. with the primary objective of creating partnerships involving SMEs, governments and civil society institutions;
- creating partnerships and setting up networking schemes to link pilot facilities, training programmes, as well as other stakeholder institutions, to promote effective coordination, optimal cooperation and resource sharing.

Building partnerships and mobilizing resources for the information society will constitute a common denominator among all these activities.

IMPLEMENTATION MODALITIES: BASES FOR SYNERGY THROUGH JOINT ACTION

The above activities will be conducted within individual phases, each with well-defined objectives, operational plans, milestones and outcomes. Quantitative and qualitative criteria will be established to ensure evaluation of progress for each phase as well as the whole initiative.

Some countries in the region have already launched activities aimed at formulating their own vision of what constitutes an information society. Many have also taken steps to formulate relevant policies and implementation strategies with the intention of promoting capacity building in ICTs. Some ICT applications, mostly imported but at least some homegrown, are also being introduced in a variety of spheres. The RIS Initiative will acknowledge and build upon all such efforts in promoting a common vision of a future information society, that capitalizes upon cultural and linguistic particularities of the region, as bases for future action.

The RIS Initiative is, thus, conceived in support of national, regional and international efforts aimed at fostering the transition to the information society in the region. It is also intended to reinforce and refine modalities already in place to support regional sustainable development.

Implementation of the RIS Initiative will commence in late 2003 or early 2004, following the first World Summit, in Geneva. Considering the scope of its objectives, the Initiative will run over a number of years, to be determined in light of consultations to be undertaken within the WSIS preparatory process. Implementation will be closely linked to the Millennium Development Goals with emphasis on goals 1, 2, 3 and 7.

Frame 1. Thrust areas in the RIS Initiative

1. Creating an enabling environment:
- vision and awareness creation;
- infrastructure creation and development;
- policy, legislative and regulatory frameworks;
- new institutional forms (incubation schemes and networks, etc.)

Emphasis on universal and secure access, equality of opportunity and freedom of expression.

2. Disseminating key applications:
- content creation and development;
- e-learning;
- e-health;
- e-government.

Emphasis on developing and disseminating key ICT applications for socioeconomic development.

3. Enterprise creation and development:
- developing and disseminating e-commerce and related applications;
- building endogenous ICT sectors;
- research and development.

Emphasis on enterprise productivity and competitiveness and creating endogenous ICT sectors.

4. Employment creation and poverty reduction:
- literacy and basis education;
- new technologies for employment creation;

Emphasis on employment creation social welfare and social development.

5. New technologies for sustainable development:
- sector-specific technology policies and implementation strategies;
- new technology and the environment;

Emphasis on new technology applications for sectoral development and environmental amelioration.

It is tentatively proposed that the Initiative be implemented in four well-defined phases. The essential objective of the first phase will be to implement surveys, exploratory activities, lay down bases for effective policies, initiate strategic action and conclude the necessary partnerships.[12] Later phases will focus upon

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creation and poverty reduction launched in a number of developing countries, e.g. in Latin America and even in some of the countries of the region as well as developed countries.

[12] Policy, regulatory and institutional reform will constitute a main area of activity in the first phase in RIS

establishing information communities within host countries in the region in partnership with national and local government institutions and public as well as private enterprises and civil society institutions.

In particular, the third and fourth phases in the RIS Initiative will foster and coordinate efforts aimed at expanding and empowering local and national information communities, with a view to their integration into regional entities capable of sustaining a regional information society, in which the countries' populations stand to enjoy the fruits of new technologies and play their part in the creation of the global knowledge-based society.

Table 1. Phases of the RIS Initiative

Phase	Main Components/Objectives
I. Initiation phase	Design, conceptual and feasibility studies
II. Preliminary phase	Detailed planning, institution building and partnerships
III. Operational phase	Implementation of well-defined capacity building activities
IV. Termination phase	Finalization, evaluation and formulation of future plans

Each phase will possess specific objectives, operational plans, milestones and outcomes to ensure progress evaluation, synergy among component activities and harmony with other related national, regional and global initiatives and programmes.[13] Each phase will also include a set of core or backbone activities, with satellite activities to cover specific action areas and localities.

Cooperation among national, regional and international agencies within specific frameworks and with a view to achieving well-defined objectives in technology dissemination will be fostered by the Initiative. The RIS Initiative will run parallel to, and in support of, rather than in competition with, programmes managed by other international, regional and national organizations. In fact, RIS will actively seek to coordinate its own activities with those being implemented by other international and regional organizations as well as recent global initiatives aimed at technology dissemination, such as the United Nations ICT Task Force Initiative.

> **"...the RIS Initiative will foster and coordinate efforts aimed at expanding and empowering local and national information communities..."**

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implementation. This phase will be designed to launch feasibility studies, establish pilot facilities and set up new institutional forms and partnerships with result-based agenda in selected countries reflecting their specific conditions and priorities.

[13] Evaluation exercises will be organically integrated into execution plans, and will be implemented before conclusion of each phase before launching into subsequent phases and in order to maintain consistency and coherence.