Information Society

Regional Dimensions

Africa
Europe & North America
Latin America & Caribbean
Asia & Pacific
Western Asia

Information and communication technologies (ICT) are an increasingly important tool for social and economic development and are the driving force behind the transition towards economies and societies based on information and knowledge. For developing and transition economies, ICT can provide a means to leapfrog some long and painful stages in the development process, and help to stimulate growth and prosperity.

The United Nations Regional Commissions – the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) – are playing a leadership and catalytic role in helping to bridge the digital divide and to promote development by harnessing the growth potential of ICT. They provide an interface between different ICT players and the development community, bringing together public and private sectors, foundations and donors to develop initiatives and modalities aimed at building ICT capacities for developing countries and countries with economies in transition.

The regional perspective is an indispensable intermediate stage in bringing together national particularities and global requirements for the Information Society. This has been demonstrated during the WSIS process, especially by the regional consultations and negotiations that resulted in the Declarations of Bamako (Africa), Bávaro (Latin America and the Caribbean), Beirut (Western Asia), Bucharest (Europe and North America) and Tokyo (Asia Pacific), which provided major inputs for the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action.

The Regional Commissions will have an important role to play in the successful implementation of the outcomes of the first phase of WSIS through technical assistance, capacity building and training; facilitating peer dialogue, exchange of experience and promoting good practices; and in the design and future development of national and regional Information Society strategies and roadmaps.

Continuing initiatives by the Regional Commissions will be indispensable in realising the Geneva goals and building momentum from Geneva to Tunis.

ECA, based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, is the regional arm of the United Nations Secretariat, mandated to support the economic and social development of its 53 member States, foster regional integration, and promote international cooperation for Africa's development.

The Africa Information Society Initiative (AISI): ECA is a key pioneer in the area of ICT for development, implementing AISI - an action framework for promoting Africa's digital agenda adopted by the Conference of Ministers of Planning and Economic Development in 1996 and endorsed by African Heads of State. Major activities and objectives include the development of national e-strategies and building Africa's information and communication infrastructure. AISI also serves as a mechanism for achieving the Millennium Development Goals of which seven out of eight are emphasized in the AISI framework document. Current activities include:

Policy Formulation and Implementation: ECA has been assisting some 28 African countries in developing national e-strategies through the National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) Plans. At the sub-regional level, activities are underway to facilitate the harmonization of national strategies and regulatory frameworks. Measuring the impact of the Information Society is being undertaken through SCAN ICT to develop indicators to assist countries.

Information and Knowledge Development and Management: Building the capacities of African policy makers, civil society organizations, private sector and institutions through workshops, training and exhibitions led by the Information Technology Centre for Africa. Through VarsityNet, ECA is supporting the R & D capacity of African universities and research institutions.

Partnership and Networking: Under the broad framework of the "the Partnership for ICTs in Africa" (PICTA), ECA is working with partners such as the Finnish Government, Industry Canada, European Commission, German Technical Cooperation, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, International Development Research Centre, International Institute for Communication and Development, Ford Foundation and Open Society Initiatives for West and Southern Africa. Other partnership mechanisms are the Global ePolicy Resource Network (ePol-Net), Global Knowledge Partnership and the African Stakeholders Network of the United Nations Information and Communication Technology Task Force (UN ICT TF).

Outreach and Communication entails a series of activities to promote AISI goals, involving all societal actors, especially marginalized groups. Information outputs produced to promote and create awareness include the award-winning AISI Radio Series, newsletters (iConnect Africa), Briefing Papers and web resources.

Africa and WSIS: ECA and Mali collaborated on the African Regional Preparatory Conference (Bamako, 2002) bringing together Governments, civil society, academia, media and private sector, to deliberate on Africa's priorities for the Information Society. A Bamako 2002 Bureau was formed with UNECA as the Rapporteur and Secretariat to coordinate Africa's participation in WSIS.

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ECE provides a regional forum for its 55 member countries in Europe, North America and Central Asia for cooperation in areas of activity such as economic analysis, environment and human settlements, statistics, sustainable energy, trade, industry and enterprise development, timber and transport.

ECE pursues its mission through the development of legally binding instruments, conventions, regulations and standards, and the provision of technical assistance. These serve to harmonize action and facilitate exchanges in the region by eliminating obstacles, simplifying procedures and thus contributing to the improvement of the quality of life of people of the region. ECE undertakes sectoral policy analysis and issues guidelines on the basis of contributions by representatives of member States or studies conducted by the secretariat.

ECE attaches high priority to assisting its member countries with economies in transition. Within ECE's regular programme of work and through extrabudgetary activities, provision is made for technical assistance to individual countries and sub-regional groupings, so all countries can benefit fully from its analytical, statistical and normative work.

ECE brought together all stakeholders at the Pan European Regional Ministerial Conference on WSIS in November 2002 in Bucharest, Romania. ECE was instrumental in developing a Ministerial Declaration which was adopted by the meeting, as well as a set of principles and priorities for the Information Society providing a substantive input to the WSIS process. On this occasion, the Information Economy Report, *E-Policy Development in Transition Economies 2002-2003,* was launched to assist member States in developing and implementing e-strategies, e-policies and e-regulatory frameworks for a knowledge-based economy.

The ECE is in a good position to contribute to ICT for development and to provide assistance to Governments in developing national strategies and goals for the Information Society. Further, ECE can strengthen the application of ICT for development and transition to support improved economic performance and capacity building programmes in the region as well as the integration of all countries into the world economy.

Implementation strategies to exploit the benefits of ICT are being developed in such areas as trade, especially tools for electronic business; collection and dissemination of statistical information; encouraging digital democracy to promote public participation in environmental decisions; intelligent transport systems; and measures to support a gender-sensitive Information Society. These actions are aimed at encouraging and providing opportunities for people to participate more fully in the knowledge-based economy and promoting an enabling environment in terms of legislation, regulation and policies throughout the region.

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ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

ECLAC is the regional headquarters of the United Nations Secretariat in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is dedicated to promoting economic and social development and reinforcing relations among the countries of the region and between them and other nations of the world. Founded in 1948, ECLAC (CEPAL in Spanish) has 34 member States and seven associated members. Its activities in connection with the Information Society include:

Preparation for WSIS: intergovernmental seminars, expert meetings and regional workshops; provision of support to Brazil in the organization of the June 2000 Regional Meeting on Information Technology for Development, which resulted in the Declaration of Florianopolis; provision of support to the Dominican Republic in the organization of the January 2003 Regional Preparatory Ministerial Conference for WSIS, which resulted in the Bávaro Declaration.

In-depth policy-oriented analysis: national Information Society strategies; international and domestic digital divides; digital economies in developing countries; local e-government and digital municipalities: women and information technologies; use of ICT in small and medium-sized enterprises; labour markets and ICT; e-commerce and export promotion via digital networks; comparative studies of ICT use by small and medium-sized exporting firms in East Asia and Latin America; ICT-supporting transport systems; education and culture in the Information Society; and electronic democracy and citizen participation via digital means.

Technical assistance in the development of a regional strategy for moving towards the Information Society in Latin America and the Caribbean. ECLAC acts as a clearinghouse for national strategies, developing conceptual and methodological frameworks and facilitating the regional dialogue by organizing and actively participating in international seminars.

Interregional partnerships with other Regional Commissions, in which ECLAC plays the role of executing agency, promoting international trade as an engine of growth through knowledge management and good use of ICT.

Development of intranet systems for all national women's advancement mechanisms within the Governments of the region, including the creation of websites and Internet portals for national e-government, with a view to strengthening gender mainstreaming in government management. This task includes training programmes for government departments that deal with gender issues.

Observatory on the Information Society in Latin America and the Caribbean: ECLAC, together with the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (ICA), is setting up the Observatory on the Information Society in Latin America and the Caribbean (OSILA in Spanish). In close cooperation with other stakeholders, the Observatory will compile ICT indicators for the region, seek to centralize these data, and work to standardize and harmonize ICT-related indicators across the region, in addition to constructing new indicators.

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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

ESCAP is the regional headquarters of the United Nations Secretariat in Asia and the Pacific, dedicated to promoting economic and social development in the region. Founded in 1947 in Shanghai, China, it moved to Bangkok in 1949. It consists of 53 members and nine associate members.

The focus of ESCAP's work is on three key areas: reducing poverty; managing globalization; and emerging social issues. The divisions within ESCAP are organized according to the thematic area they serve. The Information, Communication and Space Technology Division serves the "Managing Globalization" thematic area.

Information, Communication and Space Technology

Recognizing the importance of information technology in the knowledge economy and its impact on economic and social development, UNESCAP established the Information, Communication and Space Technology Division (ICSTD) in July 2002. It comprises three sections - the ICT Policy Section, the ICT Applications Section and the Space Technology Applications Section. The Division was established with one main objective in mind, that is to strengthen the capacity of ESCAP members and ass iate members to create enabling environments that improve access to, and application of, information, communication and space technology, and eventually bridge the digital divide.

ESCAP's previous work in the area of information, communication and space technology has shown that the Asia-Pacific countries are in need of support for the development of cross-sectoral policies that enable them to take full advantage of the opportunities presented by these technologies. ESCAP views such policies as critical in determining the ability of its member countries to fully participate in, manage, and benefit from, the process of globalization, as well as to overcome key development challenges in a cost effective manner.

At the same time, there is not enough awareness of the real and positive impacts that the application of these technologies can have in key areas of economic and social development, including, inter alia, commerce, effective and transparent governance, disaster reduction and efforts towards sustainable development and poverty reduction, and in sectors related to emerging social issues such as health, HIV/AIDS, gender and ageing.

ESCAP is therefore focusing on supporting the development of cross-sectoral policies and strategies, and on promoting ICST applications in key sectors, through support for key national institutions. ESCAP is also promoting regional cooperation aimed at making the expertise of the many relatively advanced countries of the region available to the less advanced countries, and at addressing critical issues which require regional cooperation, such as cybercrime and information security.

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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

ESCWA promotes regional cooperation and integration among its 13 Arab member States and serves as the main development forum within the United Nations system for the region. The objective of ESCWA is to accelerate the pace of economic, social and technological development in the region and to minimize the unsustainable exploitation of its natural resources.

Activities of the Information and Communication Technology Division (ICTD)

Western Asia is suffering from a widening digital divide at both internal and external levels. At the same time, the region possesses development potentials that need to be exploited in building a knowledge-based society, particularly the common language, culture and heritage. More efforts also need to be deployed in increasing levels of literacy and education and tapping human resources and talents, especially among women and the fast growing youth population. ICTD assists member countries in unlocking their development potential to accelerate the transition towards information societies and bridge the digital divide, by focusing on the following domains:

Building the Information Society: ESCWA is coordinating the preparations of its member countries for WSIS and is working towards building the regional information society. It organized the Western Asia Preparatory Conference for WSIS; produced country and regional profiles that include ranking, benchmarking, and comparative analysis of member country's endeavours in the main areas of the Information Society; developed an ICT indicators database (to be web-enabled for the benefit of member countries), which can display indicators and carry out comparisons with other regions of the world; and is building a regional action plan for moving towards the Information Society, in line with the global plan.

ICT capacity building: ESCWA promotes awareness, education as well as research, development and innovation in ICT. Feasibility studies for modern ICT-based educational systems are being carried out, along with capacity-building endeavours in e-government, e-business and e-learning. An awareness-raising review of ICT and development in the region is produced periodically.

ICT dissemination: ESCWA has analysed the connectivity and ICT infrastructure of the region, as well as the accessibility of Internet-based services and has pinpointed priority issues for the region. The promotion of e-business, e-government, e-health, and e-education applications is carried out through technical cooperation services and projects.

Building an ICT sector and Arab content industry: ESCWA launched the Arab Content Initiative, which aims at building a content industry in the Arab region based on digitizing existing Arab content, promoting research and development in areas such as natural language processing, and generating new knowledge and information in digital form. ESCWA is also promoting regional ICT sector development by providing expertise on related policies and strategies and supporting incubation schemes for nascent ICT enterprises.

ICT for sustainable development: ESCWA organized, in cooperation with the International Labour Organisation, the "Forum on Technology, Employment and Poverty Alleviation in the Arab Countries", which led to a regional agenda for action – employment creation and poverty reduction.

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UNITED NATIONS

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Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)

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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

The regional perspective is an important intermediary stage between national particularities and the global requirements of the Information Society. Regional integration efforts contribute to the development of the global Information Society and make strong cooperation within and among regions indispensable. The regional dialogue is contributing to capacity-building and to the alignment of national strategies with the goals of the World Summit on the Information Society.