

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

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PROPOSAL FOR UNECE'S FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES TO THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY (WSIS)

I. UNECE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE GENEVA PHASE OF THE WSIS

A. Background

The Geneva phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) (10-12 December 2003) was successfully concluded. It was coordinated by the WSIS Executive Secretariat at the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in cooperation with other international organizations. The WSIS process is intended to help stakeholders better understand the global information society, its impact on the international community and the roles of the various partners in its development. The first phase of the WSIS resulted in the adoption of a Declaration of Principles and a Plan of Action. The second phase will be held in Tunis from 16-18 November 2005 and will focus on development themes and the assessment of progress made. A further Plan of Action may be adopted in Tunis.

The five United Nations regional commissions made a significant contribution to the Summit. The role of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) was particularly important in coordinating the activities of all five UN regional commissions and arranging high-level panel discussions and a High-Level Roundtable. UNECE demonstrated its solidarity with all other United Nations organizations engaged in the WSIS process and gained significant visibility from so doing, adding value to its already established work programme.

UNECE, alongside the rest of the United Nations, is instructed to mainstream ICT into all aspects of its mandated work programme as part of obligations resulting from the Millennium Development Goals. It is proposed that support for the next stage of WSIS be included in this process, especially in those circumstances where it enhances existing UNECE activities.

In order to respond to the challenges of the WSIS process, UNECE set up an internal Information Society Team (IST) composed of staff members from all UNECE's substantive Divisions and from the UNECE Information Systems Unit. The IST made a significant contribution to the implementation of the Geneva phase of the WSIS.

The UN ICT Task Force and the WSIS Executive Secretariat have already requested UNECE's continued support for the WSIS process on the road to the Tunis summit in November 2005. Specifically, the WSIS Executive Secretariat has asked the UNECE

secretariat to commence work by helping to define substantive themes for regional meetings in cooperation with the other regional commissions. The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) will be responsible for coordinating the regional commissions in their preparations for Tunis during 2004.

A decision needs to be taken in respect of UNECE's role in and contribution to the ongoing WSIS process, both in the region and in cooperation with the other UN regional commissions, taking into account the decisions made at the WSIS Geneva 2003 and plans for the WSIS Tunis 2005.

B. UNECE's Contribution to the Geneva Phase of the WSIS

To summarize, UNECE's contributions to the first phase of the WSIS in Geneva included:

- Active participation in the High-Level Organizing Committee (HLSOC).
- Co-organizing the Bucharest Regional Preparatory Conference (7-9 November 2002) with the Romanian Government and the WSIS Executive Secretariat, as reported on in document E/ECE/1402.
- Participating in the UN ICT Task Force.
- Coordinating the input of all five regional commissions. UNECE served as lead coordinator of the UN regional commissions, managing their contributions to the WSIS process at both the Second and Third Preparatory Committee sessions (PrepCom-2, PrepCom-3 and its extensions), which took place in Geneva on 17-28 February, 15-26 September, 10-14 November, and 5-6 December 2003.
- Working closely with the WSIS Executive Secretariat to organize a series of parallel events to the Geneva WSIS, described in document E/ECE/1413, Section III. UNECE also helped organized a High-Level Roundtable on "ICT as a tool to achieve the Millennium Development Goals", 11 December 2003, then provided the Secretariat for the Roundtable and wrote the summary report of this meeting for the WSIS.

C. UNECE's Work on ICT applications

UNECE's comparative advantage lies in linking ICT know-how with its sectoral activities and adding value to them, as, for example, it has done successfully with the Aarhus Convention and the development and implementation of electronic business standards. By focusing on its unique competences and linking them with ICT know-how, UNECE can tailor its activities in the context of the WSIS process to include the development of policy guidelines, the identification of best practice, and cross-sectoral initiatives. Following the WSIS, UNECE will also need to address policy development and implementation of the WSIS Plan of Action in the region.

Given its regional mandate and existing expertise, UNECE can provide valuable assistance to its member States, especially those with economies in transition, in the elaboration of regional policies and national plans and strategies for implementing the global WSIS framework and developing their ICT sectors. The implementation of the WSIS framework can help countries bridge the digital divide and use ICT as a tool for economic development.

UNECE is already active in a wide range of ICT applications, with over 30 ongoing projects in the areas of trade, industry, timber, statistics, environment, transport, gender and energy. These include:

- Developing tools for electronic business;
- Collecting and disseminating statistical information;
- Promoting public participation in environmental decisions through digital democracy;
- Developing intelligent transport systems; and
- Implementing measures to support a gender-sensitive information society.

UNECE also undertakes analytical and research work relevant to the WSIS process, including its annual series of e-assessment reports, *The Information Economy Report*, launched in 2002 at the Bucharest Regional Preparatory Conference. These reports seek to assist member States, especially those with economies in transition, in developing and implementing the necessary e-strategies, e-policies and e-regulatory framework for moving towards a knowledge-based economy. The first reports cover the national progress of 16 countries and describe current e-policy development initiatives in the region.

In addition, UNECE has prepared 13 country readiness assessment reports to evaluate the progress of countries with economies in transition in establishing the policy foundations and institutional arrangements for promoting and managing the evolution of the knowledge-based economy, and its implications for society at large.

These activities are currently funded by the regular budgets of UNECE's divisions, based on existing resources.

II. UNECE'S FOLLOW-UP TO THE GENEVA PHASE, CONTRIBUTION TO THE TUNIS PHASE, AND SUBSEQUENT ACTIVITIES

The basis for UNECE's continuing activities to follow up the achievements of the Geneva phase and to contribute to the WSIS process on the road to the Tunis summit (16-18 November 2005) and beyond is contained in section 11 of the WSIS Declaration of Principles, and in paragraph 62 in particular, which underscores the importance of the regional dimension in the development of the information society: "regional integration contributes to the development of the global Information Society and makes strong cooperation within and among regions indispensable. Regional dialogue should contribute to national capacity building and to the alignment of national strategies with the goals of this Declaration of Principles in a compatible way, while respecting national and regional particularities" (paragraph 62).

The regional dimension of the information society is referred to repeatedly in the WSIS Plan of Action. Section C11, paragraph 26(c) provides the most explicit mandate for regional organizations, "invit[ing] international and regional organizations to mainstream ICTs in their work programmes and to assist all levels of developing countries, to be involved in the preparation and implementation of national action plans to support the fulfilment of the goals indicated in the declaration of principles and in this Plan of Action, taking into account the importance of regional initiatives."

III. UNECE'S ROLE IN THE REGIONAL FOLLOW-UP TO THE WSIS

A. *UNECE and the UN ICT Task Force*

UNECE continues to support the UN ICT Task Force which reports to ECOSOC, and a senior member of the secretariat is the UNECE Focal Point.

UNECE is also currently responsible, in principle, for the management of an Internet-based network to support the UN ICT Task Force's Geneva Node. To date, resource constraints have limited UNECE's action in this area. It is therefore proposed that UNECE explore the possibility of transferring this work to another organization, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) or the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

B. *Proposed UNECE Activities to Prepare for the Tunis WSIS*

The WSIS Declaration of Principles and the WSIS Plan of Action both underscore the importance of the regional dimension in the development of the information society. In order to fulfil this mandate, it is proposed that UNECE:

- *Participate in the high-level organizing committee (HLSOC) for the second phase of the WSIS.*
- *Participate in the three PrepCom meetings for the Summit. These are tentatively scheduled for June 2004, the second half of 2005, and the third quarter of 2005; all are likely to be held in Geneva.*
- *Liaise with the WSIS Executive Secretariat on behalf of all the regional commissions regarding the possible organization of preparatory meetings and side events at the Tunis summit. In view of the fact that the WSIS Executive Secretariat will almost certainly remain at ITU in Geneva for the year 2004, UNECE has been asked by the other regional commissions to maintain its role as day-to-day liaison until the Secretariat is transferred to Tunis. However, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) will have overall responsibility for coordinating the regional commissions in the context of the Tunis phase of the WSIS.*
- *Assist the host country in organizing a regional preparatory conference to be held in the second half of 2004, should such an event be decided in the WSIS process. This conference might address the monitoring of the implementation of the Geneva WSIS Plan of Action and the adoption of a Regional Digital Solidarity Charter.*
- *Help organize one or two sub-regional meetings. During the Geneva WSIS, the President of The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia invited UNECE to assist in organizing a meeting in mid-2004 to help the countries of Southeast Europe implement the results of the WSIS. A similar initiative for Central Asia was proposed by the President of Kyrgyzstan.*
- *Within the framework of the UNECE Statistics programme, organize a regional ICT-related meeting on the monitoring of information society issues, in cooperation with relevant regional and international organizations. The other four regional commissions would organize similar meetings within their respective regions. These meetings*

would all be held in 2004 and would provide input on a common set of ICT readiness and usage indicators for a global summary meeting, which would take place in early 2005 (date and place to be determined). An action plan for the Tunis WSIS could then be prepared at this global summary meeting.

- *Work on a joint project with the other regional commissions.* A project proposal is currently being elaborated on the implementation of the results of the Geneva WSIS, under the leadership of the Economic Commission for Africa, and may comprise two phases: preparatory activities for the Tunis summit and joint activities for 2006-2007, possibly funded by the UN Development Account (UNDA).

If UNECE is to benefit from extra-budgetary resources provided by the UNDA, it will be necessary to contribute to the project's development.

- *Liaise with other regional commissions,* especially with regard to the preparation of regional and sub-regional preparatory meetings, contributions to the Tunis summit and future follow-up activities. The regional commissions' secretariats have agreed to continue coordinating their work to carry out their mandate in this field cost-effectively and efficiently, seeking to add value to their already established programmes of work and to avoid duplication. The regional commissions have planned to meet during 2004 to discuss joint projects to be submitted for external funding, and depending on the availability of resources, UNECE may participate in the regional and sub-regional conferences the other regional commissions organize during 2004-5.
- *Further develop the e-assessment reports* already agreed in the UNECE programme of work under the Committee for Trade, Industry and Enterprise Development.
- *Prepare contributions by the UNECE Executive Secretary and senior management* to major international meetings within the WSIS process.

IV. RESOURCE REQUIREMENTS

All UNECE Divisions are already working on ICT-related issues to some extent. Within the context of the WSIS process, the aim should be to add value to these activities and ensure the mainstreaming of ICT in accordance with the Millennium Development Goals.

UNECE can only contribute to the WSIS process if resources are directly allocated to these activities. The use of extra-budgetary resources would be essential to support the 2004-2005 activities. The business community and aid agencies could both be sources of extra-budgetary funds for UNECE's WSIS activities. Possible fundraising could include seeking financial contributions to develop a more active capacity to assist least-advantaged member States with economies in transition in responding to the challenges of the information society and especially to assist their integration into the global economy and international networks.