WSIS Follow up Forum 2009

Brief report on the UN Regional Commissions' event

Introduction

As part of the WSIS follow up Forum 2009, the UN Regional Commissions organized an event on 19 May 2009 from 16H00 18H00 in Conference Room 2 at the ITU Conference Centre. The following Regional Commissions made a presentation at the event in the following order: UNECA, UNESCWA, UNECE and UNECLAC. UNESCAP did not make a presentation but provided documents for distribution.

The event was chaired by Mr. Hans Hansell, ICT Advisor to the ECE Executive Secretary, who welcomed participants and thanked Regional Commissions for having agreed to jointly organize the event for the 3rd time, as part of the WSIS follow up activities. He also thanked ITU for having facilitated the various events of the WSIS follow up, including that of the UN Regional Commissions.

Summary of UN ECA presentation

The presentation was made by Mr. Makane Faye. He indicated that a survey was undertaken in 2008 and that the analysis would form the basis for a regular publication on progress achieved by member States in implementing the WSIS outcomes and would create a foundation for the WSIS monitoring database. He informed participants that the 1st African Follow-up Conference on WSIS - Tunis + 3, was organized by ECA and the Africa Network of the Global Alliance on ICT and Development (GAID) during the first session of ECA's Committee on Development Information, Science and Technology (CODIST-I) held from 28 April to 1 May 2009 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He indicated that the objective of the conference was to assess actions undertaken by African countries in following up on the recommendations/action lines of the WSIS, three years after WSIS Tunis.

He indicated the following as challenges and constraints identified by participants:

- Lack of funds to implement the ICT policies and plans.
- Various legislations in enabling e-business such as e-transactions, e-payment, e-currencies, digital signature, etc. are not in place in most countries.
- Digital literacy was a challenge for participation of the majority of the population in the information society.
- Some of the ICT applications are poorly integrated or unavailable in most countries.

The main recommendations of the African WSIS follow up conference, to both ECA and member States with regard to the follow-up and implementation of WSIS outcomes in Africa were provided as follows:

- Organize coaching/training of focal points and other respondents prior to completion of questionnaire and for validation.
- Create a mechanism for coordination at national level among the different stakeholders to fully participate the data gathering process on WSIS follow up indicators.
- Include in next survey a follow up on the African Regional Action Plan on the Knowledge Economy (ARAPKE) implementation.
- Undertake the survey regularly once every 2 years.
- Cooperate with other UN Regional Commissions and other UN and international organizations to share experience and compare results of follow up surveys.

The speaker indicated actions being undertaken by ECA in support to the African Regional Economic Communities, especially in development of e-legislation and regional e-strategies. He also informed the participants of the African Union's January 2010 Summit, which will focus on the theme "ICTs in Africa: Challenges and Prospects for Development".

Summary of UN ESCWA presentation

The presentation of UN-ESCWA was made by Mr. Georges Younes who chose to focus on some of the 2008 and 2009 Information Society (IS) initiatives that the Regional Commission has implemented or is in the process of implementing. After speaking briefly about the slight but insufficient progress of the information society in Western Asia, Mr. Younes moved on to highlight a selection of related activities. It is important to note that his presentation was not meant to be exhaustive as this would have required more time than was allocated. The highlighted activities included:

- The "Regional Plan of Action (RPOA)" which was prepared in 2005 and which has been adopted and integrated almost entirely in the Arab ICT Strategy. The RPOA is due for a review and an overhaul during June 2009 (more on this below).
- The "Information Society Portal for the ESCWA Region (ISPER)" which is a Regional online tool for following up on the RPOA. This Arabic and English bilingual portal was launched during 2008 and is constantly updated with new information that is related to WSIS implementations in the ESCWA region.
- The "Regional Profiles of the Information Society in Western Asia", which is a biennial publication published by ESCWA to report on the achievements and shortcomings of the IS in Western Asia. The Regional Profiles are based on 14 national IS profiles, one for each of the ESCWA member countries.
- A field project entitled "Knowledge Networks through ICT Access Points for Disadvantaged Communities" which is being implemented by all UN Regional Commissions with ESCWA acting as the lead agency. The project aims at transforming existing ICT access points/community telecentres into knowledge hubs.
- ICT in Education in Iraq which was implemented by ESCWA in partnership with UNESCO. Related activities included the provision of infrastructure and equipment

for 5 training centres and 10 schools, the creation of courseware, ICDL courses and training sessions on the formulation of education strategies.

- Various activities related to cyber legislation which included a study, workshops and a new field project entitled "Harmonization of Cyber Legislations" launched earlier this year.
- Several digital Arabic content (DAC) initiatives which are aimed at fostering the creation of Arabic language content to be published and made available electronically to a growing Arabic speaking Internet community.

The presentation finished on the 2009 ESCWA activity that is most related to the implementation of the WSIS in Western Asia. The "Regional Follow-up to the Outcome of the World Summit on the Information Society" conference is planned to take place in Damascus between 16 and 18 June 2009. The speaker issued an open invitation to the WSIS community and asked listeners to register for the conference at: http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=850E

Summary of UN ECE presentation

Ms. Fiona Marshall reported on the consultation process carried out under the auspices of the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice on Environmental Matters, commonly known as the Aarhus Convention.[1] While the Aarhus Convention primarily addresses issues at the national level, its Parties have committed themselves, through article 3, paragraph 7, of the Convention, to promote the application of the principles of the Convention in international environmental decision-making processes and within the framework of international organizations in matters relating to the environment. At their second meeting in May 2005, the Aarhus Convention Parties adopted the Almaty Guidelines on promoting the application of the principles of the Aarhus Convention in international forums. At the same time, Parties set up a task force to enter into consultations with other international forums regarding the guidelines.

In its first three years, the Task Force on Public Participation in International Forums undertook this consultation process. The purpose of the consultation process was to identify best practices and challenges to promoting access to information, public participation and access to review procedures in international forums dealing with matters relating to the environment and to obtain feedback on the Almaty Guidelines. The first stage of the consultation process consisted of a written consultation process, in which 50 international forums from various regions took part, followed by an international workshop in which representatives of international forums, Aarhus Party governments, NGOs and academics took part. The relevant outcomes of the consultation process regarding access to information are below:

- International forums' rules, practices and procedures on access to information: A number of the forums consulted considered all reports communicated to them as

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[1] The Aarhus Convention entered into force in October 2001. It has 42 Parties, consisting of 41 countries from the UNECE region plus the European Communities.

well as institutional information in the public domain and all official documents are available through their websites. Several more disclose all documents except for financial and certain administrative documents. Another forum reported that, while all documents are posted on its website, access to the website is restricted. Examples of non-formalized practices international forums use to disseminate environmental information include the forum's website, environmental publications, media interviews, workshops, roundtables, and webcasting of events.

- Challenges faced by international forums regarding access to information. Funding was identified by several forums as the chief constraint to maximising access to information, particularly because of high translation costs due to the multilingual nature of its region. Language barriers are a challenge to the dissemination of environmental information. The gap between developed and developing countries in technological means and know-how constitutes a major stumbling block to allowing full participation of civil society in environmental matters. Internet use is still not an everyday tool in many countries, particularly in small rural towns and indigenous communities. Virtual consultation forums have not yet reached the level of participation expected. Several forums identified inadequate mechanisms for environmental data compilation, analysis, interpretation and dissemination.

- International forums' current and future work plans on access to information. A number of forums reported current or future workplans to increase the use of electronic tools and/or improve their website. These included the establishment of web platforms for more systematic exchanges of environmental information and cooperative activities; electronic newsletters targeted to experts to share information on activities, methods, and results; web-based video-conferencing and webcasting; and the development of environmental databases and use of GIS and other tools to collect and provide environmental data to decision-makers and the general public. One regional environmental forum is considering the possible development of a regional agreement or protocol establishing an institutional body to collect and disseminate information on regional environmental issues or, as an alternative, a set of voluntary guidelines on these issues.

The presenter concluded by presenting the future work of the Aarhus Convention's Task Force on Public Participation in International Forums by stating that in the next three years, 2008-2011, the Task Force will continue its work but in a more focused way; first, by continuing to build on the outcomes and relationships made in the earlier consultation process; second, by focusing more on what Aarhus Convention parties are themselves doing to implement their obligations under article 3, paragraph 7.

Summary of UN ECLAC presentation

Mr. Mario Cimoli presented the UN ECLAC Information Society Program and its initiatives on assisting countries on the implementation of the WSIS outcomes at the national, sub-regional and regional levels in 2008-2009. The UN-ECLAC Information Society Program is undertaken by the Innovation and ICT Unit of the ECLAC's Division

of Production, Productivity and Management, and it includes three main projects: the Regional Action Plan for the Information Society (eLAC2010) and the "Inclusive political dialogue and exchange of experiences", both co-financed by UN-ECLAC and the European Union (under the @LIS2 Program), and the Observatory for the Information Society in Latin America and the Caribbean (OSILAC), which is co-financed by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

The IS Program seeks to contribute to the development of the Information Society in Latin America and the Caribbean via: Production of studies and analysis; Coordination of political dialogue; Identification and dissemination of best practices; Exchange of information and experiences; Technical assistance for the governments of the region; Statistical harmonization and monitoring; Follow-up of the eLAC Regional Action Plan; Support for the eLAC working groups; Deepening knowledge through seminars, workshops and conferences; and Regional cooperation in the elaboration of policies for the IS. All these activities seek to maximize the productive potential of information and communications technology (ICTs) for the integral development of the countries of the region. See more information at http://www.cepal.org/socinfo/

The presenter highlighted activities undertaken by UN-ECLAC during 2008-9 including the following:

- An increasing number of Latin American and Caribbean countries has adopted and implemented ICT strategies and initiatives in line with the goals and objectives of the Latin America and Caribbean Action Plan (eLAC), following the WSIS action lines.

- Member States of ECLAC have begun the adoption of a second phase of the eLAC for the period of 2008-2010 (eLAC2010), which includes important adjustments in terms of capabilities in, access to, and use of ICTs in education and training, infrastructure and access, health, public administration and e-government, productive sector, and policy instruments and strategic tools. The first Follow Up Meeting on the implementation of the Plan took place on April 28-29th 2009, when the countries have reinforced their commitment with the goals agreed.

- ECLAC continued in 2008 to facilitate policy makers in embracing technology-enabled opportunities through publishing 20 studies, 4 books related to different relevant ICT issues for the region Available for download at: http://www.cepal.org/socinfo/publicaciones/default.asp?idioma=IN, and a bi-annual publication entitled "Latin America and Caribbean Digital Review" See http://www.cepal.org/cgi-bin/getProd.asp?xml=/publicaciones/xml/6/34726/P34726.xml&xsl=/ddpe/tpl-i/p9f.xsl&base=/socinfo/tpl-i/top-bottom.xsl which is compiled from national profiles, aimed at helping governments and stakeholders update and fine-tune their ICT strategies and implementation plans.

- ECLAC has continued its efforts on providing assistance to national statistical authorities to compile harmonized ICT indicators. In January 26-30th 2009, the Observatory for the Information Society in Latin America and the Caribbean (OSILAC) has published more then 10 related documents (http://www.cepal.org/socinfo/osilac/default.asp?idioma=IN) and has organized a capacity building on the implementation of ICT statistics in Trinidad and Tobago.

- The 5th regional Workshop on Information Society Measurement was also held in Rio de Janeiro, from 6-8th April 2009. So far, 17 countries have already adopted OSILAC's suggestion for ICT access indicators in their regular household surveys, 10 countries for ICT usage and 7 countries have additionally adopted OSILAC's suggestions for ICT indicators in enterprise surveys.

- OSILAC has launched the ICT Statistical Information System (http://www.cepal.org/tic/flash/default.asp?idioma=IN) that integrates indicators on household ICT usage from Latin American and Caribbean countries, and maintains the PROTIC database, which allows the exchange of experiences and the creation of synergies between ongoing projects in the region (www.PROTIC.org)

- ECLAC continued also providing technical assistance and capacity-building to the countries.

Conclusion

The meeting concluded with questions and answers from the floor and panelists. Questions centred around the role of ICT statistics in development, harmonization of tools used by WSIS stakeholders in assessing WSIS outcomes implementation and participation in e-legislation activities at the regional and global levels.

Following the adequate answers provided by panelists, the Chairperson thanked the audience for its active participation and the panelists for having facilitated presentation from their respective regional commissions. Finally, he called upon the Regional Commissions to strengthen cooperation on socio-economic development issues, especially on follow up of WSIS outcomes; and urged them to step up their participation in the next WSIS follow up fora.