

Fourth Session of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS) Steering Committee and WSIS Regional Review

Virtual Meeting

11 August 2020, 09:00-16:00 (Bangkok Time)

Concept Note

1. Overview

In the coming decade, next generation technologies like 5G, Artificial Intelligence, robotics, and the Internet of Things will drive economies. The World Economic Forum estimates that 70 per cent of new economic value will be created over the next ten years on digitally enabled platforms and that by 2022 over 60 per cent of global GDP will be digitized. Yet, only half of the Asia-Pacific population has Internet access and this growth is slowing.¹ In terms of fixed broadband access, 17 ESCAP member States have less than 2 per cent of their populations covered; the majority of those countries' growth is either flat or negative.² Fourteen member States have less than a third of their populations covered by mobile broadband.³ This infrastructure, skills, connectivity and access gap also known as the "digital divide" must be addressed if the aforementioned digitalization gains of this coming decade are to be shared by all.

More immediately, as COVID-19 left no-one country unaffected, the foundational importance of digital connectivity was brought to the fore. Countries showing signs of better pandemic containment are those that have made effective use of digital technologies - identifying, tracing, monitoring infections with timely sharing of credible public information. Furthermore, as digital connectivity became a lifeline helping maintain livelihoods for millions, it opened up the possibility for transformative decarbonization of economies away from material intensive consumption and production patterns.

ESCAP's Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS) initiative aims to improve regional broadband connectivity, increase international bandwidth for developing countries, lower broadband Internet prices and ultimately bridge the digital divide.⁴ An AP-IS Master Plan 2019-2022 and Regional Cooperation Framework Document for 2019-2022 outline the activities, studies, projects for partnerships between member States and various stakeholders. The implementation of the AP-IS Master Plan 2019-2022 and Regional Cooperation Framework Document for 2019-2022 also support the subregional and global efforts on the implementation of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) action lines.

In its resolution 75/7, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific invited members and associate members to consider developing subregional implementation plans for inclusive broadband connectivity through the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway. It further requested the secretariat to support members countries with policy advice, technical studies and capacity-building and towards this end encouraged the participation of various stakeholders.

¹ <https://www.weforum.org/platforms/shaping-the-future-of-digital-economy-and-new-value-creation>

² International Telecommunication Union (ITU), World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators (WTI) Database 2019 (Accessed February 2020).

³ Ibid

⁴ https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Master_Plan_for_APIS_English_0.pdf

The third session of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Steering Committee in August 2019 agreed that member States at the subregional level discuss detailed requirements and operationalisation priorities unique to each subregion.⁵ In particular, member States in the Pacific and South-East Asia (Cambodia, the People's Democratic Republic of Lao, Myanmar, and Viet Nam), recognised the need to establish expert working groups for identifying policy remedies on strengthening Internet traffic and network management.

Furthermore and in line with the Master Plan of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative 4, on 'enhancing ICT infrastructure resilience in the Asia-Pacific region', member States further recognised the importance of subregional cooperation on improving cost-effective ways on fiber-optic cable infrastructure development, through infrastructure sharing and co-deployment. As a result, countries from North and Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), East and North-East Asia (Mongolia) and South and South-West Asia requested secretariat support on capacity training workshops and the development of appropriate policy guidelines to better coordinate ICT co-deployment projects.

2. Objectives

The fourth session of the AP-IS Steering Committee meeting aims to achieve the following objectives:

- a) Review the progress on the subregional implementation of the AP-IS Master Plan;
- b) Regional review of the implementation of the WSIS action lines for Asia and the Pacific;
- c) Deepen regional cooperation and policy dialogue in the development and implementation of the AP-IS subregional plans and ongoing project activities for strengthening broadband connectivity during times of natural disasters, including pandemic outbreaks such as COVID-19; and
- d) Discuss future direction for next phase of implementation of the AP-IS Master Plan (2023-2026).

3. Mode and date

- Virtual meeting, Tuesday 11 August 2020. Access to the virtual meeting will be shared with nominated officials and invited participants.

⁵ ESCAP, Third Session of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Steering Committee and WSIS Regional Review – Summary Report, United Nations Conference Centre, (Bangkok, 2019). Available at https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Summary%20Report%20-%20Third%20AP-IS%20SC_0.pdf