

# A national ICT vision

## INTERVIEW WITH DR HESSA AL-JABER

SECRETARY GENERAL, ICTQATAR



HESSA AL-JABER is Secretary General of ictQATAR. Dr Al-Jaber studied at Kuwait University before completing her Master's Degree and Doctorate in Computer Science at George Washington University. She later became the IT adviser for Qtel, Qatar's telecommunications provider, and Chair of the Computer Science Department of Qatar University. She remains a member of the Board of Regents of Qatar University. In addition, Dr Al-Jaber has worked with other leading Qatar institutions including Hamad General Hospital and the American School of Doha, where she sits on the Board of Governors. A co-author of several publications and academic papers, Dr Al-Jaber has presented her research at conferences and symposia in the Middle East, the United States and Korea.

### What significance do you attach to ICT development in Qatar?

Information and communications technologies (ICT) have shaped a new world. These technologies, when correctly harnessed, enable greater access to information, stimulate economic development, enhance opportunities and enabled governments to become more transparent and accountable.

The use of ICT is quickly becoming such an inherent and integral part of contemporary life. In education more students can be engaged who historically have been beyond the reach of a traditional institutional education; precise and up-to-date patient information can be accessed by more doctors; businesses are able to serve more customers uniquely, efficiently and with optimised productivity; and all over the world families who separated by work or travel can connect in real time. The list of potential benefits are innumerable. Today, this is certainly a daily reality in Qatar, where a well-structured national ICT agenda is underway. ICT is considered to be the real enabling factor for socio-economic development in the world. A recent Harvard study concluded that, in developing countries especially, a relatively small investment in ICT can make huge impacts on the GDP growth.

### Why was ICT Qatar established and what is its role?

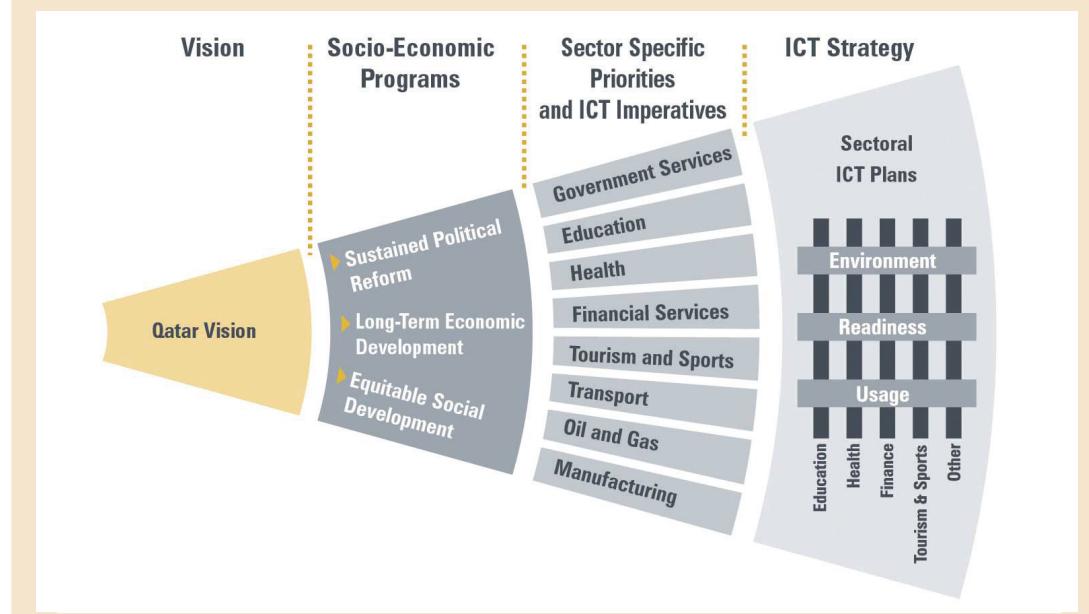
In 2004, by Royal Decree, Qatar's Supreme Council of ICT (ictQATAR) was formed with a clear and authoritative mandate as both a regulator and an enabler of Qatar's ICT sector. In May of 2005, His Highness and Heir Apparent of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, unveiled ictQATAR's vision and mission with the further directive to create an advanced information-based society that will improve the life of everyone in Qatar and will enhance the social and economic development of the country. Its main responsibilities include drafting telecommunications-related legislation and regulations as well as designing, maintaining and prosecuting a national ICT vision, strategy and masterplan aimed at enabling the socio-economic development of the nation.

### What role is the private sector playing?

Governments have a leading role in developing and implementing comprehensive, forward looking and sustainable national e-Strategies. The private sector and civil society, in dialogue with governments, have an important consultative role to play in devising national e-Strategies.

Clearly, technology and infrastructure develop-

Figure 1: Qatar's approach to developing the ICT strategy and masterplan



**The number of students under fifteen years old make up 26 per cent of the Qatari population**



ments should not be ends in and of themselves, but rather facilitators or enablers of economic or social gain. In many parts of the world, the failure to link ICT strategies with development strategies has led to misaligned or sub-optimal progress against ICT or development goals. As such, ictQATAR has diligently pursued the development of an ICT Strategy and Masterplan tailored specifically to the unique circumstances and requirements of Qatar, based on relevant international best practices and derived from Qatar's national agenda for development – its long-term vision, development targets and initiatives for specific sectors. (see Figure 1)

ictQATAR's starting point was to build the ICT strategic plan in sync with the socio-economic development goals of the State of Qatar. As a result, the Council engaged into a focused dialogue with institutions in the public and private sectors that have direct input, contribution, and influence on the development of ICT.

The Council was also in a privileged position to build on the learning from other national-level initiatives in developed and developing economies to fast-track ICT growth. To achieve this strategy ictQATAR devised twelve ICT development programs ictQATAR has been and will continue to partner with the different stakeholders in Qatar (including other government agencies, ministries and the private sector) to implement these twelve programs.

**You were a participant at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) last November which debated a number of wide ranging issues affecting ICT and development, including internet governance and "bridging the digital divide". What's your stance on these?**

I think that it is less of a concern who or where the control lies as long as each government will be able to utilise the internet to make progress in their economical and social arenas. I believe that the digital divide between developed and developing countries, is a much more important issue than who might assume a nominal control of the internet.

The internet should be as open as possible, in terms of individual access and to all countries. When you access the internet you should not feel that this part belongs exclusively to one country or another – it's there for all.

Obviously, this freedom needs to be balanced with some form of regulation to protect vulnerable users such as young children, to control cybercrime and to have secure transactional platforms to protect against fraud. But no matter what kind of restriction you try to implement somebody will always find ways around it.

In my view, the best way to protect children is

through education to promote responsible use. In Qatar, we are working on a project to develop a program with CERT to build awareness of cyber security issues that will target children from six years to eighteen years of age which will be part of an education campaign which we will be implementing.

**How important is ICT in Qatar's vision for itself as a centre of education in the region, and how is your organisation integrated within those plans?**

It's extremely important. As with the other key strategic sectors mentioned above, we undertook an extensive local consultation process rather than impose ready-made solutions from the outside. We approached the Supreme Council of Education, the Qatar Foundation and the Ministry of Education, who are the three main entities concerned with education in the State of Qatar, to gauge what are their development priorities. After these priorities were identified, we then looked internationally to determine what was the best practice in the market before developing our own ICT strategy for each sector.

When it comes to the education this was very specific. The number of students under fifteen years old make up 26 per cent of the Qatari population, so you can see that's why education is our number one priority. We are working now with Qatar Foundation and with the Supreme Council of Education, to fully integrate ICT in to the curriculum. We have started two pilot projects with Microsoft and Blackboard, which aims to create what we call a virtual learning environment involving the student, teachers and parents as well, so all of them will be integrated into "Qatar School Knowledge Net". We have yet to assess the results, but my assumption is, from what we have seen with similar projects in the US and in Singapore, that we will soon have an aggregate plan to role out this project in all schools in Qatar.

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