



United Nations

Statement

by

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and

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for development

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Madam Chair,

The three documents before us today all agree on the crucial role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in achieving the Millennium Development Goals as well as other international development goals. They highlight the various initiatives being undertaken by the UN system to turn this promise into a reality. They also provide good analyses of the hurdles in the way of using ICTs for sustainable development and offer recommendations to overcome the hurdles.

The Secretary-General's note on Communication for Development Programmes in the United Nations System (A/61/165) emphasises the need for communication to focus on people, especially the poorest, and highlights some of the initiatives undertaken by UN system organisations in this regard. It also calls for the scaling up successful examples of communication for development initiatives. I am pleased to note that a good number of these programmes are being implemented in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), where the majority of the poorest of the poor live.

The Secretary-General's report on Information and Communication Technologies for Development (A/61/254) elaborates the UN system's ICT strategy and the work of the ICT Taskforce. At the Second World Summit on the Information Society held in Tunis in November last year, the international community reaffirmed the commitment made at the first summit in Geneva in 2003 to pay particular attention to the special needs of the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States in ensuring that all countries of the world have equitable and affordable access to ICTs for their socio-economic development. This commitment has already resulted in some tangible

initiatives, most notably the Digital Solidarity Fund that has committed 60% of its resources to the LDCs. Yet, as the Tunis summit observed, greater efforts are needed, especially in the areas of financing and technology transfer, to bridge the global digital divide.

Not surprisingly, the biggest digital divide is between the 50 Least Developed Countries and the rest of the world. While access to ICT, especially mobile telephony, has grown dramatically over the last five years in the LDCs, it remains far below the levels achieved in many other developing countries. In 2000, there was only one person with a mobile phone out of every 100 in the LDCs. By 2004, the number had grown to five people for every 100. This, of course, is a major and welcome achievement. But it pales in comparison with the developed countries, where nearly 80 people out of every 100 inhabitants had a mobile phone. The disparities are even greater with regard to internet access, where less than 1% of the population in the LDCs is online compared to nearly 30 percent in developed countries and 13% in the world as a whole.

The reasons for such a big digital gap are many, ranging from the high levels of poverty in the LDCs, which make ICT unaffordable for the vast majority of the people, to the lack of ICT and supporting infrastructure such as electricity. The Least Developed Countries are therefore in an unfortunate situation; not only do they need ICTs to support poverty reduction and sustainable development efforts, but also investment in other sectors such as energy and education to make effective use of ICTs for development purposes. The limited use of ICTs in the LDCs is not just a matter of affordability or availability. It is also a matter of capacity, human and otherwise, to make use of such technologies. To achieve the desired results, support to LDCs in the application of ICTs must therefore go beyond the ICTs themselves

and encompass broader efforts to address the underlying constraints. In short, efforts should not only be directed at making ICTs work for the poor, but also at enabling the poor to work with ICTs.

In addition to greater investment in the relevant sectors to enhance the role of ICTs in development in the LDCs, greater efforts are needed in developing and deploying technologies that are suited to the particular socio-economic conditions of these countries. For example, wireless communications, despite their high cost and though they were not specifically developed for disadvantaged countries, have nevertheless demonstrated how technologies more suited to the circumstances of poorer countries can help bridge the digital divide. An initiative such as the \$100 laptop launched by the Secretary-General at the Tunis summit offers great promise to LDCs by making use of technologies that take their constraints into consideration. In some cases, therefore, the answer to the technological challenges of the LDCs lies in technology itself. What is needed is greater investment in research and development of such activities.

In this connection, I wish to highlight the importance of public-private partnerships in efforts to make ICTs work for the poor . As the constraints to effective utilisation of ICT for development are numerous, diverse and complex, there is need for joint efforts on the part of governments, international organisations, the private sector, foundations, civil society and other institutions to overcome the hurdles. Again, the Digital Solidarity Fund and the \$100 laptop initiative provide good examples of such partnerships. One area where public-private partnerships could play a greater role is in reducing the costs of ICT for the Least Developed

Countries. For example, more favourable terms could be offered to the LDCs in licensing agreements for the use of communication gateways and proprietary software.

At this point, I would like to mention a forward looking initiative that my Office in collaboration with UNESCAP and the Pacific Islands Forum have jointly taken for enhancing the Pacific Connectivity covering small island developing states in that region. A technical study has been initiated to find out the opportunities for connecting these small islands in the Pacific with the rest of the world.

As I conclude, I would like to highlight trade in ICT and ICT-based goods and services as an area of great potential to Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States. A major development challenge that cuts across all the three groups of most vulnerable countries is remoteness from international markets, either due to poor infrastructure or geographical realities, or a combination of both. The high transport costs associated with such remoteness often make their products less competitive in international markets. ICTs do not only provide the potential of reducing the export costs of traditional goods and services, but also the opportunity to develop e-exports that do not require physical movement. In fact, these vulnerable countries could even be more competitive in such goods and services due to their relatively lower labour costs. This area should therefore be given greater attention as part of the implementation of the Brussels Programme for LDCs, the Almaty Programme for Landlocked Developing Countries and the Barbados Programme and subsequent Mauritius Strategy for Small Island Developing States.
