

1.3 Chairman's report on the special session on the digital divide

A special session on Bridging the Digital Divide was held at the World Telecommunication Development Conference (Istanbul, 2002) on Monday, 18 March 2002. The objectives of the special session were as follows:

- Provide the ITU-D membership, especially developing countries, the opportunity to recommend a strategic approach to be pursued by ITU in bridging the digital divide.
- Enable the ITU-D membership to gather the views of various digital-divide stakeholders.
- Provide other digital-divide stakeholders an opportunity to present their views on a strategic approach that could be adopted by ITU.
- Enhance the visibility of ITU in bridging the digital divide.
- Establish links and synergies between these strategies and the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

The outcome of the special session is a Chairman's report on the proceedings of the session to the Plenary. An ad hoc Group, comprising Mr Fatih Mehmet Yurdal (Turkey), Chairman of the conference and of the special session, Mr Ahmed Sherbini (Egypt), Vice-Chairman of the special session, Mr Mactar Seck (Senegal), Vice-Chairman of the special session, and Ms Alice Guitton (France), was established to prepare this report.

The Chairman indicated that during advisory meetings and at the Heads of Delegation meetings, it had been agreed that the special session would be conducted outside the rules and procedures of the conference. He said the report on the session would reflect the remarks of the speakers without evaluation or interpretation. The Chairman asked the speakers to address, during their presentations, the issue of ITU's role in bridging the digital divide.

The senior-level special session was divided into two parts, each part being scheduled for two hours' duration, and was addressed by the following speakers:

Opening Address by Minister of Transport and Communications of Turkey, H.E. Mr Oktay Vural

- 1) Minister of Russia, H.E. Mr Leonid Reiman
- 2) Minister of France, H.E. Mr Christian Pierret
- 3) Minister of Cameroon, H.E. Mr Paul Maximin Nkoue Nkongo
- 4) Commissioner of the US Federal Communications Commission, Mr Kevin Martin
- 5) Minister of Syria, H.E. Mr Basheer Mohammed Al-Munajed
- 6) Minister of Tunisia, H.E. Mr Ahmed Friaa
- 7) Vice-Minister of China, H.E. Mr Chunjiang Zhang
- 8) Minister of Telecommunication and Information Technology of Egypt, H.E. Mr Ahmed Nazif
- 9) Chairman, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, Maj. Gen. Shahzada Alam Malik
- 10) Secretary, Department of Telecommunications, India, Mr Shri Shyamal Ghosh
- 11) Secretary-General of African Telecommunication Union, Mr Jan Mutai
- 12) Chairman of Com-CITEL, Mr José Pileggi-Veliz
- 13) Chairman of Telecommunication Regulatory Authority of India, Mr Maya Shankar Verma
- 14) CEO of WorldSpace, Mr Noah Samara
- 15) Vice-President of Cisco, Mr Arthur Reilly
- 16) Director-General and Chief Executive Officer of International Telecommunications Satellite Organization (ITSO), Mr Ahmed Toumi

- 17) Président, Autorité de Régulation des Télécommunications, France, Mr Jean-Michel Hubert
- 18) Deputy Secretary-General, Ministry of Energy, Communications and Multimedia of Malaysia, Ms Suriah Abdul Rahman

This report summarizes the main points of the speakers. The remarks were clustered into common themes. References to bridging the digital divide were also made in policy statements in subsequent plenary meetings of the conference; however, these are not included here. The numbered lists do not represent a prioritization of the points made. The contents of the statements were not discussed or debated at the conference and, therefore, there may be varying opinions about what is contained in the report.

The full text of some of the presentations can be found on the ITU website at the following address: http://www.itu.int/newsroom/wtdc2002/Policy_statements_top.html

Only the documents provided electronically to the WTDC-02 Newsroom are found on this page and are available in the language submitted.

1.3.1 Summary

Defining the digital divide

The digital divide is no longer defined in terms of lack of access to telephone services, but rather in terms of lack of access to information and communication technologies (ICT). There appears to be a converging viewpoint that the digital divide is not just about access to technology, nor necessarily of high cost, but has a socio-economic component. There are many dimensions to the digital divide. The digital divide exists between nations and within nations. It exists between rich and poor, young and old, urban and rural dwellers. There is a financial divide, a knowledge divide and a divide of confidence. The divide is also reflected in the concentration of information resources in a small group of developed countries – the imbalance of information technology assets among nations.

Globalization and rapid technological change have made information and knowledge critical determinants of competitiveness in the new world economy. To compete successfully, a country must have connectivity. There is no competitiveness without connectivity.

However, connectivity alone is not enough. Human development and poverty-reduction initiatives are important in creating the conditions for people to benefit from ICTs.

Information and communication services transform themselves into a global information society where equal access to information technologies irrespective of the level of social and economic development has been determined as the basic principle of the world community. An important task is to provide for the equalization and harmonization of the introduction of digital technologies among regions, among countries, and within countries. Access to the information society can stimulate economic growth by creating new products, increasing productivity and opening the way to new administrative and marketing methods.

Rapid expansion of the information society can have negative effects as well. It can aggravate economic disparities that exist at the international, regional and local level. Access to and availability of ICTs and the capacity to use them can be seen as a threat to those that do not possess them. This can be viewed as another form of the wealth and poverty dichotomy. The possession of ICTs is a determining factor in who can join the new world order and those who will be excluded from it. However, recognizing the existence of a digital divide does not imply an acceptance that it is irreversible.

Bridging the digital divide

A principle of non-discriminatory access to modern telecommunication services is important to closing the gap. Principles of equity and universality – access for everyone, everywhere, at a cost within reach of the majority of the population – should underpin the efforts to bridge the digital divide.

There is a need to prioritize bridges that are to be built, the most important being:

- promotion of regional trade to fight poverty;
- human resource development, access to education, access to health;
- support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Three important factors to bridge the digital divide can be:

Awareness – The state and individuals should be fully aware of the importance of digital technologies and their applications.

Accessibility – Infrastructure should be expanded and improved in order to provide the necessary connectivity for effective use of ICTs.

Affordability – Means should be found to provide low-cost services to users, low-cost equipment, and training on the effective use of ICTs for national and individual development.

Infrastructure is critical for closing the gap. Difficulties with access to digital networks can widen the digital divide. Diversifying access is important, but so is content and usage. Other problems in closing the gap are: slow telecommunication sector liberalization, mobilizing resources, lack of modern equipment and reliability of equipment, access to information resources, access to modern infrastructure, lack of qualified human resources, difficulties with general economic development, confusing movement with action. Even when resources are available, a well-aligned vision and the will that follows may be missing.

Participation of commercial enterprises in any funding activities is crucial, both in terms of providing required services and financial support. Indeed, all stakeholders must be involved in closing the gap: governments, the private sector, multilateral institutions, financial institutions, non-governmental organizations and civil society.

International cooperation and solidarity is necessary for ICT benefits to be available to all.

The special session noted the following regional initiatives which are already under way:

The Tokyo Declaration of APT Summit on the Information Society (Asia-Pacific)

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) initiative (Africa)

The Connectivity Agenda Initiative (Americas region)

The special session noted, *inter alia*, the following means to close the digital divide:

- 1) Identify strategies, policies and procedures exclusive to each country or common to each region as a whole
- 2) Expand training support in the area of ICTs
- 3) Invest in people
- 4) Provide a critical mass of female role models to stimulate interest of women in ICTs
- 5) Recruit and retain women in the ICT workplace
- 6) Improve infrastructure and connectivity
- 7) Include broadcast services, such as digital radio, in all ICT projects for development
- 8) Deploy digital radios together with computers and printers in projects intended to bridge the digital divide
- 9) Develop appropriate low-cost ICT equipment with broadband access
- 10) Expand access points especially in rural areas using telecentres and other proven models
- 11) Create a mass market for satellite services using small-size and low-cost satellites
- 12) Simplify procedures for access to spectrum used by satellite systems

- 13) Sustain R&D aimed at innovation to reduce cost and foster interest and demand for information through the Internet
- 14) Enhance access to multiple rural users through mobile handsets moving from household to household
- 15) Achieve closer South-South collaboration
- 16) Improve efforts of developed countries to assist developing countries in areas such as infrastructure build-out, human resource development, and lowering network access costs
- 17) Promote cultural diversity of the Internet (languages, content and culture)
- 18) Encourage development of content in local languages
- 19) Improve cooperation to combat cybercrime, and to preserve the security of the Internet and information
- 20) Assign ownership of digital divide projects to make them sustainable
- 21) Establish win-win partnerships (public-public, public-private and private-private)
- 22) Establish a common corpus similar to the national universal service fund, to which major telecommunication enterprises could contribute

The role of governments

Governments can assist in closing the gap by:

- 1) Exerting political will to push through digital divide initiatives
- 2) Fostering good governance
- 3) Promoting telecommunication sector liberalization and providing the right level of regulation to instill confidence and promote competition in the provision of services with the result of increased operational efficiency and lower costs to the user
- 4) Granting independence to regulators to ensure that all citizens have an opportunity to gain benefits from new digital technologies and that the telecommunication market is attractive to capital investment
- 5) Providing public information centres at all schools and other places open to public access or at all decentralized administrative geographic units within a specific time-frame
- 6) Providing training on the use of ICTs and the Internet
- 7) Seeking more cost-effective solutions in end-user equipment such as low-cost PCs
- 8) Promoting efficient utilization of infrastructure by developing national and regional content aimed at promoting the respective cultural identities
- 9) Stimulating the use of languages in all countries, covering all aspects of daily life, with the objective of improving the quality of life
- 10) Expressing a global vision or a plan of action with specific, progressive and time-bound targets for addressing the digital divide, e.g. by the next WTDC.

Role of ITU and BDT

ITU is recognized as a leader in the information society, and as a leader in various activities such as raising efficiency of limited resources like the radio-frequency spectrum, and is also seen as keeping step with the huge transformation in technologies. The following comments were also noted by the special session:

- 1) ITU's role in developing infrastructure should be reinforced.
- 2) ITU should strengthen its role in human resource development in the area of ICTs.
- 3) Multilateral institutions like ITU have a critical role to play in shaping public policy to maintain the balance in access to Internet at a reasonable price and thereby reduce disparities of the "haves" and the "have-nots".

- 4) ITU and ITU-D should continue to support regulatory reform by sharing information and experiences.
- 5) ITU should promote collaboration between regional and subregional organizations, strengthen cross-border connections, and promote major subregional and regional telecommunication development projects that will help with project resourcing and reducing debt.
- 6) ITU should give more assistance to strengthening management of the radio-frequency spectrum.
- 7) ITU should set up a coordination mechanism for technical cooperation, business exchange, human resource development, consultant support, and management of the Internet.
- 8) With a view to greater experience-sharing and mutual learning, BDT should obtain and compile information on how various countries, especially developing countries, are addressing the problem of the digital divide and should also identify the various digital-divide initiatives at the global, regional and national level.
- 9) BDT should set up a monitoring centre to monitor success and best practices in promoting the use of ICTs in developing countries; this information should be disseminated so that others can benefit from these positive experiences.
- 10) BDT should be entrusted with identifying low-cost technologies and products to reduce cost of ownership of Internet access devices.
- 11) ITU should seek new mechanisms for financing on concessional terms.
- 12) BDT needs to be involved in developing an action plan for the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS).
- 13) ITU needs to examine mechanisms to assist developing countries to disseminate their products worldwide through the Internet.
- 14) ITU should promote the establishment of e-applications for socio-economic development such as e-health, e-learning, e-government and other e-projects.
- 15) ITU should assist developing countries to find ways of harmonizing basic national development and digital-divide priorities.
- 16) ITU should support efforts, including in the area of standardization, for research and development for affordable technologies, especially end-user equipment.
- 17) ITU-D should integrate regional initiatives like NEPAD so there can be ownership in bridging the digital divide.
- 18) ITU-D should assist in solving issues relating to multilingual domain names.

In closing the special session, the Chairman expressed his appreciation to the many speakers who delivered presentations on the matter of digital divide, and reiterated his intention of submitting his draft report to an upcoming Plenary Meeting.