



Statement by UNFPA

At the PreCom 1

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Statement to WSIS Geneva July 2002

On behalf of UNFPA, I like to remind the delegates of the core point made by Shashi Tharoor, representing the SG of the United Nations, when he pointed out that over 1 billion people on this planet are illiterate. The vast majority of them are living in the poorest parts of the world and will be disproportionately female. A large number of these will not have access to electricity, as we were clearly reminded by the delegates from the Russian Federation and from Nepal, and these excluded people will form the bulk of those living on less than \$1 a day. We often associate the digital age with youth and yet almost 4000 youth, most of them illiterate get infected by HIV/AIDS each day for lack of information and services. The central question is 'how to use ICT to make a real difference for the poor and for the vulnerable youth, our next generation?'. WSIS must not allow these people to fall further behind. It must not become a question of choice between penicillin and PCs. A literate person can become computer literate in two

weeks, but it may take 10-15 years for a person to become literate in the first place. We must ensure that these strategic linkages to the WSIS are fully captured in the themes of this conference process. We can wire the globe and every mud hut and equip everyone with computers and electricity but we know that one billion won't be able to participate and millions of women who could, will not be allowed to.

While telecom infrastructure is an essential for all economies in this new millennium, it is insufficient in itself to make a significant difference to the billions of people now excluded. Great opportunities exist to link those that are working with the most vulnerable to learn from each other. For those of us in international organisations that have built up extensive knowledge, we need to synthesize what we know and make it available in a culturally and linguistically acceptable format for those that need it the most. There is a glut of information but a shortage of real actionable knowledge.

Is it sufficient to give a woman (even if literate) a computer where she can type in 'family planning' and get 3,290,000 hits in a typical search engine? No, we need to provide her with simply formulated experiential knowledge that respond to her needs in a language she understands for her to take action. This is the great challenge for all of us that are interested in addressing poverty and who see technology as a new opportunity that can link people and essential knowledge to each other. We in the development community must change the way we present our knowledge to meet this challenge. UNFPA is experimenting with packaging knowledge for users on such subjects as obstetric fistula, adolescent reproductive health and quality of care. We are preparing for the opportunities for bridging the digital divide as an instrument of bridging the poverty divide.

It is essential that WSIS keeps its eyes on the ball, which is using technology to address poverty, gender

inequity and youth concerns within the context of the Millennium Decade Goals. We should also ensure that WSIS interacts closely with supporting the follow-up to the recently concluded Special Session on Children and the forthcoming Rio+10 and ICPD+10, which will come between Geneva and Tunis, so that ICT does have a clear and coherent support role to these issues that are as relevant and vital as ever.

Finally, let me state that we have had a lot of world conferences in the past decade all dealing with fundamental aspects of development and at each one pledges are made to increase the flow of funding to the issue of the day. While aid flows have been stagnant or decreasing, we have seen funds moving from previous priorities that remain un-resolved to the newest priority. Now we have the huge opportunity of the WSIS and because we have not been serious enough in dealing with past priorities such as literacy and women's empowerment we run the risk of letting this opportunity achieve less than what we desire as well. It should not be a matter of choosing but of linking. We can do it differently this time, and we must.