

Secretary General of ITU, Director General of UNESCO, Honorable Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to thank the organizers of the WSIS Forum for the kind invitation to participate in the opening ceremony to share with you some thoughts about post WSIS developments.

Seven years have gone by since the adoption of the Geneva Declaration and Action Plan. Five years have passed since the adoption of the Tunis Commitment and Agenda. These four documents are guiding the activities of different stakeholders – governments, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, private sector, academia, and the technical community – in implementing the results of the first global reflection on the issues of the information and knowledge society. During this time some significant technological developments have taken place and some concepts discussed have evolved considerably. What is required now is an ongoing adjustment of the implementation activities. The WSIS Forum is ideally placed to serve this purpose.

The multi-stakeholder process which was established at the beginning of the first phase of WSIS is gaining force and proving its importance in addressing Information and Knowledge Society development challenges. The preparatory process of WSIS was unprecedented in UN history because of the level of involvement and constructive participation of different stakeholder groups in the decision-making process of the Preparatory committee. When we look back, we must acknowledge that it was not easy. Decades of intergovernmental decision-making traditions had to be changed. But incontestably, the contributions of civil society, industry, private sector, academia, and the technical community in the intergovernmental debate brought all us a better understanding of the challenges ahead of us and actions which needed to be taken in addressing those challenges. Stakeholder contributions in the implementation of the Summit decisions have continued to be valuable.

In 2015 the WSIS + 10 review conference will take place. This will allow the international community to assess the achievements in developing the information and knowledge society as well as the impact of the use of ICTs in the attainment of internationally agreed development goals, including the MDGs. But already today we can draw some conclusions based on information collected in the framework of the follow-up activities and which will be presented today in a new report published by the ITU on monitoring progress towards the WSIS targets. It shows that access to the internet has doubled in last 6 years and will soon reach 2 billion people; mobile network coverage is close to 90% of the population and growing; the number of mobile phone subscriptions are close to 5 billion; internationalized domain names will be introduced in the coming weeks opening new horizons for the use of internet in languages that are not using Latin scripts. All of these are very positive developments.

At the same time, we are still ways from the announced goal of building a people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society. The digital divide, which WSIS vigorously sought to address, is still present, though changing in character. During the Geneva phase, delegates were talking about access to the Internet without a clear separation between narrow and broadband. Technological advancement and new opportunities created a new type of divide – that of speed of access. This

requires a correction of our focus and the targeting on the development of broadband access – be it through networks or wireless. Equally, capacity-building programs should be adjusted to these new technological developments. Earlier this year I had the opportunity to visit Kenya, which recently was connected to the global network with three powerful optical cables. Speed of access was better than in Paris, but only a few applications and services were able to use the potential provided by broadband. Efforts should be deployed to harness new technological possibilities for the benefit of the local community. Not only in Kenya, but everywhere in the developing world.

I already mentioned internationalized domain names. It is a significant development with great potential to make the Internet truly multilingual. The Russian Federation, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates will be the first to introduce non-Latin characters in their country code TLDs in the next two-three weeks following the IDN ccTLD Fast Track methodology developed and deployed by Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). Another dozen countries will join the list of four by the end of the year 2010. This development will stimulate not only the use of non-Latin characters in secondary level domains and e-mails, but also the creation of local content in local languages to the benefit of the local internet user community. Local content means cost savings for the local Internet user community because of decrease in international traffic.

I would like to address some challenges that the international community is facing. With time, the interest among governments on the use of ICTs is fading and is substituted with other pressing issues which have appeared on the international agenda. The challenge for the intergovernmental organizations is to maintain the level of interest on the use of ICTs among governmental officials and to prove that ICTs are multipliers in terms of the returns on investments in any field, be it education, health, science, environment, innovation, culture or peace building.

The building of the information and knowledge society is a multi-dimensional task. Issues are cross-cutting and often do not have a single ownership. This type of situation usually leads to overlap and duplication of activities of different actors involved in implementation. In order to coordinate the actions of different UN agencies in implementing WSIS decisions, the Summit decided to establish UNGIS. This group, which is chaired on rotating basis by ITU, UNESCO and UNDP, is doing useful harmonization work among specialized agencies, UN funds and programs. Without this coordination effort we wouldn't have progressed thus far on implementation of the WSIS decisions. In the years to come, UNGIS needs to focus on identifying further synergies that joint efforts of all UN agencies, together with member states, civil society and private sector, can bring to the implementation process.

Perhaps the biggest disappointment of the WSIS implementation has been the complete failure of the Digital Solidarity Fund. In Latvia we have a proverb – something that starts badly, ends even worse. Already during the Preparatory Committee there were forces that impatiently dragged the DSF outside the WSIS process without the necessary support of the entire international community. As a result, and combined with poor strategic management, the Fund ceased to exist and one potential part of the WSIS impact was lost. UNGIS took the initiative to review the situation by convening a special meeting in 2009 devoted to financial mechanisms for ICT advancement. I hope that this initiative will bear fruit in the near future.

In conclusion, we have 5 years ahead of us until the WSIS review conference. All stakeholders should use this Forum to take stock on mid-term achievements and acknowledge that much more needs to be done in order to achieve the WSIS targets. In addition, and beyond the targets, we need to bring the information and knowledge society to every household in every country of the world.

Thank you for your attention.