
World Summit on the Information Society: Connecting for Global Progress

Imagine a world without wires, cable or satellite service. New Yorkers had a brief taste of this during last summer's blackout. But they knew their computers, palm pilots and Internet connections would whirl back to life within hours; that business as usual would resume.

It had to. The city that never sleeps lost a whopping US\$750 million in revenue when the lights went out. But most of the world doesn't even have the option of logging onto the Internet; an essential tool that data shows helps speed economic growth and boost literacy levels, health-care and community building. Technology investments raised GDP growth and productivity levels in OECD countries by between .3 and .8 percentage points respectively between 1995 and 2001.

The Internet's rapid and long reach is also improving lives in connected pockets of emerging economies. Innovative human uses include Bhutan's hybrid postal services building on the Internet in remote regions, and South African shantytown residents selling sandals using rubber from discarded tires over the Ecosandals.com portal. And the n-Logue \$1000 Internet kiosk kit in India enables rapid epidemic and crop disease diagnosis and cure in remote villages through email and video-conferencing on revenue of \$2.50 a day. Some 950,000 such booths now span the vast nation and generate one quarter of all telecom income.

Still, under 1% of low-income country residents are Internet subscribers. With information the universal currency of the economy and its free and rapid flow shaping the way we live, learn and earn, half of the world's residents risk missing out on its many promises of social and economic development.

To extend and harness information and communication technologies for all and ensure that they are culturally appropriate, affordable, and user-friendly, and to forge policies on pressing issues like privacy and cybersecurity, the United Nations is holding the World Summit on the Information Society from 10-12 December in Geneva, Switzerland. Spearheading the Summit is its agency focusing on telecommunications, the International Telecommunication Union.

More than 50 heads of state will be there, from G8 and developing countries; some 8000 representatives of governments, international organizations, civil society, private sector and the media will attend too. Joining presidents and pundits is Web pioneer Tim Berners-Lee and other visionaries. Together they will forge practical partnerships for innovative applications and sign agreements on the human implications of technology and how they can shape a better world. Such cross-sectoral collaboration and leadership is essential for buy-in and implementation of an Action Plan to be produced at the Summit.

Why A World Summit on the Information Society?

The World Summit on Information Society is rooted in a 1984 watershed ITU report called "The Missing Link". It identified the yawning telecommunications gap between emerging economies and the developed world, and recognized communication as a critical tool to boost the global quality of life.

Findings from that study highlighted the need for universal telecommunications access and spurred many governments to implement policies that would favour telecommunications development; in tandem the costs and complexity of new systems dropped dramatically.

As a result teledensity is up markedly, mostly over the last five years. Mobile phone subscribers in developing countries have skyrocketed to 530 million from 3 million since 1992; the number of personal computers in those regions grew nearly 12-fold over that time. Small pockets of high-speed Internet access are enabling doctors, teachers and employees across the world to talk and work together in real time; rapid and widely available information dissemination over the web, when available, is boosting public awareness and involvement in politics and expanding the educational horizons of young people through distance learning.

But there are still glaring gaps. Fewer than 3% of Africans can access telecommunications of any kind. Only one third or so of developing country inhabitants (80% of the world) are Internet users. One million villages around the world are unconnected. And the 400,000 citizens of Luxembourg have more international Internet bandwidth than Africa's 760 million citizens.

Enter the World Summit on the Information Society, because the time is ripe to truly bridge this digital divide, providing technological, economic and regulatory forces align. If fully harnessed, the socio-economic impact of new technologies could rival that of the Industrial Revolution.

The summit aims to jumpstart and speed access and adoption of new technologies through active collaboration and commitment from all. Respect for the universal human values of equality, justice, democracy, freedom of expression, mutual tolerance and respect for diversity are integral, as well, to a people-centred information society.

For these reasons, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has endorsed WSIS as a means to meet goals set by heads of state at the millennium to combat poverty, hunger, illiteracy, disease and environmental degradation, and to create a more peaceful and prosperous world. He has also singled out Wi-Fi (a flavour of broadband wireless) technologies, as an affordable and accessible tool to help bridge the digital divide.

WSIS aims to be much more than a talk shop. Its tangible and measurable targets that address issues the whole world wants to resolve - like SPAM - and the hands-on technical tools available, plus active input and commitment from all parties paves the way for rapid program implementation.

The WSIS two-step rollout - a follow-up meeting is slated for Tunis in 2005, to gauge progress and set new targets - will also ensure that ideas don't evaporate into the ether.

The Summit's key outcomes will be a Declaration of Principles - or a roadmap for today's information Society - and Plan of Action which will deliver on that.

WSIS Outcomes

The Summit's overarching proposed goals include connecting all villages, educational institutions, health centres, hospitals and local and central government departments by 2015. Among other targets are all high-school curriculum incorporating an ICT component and universal access to TV and radio by then.

Under that umbrella, proposed actions to extend the benefits of information and communications technologies to the whole world, and protect privacy and press freedom will include efforts to

- Create an interactive healthcare portal for data swaps between low- and high-income nations
- Set up systems to forecast natural and man-made disasters, monitor environmental impacts and develop projects for the environmentally safe disposal and recycling of hardware
- Forge partnerships to swap information on agriculture, fisheries, forestry and food
- Scrap duties on hardware and software and grow awareness of open source software
- Set up a worldwide journal and book portal, and an open archive of scientific information.
- Encourage incubator, micro finance and trade counselling; organize a "donors roundtable"
- Develop computer security safeguards with a focus on banks for reliable online transactions
- Encourage countries to forge IT security legislation and set up focal points for real-time incident handling and response, and set up a cooperative network to share information
- Boost research on public Internet access devices priced at under \$100, and for rural areas

There has been, of course, passionate debate on some topics. They include Internet governance, human rights, (e.g., "the right to communicate"), a digital solidarity fund, open source software, and intellectual property rights versus the public domain.

Over 100 parallel events are planned during WSIS, from 9-13 December. As key agents of change, NGOs and businesses will showcase their projects and technologies that have, in some way, contributed to shrinking the digital divide (www.ict.4d-org). More than 200 exhibitors from over 50 countries are expected. (www.wsisgeneva2003.org/03_summit/events.html).

Other highlights at the exhibition include CERN's presentation on the "Future Generation of the Internet" (the pan-European physics lab should know: it developed the World Wide Web); the World Bank's infoDev symposium where topics include mobilizing private investment for Africa (www.infodev.org/symp2003/index.html); workshops geared towards boosting business opportunities for

small developing country exporters through better technology, spearheaded by International Trade Centre (www.intracen.org); and the International Chamber of Commerce's session on young entrepreneurs, innovators and investors as champions of the Information Society.

Business Opportunities Meet Development Needs At WSIS

Today's looser regulatory environment, novel financing vehicles (think the Grameen Banks oft-cited cell-phone renting scheme) and better, cheaper, and simpler technology finally makes doing business in many developing countries both possible and profitable.

When properly assessed, such ventures attract investment. The World Bank reckons business kicks in up to \$9 for every dollar the bank commits to a technology project (that's also triple the normal private sector match).

Today's tools like Internet protocol, cellular telephony and Wi-Fi are particularly suited to nations with a nascent telecommunications infrastructure for their quick set up time and lower costs. For that reason, industry innovators have begun to look to untapped markets like India, China and Russia for growth.

For every potential Internet subscriber in a rich country, there are ten in the developing world, and follow-on services like broadband often bring better returns. With the roving handset morphing into the communications mode of choice in today's developing and densely populated markets, wireless broadband may be tomorrow's killer app.

New technologies are also powerful instrument of change in the emerging knowledge-based economy. The Internet has spurred new micro-enterprises that sell services as simple as cell phone time. Sugar cane and coffee farmers in India go it alone globally by clicking onto the latest overseas commodity prices (www.datamationindia.com/eway.htm). Hong Kong's government short messages public health updates.

If these nascent, scattered and small-scale examples were to be replicated in other countries, the effect could be considerable. Unfettered, explosive demand could also steer and save a sector in crisis.

Multi-Stakeholder Commitment is Critical to Summit Success

The Summit provides the first opportunity to examine the entire range of issues faced by an information-driven world. It will attempt to find new and creative solutions to old problems such as how to guarantee freedom of expression while ensuring cybersecurity and privacy. It must also find a way to expand and finance access to the tools of technology that are increasingly important catalysts to human, social and economic development.

The issues facing the World Summit on the Information Society are complex and interconnected. But the innovative multi-stakeholder solutions required are within reach if political and government leaders, policy makers and bureaucrats, the private sector, civil society and the media commit to ensuring the benefits of the global information society are extended to all of humanity and not just a privileged few.