



OPENING CEREMONY  
WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY  
GENEVA, 10-12 DECEMBER 2003

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*Secretary-General, World Summit on the Information Society*

Your Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

ITU has been a pioneer in many ways including by being the very first intergovernmental organization to be set up, back in 1865. Since then, ITU has withstood the test of time, weathered colonial empires, two world wars and the cold war. Throughout decades, ITU's mandate has been constantly evolving from the facilitation of cross border communication in yester years to the very important mandate of today: spearheading and fostering policies and technology that extend the benefits of communication to all citizens.

When I took over as Secretary General of ITU in 1999, I had one desire, one ambition, to oversee the growth and expansion of telecom services in every corner of the world. And I was also tired of hearing the lament that New York has more telephone lines than the whole of Africa.

Ladies and Gentleman, it gives me great satisfaction to tell you today that we have had unprecedented growth and expansion, as never before, despite the economical downturn. In 1999, there were around 1.5 billion telephone lines, today there are nearly 2.5 billion lines. In the last four years we have added 1 billion lines to the 1.5 billion we had connected in all the years before. This is a remarkable achievement, especially as more than a 75% were installed in the developing world.

ITU is making untiring efforts to bring the benefits of ICT to every strata of the global community.

Today, the ITU is proud to be the lead agency organizing WSIS on behalf of the UN system. The resolution adopted by the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference in 1998 proposing the idea of this Summit, recognized that the information society touches on the work of many UN agencies. For that reason, I proposed to establish a High-Level Summit Organization Committee composed of interested UN agencies, to oversee the Summit process. I have had the privilege to chair that Committee.

As Secretary-General of the ITU, I have followed every step of the Summit process.

It has been a long journey. It took more than a year to reach an agreement with the host countries for the framework of the Summit.

The establishment of the Executive Secretariat without any financial resources was a most difficult task.

To make the summit meaningful and substantive, I decided it would have to be a Summit with a difference, a Summit that is inclusive, reflects the changes in the modern world and the pervasive and fundamental nature of the transformation brought about by the Information Society.

Hence, it has many innovations: it is a two-phase summit, it includes private sector and civil society's participation in the whole process through written and oral contributions, it benefits from a multi-disciplinary executive secretariat, with civil society and business bureaus respectively. All are quite new in the process of UN Summits. I thank all the stakeholders for their excellent inputs and contributions to the process.

Regional WSIS meetings took place in many parts of the world and tens of thousands of delegates have met to debate the issues.

I thank the governments of Mali, Romania, Japan, Russian, Dominican Republic, Lebanon, Egypt and Lithuania for hosting those meetings.

Our sister international organisations have also been active in the preparations. Although there is not sufficient time to mention all of

them, I would particularly like to thank UNESCO, ILO, UNOG and ITU for providing their facilities during the PrepCom process, WMO, UPU UNESCO, UNITAR and UNDP as well as ITU for financial and human resources.

I would be failing in my duty if I do not appreciate and thank both host countries for their excellent and generous support. As we gather here today, I particularly wish to thank the government of Switzerland and the Canton of Geneva. Their contribution throughout the preparatory process has been enormous.

A great deal is at stake in this Summit. For the first time, you, the leaders of the world, will be addressing the challenge of the Information Society.

The transformation to the Information Society will be every bit as profound as the movement from agrarian to industrial societies. In the past, such changes have led to winners and losers. Some countries have prospered, while others have fallen behind. It could happen once again and, if we do not take any action now, existing gaps may be widened.

We must not make the same mistakes. By taking the right decisions, we must shape the direction of the Information Society and create a more just, prosperous and peaceful world. The cornerstone of any project today, be it AIDs eradication or poverty

alleviation, is reliable effective communications. Connectivity has the power to bind the global community into a cohesive fraternity, which shares the common ideals of peace and tolerance, growth and development. A concerted global effort must be made to ensure that there is no gap between the rich and the poor when it comes to flow of and access to information.

This quote from the World Youth Forum Declaration made by youth during the ITU Telecom event this October, expresses the hopes of tomorrow's generation:

*“The world we live in is not fair at this moment. Some of us benefit daily from the empowering force of ICTs while others—to whom simple communication could mean the difference between life and death, hope and downheartedness, a sparkling future and stagnation—do not have access to any form of ICTs.*

There comes a moment in history when one must walk the talk. Always the answer is easy to give but hard to live. But the need of the hour is for preaching to give way to practice

Hence, I call upon the political leaders to exert their will, the captains of industry to show their business acumen, the NGO and civil society to provide the zeal, in order to forge a unity of purpose, a unison in the vision of universal access.

In the annals of history let us be remembered for ushering in the information revolution with a legacy of pioneering a truly global information society.

Lets us bestow on the next generation the gift of information communication technology for everyone in the global community.

Thank you.