

SECOND PHASE OF WSIS, 16-18 NOVEMBER, TUNIS

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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the government and people of Tunisia for hosting this Summit. The hosting of a UN Summit of this magnitude is a big challenge for any country.

We started on the long journey to Tunis some seven years ago, when the government of Tunisia proposed to hold a World Summit on the Information Society.

During those seven years, we have accomplished much. We have shared the vision of an Information Society that is people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented. An Information Society where information and communication technology is a vital tool to promote sustainable development and to improve the quality of life. A society where anyone, anywhere has an opportunity to participate and no one is excluded from the benefits the Information Society offers.

Here in the Tunis phase of the Summit, we will be closing one chapter; on the development of a common vision of the Information Society, and we will be opening a new and much bigger chapter; on the implementation of that vision.

In this endeavor, however, we should really recognize the true value of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a central theme in national development policies. And we must develop the concept of a new principle for the information society.

ICTs are changing our society in ways which are as fundamental as the changes wrought by steam engines in the 19th Century or motor cars in the 20th Century. As those machines did, ICTs help us to be more productive and efficient than ever before in order to fulfill our desire for a better life.

During an earlier stage of social development, we passed from an agricultural economy to an industrial one driven by those machines. But if we have to wait for all countries to pass through the same process of development, I fear the developing world would never close the gap. However, ICTs can help countries to leapfrog this development process, by moving directly to an information-based society.

Flat-rate pricing models of communication services are eliminating the tyranny of distance and remoteness. In fact, for those who use the Internet or Internet telephony, distance no longer exists.

ICTs give us the power of access to information and thereby to harness democracy, avoid misunderstanding and foster world peace.

We have, in our grasp, the opportunity to build a more just and equitable information society, in which the developing world even with disadvantages such as lack of industrialization or remoteness, for the first time has a real chance to catch up with the developed world.

But with these new opportunities come new threats. The emergence of the Information Society risks widening the existing digital divide if “have-nots” cannot follow.

The Geneva Plan of Action provides us with a roadmap of where we should go and how to get there. Two critical elements are the development of basic infrastructure and the provision of training and education to make the best use of it.

The challenge we are now facing is, in short, to implement these two elements. So how should we go about it?

I believe what is required is a new pact between “haves” and “have-nots”.

When discussing the WSIS texts, we have too often assumed that promoting ICTs for development means just another type of traditional assistance. But that’s not true. In the Information Society, we become richer by sharing what we have, not by hoarding it.

The new pact will not obey the normal rules of negotiation of give and take. It will be based on mutual self-interest.

In the old world of *finite* natural resources—like oil, coal or iron ore—one country’s exploitation of those resources meant there were less available for other countries. But in the new world of *infinite* information resources, one country’s creation of wealth based on information can be shared by all. The value of information increases, the more it is shared.

If we are able to create a new generation of digitally-literate consumers in the developing world, it will be to the benefit of information-producing countries. And if developing countries themselves are able to become creators of information, then consumers in the developed world will benefit. It is a win-win game. To equip the developing world with ICTs is not a mere humanitarian grant.

While we were still discussing endlessly about the financial mechanism at PrepComs, some member states and local governments responded quickly and created the Digital Solidarity Fund.

When ITU invited stakeholders to join the Connect the World initiative this summer, many companies, governments, NGOs and international organizations immediately came on board as partners. And more continue to join.

We are indeed changing. There is a genuine desire to move beyond lofty words and grand promises.

The goal of creating a people-centered, inclusive global Information Society is a task for all stakeholders, not just governments.

The WSIS process itself has been a learning process in which we have been trying to identify the role of private sector and civil society in the new international order. Although we cannot claim to have been totally successful in embracing a multi-stakeholder approach, we have gone further in this direction than any previous UN Summit.

The challenges to the conventional sovereign state are never greater than in the realm of cyberspace. The traditional principles of “national sovereignty” that have been applied to telecommunications—namely that each state regulates its telecommunications in the way it sees fit— are not working for the Internet.

Unlike traditional telecommunications, the Internet which started in one country has penetrated everywhere before sovereign states could step in.

Now that the Internet has become a basic element of infrastructure for any nation, it is very natural that nations claim their sovereignty over the Internet as they do over the traditional telecommunication infrastructure.

However, the value of the Internet lies in the value of information created and consumed by users rather than in the infrastructure itself. So, Internet Governance requires a multi-stakeholder approach in which providers and users of information alike agree to cooperate on issues like security, privacy protection and efficient operation at international level.

That is why we have suffered such agonies in our discussion of Internet Governance. The existing models do not work well. We need to embrace a new model for “communication sovereignty”.

What matters is that everyone be guaranteed to have access to information and to communicate with others rather than to control the means of communications.

Communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization. We must fight to defend the “right to communicate” rather than the “right to govern”.

In order to guarantee the right to communicate, we must first solve issues of connectivity. And when it comes to technical issues, an international technical institution such as the ITU is best placed to ensure this.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These are just a few examples of issues which are not governed by the traditional principles or logic. We all must share a new equation if we wish to achieve the Information Society we started to envisage two years ago in Geneva.

We still have a long way to go. This Summit is not an end but just a beginning

In conclusion, I am proud to have served as the Secretary-General for the World Summit on the Information Society. I feel truly honored to have been given the opportunity to serve the international community at this key moment of change in its history. As the wheel of change continues to turn, we must work together to create a more just and equitable Information Society.

Thank you