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**English only**

## **World Health Organization (WHO)**

Dear Mr Gagne,

Contribution of the World Health Organization (WHO) to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

We follow up on our letter to Mr Utsumi of 12 November 2002 and present our views on the WSIS thematic focus, and a proposal for inclusion in the draft Declaration of Principles and Action Plan. Our comments refer to the documents related to the outcome of WSIS PrepCom 1<sup>1</sup>, which took place in September.

WHO expressed its concern in a statement submitted by the UNDG (of which WHO is a member) at PrepCom1 that the scope of the proposed themes is too broad, and recommended a focus on the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This recommendation was reiterated by the UN ICT Task Force recently. Specifically we propose that the thematic focus reflect the perspective that information and communication technologies (ICT) are *vital in support of development goals* but are not an end in themselves.

In the same way that education is understood as fundamental to development, health also plays a crucial role, evident by the fact that three of the eight Millennium Development Goals concern health. Further, health-related investment can spur economic development, as highlighted in the recent report released by the Commission on Macroeconomics and Health<sup>2</sup>, which specifically mentions ICT.

In this context, *the role of ICT in relation to health* must be seen as more than an application, or “e-health” as proposed in the current WSIS approach. ICT in health is clearly part of a more comprehensive health system development, for example in:

- providing reliable, timely and relevant content (including scientific literature, information for health policy and practice, training and education), which is created for or adopted to local needs;
- ensuring basic ICT infrastructure for public health;

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<sup>1</sup> [www.itu.int/wsis/documents/documents.html](http://www.itu.int/wsis/documents/documents.html)

<sup>2</sup> Report of the Commission of Macroeconomics and Health, Jeffrey Sachs, Geneva December 2001

- enabling education and training for the health workforce in accessing and managing information through ICTs; and
- promoting standards for developing and linking health information systems.

*Our vision for the Information Society is for open and unrestricted access to information for health, a global public good, by making full use of ICT in health system development..* Towards that end, the WSIS provides an opportunity to make real progress in outlining and agreeing on the collaborative action needed to use today's knowledge, tools and technologies in the service of health and development.

WHO would like to see the Declaration of the Summit as a call to action, a challenge to participants to commit to realizing the promise of the Information Society. To use ICTs to truly support the MDGs on health, this means that international and national actors and the many stakeholders in the economic and social sectors must be able to understand the benefits, their interests and roles in this respect. Worldwide, ICT can make an essential contribution to effective health systems and the efficient and equitable delivery of health services.

We propose that the principle of “*equitable access to health information*”, a global public good, is therefore adopted as a guiding principle in the Declaration. This requires efforts in three areas: Content, infrastructure and education.

We would like to see included in the Action Plan a strengthened and sustained commitment and capacity to:

- finance, build and maintain ICT infrastructure and a pricing structure which reflects the ability of the health system to pay for services;
- ensure services to remote and underserved populations;
- address standards, norms, laws and regulation towards free flow of information for health;
- address the challenge of ensuring ICT in an unstable world – maintaining services where there is internal instability, disaster and other conditions posing an extra threat to health;
- train and educate the health workforce, researchers and policy makers in making the best use of ICTs in health.

The WSIS in Tunis will take place just over a year from the Geneva Summit. This short time between Summit events doesn't allow enough time to make and measure real progress on any Action Plan that may be adopted. However, we will be judged on whether we are serious about ICTs for development by whether we have made a start in facing up to the global challenges outlined in the Action Plan.

In an earlier communication, WHO has offered the WSIS secretariat its technical expertise to address ICT and health as part of the WSIS. We want to reiterate this offer to draw on resources and contributions from the UN ICT Task Force Working Group 3, Human capacity building.

We hope that this input is useful in the preparation for the next stage of the WSIS.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Michael Scholtz  
Special Representative of the Director-General