

Opening Address to the second Preparatory Conference (PrepCom2) for the World Summit on the Information Society

made by Federal Councillor, Moritz Leuenberger

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Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen

We are here in Geneva to prepare for the World Summit on the Information Society because information has become *the* essential resource in our society.

Man does not live on bread alone. He has more rights than simply that of physical survival. Man is a social animal. He has an interest in playing his part in society. This is why access to information and to means of communication is a basic human right.

Most people are, however, denied this human right, for access to information and to means of communication is shared out very unevenly. Those who have to get by without this resource have little hope of prosperity. When it comes to the information as a resource, there is just as wide a gap between the haves and the have nots as there is when it comes to money. Some societies - our own in Switzerland, for example - are almost drowning in a flood of information, while others - and here we are speaking of the majority of those on our planet - do not even have a telephone, let alone a television or a computer with Internet access. If we cannot close the gap between the Info-Poor and the Info-Rich, then the gulf between the rich and the poor will grow even wider.

It is therefore imperative that we do everything we can to ensure that everyone has access to this resource, information. Granted, this will initially take the form of statements and declarations, because in the beginning there is always the word. But we will become credible only by taking concrete action. Examples show how information technologies can be used to create a better world.

- In schools in rural Ethiopia, satellite dishes have been set up for next to nothing to enable the pupils to have a broader, more comprehensive curriculum.
- Young girls in Aids-afflicted regions of Africa can obtain information via the Internet on Aids prevention – information that they do not, indeed cannot, get from their families.

- Or the example of the sponsorship and establishment of small radio stations in Latin America that create their own identity in the local language, despite the competition from all the international entertainment broadcasters.

These are examples that give us hope and that form the basis for the strategies of the information society of the future. And it is in order to implement these strategies, ladies and gentlemen, that we have gathered here in Geneva for the second preparatory conference. Around 1600 participants from well over 100 countries makes an impressive number – and at the Summit in December we expect far more people – a gathering that will be even more global in its composition.

But is not only quantity that counts here, but also quality. And quality can be achieved through the following measures:

1. Enlist the help of everyone who can contribute to the better exploitation of information technologies. To politicians and government representatives, and I also number among these, I would say this: remember that we cannot solve these problems on our own. We need the support of society – that is of groups outside the government – and we need the ideas that come from the private sector.

In Switzerland too, this PrepCom meeting has given rise to protests from journalists and NGOs. I am perfectly happy to have these protests, because they are protests about more participation, and thus about more cooperation and more responsibility. I would like to invite everyone to take part in the Summit, as there we can bridge the gap between north and south, between urban and rural areas, and between different cultures. This does not mean that we are looking to solve the world's problems as part of a profit-maximising strategy. We should therefore involve critical groups in our work. With this in mind, the roundtables at this Prepcom will be of major importance to the result of the Summit.

2. Secondly, it is vital that a more broad-based approach be taken to the topics covered by the Summit. I see a danger of too much talk of bandwidths, telecom networks and deregulation in discussions relating to the information society, with people forgetting about the content, by which I mean the cultural and political dimension of the information.

Let us not forget: communication means solidarity, and solidarity is the basis for peace. It permits the dialogue between cultures to take place. This dialogue is the alternative to war. Because we believe in this alternative, we will do all we can to encourage it, just as millions of people around the world were demanding yesterday and the day before yesterday.

Let us therefore make use of dialogue and communication for the good of peace.