Second Meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the World Summit on the Information Society

Address by
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PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SENEGAL

Gap or worlds apart?
A fellow standing beside the road
Watched as a postal van from his village drove past:
"I could always catch up with it later!" said he.
The next moment, a beam carrying a thousand messages flashed by
At the speed of electronics.
He didn't even notice it:
The two were no longer in the same world!

I should like to begin by thanking you for having invited me, a citizen of the Third World, to attend this important meeting being held as a prelude to the historic World Summit on the Information Society, which will take place in Geneva in December 2003.

You did so, I am sure, out of consideration for the fact that I am one of Africa's spokespersons on NEPAD, which includes among its priorities new information and communication technologies (NICT), one of the sectors I am responsible for coordinating; and perhaps also because you are familiar with the efforts that my country is deploying in this sphere, where our level of expertise is already one of the highest on the African continent.

I therefore hope that I can speak on behalf of all the marginalized peoples of the Third World and those being excluded from the digital society, our situation being virtually identical and our quest being the same.

At this point, Mr President, I should like, through you, to pay a strong tribute to those men and women who daily represent the lifeblood of the International Telecommunication Union. Through their expertise and commitment, they have contributed to the emergence of this new global information society which, for the first time in the history of humanity, is seeking to bring peoples together through the exchange of and easier access to knowledge.

Irrigated by the awesome effects of an information flow that now moves at the speed of light, our planet has suddenly been transformed into a gigantic village in which distance is no longer measured in kilometres but in bandwidth capacity.

An innovative industry coupled with ever-growing expertise have placed NICTs at the heart of the new digital revolution. Governments and businesses have had to change the way they work, making ongoing modernization an integral part of their strategies, while the traditional economy has begotten a new offspring, the e-economy.

This dynamic and intangible economy with its elusive contours has, after a number of years of euphoria, recently decided to subject itself to the rigour of scientific examination and quantitative discipline. To my mind, the new economy is merely taking a breather before pursuing its inevitable course, the bubble having deflated solely in order to remind us of the laws that govern its volume. It is therefore with optimism that I turn my gaze to the future, in the knowledge that one thing has remained constant throughout, namely the ingenuity of human beings in the pursuit of their well-being and a better life.

Given the compelling ubiquity of NICTs, I see it as appropriate for the countries of the South to elevate them within their government strategy to the level of a prime vehicle for development.

Just as solving a scientific problem can call forth a variety of solutions, the use of new technologies is emerging as the elegant solution to a great many development problems.

In June 2002, we carried out a number of fruitful and encouraging telemedicine experiments in Senegal thanks to cooperation between FISSA, a French NGO, and the Senegalese organization Education santé. Pregnant village women living in one of the country's most remote and isolated areas were able, accompanied by their husbands and with the aid of equipment contained in a small suitcase, to view, at the same time as the medical professors in Dakar, satellite-borne images showing their baby sucking its thumb. Through that experience, villagers were able to learn, for example, that to ill-treat the mother was tantamount to ill-treating the child, and that to oblige the mother to perform laborious jobs requiring her to work bent over, as in the fields, could cause perilous injuries to the baby. The cultural revolution was thus brought to the rural world in an instant.

Over and above the medical and technological aspects, therefore, it is clear that, where used appropriately, NICTs can usher in salutary social change that is conducive to development.

In the field of education, we in the countries of the South are in a position to grasp the fantastic opportunities provided by distance learning. Initiatives to digitize course content such as the one recently launched by MIT represent a historic invitation to share a feast of knowledge. It is incumbent on us, leaders from the South, to realize what is currently at stake and respond accordingly.

It is within this framework that I have initiated in Senegal a project entitled "University of the Future". Currently under construction, the project consists of the establishment of a university equipped with modern telecommunication infrastructures and services designed to enable students, among other things, to follow the courses of partner universities via real-time satellite link. The diplomas awarded would then be co-signed by the partners participating in the network. In this way, young Africans could, without having to leave their country and hence their cultural and economic environment, become Harvard graduates, for example, if a contract is concluded between the two universities. By not having to travel to the United States they would then be at less risk of being snapped up by American companies after completing their studies, and can immediately take their place in their own country's productive workforce.

The countries of the South, as economic powerhouses, must appropriate NICTs according to their own way of being and of doing things. Where e-government is concerned, the clear issue, over and above technology and automation, lies in how it can provide the State with an effective short-cut to the implementation of its social and economic reform strategy. The government-citizen polarity which, in the countries of the South, places the State at the centre of all economic activity can be inverted through use of the new technologies. Taking their cue from the customer/business relationship strategy, our States should revolve around their citizens, offering them services, information and assistance by means of a simple and accessible communication gateway, the implementation of which will result in the creation of new wealth and a better distribution of that which already exists. The e-government challenges in the countries of the South are thus also of a political nature; indeed, thanks to e-government, an infant democracy is able - I was going to say "in just a few clicks of the mouse" - to achieve teledemocracy.

There is one constant running through the extraordinary changes to which the information society invites us: the improvement of the human condition.

For this reason, we must be alert to the dangers of digital exclusion and make all appropriate efforts in that regard.

In 2001, 22 out of every 100 Americans were Internet users, while only one out of every 100 Africans had the same opportunity. According to the way in which North-South relations develop, the digital divide can be seen as a glass that is half full or half empty. The understanding of that divide must not come down to a handful of statistical studies and a string of intentions, but rather fuel the inevitable conclusion that it serves to reduce opportunities, exacerbate intellectual and economic poverty and, above all, drive a wedge between cultures and civilizations. Our planet today has need of cohesion in diversity and of mutual comprehension and respect. It is thus that

humanity will be capable of rising to the other challenges which destiny sets before it. The information society must derive its principles from this profession of faith.

It is within this context that I should like to take, with you, a step towards the future.

I should like to place before this august assembly the concept of digital solidarity.

The studies carried out on the digital divide have served to differentiate between those who are advanced and those who are less so. This being the case, has the time not now come for all of us to adhere to a common notion, any actions in respect of which could be underpinned by the data resulting from studies on the digital divide? Digital solidarity might consist, for example, in stating that any country whose rate of Internet usage was higher than a certain level should engage in a specified, quantified action for the benefit of countries where the rate is lower than a given level. The International Telecommunication Union could then establish the various statistical ranges and coordinate such actions with governments and the private sector.

By way of a practical image, one could imagine a digital snake fluctuating between a lower and an upper limit. The joint effort would then be focused on ensuring that all countries were within the snake. Here you can see the analogy with monetary integration and the policy of convergence. The snake would evolve through time and the fluctuation amplitude would narrow, ultimately causing the digital divide to disappear.

This process could be enshrined in the Charter on digital solidarity to be signed by all States having signified their adherence.

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) offers a framework within which this concept could succeed. The NICT sector constitutes one of NEPAD's eight super-priorities. In my capacity as Vice-President of NEPAD, with responsibility for supervising this sector, I am gratified to note that the near technological virginity of the African continent and of the countries of the South in general is in reality an asset. Telecommunication and information technology companies will agree with me that this virginity eliminates the risk of the kind of technological migration that often proves so costly in the North. Furthermore, the countries of the South can immediately benefit from the latest technologies, an obvious example being GSM, which has in fact only recently become commonplace in the United States.

It is to examine and seize these opportunities that NEPAD calls upon the North and the international private sector. Massive investment in the areas of technology infrastructure, training and technology transfer is the key to solving the interconnection and bandwidth problems currently facing the countries of the South. The principle of digital solidarity should, within the framework of NEPAD, make for balanced access to the planet's abundant technological resources. Is there, after all, any rhyme or reason in the fact that IP is only just beginning to make a mark in the South, while the North, already saturated, is experimenting with pilot projects on IPV6 technology?

Digital solidarity cannot be limited to a North-South exchange. The South has demonstrated its ability, under certain conditions, to serve as an example of successful digital emergence. The example of India should inspire leaders from the South, that country having succeeded in the space of a few years in transforming itself into a veritable technological power, thereby positioning its people as a major player in the information society. NEPAD therefore has a responsibility to explore opportunities for South-South cooperation.

Mr President
Mr President of the Republic of Romania
Your excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Even as we speak, our planet is at a crossroads.

In his excellent work entitled "The clash of civilizations", the Harvard professor Samuel Huntington describes the process whereby civilizations have gained the upper hand over nations when it comes to tracing the history of the world. The clash to which he refers could instead

become a meeting, and this, to my mind, is the challenge that the information society should be addressing.

I believe firmly in the emergence of a universal civilization in which, as in the United Nations, all cultures would be represented in order to assert themselves and maintain an exchange.

If provided with the means to do so, the South will contribute to the e-civilization to which the information society is now calling us. It has so much to show, to say and to offer, if only it were afforded the opportunity to do so.

Let us work together on bringing its wisdom, its colours, its tradition, its joy and its warmth to the dwellings of the North, at the speed of light.

I thank you.