SECOND PHASE OF WSIS, 16-18 NOVEMBER, TUNIS

STATEMENT FROM IRELAND

It is a great honour to be here in Tunis this evening and to speak at this the second phase of the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society. The phrase `information Society' is one that may not be used in the daily lives of many people around the world. But the power of technology to change people's lives is understood and accepted.

Much has been said about ICT. Technology is an enabler and driver of change. However, technology alone cannot and should not dictate how our societies are developed. We always need to think of the citizens — as they are the people whom we serve and they must be involved in deciding their own futures.

I would like to address three issues:

 1) the institutional changes needed to address the emerging global ICT agenda
 2) Ireland's experience and
 3) who should be involved

Information and Communication Technologies present us with huge opportunities and challenges. The power, scale and scope of the technologies together with the speed at which these technologies can be rolled out present us with new challenges at a global level. Our current institutional structures may not be sufficiently flexible or capable of adapting quickly.

We have seen at this Summit how the role of technology can both improve people's governance. (e.g. of the Internet) or human rights issues (e.g. controlled access to the internet). These are new challenges for us but these are at a global level. To respond effectively to the challenges we need to build on the global corporate governance structures. Let's hope the follow on to this Summit will result in the correct structures being put in place.

This Summit has also raised other issues that challenge our traditional institutional roles. For example, we have all committed to the importance of engaging the private sector in the development agenda — but I am not convinced that we have actually found the best ways of engaging this sector either in the Prep Coms or even in the broader debate. We have to be prepared to challenge the existing structures and to facilitate the development of new structures that will allow the full participation of the private sector and NGOs in addition to Governments.

In Ireland, we have begun to tap into the huge pool of ICT expertise in government and business in a new partnership in support of achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Since the Geneva phase of this Summit, we have consulted and are supporting business and Third Level educational institutions as they develop new areas of research into ICT and development. We are working to develop new bridges and partnerships between Irish ICT companies and enterprises in developing countries.

We have, in collaboration with other like minded countries and organisations supported the development of the UN sponsored Global e-Schools and Communities Initiative. We see the role of education as absolutely critical in development and we particularly see the role of ICT within education as very important. This multi-stakeholder initiative, launched at the first phase of this Summit, works at the local, national, and international level to support, create, and implement strategies to harness ICTs for education and community growth. Ireland is working with our partners to create a strong organisation that will have a positive and sustainable impact on the ground.

Achieving universal primary education is not only one of the Millennium Development Goals but it is also critical to the attainment of all the other goals. Building partnerships is critical to achieving the goal of universal primary education. This initiative will strive to assist in the achievement of this critical goal.

Ireland's development cooperation programme works with some of the poorest people in some of the least developed countries of the world. Ireland will work with its partner Governments in our programme countries in support of their national ICT strategies. As stated we want to see ICTs used to achieve the goal of universal primary education by 2015. We believe ICTs can make a vital contribution to the implementation of HIV/AIDS treatment regimes in countries where millions face death because they have no access to life-saving drugs.

Development Cooperation Ireland will use ICTs as a new and powerful tool in its programmes of development cooperation. We will advocate greater use of ICTs in national poverty reduction strategies. We will promote regulatory systems which encourage the open flow of information and widespread access to the Internet and other communications media.

ICTs hold out great promise for the future, and should help us in our common effort to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. However, we have to be realistic and pragmatic about their application. The digital divide in access to ICTs is a symptom of a wider development divide. Unless we tackle the root causes of global inequality and injustice, we will not bridge the digital divide.

The Information Society is about understanding the challenges and looking at solutions that technologies makes possible – technologies that have opened up many new doors to rich sources of information and knowledge. As a global society, we must ensure that all our citizens enjoy the benefits and the opportunities that an inclusive people-centred Information Society offers. If we do not ensure this, we will be remiss in our responsibility and duty as governments.

I congratulate the Tunisian Government on hosting this the second phase of the UN World Summit on the Information Society. The Irish government is committed to ensuring that this Summit is a success and that its commitments to the world are delivered. In referring to the follow-up to the Summit I would make a strong appeal that we seriously consider ensuring inclusion not just of Governments but also non-governmental organisations and the private sector. We must also ensure that those charged with driving the development of the agenda include those people outside the economic sphere – the poets, the musicians, the philosophers, the theologians and the social workers not to mind young people, disabled and the marginalised. I would not like to live in a world designed and regulated by technologists, business people and governments. Let's ensure that we live in an inclusive society and let's use the opportunities provided by Information and Communications technologies to build that inclusive society.

Thank you.