

SECOND PHASE OF WSIS, 16-18 NOVEMBER, TUNIS
STATEMENT BY H.E. TANYA VELLA, AMBASSADOR OF MALTA TO
TUNISIA ON BEHALF OF THE HON. AUSTIN GATT, MP, MINISTER FOR
INVESTMENT, INDUSTRY AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

MALTA

Your Excellency President Ben Ali of the Republic of Tunisia, Your Excellency Mr Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, Your Excellency Mr Yoshio Utsumi, Secretary General of the International Telecommunications Union, Your Excellencies Heads of State and Government, Ministers, Heads of Delegations, distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The future is a moving target.

The Action Plan adopted in Geneva two years ago was wise in recognising this basic fact.

There was much debate during that gathering and some issues remain unresolved and are likely to remain unresolved for some time. But there was little doubt even then that the Information Society was not an end in and of itself. It is a transition to a future beyond, towards which we must all work even while we cannot all too clearly imagine it.

It is the lot of leaders to combine distant vision with immediate delivery: and the Tunis gathering is torn between these two possibilities.

On the one hand we can wind up in a renewed declaration of principles limiting ourselves to the short list of principles with which we all agree.

On the other hand we can limit ourselves to agree on a short list of deliverables which we can tick off as achievements of our short political lives that would ultimately not have taken the world anywhere. Neither of these short lists is intrinsically wrong or even mutually exclusive. But neither of them is enough on its own.

The Millennium Development Goals load on humanity the collective responsibility of eliminating poverty. At a time when the harrowing reality of war, famine, disease, forced migration, ignorance and isolation shows no sign of letting up, these Goals cannot but feel like high-sounding nothing: a responsibility far beyond our power to fulfil.

It is under this sometimes overwhelming weight that we must strive to achieve a global information society. Technologies have no intrinsic value beyond the fact that they are means to ends and that ultimately the real end that counts is the fundamental ambition that all humans live a full, healthy and prosperous life.

Fulfilling that ambition is a long-term project. Getting there must take the time of individual footsteps frustrating as our speed might feel. Individual footsteps are sustainable, are within our reach, and are enough to accumulate the momentum we need to keep up our pace.

The two years since Geneva have recorded concrete progress in initiatives that have delivered to the citizens of the world technological tools to learn, to access public services and to earn themselves a living.

The greatest barrier experienced during this time was the unbearably stark gap of infrastructural communications. I am of course particularly sensitive to the picture in sub-Saharan Africa where huge stretches of yawning distance are unconnected by any fixed line source.

Delivering information over phone lines or even over power cables may have solved most problems for large portions of the globe but any solution for great swathes of Africa must be physically intangible if it is to be delivered in any reasonable period of time.

We cannot solve this problem by raising funds to pay the capital cost of setting up this infrastructure. We may very well be able to go some way towards delivering cables but we would be falling in the trap of promoting technology for its own sake rather than for the sake of what it can do.

Sustainability must rise from the ground: from the villages, the class rooms, the clinics and the shops. We are not pursuing a Technological Society but an Information Society. Indeed having provided those villages with the means of acquiring information, the Information Society will become but a transient phase towards the Knowledge Society where people acquire the means to pursue their individual ambitions and communities grow and prosper on the strength of their members, not on the charity of their donors.

We all have a responsibility to deliver that information to the villages. Europe not only recognises this but our work with our eastern European neighbours and our partners in Africa, South East Asia and Latin America, as well as the Caribbean and the Mediterranean has delivered tangible results that have transformed lives. These efforts are consistent with our understanding of what it means for people to live a full life, free of poverty.

Technology is a crucial tool to acquire knowledge and education; to express ones own cultural identity and strengthen the basis for community integration; to earn a living; to live free of fear from vehicles of oppression from governments unrestrained by the rule of law.

Unless technology is used to reach all of these objectives without exception, the tool risks becoming another vehicle of oppression and suppression in the hands of those who have already used all resources available to them to perpetuate their power.

Warlords, terrorists and organised crime have found their way to this means of monopolising wealth and power sooner than the people in the villages that are still out of touch.

It is why we must approach a fresh global structure for governing the Internet to ensure legitimacy and global ownership of this great asset of the present without damaging any of the liberating and open benefits that the Internet has brought about.

Nothing that is man-made is good or evil in and of itself.

We are right to commend the educational and cultural power of the Internet and how this opens up new prospects for our children. But we cannot afford to gloss over the dangers to our children that are vulnerable to the abuse of those who are willing to use any means to harm them.

No society that fails to protect its young is worthy of that name.

Protecting children everywhere must become a genuine priority unless the Knowledge Society we aspire to become a place where children are not safe and are exposed to the sophisticated and for that no less harrowing abuse of technology-using perpetrators.

Malta exhorts this Summit to push further up in its list of priorities, a credible and coordinated effort to make the Internet a safe place for children.

Mr President,

Tunis 2005 is not the closure of a cycle of effort and cooperation: it must be but the opening. We have achieved much from our individual projects and the sharing of our results and our efforts in groups as regions and partners. Yet there is no twenty-seventh mile in this marathon of leadership.

Indeed, the future is a moving target. Thank you.