

SECOND PHASE OF WSIS, 16-18 NOVEMBER, TUNIS

STATEMENT BY MR. PIER FERDINANDO CASINI, PRESIDENT OF THE INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

18 November 2005

Distinguished delegates,

Information societies have the potential to enrich and renew democracy. ICT facilitates sharing of knowledge between peoples. It offers an additional channel for public debate. It enables greater participation by all citizens in the decisions that affect them.

But in order to realize this potential, information societies need to be inclusive. ICT must be universally accessible to all, including the skills and training required to make effective use of these technologies. We recognize the distance that separates this ideal from the reality today. We must address this digital divide. The second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society gives us the chance to take a decisive step towards addressing the gap between the info-rich and the info-poor.

Distinguished delegates,

The way parliaments work is being transformed by ICT. ICT can make parliamentary work more effective and more transparent. It offers new opportunities to consult with the public and receive input from citizens. ICT enables members of parliament to access a wider range of sources of information, that can be used to better hold the government to account. It gives citizens the possibility to be in direct contact with members of parliament, to know what contributions members have made in parliament, how they vote, and how they represent their constituents.

We want all parliaments to benefit from the potential of ICT. That's why the Global Centre for ICT in Parliaments was officially launched at this Summit on Wednesday by the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, in partnership with the IPU. The Global Centre will gather experience of the implementation of ICT in parliaments and provide advice and assistance on the most effective solutions for parliaments. It has the potential to become an essential instrument for reinforcing Parliaments' capacity to use ICT in order to better fulfil their democratic functions.

Distinguished delegates,

The implementation of decisions taken at WSIS will require the active participation of parliaments. In most countries, the parliament has the constitutional role of adopting laws and approving expenditure, through the national budget. Parliaments also oversee the government, and hold government to account in the name of the people.

The role of parliaments as essential partners for government, civil society and the private sector is increasingly recognized. Parliaments must be included in discussions on the development of information societies at the national level, but also at the regional level through regional

parliamentary assemblies and at the international level through the IPU, the world organization of parliaments.

Indeed, many of the unresolved issues, such as the fight against child pornography and spam mail, require coordinated legislative action on an international scale. This coordination can only be achieved with the input of parliaments that are working together towards the same goals.

Yesterday, the IPU organized a panel for parliamentarians from around the world at the Tunisian Chamber of Deputies to explore the role of parliaments in the construction of knowledge societies.

At the meeting, parliamentarians discussed ways in which ICT can reinforce the connection between citizens, parliaments and governments. Access to information was identified as an important issue for both parliaments and the public. And speakers regularly drew attention to the digital divide which prevents the full benefits of ICT from reaching many countries.

Participants also shared ideas on how they, as parliamentarians, can make a difference. One proposal is to set up a structure in each parliament to oversee the implementation of the decisions you will take here today - in other words, to hold governments to account on the commitments they make at WSIS. The IPU will follow up with its 143 member parliaments to make this, and other proposals, a reality.

Much remains to be done to before the dream of inclusive and accessible information societies becomes a reality. I am convinced that all stakeholders must work together to achieve this goal. As users, parliaments have an intimate understanding of the potential of ICT to enrich and renew democracy. As legislators, parliaments must play an proactive role in defining the shape of information societies. The IPU and the parliaments of the world look forward to contributing to the follow-up to this Summit, where principles must be turned into practice.

Thank you.