

SECOND PHASE OF WSIS, 16-18 NOVEMBER, TUNIS

STATEMENT FROM THE UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY

An Information Society Open to All

(DRAFT - check against delivery)

Hans van Ginkel
Rector of United Nations University, Tokyo,
Under-Secretary-General of United Nations

The World Summit on the Information Society has stretched over more than two years from its major Geneva meeting in 2003, to the Tunis meeting which is being held from 16-18 November 2005. The real challenge the Tunis phase will have to address is to find ways to create an Information Society truly open to all; so that the benefits can be shared by all humanity. This is a task of Promethean proportions.

There have been extensive and highly politicized discussions within the framework of this Summit and we have worked hard to define the kind of Information Society we want. At times we have disagreed bitterly but there has also been much progress. We have had to deal with many contentious issues including the digital divide, Internet governance and Internet security. I am not sure we have found the answers many hoped for.

Now we find ourselves in Tunis working together to spread some good news across the world about the benefits that the Information Society could bring. From the perspective of my institution, the United Nations University, our message is that we need an "*Information Society Open to All.*" Hence, this Summit should not be about who has the power to decide what, when and where. We have had plenty of them over the past few decades. Rather, it should be a Summit that focuses on *how*. *How* to spread the opportunities associated with the Information Society to the most disadvantaged in the world. *How* we can use the Information Society to help share the knowledge we need desperately to solve the world's pressing problems.

Our message is simple. We don't need to make major changes in order to achieve these goals. In fact, the best way forward from here may only require that we open things up.

Let me give some examples. The UNU is investigating the benefits associated with the use of open source software in terms of stimulating innovation and in improving commercial software. Open source does not always mean “free” but it does represent an important opportunity for institutions in the developing world to find cost effective solutions in many areas like e-governance, e-health, online learning and so on.

With respect to e-governance, it is interesting to note that some of the most innovative applications of ICTs in government are emerging from the developing world. At the UNU Institute for Software Technology in Macao we are building a knowledge network for Electronic Governance - UNeGov.net - to share such experiences throughout the developing world. This initiative will bring together various stakeholders from government, civil society, academia and industry within a framework of a community of practice, to develop, share, and apply concrete solutions for e-Governance. Particular attention will be paid to the various kinds of challenges, such as legislative, budgetary, organizational and technical, faced by developing countries. In addition to providing a community portal, UNeGov.net is organizing a series of workshops and an annual conference on the “Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance.” The first workshop will take place here at WSIS.

Moreover, it is my view that we really need to build a global community of open source developers. As such, UNU-IIST has begun the Global Desktop Project to help build this community, with the goal of empowering developing countries to become not only competent consumers of the information society but also important producers. Related to this, the UNU Institute for New Technologies and MERIT in Maastricht are involved in a project called WorldFLOSS dealing with Free/Libre Open Source Software.

The UNU would argue that cases already exist of local companies, academics, and even teenagers from developing countries making major contributions to open software used around the world. This is one area where developing countries can have immediate access and acceptance as partners in technology at the global level. We really ought to have been more outspoken during the Summit about the importance of this area of software development. We should celebrate it rather than denigrate it. For our part, the UNU is going to work even harder to promote open source software in the future and we are planning an international conference on software technology here in Tunis next year November.

Another area where we could have been more forthcoming is in relation to open educational resources, also called open courseware and open content. The improvements to the existing copyright and intellectual property right regimes associated with this new movement for open educational resources are exciting and worthy of more extensive support. The UNU has been collaborating with MIT OpenCourseWare, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and others to try to raise the profile of open educational resources in the WSIS process. This movement is here to stay and if supported more extensively could bring major benefits for educational institutions, particularly those in the developing world. We are really talking about new forms of knowledge sharing in many fundamentally important fields like health, science, the environment, energy and engineering, to name but a few.

Realistically, open source software and open educational resources alone will not take us far enough, fast enough. We need infrastructure, affordable technologies and technical skills in the developing world. On the former, the UNU is collaborating with the ITU and CERN to promote the idea of an African University Network (AFUNET) to enhance online connectivity for tertiary educational institutions on the continent, perhaps under the auspices of the Association of African Universities. It is well recognized that universities in other parts of the world have been the springboards for the development of the Internet – and facilitating the development of Africa’s Internet infrastructure is essential for research and education in many crucial areas such as malaria and aids. We are also working with universities in Asia and the Pacific to try to open up the existing broadband networks that are currently only available for rather narrow client groups. Sometimes it is not necessary to build new networks, all we need to do is open up the existing ones a bit more.

Yet, we need to reach out beyond the universities, and that is why I admire so much the proposal from Nicholas Negroponte for the “One child, one laptop” initiative that would bring down the prices of mass-produced computers to less than US\$100. We invited Professor Negroponte to Tokyo in May 2005 when we co-organized the Ubiquitous Network Society thematic meeting with the ITU and the Government of Japan. At that meeting, many delegates commented on the practical and action oriented approach proposed by Professor Negroponte and the need for many more initiatives like that. I am delighted to see that he is here in Tunis with a prototype in hand.

The last issue is somewhat complex – that is technical training. Since its establishment thirty years ago, the UNU has provided over 2,500 fellowships and implemented thousands of training programmes targeting young professionals in developing countries. The concern we often find is how to keep the trained people in their countries where they are needed. In this modern competitive world, information technology skills are highly sought after and the “brain drain” is all too apparent.

The answer may lie in improving connectivity as rapidly as possible so that the graduates can work in the global labour market from their home countries. We need to promote new forms of online learning, so that people do not necessarily need to travel to an industrialized country to get a degree. For this reason, the UNU and its partners launched the Global Virtual University in 2002 with support from the Government of Norway. Our approach to online learning is to ensure that the technology is used to enhance existing practice and face-to-face contact. Our priority is to bring about an Information Society with a human face and to build up local institutions, skill bases and capacities in developing countries, so that the opportunities associated with the Information Society are spread globally. In this way, we can envisage such a society making a significant contribution to the attainment of all eight UN Millennium Development Goals.

We have a lot of work ahead of us and it is my hope that many more people in Tunis and around the world will rally around the notion of “An Information Society Open to All.” Perhaps the first step is to open our minds a little.

Thank you very much!