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Session 1: Development Updates

What is Information Society?

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What is the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS)?

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Excellencies
Distinguished Delegates
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon and warm greetings from the International Telecommunication Union!

First of all, I would personally like to express my thanks to the organizers for the kind invitation to participate in this National Summit on Information Society (NASIS).

Also, in behalf of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), I would like to congratulate the Ministry of Communications, Brunei Darussalam for holding this very important event, which indeed responds to the call of the WSIS for (1) the effective participation of governments and all stakeholders in developing the Information Society, (2) the development of national e-strategies, including the necessary human capacity building by all countries by 2005 and (3) initiating at the national level a structured dialogue involving all relevant stakeholders, in designing e-strategies for the Information Society and for the exchange of best practices.

I was invited in this forum to present to you some of the highlights about the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) and the progress that have been made to date. In so doing, it is hoped that NASIS delegates will have better appreciation of some global perspectives of what could be behind this 2-day National Summit.

OVERVIEW

The UN General Assembly Resolution 56/183 (21 December 2001) endorsed the holding of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) in two phases, with the International Telecommunication Union taking the lead in its preparation. The first phase took place in Geneva hosted by the Government of Switzerland from 10-12 December

2003 and the second phase will take place in Tunis, hosted by the Government of Tunisia, from 16 to 18 November 2005.

WSIS, while recommending representation from governments at the highest level also invites participation of all relevant UN bodies and other international organizations, non-governmental organizations, private sector, civil society, and media to establish a truly multi-sectoral process. I have noted that this approach is also being adopted by NASIS

Phase I: Geneva, 10-12 December 2003

The objective of the WSIS Phase I was to develop and foster a clear statement of political will and take concrete steps to establish the foundations for an Information Society for all, reflecting the different interests at stake. At the Geneva Phase of WSIS, world leaders from government, international organizations, private sector, and civil society from 175 countries provided political support for the endorsement of the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action.

The Declaration of Principles covers 11 general areas:

1. Recognition that ICTs are an essential foundation for an inclusive Information Society and embraces the idea of universal, accessible, equitable and affordable ICT infrastructure and services as a key goal of all stakeholders that will help build it.
2. Boosting trust and confidence in ICTs including information and network security, authentication, privacy and consumer protection have been underscored as a prerequisite for the development of the Information Society.
3. ICTs are also important tools for governance. The Declaration stresses the need to create an enabling environment at the national and international level based on the rule of law with a supportive, transparent, pro-competitive, technologically neutral and predictable policy and regulatory framework.
4. If universal access is the foundation of the Information Society, capacity building is its mentor. The Declaration acknowledges that only by inspiring and educating populations unfamiliar with the Internet and its powerful applications will the fruit of universal access ripen.
5. Recognition that resources must be channeled to marginalized and vulnerable groups to ensure adoption and empower them.
6. Reaffirmation of the universality and indivisibility of all human rights as fundamental freedoms in the Information Society, along with democracy and good governance.
7. On the question of Intellectual Property, the Declaration underlines the importance of both encouraging innovation and creativity and the need to share knowledge to spur such innovation and creativity.
8. Key principles also include the respect of cultural and linguistic diversity as well as tradition and religion. On the internet in particular, that translates to multilingual, diverse and culturally appropriate content.

9. As for internet management, involving all stakeholders and intergovernmental organizations to address both technical and public policy issues has been underscored. But, overall, the global internet governance issue was to complex to resolve in detail. Agreement was therefore reached to set up an open and inclusive working group on Internet governance to investigate and make proposals for action prior to WSIS Phase II.
10. The principles of freedom of press, independence, pluralism and media diversity are also upheld.
11. And finally, the Declaration expresses an unconditional support and commitment to close the Digital Divide through international cooperation among all stakeholders.

The common vision and guiding principles of the WSIS Declaration are translated in a Plan of Action with indicative targets to be achieved by 2015 and action lines for each of the 11 general areas in the Declaration, The indicative targets may serve as global references for improving connectivity and access in the use of ICTs. These targets are recommended to be taken into account in the establishment of the national targets, considering the different national circumstances:

1. to connect villages with ICTs and establish community access points;
2. to connect universities, colleges, secondary schools and primary schools with ICTs;
3. to connect scientific and research centres with ICTs;
4. to connect public libraries, cultural centres, museums, post offices and archives with ICTs;
5. to connect health centers and hospitals with ICTs;
6. to connect all local and central government departments and establish websites and email addresses;
7. to adapt all primary and secondary school curricula to meet the challenges of the Information Society, taking into account national circumstances;
8. to ensure that all of the world's population have access to television and radio services;
9. to encourage the development of content and to put in place technical conditions in order to facilitate the presence and use of all world languages on the internet;
10. to ensure that more than half the world's inhabitants have access to ICTs within their reach.

Phase II: Tunis, 16-18 November 2005

The second phase of the Summit, to be held in Tunis, will follow up the implementation of the Geneva Plan of Action at national, regional and international levels, including the United Nations system, as part of an integrated and coordinated approach. It will measure progress made in fulfilling the specific objectives set in Geneva and will call on all stakeholders to transform the political will expressed at the first phase into long-term commitments.

The road to Tunis entails a process of monitoring and evaluating the progress of feasible actions laid out in the Geneva Plan and a concrete set of deliverables that must be achieved by the time the summit meets again in November 2005. Efforts are now being made to put the Plan of Action into motion by all stakeholders. Working groups that have been set up are finding solutions and reaching agreements in some unresolved areas such as internet governance and financing mechanisms.

1. Stocktaking exercises on activities implemented by governments and all other WSIS stakeholders in response to the Geneva decisions are also currently being undertaken. For example:

- Serbia and Montenegro has set up a National Strategy for the Information Society in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).
- Chile has encouraged public-private partnership in order to set up a Digital Action Group to coordinate and oversee projects on the information society.
- Lebanon has launched the "SmartBus" as one of its national capacity building projects, deploying a mobile internet unit equipped with a literacy training module, a local area network server, audiovisual teaching aids, a laser printer and a fax machine, designed to reach rural communities.

2. A number of "multiple-partners initiatives" have been launched to bridge the digital divide. For example:

- The *Global Digital Solidarity Fund* which was inaugurated on 14 March 2005 in Geneva has a mission to promote and finance development projects that will enable marginalized people and countries to join the information society.
- The *Connect the World* initiative, a global multi-stakeholder effort aims to create a critical mass that will generate the momentum needed to connect all communities by 2015.

If you wish to know more about these initiatives, kindly visit the ITU website. You may participate here as partners or beneficiaries of the program.

3. Conferences and thematic meetings have been organized to tackle specific issues identified during the WSIS Phase I.   For example:
- ITU organized among others, the Cybersecurity Symposium in October 2004, the WSIS Thematic Meeting on Countering Spam in July 2004 and a Workshop on Internet Governance in February 2004. All these are along the WSIS Plan of Action and will provide inputs to WSIS Phase II.

Aside from the ITU, other UN agencies and international organizations have actively participated in the WSIS process. For example:
- the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) organized a WSIS thematic meeting on ICT Applications in Natural Disaster Reduction in January 2005.
- ILO, ITC, OECD and UNCTAD organized a meeting on Economic and Socail Implications of ICT in January 2005 and referred to the Geneva Plan of Action,

which requests all stakeholders to encourage the use of ICTs by SMEs to foster innovation, realize gains in productivity, reduce transaction costs and fight poverty.

- In preparation for the WSIS Phase II, UNESCO organized a thematic meeting on freedom of expression in Cyberspace in February 2005. The purpose of the conference is to discuss the challenges and opportunities this fundamental right encounters in the global network. The conference is one of the UNESCO actions to advance the process of the WSIS in terms of the promotion of freedom of expression and the universal access to information.
- WIPO organized on on-line Forum on Intellectual Property in the Information Society in June this year. This provided a forum for an open debate on issues related to intellectual property in light with the goals of the WSIS.
- In March 2005, the Government of Canada and UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues held a thematic meeting on Indigenous Peoples in the Information Society: Delivering on the Plan of Action to begin planning for Phase II WSIS Tunisia 2005.

These are just some of the very large number of initiatives in the national, regional and international levels and time is too short for me to present the many other initiatives that have been undertaken. But surely, NASIS should be added to the update of WSIS stocktaking database.

Obviously, it can be said that WSIS is multi-sectoral.

CONCLUSION

I have just described what the WSIS is and some of its related activities. But some people may have the question: what is the information society?

UN Secretary General Kofi A. Anan said that the expression "information society" is both a description and an aspiration. Quoting further, he said:

"As a description, the term captures the times in which we live, as did other terms such as the atomic age and the industrial age – and even the stone and iron ages of antiquity. For we live today in an era in which information is omnipresent, through newspapers, radio, television and the Internet, and is transforming the ways we live, learn, work and communicate.

Description turns to aspiration when we consider what to do with the masses of information and knowledge increasingly at our disposal – how to make it serve some greater purpose, be it peace, development, democracy, human rights, global harmony or all of these together. At the same time, the sheer quantity of information available should not mask the fact that access to it, and the means to use it, are unequally distributed among the world's population."

The WSIS Phase I in its declaration stated that it is its desire and commitment to "build a people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

Information and communication technologies are not the total solution. But they are tools, if properly used that can improve the lives of people. WSIS has defined the common goal and vision of the Information Society. The challenge before us, and in this National Summit on Information Society is when, how and what to do with it.

Thank you very much for your attention and I wish you a successful Summit.