



editorial

A unique opportunity

The swift emergence of a global "information society" is changing the way people live, learn, work and relate. An explosion in the free flow of information and ideas has brought knowledge and its myriad applications to many millions of people, creating new choices and opportunities in some of the most vital realms of human endeavour.

Yet too many of the world's people remain untouched by this revolution. A "digital divide" threatens to exacerbate already-wide gaps between rich and poor, within and among countries. The stakes are high indeed. Timely access to news and information can promote trade, employment, health care and education. The openness that is another of the hallmarks of the information society is a crucial ingredient of democracy, good governance and accountability. Information and knowledge are also at the heart of efforts to strengthen tolerance, mutual understanding and respect for diversity. The World Summit on the Information Society offers a unique opportunity to shape the future of the information society so that all people can enjoy these benefits. It will bring together political leaders and leaders from the private sector, civil society and media organizations. It can help us to better understand just how the information revolution is transforming our societies. Most of all, it provides a platform for developing a shared vision of ways to create a truly inclusive information society that serves and empowers all people.

Switzerland, the host country for the Summit's first phase (the second phase will take place in Tunis in 2005), is providing strong support. For my part, I have called on world leaders to participate and show their commitment to this endeavour. The Summit has an important contribution to the world's quest for development and peace. We must all do our utmost to make it a success.

Kofi Annan

UN Secretary-General

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The Information Society

"Geneva must send a strong signal!"

Next December, Mr. Pascal Couchepin, Switzerland's President for 2003, will welcome heads of state and government to Geneva to participate in the first World Summit on the Information Society—an event with global implications and in which Switzerland is heavily involved. Interview.

Other than fulfilling its obligations as the host country, what role would you like Switzerland to play in the World Summit on the Information Society?



"Our country's tradition of hospitality is well established, and the fact that the first phase of the Summit is taking place in Geneva reaffirms Switzerland's commitment to serving United

Nations ideals. At the dawn of this new millennium, technological progress should allow us to take on the challenge of disparities in development that we have inherited from the past. Next December, the heads of state and government will unquestionably take part in a Summit that is by definition global, to the extent that information and knowledge are at the heart of all sectors of human activity."

Since this Summit will be held in two phases, how do you see Switzerland following up on its involvement to ensure good continuity with Tunis in 2005?

"All of the effort put forth to ensure the success of the Summit's first phase bodes well for the successful outcome

of the second phase in Tunis. The two phases are inseparable and the success of one depends on the success of the other. The first phase of the Summit will strive to produce a Declaration of Principles and a Plan of Action developing a vision and covering all basic subjects related to the information society. The second phase should attempt to take into account experiments carried out in all regions of the world using the experience from the first phase."

How can Switzerland contribute to making partnerships—governments, civil society, private sector—a reality and to reinforcing the unifying tendency that is seen in the draft Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action?

"In a true partnership, everyone must win. This implies recognizing the other party's expectations and treating its interests with respect. In this case, dialogue is the key word, and as the host country, Switzerland is naturally inclined to encourage it by continuing to welcome, within its borders, structures in which the Summit's spirit is likely to develop on a long-term basis. The Summit must bring together all the participants (countries, international organizations, the private sector and civil society) in order to shape a worldwide consensus,

«Switzerland can bring its own approach, humanistic

to state the collective intention of reaping the benefits of the technological revolution and, through them, to meet the objectives of the United Nations Millennium Declaration.”

Tangible results do not necessarily materialize at large international meetings, hence the growing skepticism of public opinion. In what concrete initiatives is Switzerland prepared to invest to bridge the digital divide?

“Large international meetings always have a message to deliver. The Geneva meeting, which is of great concern to us, must send a strong signal allowing the challenge of the digital divide to be addressed. This being said, such a challenge cannot be met by governments alone. The private sector and civil society must be associated in the joint effort leading to a more equitable information society, in North and South alike, that will be the driving force for economic growth throughout the world. As for Switzerland, it has a unique opportunity to make itself heard on the topic of preserving cultural diversity. In the face of a technical vision of development, our country can bring its own approach, humanistic and respectful of minorities, to the forefront. By using information and communication technologies to further social, economic and cultural development in the most disadvantaged communities and to advance minorities, the World Summit will have fulfilled its mission. In addition, we are committed to seeing that the Plan of Action adopted in Geneva will lead to concrete, tangible measures, with implementation centered on national strategies.”

What place will the December Summit in Geneva have in the discussions that Switzerland’s President will hold at the G8 meeting?

“The presence of emerging countries in Evian is proof that the world’s richest countries are becoming conscious of the fact that economic growth is everyone’s business. Switzerland cannot but congratulate itself on this de-

velopment. Following a period during which growth has been declining in all regions of the world, the Evian meeting provides an opportunity for dialogue with the key players. Switzerland will take advantage of its presence at the expanded G8 in Evian on June 1 to emphasize the Summit’s stakes, which also lie within the scope of sustainable development.”

An important Pan-Arab meeting devoted to the Summit will take place in Cairo on June 16-18, 2003. What does this event bring to mind in the current context?

We value dialogue with the Arab world. The World Summit on the Information Society, due to take place in Geneva in six months from now, falls in line with this permanent feature of our foreign policy. The Summit will be a turning point in the peaceful use of new technologies to benefit humanity. The presence of a Swiss delegation at the meeting organized by the League of Arab States is evidence of this conviction and of the importance our country attaches to the contribution the Arab world can make to the success of the World Summit, the first phase of which will take place in Geneva, followed by a second phase in Tunis.”

WSIS Six months to go!

In six months from now, the World Summit on the Information Society will become a reality. From this perspective, preparations in Geneva are moving forward as planned, especially those for which the host country is responsible. For their part, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Swiss President Pascal Couchepin “kicked off” the Summit by sending an invitation to all of the heads of state and government whose countries are



Ms. Micheline Calmy-Rey with the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States

UN members. In addition, civil society, the private sector, the UN, international organizations, various Swiss federal offices, the World Bank and regional development banks, as well as the UN regional economic commissions have jumped in to organize about forty other events—to date—during the same period. These additional events will take place a few days before and during the WSIS (December 10-12) and will be held in the Geneva-Palexpo exhibition center, the location chosen by the organizers to welcome the heads of state and government. Major events will be staged by the UN Information Department jointly with EBU (World Electronic Media Forum), as well as by the World Bank (InfoDev symposium), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation with the Global Knowledge Partnership (ICT4D platform), and by UNESCO (roundtable with Nobel prize winners). Other events will be held at the same time at nearby locations in the Geneva area. CERN (the European Organization



International Francophone Organization



Ambassador Daniel Stauffacher with Mr. Abdou Diouf

Abdou Diouf in Switzerland La Francophonie in Action

for Nuclear Research), birthplace of the World Wide Web, and the UN ICT Task Force (local content committee) will hold two separate conferences in Meyrin, located on the Swiss-French border near the Cointrin airport. One of the conferences will cover the role of science in the information society while the other will address the issue of local content.

From June 1-3, Switzerland will be represented by the highest levels at the enlarged G8 Summit being held in Evian with the participation of NEPAD and emerging countries. This will afford an opportunity for Swiss President Pascal Couchepin to provide the heads of state and government invited to this important meeting with the latest information about preparations for the Geneva Summit, and to renew the invitation to meet in Geneva next December for the WSIS.

Daniel Stauffacher
Ambassador

Delegate of Swiss Federal Council for the WSIS

Mr. Abdou Diouf, the Secretary-General of the International Francophone Organization (OIF), also known as La Francophonie, was recently in Switzerland on an official visit. Interview.

In what way did the World Summit on the Information Society come up during your discussions in Bern and Geneva?

"It is certainly one of the most important issues that I brought up in my discussions, both with the Swiss authorities and with officials of international organizations. During my talks with President Couchepin and Swiss Federal Councilor Ms. Calmy-Rey, I was struck by Switzerland's mobilization. I was also impressed by the commitment of the Swiss officials in charge of preparing for the Summit. In this respect, I had highly enlightening conversations with Mr. Furrer, the OFCOM Director, as well as Ambassador Stauffacher. During my visit to ITU, I took part in very useful working meeting with Mr. Utsumi and my friend Adama Samassékou, the President of Prepcom."

So La Francophonie is involved in preparing for this Summit...

"Absolutely. Since 1997, with the first conference of French-speaking ministers responsible for information highways, La Francophonie has been involved in a

development program for NICTs. Through the Institute of New Technologies, the Intergovernmental Agency of La Francophonie, in cooperation with other international bodies - including ITU - is working on three fronts: bringing La Francophonie into the information society, sharing information and documentation, and mastering education technologies and distance learning. A Francophone information highway fund also exists to promote the adaptation and use of technologies by creating digital content. I would add that the Francophone University Agency is developing effective programs in this area. For example, it has already opened about thirty digital campuses in the French-speaking universities of the South."

What are your goals for this Summit?

"In the first place, I want to encourage coordination at all levels of the French-speaking world, because preparing for the

Summit is, in my opinion, a collective effort that concerns all French speakers. From this angle, we are regularly calling meetings of experts and organizing topical sessions. Moreover, the next Francophone ministerial conference, which will be held in Rabat in September, will be devoted entirely to the information society. I am also expecting to call on the heads of state and government to participate personally in the Geneva Summit. Just as a reminder, the OIF includes 56 countries and governments, a majority of which are southern countries particularly affected by this issue."

Does La Francophonie have a particular message to convey to the WSIS?

"I hope that La Francophonie will make a clear and visible contribution to this Summit. I especially hope that we will be able to offer concrete suggestions that will improve the Plan of Action. In this respect, we are thinking not only of techniques but of con-

tent as well. Bridging the digital divide means facilitating access to telecommunications infrastructures, of course, but it also means reflecting on the quality and diversity of the proposed content. This Summit, which is based on cultural and linguistic diversity, should provide an opportunity to recall our connection to a pluralistic and interdependent world. We cannot allow the existence of "cybermarginalized" people! I also want to emphasize our connection to democracy and good governance, because I am convinced that NICTs can help democracy work in our countries by bringing governments and their citizens closer together. Finally, I would like to offer a reminder of the role of distance learning and the mastery of computer tools in development and education in the poorest countries. You'll see, La Francophonie will be very much in evidence at the meetings in Geneva and Tunis... two French-speaking cities, I might add."

Science and Summit CERN into the ring!

Because science is the cornerstone of the information society and a key to its future development, it naturally has a vital role to play at the WSIS. Four of the world's leading scientific organizations, UNESCO, the Third World Academy of Science (TWAS), the International Council for Science (ICSU) and the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) have teamed up to organize a major conference on the *Role of Science in the Information Society (RSIS)* as a side event to the WSIS. The conference will take advantage of CERN's Geneva location to play a full role at the Summit. Through an in-depth examination of how science has laid the foundations of today's information society and what role it will continue to play in the future, the conference will provide a model

for the technological underpinning of tomorrow's information society. Parallel sessions will examine future contributions from science to information and communication issues, notably in the areas of education, healthcare, environmental stewardship, economic development and enabling technologies. The conference's conclusions will be discussed at the UNESCO roundtable on science staged during the Summit itself. ICSU, TWAS and UNESCO have a long tradition of scientific, political and cultural collaboration across boundaries. CERN produces knowledge that is freely available for the benefit of science and society as a whole. The World Wide Web, invented at CERN to enable physicists around the world to work together, was made freely available to the community at large, revolutionizing the



Tim Berners-Lee with the navigator web of origin

global communications landscape. Working together, these four organizations are providing a meeting place for scientists of all disciplines, policymakers and stakeholders to share and shape their vision of the budding information society.

The RSIS conference will take place on December 8-9. Its conclusions will feed into the UNESCO roundtable, and the scientific community's commitment is long-term. The conference will set goals and deliverables to be reported on at Tunis in 2005.

James Gillies
CERN