editorial

The partnership Summit

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) whose first phase will take place in Geneva in December this year is a very important event for Africa and indeed the developing world as a whole.

Globally it comes soon after the world leaders adopted the Millennium Declaration and committed themselves to meeting very specific goals aimed at improving the lives of the citizens.

In Africa it comes soon after African leaders decided firmly to take personal and collective responsibility for Africa's development and adopted the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) which is a holistic, comprehensive and integrated strategic framework for Africa's socio-economic development.

The main objectives of NEPAD are to eradicate poverty, place African countries, on a path of sustainable growth and development, halt the marginalization of Africa in the globalisation process, enhance its integration into the global economy and accelerate the empowerment of women

The important role that information and communication technologies (ICT) can play in development is now broadly accepted. Accordingly NEPAD established the e-Africa Commission as its ICT Task Team with the responsibility for developing and overseeing the NEPAD ICT programme. The e-Africa Commission is also setting up the Information Society Partnership for Africa's Development, ISPAD. WSIS provides a unique opportunity for a global commitment to facilitating access to ICT to the millions of African and other peoples who are getting more and more marginalized from the rest of the world.

In NEPAD we see WSIS as a not only a development Summit but also a partnership Summit. This is because we are convinced that through true and genuine partnership based on mutual respect with mutual benefits our programme for Africa's development can not fail. This is why the e-Africa Commission is working with the African WSIS Preparatory Committee, the Bamako Bureau, to prepare for this important event.

Prof. Wiseman NKUHLU
Chairman of NEPAD's Steering Committee

Mark Malloch Brown and WSIS
"A range of historic opportunities"

UNDP is at the forefront of the communication revolution that is sweeping through developing countries. UNDP administrator Mark Malloch Brown explains his views on the WSIS.

What is really at stake at the World Summit on the Information Society?

"The Summit offers a range of historic opportunities. It can highlight the profitable ways that businesses and the media may use information and communication technologies (ICT) in the service of development. It can enable developing country governments and civil society groups to participate more in the ongoing global dialogues related to "ICT governance" – all of which have a direct impact on their position in the global economy – on such issues as domain names, privacy, security, intellectual property and e-commerce legislation and standards. And it can focus world attention on how ICT may either advance or hinder the poverty-reduction agenda set by world leaders at the Millennium Summit in 2000. That agenda – embodied in eight Millennium Development Goals ranging from halving poverty by 2015 to rolling back HIV/AIDS – can either be undermined or promoted by the spread of these new technologies, which may have unintended negative effects as well as immensely positive ones. In our work at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), we have seen firsthand how new technologies can suddenly render many traditional economic approaches and channels less viable. When poor countries or poor citizens are unable to access new technologies that are being widely adopted by the more fortunate, existing inequalities are exacerbated. And those on the wrong side of the "digital divide" find their chances for participation, whether in their own society or in the global economy, further diminished. On the other hand, of course, new information and communication technologies can serve as a critical enabling force, creating earning opportunities and jobs, improving access to health and education, facilitating the sharing of information and making government more transparent and accountable. At the WSIS, we can showcase the numerous ways that ICT may be harnessed to help the poor. And we can forge new bridges across the digital divide."

ICT are often heralded as formidable tools for advancing development. Under what conditions is this actually true?

"Pro-poor ICT needs to be inexpensive and accessible. Access is not determined only by infrastructure and the availability of internet or telephone connections. It depends on local human capacities, on the kind of content that is available (for example, whether it is available in local languages) and the existence of legal and regulatory frameworks that conducive to a given technology's use by businesses, consumers and citizens in general. Developing countries often have an actual advantage: in the absence of already-established and entrenched technologies, it may be easier for new, cost-effective technologies to make easy inroads. For example, broadband access in some neighborhoods of Dhaka is cheaper than in Geneva or Manhattan. Mobile telephony is growing at a fast pace in developing countries; in Africa,

more than half of all telephones are now cellular. Innovation is also possible at the grassroots and rural areas – consider the pro-poor example of Bangladesh's Grameen village phone.

Another crucial condition for ICT to be truly effective as a catalyst for development is that decision-makers must recognize its potential as an enabling social and economic force. Too many key decision-makers have a narrow view of the gains to be made from ICT, focusing primarily on the cheap production of information technology services or software for export, along the lines of the old export-processing zones. The innovative use of ICT can transform a school system, create greater opportunities for students' upward mobility, foster learning and encourage parents to send their children to school. In healthcare, ICT can lead to huge leaps forward in the sharing of information, awareness-raising campaigns and logistics management. ICT can also be used to enhance the transparency and accountability of both public and private-sector institutions, and enable more participatory and democratic processes in decision-making.

A recent study sponsored by the OECD showed that few countries have integrated ICT into their poverty-reduction strategies. For those that have, it is often only in the context of infrastructure or telecommunications reform. Few have a strategic focus on the use of ICT in promoting public health and education. At UNDP, we are undertaking a series of country studies in Asia and in Africa that will serve two purposes: to highlight cases in which ICT has been used successfully to advance the Millennium Development Goals; and to underscore just how much more remains to be done. While I have no doubt about the role that ICT can play, I know we need to make the case much more effectively to decision-makers and heads of state, so that they can see ICT not in "either-or" terms, competing for development dollars, but as a tool for advancing their own development priorities."

Pan-Arab Ministerial Conference
OFCOM's Director in Cairo

From left to right:
Mr Marc Furrer, Director of OFCOM,
Mr Amr Moussa, Secretary General of the Arab League, and
Mr Ahmed Nazif, Egyptian Minister of Communication

Mr. Marc Furrer, Director of OFCOM, was invited to take part in the Pan-Arab Preparatory Conference on WSIS staged in Cairo from June 16 to 18 under the auspices of the League of Arab States. ITU was represented by its Secretary-General, Mr. Yoshio Utsumi, the WSIS Executive Secretariat by its Director, Mr. Pierre Gagné, and the Summit Preparatory Committee by its President, Mr. Adama Samassékou. The SDC envoy, Mr. Gerolf Weigel, made a presentation together with Messrs. Furrer and Gagné on the events listed in the WSIS program for next December at Geneva-Palexpo.

The mobilizing role played by Egypt in promoting an effective participation of developing countries was hailed by the aforementioned personalities, all of whom are involved in preparing the Summit's first phase. Moreover, they welcomed President Hosni Mubarak's positive response to the invitation extended to him.

"*The Summit is breaking new ground*"

Excerpts of the address delivered at the opening of the Ministerial Conference in Cairo by Mr. Marc Furrer, Switzerland's representative.

"For the first time ever, the challenges of the information society are the subject of a World Summit. Geneva 2003 will only be the start of a global debate on the various aspects of the information society. All countries have to facilitate a universal access to information technologies for all their population. Therefore, the national telecom markets should be opened to a competitive market, but with an obligation that all areas in the country are provided with telecom services, also the unprofitable and rural ones.

These services can for instance be financed by a fund that has to be fed by the telecom-operators. Of course, the extent of these services have to be defined nationally in cooperation with private sector and civil society. In less developed countries, financing of these services could be supported by international funds.

As a good example of national universal service funding strategy I would like to mention the Egyptian law on telecom: an example to be followed and to be generalized!

To sum it up: open up the telecom markets, yes! But not without a guarantee of a universal service!

Besides technical and economic aspects, the Summit will also deal with the content of information. Cultural diversity and local content and media will be main issues. The content of the information society must be generated and expressed in the various societies and different cultures in the world, not in a globalized culture with its uniform messages. Different sources of information, independent media and freedom of information are necessary for the development of every society and they can help solving conflicts in a peaceful and understanding way. In this regard, I want to stress the importance of the voice of independent Arab media that can be heard all over the world.

Another important subject is security. Network security on the one hand, as the multitude of databases has made our societies very vulnerable. On the other hand security in the sense that human dignity and privacy of the people using those networks have to be respected.

e-Governance and transparency will be another issue. With the help of new technologies, governments can provide better services for their local businesses and for their citizens including the weak and disadvantaged ones. ICT must create a better link between citizens and authorities.

The Summit is breaking new ground, not just in terms of content, but also in terms of its architecture: alongside the speeches of heads of states, round table discussions, the adoption of a policy declaration and an action plan, there will be a "forum for ideas" – an intense debate between representatives of governments, the business sector and civil society. This dialogue is essential, since as governments we cannot solve the problems on our own: we need support and ideas from civil society, as well as the skills and financial resources of the private sector. In the premises of the Summit we

will have dozens of stands and manifestations that will show solutions and best practices in this field.

The fact that the Summit is being held in two stages, first in Switzerland in December, then in Tunisia in 2005, is an illustration of our wish to initiate a process rather than a one-off event – a process which starts in a country of the North, in Europe, and which continues in a country of the South, in the Islamic world.

This Summit needs new ideas and requires a lot of preparatory work. We have made a good start, but we need the cooperation of all countries and every government.

So I would like to encourage the Arab countries to take an active role in the preparation of this Summit and to be present in Geneva this December at the highest political level. Like in this regional conference, Egypt but also Tunisia can play a "motor" role in the coordination and cooperation of the Arab countries for the WSIS. Please encourage your friends and colleagues, your fellow Heads of State, to commit themselves to participate actively in the preparation of this Summit.

Furthermore, Switzerland encourages the Arab region to be present and involved in the Side events of the Summit where there will be presentations and discussions of concrete solutions and best practices. Your presence will give the Summit a special resonance. But it will also enable you to enrich the debate with your valuable experience and to share with us your thoughts and ideas concerning a development which will affect the lives of all our peoples.

I would like to express my gratitude for your support and commitment to making this UN-Summit a success; you will be making a decisive contribution to its content and thereby to its success. After all the political tensions we had, this Summit will also be a unique opportunity for peace and understanding. This Summit is more than just a dialogue about information society. This Summit is a most welcome and

necessary contact on global level between North and South, between the Arab world and the other cultures. The fact that the Summit is held in Geneva and in Tunis is symbolic for that."

WSIS drafts
Key employment issues

Mr Philip J. Jennings

Global unions are concerned that planners of the World Summit on the Information Society - due to open in Geneva in December - have ignored key employment issues.

The draft declaration and draft action plan that emerged from two weeks of preparation in Geneva in February (PrepCom2) - failed to acknowledge the important role of the ICT sector as employers.

It has proved difficult for global unions - including UNI - to get their points on decent work, health and safety and equality incorporated in the WSIS drafts.

This process has not been helped by the determination of government representatives to keep the civil society and NGO group out of the decision-making procedure - a clear violation of the tripartite process.

The sheer size and diversity of the Civil Society and Non Governmental Organisation Bureau, set up as part of a tripartite participation structure, and the lack of coordination also made it difficult for global unions to be heard. But the fact remains - you cannot set a world blueprint for the Information Society without recognising the needs of working people whose lives will be affected by the growth of ICT.

Global unions tabled a 12-point plan for inclusion into the Summit.

Two of these are:

• Health and safety, secure and fair working conditions.
• Recognition and application of fundamental workers rights and core labour standards. (ILO Core labour standards give workers the right to organise into unions and for those unions to bargain and outlaw discrimination.)

UNI is also campaigning for on-line workers to be given on-line rights to access their unions and their works councillors.

But it goes wider than that.

We want better dialogue between unions, employers and governments to respond to economic developments associated with the spread of the Information Society. And we want to forge a social partnership to effectively mobilise ICT as development tools.

Other points pressed by the global unions include:

• Tackling the social as well as the digital divide with better primary education, computer literacy and lifelong learning
• Ensuring ICT strengthens and not undermines democracy and public services
• Promoting pluralism and cultural diversity

There is still time to get these issues included in the final declaration and action plan and global unions are already planning for the 3rd WSIS PrepCom Conference, due to be held in September.

Philip J. Jennings
General Secretary, Union Network International

(UNI is based in Nyon, Switzerland. It's the global union federation for skills and services representing 15 million members worldwide - three million of them in Telecom and IT.)

The Media and WSIS
Towards full participation

International media organizations have serious concerns and reservations about *"the failure to give sufficient recognition to the role of media and information professionals in the information society"*, as the Secretary-General of the International Federation of Journalists recently put it. The fact is that, for the first time at a World Summit, media won't be present just as outside observers to report and comment on what is said and achieved. As a keystone of the information society under construction, who are creating and disseminating an important part of the information circulating in cyberspace, they firmly demand to be recognized as a major partner in the WSIS preparatory process.

Actually, media professional organizations suspect some governmental representatives of deliberately evading an open debate on the sensitive issue of freedom of expression in cyberspace, because it would inevitably lead to a fierce and public confrontation between media and governments who are controlling content on the internet. However one can guess that should a debate on freedom of expression in cyberspace take place all the same, the demarcation line wouldn't necessarily coincide with the traditional divide between democratic countries and authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. Fighting against cyber-crime, terrorism or pedophilia on line is a priority concern for most members of the international community. To fight this battle, many of the world's nominally democratic countries don't hesitate nowadays to promote "protection" and "security" measures on the internet which media and the civil society consider as liberticid (see Freedom House Report on Press Freedom in 2002, New York).

The international media organizations' position regarding freedom of expression in cyberspace has the virtue of being clear: "*News media in cyberspace and via international satellite broadcasts should be afforded the same freedom of expression rights as traditional news media. Any text adopted by the World Summit on the Information Society should affirm this. A free press means a free people. Press freedom on the Internet must be a fundamental characteristic of this and any new communication system.*" These organizations recall that this basic principle is embodied in the *Sofia Declaration of 1997* endorsed by the UNESCO Member States at the 29th session of the General Conference (Paris, November 1997).

Nevertheless, one can reasonably expect from the States that they will reaffirm the fundamental right to freedom of expression enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The question is chiefly how they will express it and which formulation they will use to introduce limitations and restrictions. In this regard, international media organizations are keeping a vigilant eye on possible abuses.

As stated by the PrepCom President, Adama Samassékou, at the Media Workshop organized by the Francophonie on 26 May, in Bamako (Mali): *"The emerging information society's credibility will be measured against media's credibility, both traditional and new media. Whatever technologies are used, content quality will make the difference. In other words, those who will make the difference will be content professionals who create, process, disseminate or conserve information. In this regard, media professionals are key actors of the information society. In my opinion, their full participation in the WSIS preparatory process beside governments, private sector, intergovernmental organizations and other actors of the civil society, in a constructive and dynamic partnership, is a sine qua non condition for a successful World Summit."*

Alain Modoux
Former Assistant Director-General of UNESCO for Communication and Information