editorial

The last mile

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), held under the patronage of the Secretary-General, enjoys the full support of the United Nations family. It is the first Summit to deal with the information society, including critical issues in the use and dissemination of information and communication technologies (ICT) in development programmes and policies. The Secretary-General has called on "leaders from the developed and developing world, private sector and civil society to use the unique opportunity provided by the Summit to forge an action plan that will put technology at the service of development."

At the Summit, we can build new bridges across the digital divide. We can showcase the numerous ways that ICT may be harnessed to help the poor, for example, through telemedicine, distance education, wireless applications, use of the Internet for a wide variety of critical information dissemination tasks.

An enormous amount of work on the logistical and substantive preparation has been done by the host countries, particularly Switzerland, by the Chairman of the Prepcom Mr. Samassékou and by the summit secretariat, led by Mr. Utsumi. Broad participation of all stakeholders is crucial for the effectiveness and sustainability of the summit outcome. We need to continue amplifying the development-oriented objectives of the Summit to attract high-level participation by Governments, private sector and civil society. Such broad participation in the WSIS process will allow us to pursue meaningful partnerships.

We are now poised for success and must run the last mile with courage and conviction.

Nitin Desai
Special Adviser of the United Nations Secretary-General for the WSIS

Paris inter-sessional meeting
Truly significant steps

It is not everyday that one gets the honour to contribute to a cause that is noble and that could have an impact on millions of people the world over, especially the needy. The honour bestowed upon me by PrepCom-2 to assist in advancing the work related to developing the draft Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action to be considered by the WSIS was most humbling PrepCom-2 decided that we should have an inter-sessional meeting to advance these two documents. This meeting, which took place in Paris in July, was truly a rewarding experience. All the delegates took to the task with a renewed sense of seriousness, urgency and cooperation.

Of course, the lovely fire-crackers that illuminated the whole of Paris the previous night to mark Bastille day brightened our spirits and the address to the meeting by Ms. Haigneré the Minister for Research and New Technologies of France reminded us of the very important nature of the Summit.

The fact that the meeting was hosted by UNESCO, the UN agency charged with science, education, cultural as well as media matters also, in my view, assisted with reminding us of the broad-based nature of our task.

Unfortunately, because the documents were very long, we could not discuss each of the issues as much they merited. The meeting however did manage to go through the Declaration identifying the areas that were particularly difficult and needing more atten-

tion. A small ad hoc group, with a coordinator, was created for each one of the issues identified as difficult and mandated to work on agreed language.

These issues included the right to communicate as a fundamental human right, freedom of expression in the context on national laws, internet governance and the role of governments and civil society, open source software and its role in development, internet security with respect to the protection of data and privacy as well as the security of networks and possible multilateral action to prevent abuse especially for terrorist purposes. Following what I believe were rather lively discussions, the coordinators of the groups brought back some text which had to be kept in square brackets because no agreement had been reached yet on it. These square brackets were added to the already existing brackets around the whole document reminding us that no text is agreed to until the whole document is agreed to.

At the end of our meeting in Paris we had managed to reduce fairly substantially the length of the draft Declaration. This in itself was a major achievement taking into account that many delegations had made inputs into this document which needed to find themselves reflected in some way or other. We also managed to identify fairly precisely the areas that definitely required much more discussion and negotiation in pursuit of compromise

language that expresses the positions of all to a some reasonable extent.

The draft Plan of Action did not enjoy as much attention in Paris as we would have all wished. We were however all fairly satisfied that with the progress made on the draft Declaration it would not be as difficult to work on a Plan of Action whose objective is to show how we plan to achieve the vision and principles agreed to in the Declaration. The draft Plan of Action will however need a lot of work to be done on it on the basis of a clear understanding on what exactly we want to have reflected in it and the extent of the detail.

The Paris meeting made some good progress with respect to the participation by observers. Although the structured participation where observers made their input in the morning prior to the start of the session may not be viewed by some as major progress, there can be no doubt that the fact that the final documents of Paris were two and not four was truly major progress. The agreement by the meeting to incorporate the inputs by observers into the main documents for negotiation should be recognised as a truly significant step in making the Summit more inclusive of all the sectors of society.

In trying to progress the pace of our work there are many delegates who were not able to express themselves fully due to the very stringent time limits that we used. There were also many written inputs from all three sectors that were good but, due to time pressure, we were not able to reflect in the final documents. I would like to once again apologise for this and express my utmost gratitude for the understanding and cooperation.

Following our work in Paris, I received a lot of kind congratulatory messages. I thank you for these and would in so doing to say that this was possible because I had a mentor and a good support base.

With the expert, friendly and passionate support that I received from the executive secretariat and the leadership and guidance from the President of the PrepCom, Mr Adama Samassékou, I could not but strive to give my best. I thank the PrepCom for the trust put in me to perform this important task, the opportunity it provided for me to learn and the honour to serve.

Lyndall Shope-Mafole
Chairperson of the Presidential National Commission on the Information Society and Development (South Africa)

2003 priorities
Content and access

Next December, Geneva and Switzerland will host the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). The purpose of this meeting might seem removed from our daily concerns, but that is not the case. This summit touches the very heart of our existence and habits.

For 150 years now, the international community has taken a keen interest in telecommunications and, more recently, in information and communication technologies (ICTs). This interest became a concrete reality in the 1850s with the foundation of intergovernmental organizations such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), which moved to Geneva in 1948. The rest, as they say, is history. The standardization of exchanges and networks made it possible to multiply the number of telephone lines and to develop telecommunication satellites as well as computers and mobile telephony. The convergence of these different sectors has reshaped our daily lives. Information now circulates faster and more easily; it can be produced and processed in a decentralized way.

This development, however, has not benefited all continents equally. On the fringes of the developed world, some regions are still inadequately connected to the global network, removed from it, or poorly represented in this information flow.

It is this problem that the WSIS will be tackling. The approach is novel, in terms both of topic and method. Rather than focus on containers, the summit will emphasize content and the access thereto. Civil society has also been invited to make itself heard loud and clear. This undertaking is unlike anything, except perhaps the New World Information Order (NWIO) that UNESCO unsuccessfully attempted to promote in the 1980s.

It would be inaccurate to think that the new technologies are superfluous. It is striking to see that, since the Kosovo crisis in 1999, humanitarian organizations offer more than basic aid to persons displaced due to a conflict; they provide them with an opportunity to call close relations using the mobile telephone network. In India, volunteers travel from village to village by motorcycle, carrying a laptop computer in their bags. Their goal? To allow peasant farmers, via the Internet… and by satellite, to check the weather and the market for their crops so they can get the best price.

These technologies also facilitate knowledge transfer. Think of the telemedicine project that is bringing together the hospitals of Geneva and Ouagadougou, in Burkina Faso. Thanks to ICTs, African patients will have access to health care that is comparable to ours.

These few examples suffice to illustrate the importance of sharing such applications and ensuring broad access to the networks and their contents. It was to be expected that Geneva and Switzerland[1], as hosts to many international organizations, played a significant role in the development of telecommunications and in welcoming this first summit of the third millennium.

Paraphrasing Mr. François Mauriac, this summit will enable mankind to reach the moon without losing the earth.

Robert Hensler
State Chancellor of the Republic and Canton of Geneva

[1] For instance, between the two wars, the International Federation of National Standardization Associations was headquartered in Switzerland. The ITU's predecessor, the International Telegraph Convention, was based in Berne until 1948 when it was transferred to Geneva.

Egypt
550 IT Clubs

The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT) established more than 550 *Information Technology Clubs* in dense and remote areas of Egypt with an aim to familiarize people with computers and promote IT awareness regardless of skills, gender, and economic standing. In collaboration with NGOs and local organizations, the Clubs offer affordable access to computers, internet, IT training and software libraries. Visitors receive guidance as well as training on basic IT skills. Moreover, the IT Clubs contribute to work opportunities in IT, for those who join a special Training of Trainers program.
Through its continuing commitment to IT Clubs, MCIT is making IT part of local communities, the ministry is ensuring equal opportunities for all.

The information society of the future starts with the citizens of today. Projects initiated under the umbrella of e-access are crucial to bridging the digital divide. By increasing technology usage, we are laying the foundations for a vibrant domestic CIT industry with the potential of yielding rich export and employment opportunities and most importantly empowering citizens for change.

Through increased Internet penetration, we are linking the average Egyptian to the global information society and empowering individuals to meet the challenges of the global marketplace. And, by encouraging Egypt's citizens to make the Internet their own, we are, in turn*; increasing* the amount of Arabic content on the Web.

Remarkably, since the creation of the Ministry in 1999, Egypt increased the number of fixed phone lines to 10.9 million; estimated ownership of personal computers reached 1.2 million; and the number of Internet users grew to 2.1 million.

To progress towards an information society, Arab countries have to intensify their efforts towards creating an environment conducive to investment and innovation, thus regional partnerships are necessary to create awareness on the importance of ICT as a tool for development in all sectors.

Building on this potential, Egypt actively is gearing up its efforts for the WSIS. In June, Cairo hosted the *Pan-Arab Regional Conference on the World Summit on the Information Society*. The conference yielded to a common action plan for the Arab region entitled *Towards an Arab information Society*, later endorsed by the Council of Arab Ministers. Concurrently, an African ministerial meeting was held, parallel to the Pan-Arab Regional Conference, to bring closer Arab and African views vis-à-vis issues of relevance to the World Summit in December.
Notably, Egypt is looking forward and intensively preparing to host *the ITU Africa Telecom* in May 2004.

Dr. Tarek Kamel
Senior Adviser to the Minister of Communications and Information Technology (Egypt)

UNDP and WSIS
Favouring partnerships

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.

How can a global partnership be created for using ICT to promote equitable economic growth?
"WSIS can play a critical partnership role at two levels. First, it can help build awareness about the importance of adopting an inclusive, multi-stakeholder approach. Far too many strategies and policies lack credibility, realism and impact because they are developed without sufficiently broad consultation and without benefit of the creative energies of all relevant stakeholders. WSIS can set an example, promoting a multi-sector, inclusive approach to the integration of ICT in development strategies and the en-

Geneva
Strengthening the team

Two leading international personalities linked to the United Nations Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, have arrived in Geneva to join forces with the organizers of the World Summit on the Information Society. They are UN Under-Secretary-General Nitin Desai, recently appointed as Kofi Annan's special adviser for the WSIS, and Maurice Strong, a veteran organizer of UN summits, who becomes the Swiss government's special adviser. The entrance of the Desai-Strong duo on the WSIS stage underscores the importance which the United Nations and Switzerland attach to the staging, next December, of the millenium's first summit on the information society.

couragement of new thinking about business and investment models.

Second, the summit can serve as a forum for developing ICT partnerships around a variety of specific types of development objectives, whether the focus is public health or the launching of business ventures. Partnership can be forged between all kinds of actors. An excellent example is the partnership between UNDP, a development agency, and Cisco Systems, a transnational corporation. This partnership has created community learning centers called Network Academies in some of the poorest countries on the planet. WSIS is an excellent opportunity to tap into the creative thinking and energies of the private sector and civil society."

How does UNDP try to promote a global vision of the information society that can help reduce world poverty?
"Let me answer that by citing the example of the multi-purpose Virtual Exhibit that we pioneered during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg last year and used again earlier this year at the World Water Forum in Kyoto, Japan. It was a remarkable demonstration of how ICT can be applied to provide greater accessibility, participation and effectiveness. In fact, we are now working closely with the Swiss Government and a range of other UN agencies and partners to develop a similar virtual platform to link WSIS 2003 and subsequent WSIS's, as well as other future global summits.

The Virtual Exhibit, or VE, launched at WSSD in partnership with the United Nations Foundation and Business Action for Sustainable Development, was an immensely successful website and web cast that not only spread summit news and information globally but also facilitated participation in the summit by people from around the world. The online consultations through the VE prior to the summit facilitated partnership discussions with over 450 participants worldwide, over a third of whom were from the South. Our 10-day web cast during the summit brought together world leaders, CEO's, heads of NGO's, academics, youth and native leaders to talk about practical issues of implementation on the
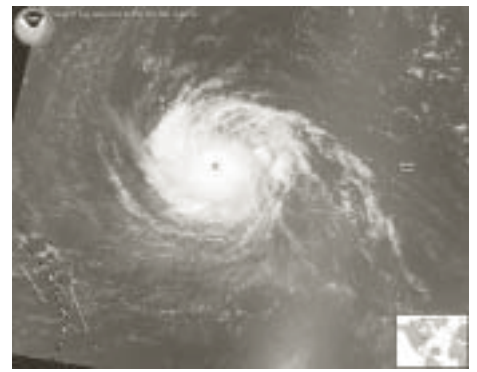
ground. Using video conference technology we were able to link over 100 people from around the world with summit participants to discuss project challenges and achievements. By linking our web cast with a host broadcaster we were able to make our content available through television and radio to over 10 million people in Africa each day during the summit. VE received two million hits, with 10,000 per minute at the height of its web cast–unprecedented numbers for a newly established site, especially one devoted to development issues."

ICTs and WMO
A permanent challenge

Since the first weather networks took off in the 19th century with the telegraph, information and communication technologies have played a key role in meteorology. Progress in telecommunications and informatics, which weren't always called ICTs, made it possible to launch the World Weather Watch (WWW) in 1963. Linking the National Meteorological and Hydrological Services (NMHSs) of countries throughout the world, this large operational network observes and measures the weather. It also fosters the quasi-instantaneous exchange, at the global level, of information, analyses, forecasts and warnings.

Today, the world telecommunication system of the WWW connects more than 200 meteorological centers via dedicated links, data communication networks and satellite systems, at binary rates of up to 512 kbits/sec. Every country in the world participates hour after hour, exchanging its data, studies, forecasts, and warnings, which it develops according to its national, continental and global responsibilities. The atmosphere and weather know no borders, and meteorological services depend on these exchanges of information to serve their users and the public at large. For countries vulnerable to dangerous phenomena such as cyclones, storms, heavy rains, flooding or drought, such exchanges are all the more vital.

Hurricane "Isabel"

An ongoing challenge for WMO and its member countries lies in the fact that the developing countries, which are among the most exposed to natural disasters, have too limited an access to information and communication techniques, and services continue to be unavailable or too expensive. This situation seriously handicaps the meteorological services of these countries, not only in terms of their participation in the WWW and other WMO programs (climatology and hydrology), but also as regards information and early warning services for the protection of life and property. International solidarity is trying to fill the gap. One striking example, among others, is the project funded by Finland for the modernization, by way of telemetering networks and visualization software, of the weather detecting systems in twelve small island states of the Caribbean. These countries have been equipped with VSAT satellite communication systems which collect observation data and distribute analyses and forecasts, as well as early warnings for hurricanes and tropical storms issued by the specialized meteorological center in Miami. In this way, these island states can better serve their populations and economies, which are especially vulnerable to climate and weather whims.

WMO wants to take full advantage of the rapid progress achieved in ICTs. It aims to develop strategies – accessible by all NMHSs – adapted to the economic and human conditions prevailing in different regions and continents. The World Summit on the Information Society is an historic occasion to promote ICTs as a major tool in the risk management of weather- and climate-related disasters.

Jean-Michel Rainer
Chief, Telecommunication and Monitoring Unit, World Weather Watch (WMO)