

WSIS and the United Nations ICT Task Force

Sarbuland Khan

Executive Coordinator, United Nations ICT Task Force

The greatest paradox and challenge of our times is a glaring gap between the resources and technology available, on the one hand, and actual progress towards eradication of poverty and ensuring life in dignity for all of humanity, on the other. Indeed, there are significant investment opportunities that could be productively tapped for empowering people and promoting development where the needs are most urgent. Technological solutions to most development problems are known. For example, software has been developed for permitting illiterate people to use computers and for localizing Internet content. Affordable medicines exist to prevent some of the most dangerous diseases. Enough food can be produced on the planet to eradicate even the notion of famine. And yet, these resources and technologies do not get fully, effectively and sustainably employed in global development efforts. As a result, paraphrasing the words of former chairman of the United Nations ICT Task Force, José Maria Figueres Olsen, while some countries extract value from globalization, others see globalization extract value from them. On the other hand, as Secretary-General Kofi Annan has said, “The ICT age has dawned, but not yet for all. Let us show that we can unite the great promise of ICT with the needs of the poor.”

In the late nineties, the General Assembly of the United Nations considered the question of economic and social effects of globalization and the policies needed to address them. The Assembly recognized that the information revolution, and in particular the Internet, were having a profound impact on the global economy and on development and agreed that information and communication technologies (ICT) should be put at the service of development. Taking up this challenge, in July 2000, the Economic and Social Council adopted a Ministerial Declaration on “Development and international cooperation in the XXI century: the role of IT in the context of a knowledge-based global economy”. For the first time, Member States agreed that for the success of an effort to harness the potential of ICT for advancing development, all stakeholders – including governments, the private

sector, civil society, multilateral institutions – must be brought together in a new alignment of forces to support development.

At the request of ECOSOC, the United Nations Secretary-General established an ICT Task Force – the first body created by an intergovernmental decision of the United Nations in which all members, representing governments, the private sector, civil society and international organizations, have equal rights. A major component of the Task Force’s mandate and plan of action has been to provide a platform for bringing together not only different stakeholders, but also different constituencies within each stakeholder (such as different ministries within a government), in open and inclusive discussions on the ways to enhance to impact of ICT on development.

As a multi-stakeholder body, the Task Force performs a unique role in promoting awareness of how ICT can help transform development-performance and prospects and serves as a catalyst for policy reform and building partnerships among key stakeholders. The Task Force has served as a bridge between the ICT community and the broader development community, helping to integrate ICT into the United Nations development agenda, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The multi-stakeholder nature of the Task Force, along with its link to the Secretary-General, have brought world wide participation, legitimacy and a broad, cross-sectoral representation that is essential for policy dialogue in this area.

The main focus of the work of the ICT Task Force has always been ICT for development, rather than information and communication technologies per se. It was therefore quite natural for the Task Force to seize the major opportunity and vehicle provided by the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) to work actively for creating an inclusive development-oriented information society. Recognizing the role that the ICT Task Force played in helping to place development, rather than technology, at the “heart” of WSIS, the Secretary-General of the United Nations extended the initial mandate of the Task Force so that it could continue to support WSIS leading up to the Tunis Summit.

The Task Force contributed to the WSIS process in many ways. Through its regional networks in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Arab States, and Europe and Central Asia, it organized events around the developing world to bring specific regional perspectives to WSIS. And, as a multi-stakeholder body, the Task Force was instrumental in making WSIS a truly multi-stakeholder enterprise in which the private sector and civil society played a critical role.

Taking advantage of its world-wide reach, the Task Force has also organized several global forums on key substantive issues that are being addressed in the WSIS, such as the Global

Forum on Internet Governance (New York, March 2004), the Global Forum on Enabling Environment for Digital Development (Berlin, November 2004), and the Global Forum on a Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Harnessing the Potential of ICT for Education (Dublin, April 2005). These forums provide an open, inclusive and neutral platform for a productive dialogue among key stakeholders, thus contributing to a better understanding of ICT for development issues and to promoting consensus amidst the diversity of opinions and views within the development community. By organizing several parallel events during the Geneva Summit and planning similar events at Tunis, the Task Force has succeeded in bringing various stakeholder perspectives into the Summit process. The Task Force remains fully committed to contributing effectively to the Tunis phase of WSIS.

This year, the world has an opportunity to achieve a historic breakthrough in the fight against global poverty. The United Nations will convene a Summit of World leaders in New York this September to review progress made in implementation of the Millennium Declaration since its adoption in 2000. The 2005 World Summit is also expected to develop a global response to the challenges and threats of the 21st century as outlined in the Secretary-General Kofi Annan's report "In Larger Freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all".

The second phase of WSIS will culminate in the Tunis Summit in November where world leaders are expected to define practical steps that should lead towards the goal of a universal and inclusive information society.

These two major events may seem to be two separate streams, but their goals are, in fact, closely intertwined. For, it is unlikely that the goal of reducing extreme poverty by half by 2015 can be realized without innovative solutions and investments that create new opportunities for the poor to better their own lives. Bridging the digital divide is one key to integrating the poor into the world economy through access to information and communication technologies. By the same token, a universal information society is hardly conceivable in a world that is deeply divided between the affluent few and the majority who live in abject poverty.

The 2005 World Summit will focus the world's attention on the causes of poverty eradication and sustainable development. The WSIS Tunis Phase, on the other hand, will emphasize the need for innovative and collaborative approaches to address these problems, with a focus on the use of ICT in the service of development. The United Nations ICT Task Force will continue to mobilize multi-stakeholder support to strategically align the outcomes of these two events, so that the full potential of ICT can be brought to bear on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.