

Keynote Address

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The UN ICT Task Force was formed to emphasize and to implement the UN's belief and commitment to utilizing modern ICTs to meet the human development and poverty reduction goals agreed at the Millennium Summit. The driving concept is two-fold. Firstly, it is the idea that ICTs should not be seen as a separate category of development tool, but rather as a medium for all development efforts. Secondly, it is facilitation and co-operation; thousands of diverse development-oriented projects are underway around the world; many of these could benefit from co-operation or note-sharing, if they were aware of each other. Others may be duplicating others' efforts, utilizing resources that could be better allocated with co-operation.

Let me recall with you an expressive statement made by His Excellency Mr. Koffi Annan that was delivered at the official launch of the UN ICT Task Force. He said that new technologies are not a panacea or a magic bullet, but they are, without a doubt, enormously powerful tools for development, creating jobs, transforming education, health care, commerce and politics, helping to deliver humanitarian assistance and contributing to peace and security. One of the most pressing challenges in the new century is to harness this extraordinary force, spread it throughout the world, and make its benefits accessible and meaningful for all humanity, in particular the poor. The principle mission of this Task Force is to tell us how we might accomplish this ambitious goal.

The new body, which includes the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), will work with partners such as regional development banks, international donors, and non-profit organizations to help mobilize resources around specific programs and initiatives. It will also work closely with the Implementation Teams set up as a follow-up to the Digital Opportunity Task Force (DOT Force) of the Group of 8 (G8) countries as mandated by the Secretary General. He stressed that there would be no duplication and no replication; rather, the Task Force would look for the missing pieces so that the ICTs could work for a much larger group of people. The Task Force had already received contributions from its stakeholders, and its viability was guaranteed for a year and a half. The Task Force would have to demonstrate that it was really gaining traction in terms of its deliverables. The Task Force will not be directly involved in implementing programs and initiatives,

but will work through existing and emerging institutions and mechanisms and will facilitate the creation of new partnerships.

As you know, the G8 DOT Force successfully fulfilled its mandate as set out in the July 2000 Okinawa Charter on the Global Information Society. The DOT Force presented the conclusions of its work in a report and proposed a nine point action plan -The Genoa Plan of Action - both of which were fully endorsed by Leaders at their 2001 Genoa Summit- and is to present the results at the next G8 Summit in Kananaskis, Canada in June 2002. The implementation of the DOT Force Action Plan is underway. DOT Force members and other interested stakeholders met in Montreal, Canada, on October 9-10, to officially launch the Implementation Teams that will work on developing concrete initiatives addressing the priority areas of the DOT Force Action Plan.

Building on the Genoa Plan of Action, the ICT Task Force complements the implementation work that DOT Force members and their partners will undertake this year by drawing together the key UN Agencies, and reaching out to a broader audience through its network. In particular, the UN ICT Task Force will play an important role in the establishment and support of universal participation when addressing new international policies and technical issues raised by the Internet and ICTs. The UN ICT Task Force is privileged to count on the DOT Force as a powerful partner helping in maintaining a strong momentum as we collectively address the Digital Divide challenge.

Mr. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UN, has previously stressed the important role played by all the stakeholders and that the taskforce won't be able to achieve its goals unless it is supported by all of them. He said that the Task Force belongs to all of us - governments, civil society, the private sector, and the organizations and agencies of the United Nations system. Let's nurture it together. It is worth noting that this Task Force is comprised of an unprecedented mixture of world-wide representatives from governments (18 members), the private sector (8 members), non-governmental organizations (4 members), foundations, and United Nations bodies (6 members), in a co-operative effort to build digital opportunities and to leverage the multitude of efforts to bridge the Digital Divide.

The UN, drawing upon its unique advantage of universality, legitimacy, neutrality, and experience in promoting human development world-wide, has formed the UN ICT Task Force to build collaborative partnerships to help bridge the Digital Divide. The UN ICT Task Force will provide a global forum for national, regional, and international ICTs-for-development issues through multi-stakeholder partnerships, and will promote the deployment and transfer of ICTs-for-development, including human resource development and training, health, gender, enterprise development, and e-government through actions at the local, national, sub-national, and regional levels, including South-South co-operation.

When I first learned that the Task Force planned to establish regional networks, I began to think about all the ICTs and development projects that are going on in the Arab world. Through my work as Chairman of the ICC Commission on Telecommunications and

Information Technology, as well as my involvement as the Chair of the Arab Knowledge Management Society (AKMS), the Licensing Executives Society Arab Countries (LES-AC), the Arab Society of Certified Accountants (ASCA), the Arab Society for Intellectual Property (ASIP), etc., I am personally involved in quite a number of exciting development-related ICT projects. But when one starts to consider everything going on in the Arab world, it is clear that my own activities are only the tip of the iceberg; much more is going on than I am personally aware of, I am sure, even though I am quite involved in many organizations and activities in this area. This is quite normal, especially when one considers the whole range of perspectives from which one might approach the ICT; it is hard for all the players to keep track of each other. The different communities and organizational cultures in NGOs, government, and the private sector do not necessarily have fully open and cross-referenced channels of communication. So, my immediate thought was that we in the Arab world could really benefit from the UN ICT Task Force, having a clear facilitation role in our region. I was, therefore, very excited when the Task Force accepted my proposal to establish an Arab Region Network for the UN ICT Task Force, the result of which is our meeting here today.

Along with the regional networks established in Africa, Asia, South America, and elsewhere, the Arab Region Network of the UN ICT Task Force will aim to inventory, co-ordinate, assist, upscale, benchmark, rationalize, facilitate, advocate, and otherwise benefit (but not initiate or implement) the ICT projects for development in the Arab world. The Task Force is not an implementing agency. This is important to note because an implementing organization could be seen as a competing organization – this is not the purpose of the Task Force. What we will want to emphasize is the universality, neutrality, and service-oriented nature of the Task Force. We will also need to stress that the Task Force is not a funding agency or a marketing agency; we are not here to help floundering companies or NGOs, no matter how noble their goals. We are here to take note of, facilitate, and work with those organizations that have successful models of ICT projects with positive implications for development. These may originate in the private sector, NGO sector, or the public sector and may be for profit or not-for-profit. The motivation behind an initiative is not as important to us as the positive impact that the project has toward the UN's development goals.

This is one of the interesting things about this Task Force; it represents one of the most universal and inclusive development efforts to date. In the past, the private sector went about making money, the public sector did its thing, including development, and NGOs were much less visible. New models of development partnerships have accompanied the rise in the global importance and visibility of NGOs. In the past, you would not have seen such a dynamic interaction between all elements of society as is now represented by the Task Force. This is quite apropos our subject matter. I am convinced that what is happening in ICT today, in its entirety represents a real revolution which, like all revolutions, is multifaceted in its impacts: technological, social, financial, economic, and cultural. The bursting of the Internet bubble deflated much of the hype regarding the Internet and ICTs, and some of the prevailing enthusiasm. This has had some disruptive effects but it was necessary and will be beneficial in the long run, as it redirects resources in a more productive way. For our purposes, from a development point of view, it is

helpful because it highlights the need to bridge the Digital Divide and it provides a lesson in how to view this revolution in a more realistic way. The fanciful notion of an "ICT-spawned alternate virtual reality" has given way to a realistic vision of the interrelationship between ICT and society. But this has led to another of the particularly noteworthy ideas behind the Task Force, which is to look at ICT not as a separate category of the development project, but as a basic infrastructure that will assist in all other areas.