United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force

Second annual report

Introduction

The present report has been prepared in response to the mandate contained in Economic and Social Council resolution 2000/29 of 28 July 2000 on an information and communication technologies task force, in which the Council endorsed the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Informatics contained in the annex to that resolution. By its decision 2001/210 of 13 March 2001 on the establishment of the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, the Council requested the Secretary-General to undertake the necessary steps to establish the Task Force as recommended in the report of the Secretary-General (E/2001/7), paragraph 35 of which states that the Secretary-General will report annually to the Economic and Social Council on the work of the Task Force. The First Annual Report of the ICT Task Force was submitted to the Secretary-General on _____ 2003, and subsequently a report of the Secretary-General was presented to ECOSOC.[1]

The report, covering the period from December 2002 to February 2004, is presented to the Sixth meeting of the Task Force (25-27 March 2004) and, once approved, will be submitted to the Secretary-General to form a basis for his subsequent report to ECOSOC.

This report provides a brief overview of the environment in which the Task Force operates, presents an outline of its major activities and accomplishments, and gives an assessment of progress made over the second year, as well as an outline of a strategy through the end of 2005.

## The dynamics of the digital divide[2]

In recent years, as information and communication technologies have become the backbone of the global information economy and given birth to the rise of the information society, more attention has focused on the gap in access to ICTs between developed and developing countries. This gap has come to be known as the "Digital Divide". But how big is it? Is the gap widening or narrowing?

One relevant way of measuring the gap in access to ICTs is to look at the differences between developed and developing countries in the level of penetration of different ICT services (telephone, mobile phone, Internet) and of personal computers, over the course of the last

decade. As the graphs in Figure 1 show, the gap has narrowed markedly, with particularly rapid progress in the field of mobile phones and Internet users.

Figure 1: The shrinking divide

Distribution of fixed and mobile telephone subscribers, personal computers and Internet users per 100 inhabitants, by economic grouping, 1992 and 2002
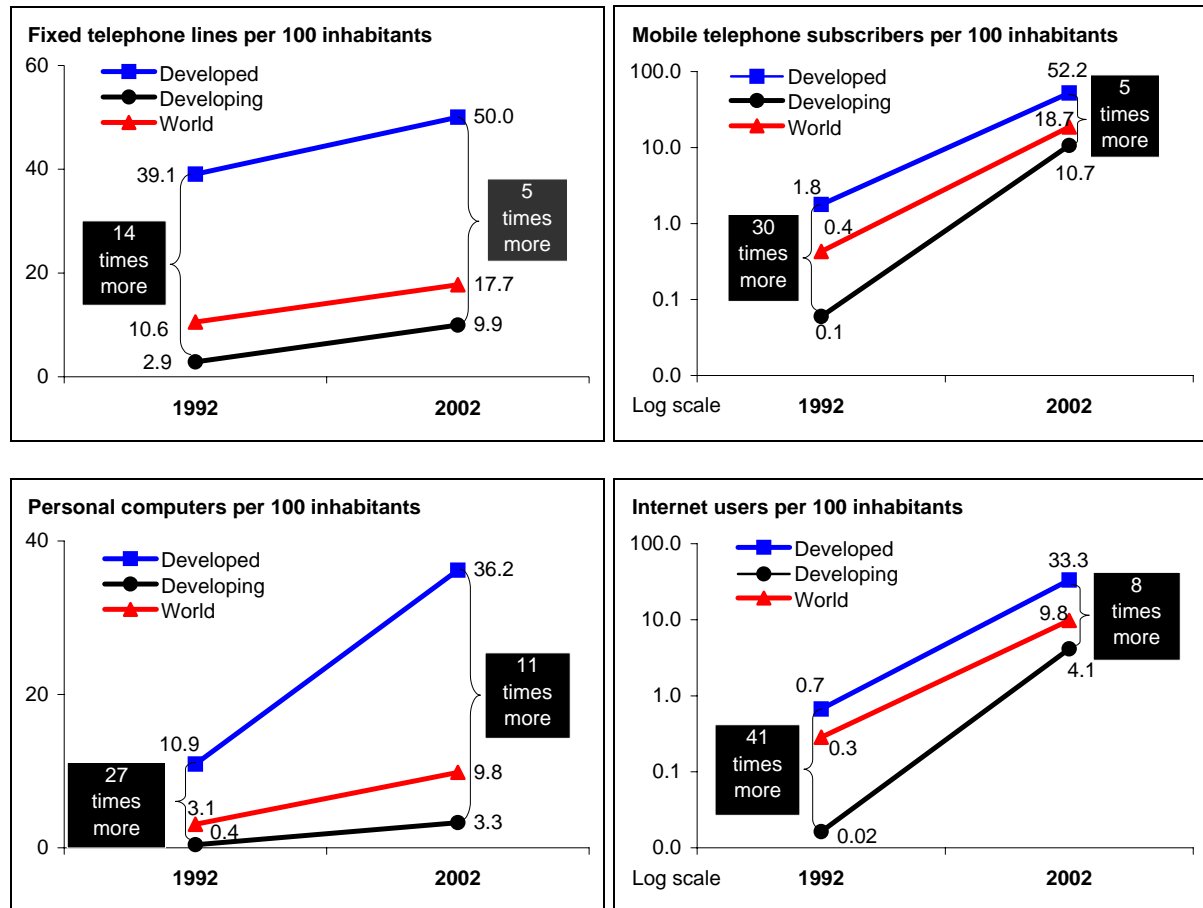
Note: Developed includes Western Europe, Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand and the United States. Developing refers to all other countries.
Source: ITU World Telecommunication Development Report 2003: Access Indicators for the Information Society.

It is notable that the average level of Internet penetration and mobile phone penetration in the developing world in 2002 (4.1 Internet users and 10.7 mobile phones per 100 inhabitants, respectively) was equivalent to the level of development reached in the developed countries around five years earlier. By contrast, the average level of fixed-line penetration in developing countries at the end of 2002 (just under one in every ten inhabitants) was reached in the developed world as long ago as the 1960s.

What this suggests is that the process of "catch-up" is occurring much more rapidly among newer services than is the case for older ones. But it also suggests that the developing world's strongly expressed preference for mobile phones over fixed-lines ones is likely to put the brakes on Internet development in the near future. That is because the vast majority of the world's Internet users still use copper-based fixed-line technologies (e.g., dial-up, ISDN, DSL, cable modems) to access the Internet. Internet access from wireless devices is certainly possible (e.g. through so-called "third generation" mobile or through wireless LANs), but it is still quite expensive and, in the case of wireless LANs, has only limited range. These constraints are solvable, but there may well be a period of years during which the further development of the Internet in some developing regions of the world is slowed by the absence of a dense copper-based network.

The converging trends in ICTs worldwide have come about in large part due to changes within the last few years. 2002 was the first year in which the number of mobile phones overtook fixed-lines worldwide (see Figure 2, left chart). Africa was the first region where this took place and the impact has been most profound in Sub-Saharan Africa. Several countries of the region, including Uganda and DPR Congo, have levels of mobile phone penetration that are up to ten times higher than fixed-line penetration. As Figure 2 right chart shows, 2000 was a turning point in Africa's telecommunications history as it crossed the psychological threshold of one user per 100 inhabitants. In the first few years of the new century, more Africans have become telecommunication users than in the hundred years of the previous century.

Figure 2: Leaping ahead
Trends in total teledensity, worldwide, 1993-2002 and in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1992-2002
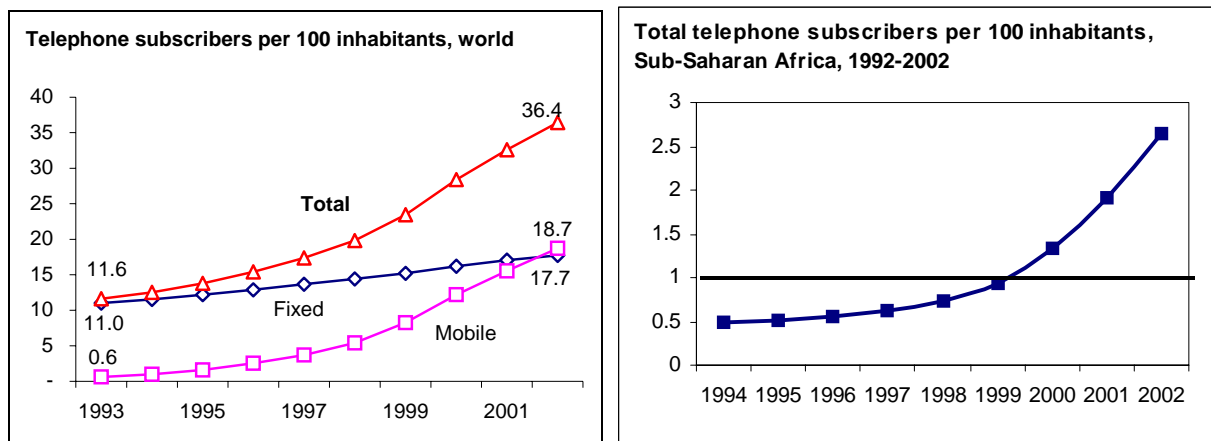
Note: Total teledensity is the combined number of fixed lines and mobile phones per 100 inhabitants.
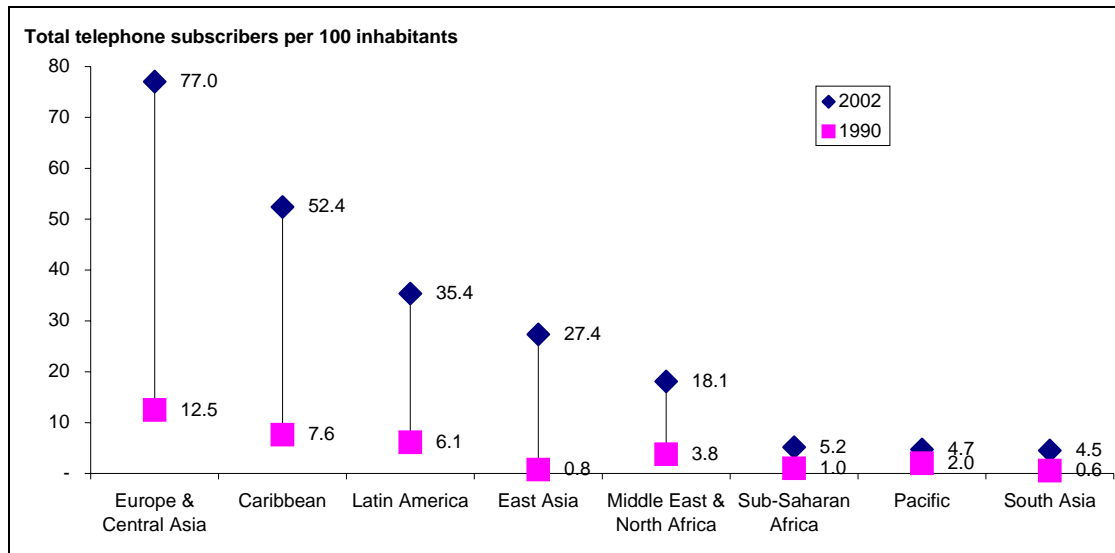*Source:* ITU World Telecommunication Indicators Database.

As shown in Figure 3, all of the developing sub-regions of the world have grown their fixed and mobile telephone networks at a faster rate since 1990 than before that date. In the exceptional case of East Asia (which includes China), the total number of fixed and mobile subscribers per 100 inhabitants (i.e. total teledensity) in 2002 was more than 35 times higher than

in 1990. In all cases except in the developing Pacific, total teledensity was at least five times higher in 2002 than it was in 1990.

Figure 3: A decade of ICT progress
Total teledensity (main telephone lines and mobile users per 100 inhabitants), in 1990 and 2002, in developing regions

Note: Developed countries are excluded. For definitions of regions, see: www.worldbank.org/data/countryclass/classgroups.htm.
Source: ITU World Telecommunication Indicators Database.

In the 1990s, Africa was the main focus of UN system-wide attempts to eradicate poverty and to raise living standards. The problems of that region continue to dominate the development agenda. But there is a danger that other parts of the world may be overlooked. As Figure 3 shows, the problems of the digital divide are also evident in South Asia and especially among the small island developing states of the Pacific, which have so far failed to benefit from the information age. The Pacific has slipped from fifth place to seventh place in terms of total teledensity. Part of the problem is that, with small domestic markets, the introduction of competing mobile operators has not always been viable. These countries have also suffered from the decrease in settlement payments from international voice traffic that helped them overcome the problems of isolation and lack of economies of scale.

The digital divide is shifting, and the focus of development efforts must change with it. The successful conclusion to the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, held in Geneva 10-12 December, provides a fresh impetus for international efforts to address the digital divide. Those efforts must concentrate on those areas of the world that are not yet benefiting from growth (such as the Pacific) and on those technologies where the catch-up process is proving slow (principally the fixed-line network). In those areas where the digital divide is already narrowing, (such as in East Asia), and where developing countries are already leapfrogging ahead (for instance, in mobile communications) successful policies can be studied

and copied. The digital divide is primarily a problem of geography, not of economics or technology.

Role of the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force

The digital divide is cause for concern precisely because ICTs have been acknowledged in the 1990s as potent instruments for accelerating growth and sustainable development and for reducing poverty. Their evolution and increasing sophistication have created a new context for development, presenting both a unique opportunity and an urgent requirement for an unprecedented new initiative to harness the potential of the nascent information society to the benefit of all.

The Task Force is not an operational, implementing or funding agency, but provides a platform and focal point for establishing strategic direction, policy coherence and coordination, and advocacy in relation to the global ICT-for-development agenda. It has the mandate to provide overall leadership to the UN role in helping to formulate strategies for the development of ICT, putting those technologies at the service of development and forging a strategic partnership between the UN system, private industry and financing trusts and foundations, donors, programme countries and other relevant stakeholders. It facilitates connections among interested parties to execute programmes and projects that it wishes to promote and support.

Soon after its inauguration, the Task Force adopted a plan of action and a mission statement,[3] built on guidance contained in the Millennium Declaration, the ECOSOC 2000 Ministerial Declaration and the mandate contained in the report of the Secretary-General (E/2001/7), identifying a set of objectives for the short, medium and long term. The key areas of action included: ICT policy and governance, national and regional e-strategies, human resource development and capacity-building, low-cost connectivity and access, business and entrepreneurship, as well as resource mobilization.

Since its launch, the ICT Task Force has striven for efficiency, accountability, transparency, and agility. It has built a global network of working groups and regional nodes as platforms for the implementation of its Plan of Action and for addressing critical elements of the challenge of harnessing the potential of the ICT revolution for development. It has used an open, inclusive and decentralized approach to develop stakeholders' campaigns and electronic outreach, targeting policy makers as well as broader audiences through its website and stakeholder networks composed of government policy makers and representatives from the private sector, foundations and NGOs. Significant efforts have gone into promoting public-private partnerships to assist developing countries in designing and implementing national e-strategies for poverty reduction and to enhance the participation of developing countries in global ICT policy-making. Emphasis has also been placed on supporting ongoing efforts to develop innovative solutions for affordable access and connectivity for the poor and in rural areas, and for the creation of diversified local content.

In January 2004, in light of the role that the Task Force plays in the follow-up to the Geneva phase of the World Summit on the Information Society and the preparation for the Tunis

phase (November 2005), the Secretary-General extended the mandate of the ICT Task Force to the end of 2005.

Activities and accomplishments

During the second year of its work, the Task Force and its subsidiary bodies welcomed new partners and collaborators, contributed to the ongoing international dialogue, made significant progress on initiatives launched in its inaugural year and developed new projects to capture the benefits of ICT to further development and to support the attainment of the internationally agreed development goals.

Building Partnerships and Networks

Partnerships, and the synergies they can produce, are at the core of the ICT Task Force mandate. The Task Force has sought to build upon and leverage ongoing work by the G8 Digital Opportunity Task Force (DOT Force) implementation teams and by other networks such as the Health Internetwork. In addition to facilitating productive collaboration among its members, the Task Force has strengthened close working relationships with its numerous partners, including the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), United Nations Fund for International Partnerships (UNFIP), Global Knowledge Partnership, the Asia-Pacific Telecommunity, the International Trade Center, la Frankophonie, the Multilingual Internet Names Consortium (MINC), the regional development banks, and many other relevant organizations and initiatives.

As an example of the activities on building multi-stakeholder partnerships, one of the founding members of the Task Force, the United Nations Fund for International Partnerships (UNFIP) has worked closely with other members of the ICT Task Force on several partnership projects throughout 2003 in response to the emphasis on partnership building made at the Geneva phase of the World Summit on the Information Society. First, the Equal Access/UNDP Initiative (with support from the UN Foundation) brings vital development information to the most remote communities in Asia through digital satellite broadcasting. The Initiative has a particular focus on three of the MDGs: HIV/AIDS prevention, women's empowerment, and the fostering of Partnerships in support of ICT solutions for the developing world. Other parties, such as the Ford Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, USAID and the World Bank have helped to bring the Initiative to scale. Second, UNFIP and the ICT Task Force are exploring how best to deploy a set of low-cost products produced by HP under its e-Inclusion Initiative to reach people at the bottom of the economic pyramid. The products include a script mail and email service which recognizes handwriting and symbols and is able to send messages without need for dedicated service; adult literacy training, which primarily uses pictures to teach vocational skills in the developing world; and a micro-finance solution that allows for more efficient transactions in areas where access to capital is most limited. Third, research conducted by the Education Development Center (EDC) in its long term study the Power Users of Technology Initiative is supporting the UN system by making their research on power users of technology and technology's impact on them available widely especially for the developing world and to serve

as a catalyst for future change. Fourth, Microsoft is now working with a number of UN agencies to explore strategic collaboration with the UN system, and to use its intellectual capital for the benefit of the developing world.

Thousands of Internet nodes and digital activities are taking shape in many developing countries, but nascent initiatives often lack the capital, expertise and networking ability to stabilize and grow. Through the Digital Diaspora Networks created by the Task Force and several partners, expatriates working in the high-tech sector in North America and Europe join their efforts and resources to jump-start ICT initiatives in their home regions of Africa, The Caribbean and Latin America. The Networks seek to mobilize the entrepreneurial, technological and professional expertise and resources of the various Diaspora to promote development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals with ICT applications. The Digital Diaspora Network—Africa (DDN-A) was launched in July 2002 and The Digital Diaspora Network for the Caribbean Community officially began operation in January 2003. The reports *Digital Bridge to Africa* and *Digital Bridge to the Caribbean*, published in 2003, contain the accounts of these launch meetings.

In Kampala, Uganda on 5-7 May 2003, UNIFEM, UNDP, UN ICT Task Force, UNFIP, and the United Nations Office of the special Adviser on Africa, in cooperation with the Republic of Uganda, organized the meeting on "Bridging the Gender Digital Divide Through Strategic Partnerships," attended by 150 representatives from United Nations organizations, African governments, non-governmental organizations, the African Diaspora and the private sector. Building on the existing Caribbean Network's foundation and broadening its geographic scope, the ICT Task Force held a roundtable discussion on 5 September 2003 between 130 leaders of the Latin American and Caribbean Diasporas on the "Digital Bridge to Latin American and the Caribbean", launching the enlarged initiative.

Unveiled jointly by the UN ICT Task Force, the governments of Canada and Ireland, and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) at the WSIS on 11 December 2003, The Global e-Policy Resource Network (ePol-NET) is a multi-stakeholder partnership, designed to mobilize global efforts in support of national e-strategies for development. The Network brings together providers of e-strategy and e-policy information and expertise for the benefit of individual policy and regulatory experts, organizations and governments in developing countries. The Network consists of virtual centres of knowledge and expertise of stakeholders from the public, private and non-profit sectors around the world. The UN ICT Task Force succeeded in bringing new international partners and regional focus to this initiative, and its African Regional Network and its Working Groups on ICT Policy and Governance as well as on National and Regional E-strategies contributed to the project.

The Task Force intends to continue its partnership-building work. In particular, at the forthcoming UNCTAD XI conference, to be held in Sao Paulo from 13 – 18 June 2004, at which a number of partnerships on ICT-for-development will be launched that are being constructed by UNCTAD in close cooperation with other Task Force members.

Contributing to International Dialogue and Action on ICTD

The Task Force sponsored or supported a number of significant international conferences and produced several new publications throughout 2003 in order to further discussions on the ICT-for-development agenda and to catalyse new initiatives.

The series on Policy Awareness and Training in Information Technology (PATIT), organized by the ICT Task Force, UNITAR in cooperation with Intel, in cooperation with the ECOSOC Working Group on Informatics in New York, aims to provide policy makers and officials from developing and less-developed countries with basic exposure to computers and Internet technologies and related policy issues. In 2003, 127 participants were trained in the five-module certificate programme, and approximately 315 participants attended three high-level seminars. The much-lauded series will continue in 2004. Following 2003's successful pilot programme, its Global eLearning programme for Senior Policy-makers in Capitals will be officially launched in April.

The Task Force co-sponsored The International Council for Caring Communities' (ICCC) international conference on facilitating connectivity for older people, "Caring communities for the 21st century: Imagining the Possible 'Age of Connectivity'", held in New York on 12 February 2003. Following the conference, *The Age of Digital Opportunity: Connecting the Generations* was published through a collaborative effort by the ICCC, the United Nations ICT Task Force, the Inter-American Development Bank and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme. It presents an assortment of viewpoints on how ICT can help meet the challenges posed by the ageing of the population. A follow-up conference on the theme "Harnessing the Generations" was held on 11 February 2004 at United Nations Headquarters.

In response to the Secretary General's challenge to the Silicon Valley to bring wireless fidelity ("wi-fi" or Wireless Internet) applications to the developing world to deliver cheap and fast Internet access, the United Nations ICT Task Force joined forces with the Wireless Internet Institute (W2i) to host "The Wireless Internet Opportunity for Developing Countries" on 26 June 2003 in New York City. The conference, attended by over 200 participants, including industry practitioners, government regulators, United Nations system organizations, international development experts, academics, non-governmental organizations and private sector technology experts, created the conditions for informal dialogue and brainstorming. It featured plenary sessions and structured workshops establishing strategies to overcome obstacles as well as to develop environments favourable to the broad deployment of Wireless Internet infrastructures. Conference conclusions are used as a tool for national consensus-building programmes, spectrum-policy reform and infrastructure deployment. *The Wireless Internet Opportunity for Developing Countries*, published jointly by the ICT Task Force and the Wireless Internet Institute, continues the discussions begun at the event. It provides an extensive resource base for people who want to learn more about the Wireless Internet and its possibilities in developing countries. The publication addresses issues on policy, technology as well as providing insight through real life experiences. It also offers extensive information about actors in the field and gives the reader information on how to create linkages and partnerships. The Wireless Internet Institute has formed a follow-up programme to WSIS that will further develop its actvities.

Taking the first step to implement the mandate contained in the General Assembly resolution 57/295 on "Information and communication technologies for development" the ICT

Task Force and the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) Secretariat jointly organized a brainstorming session on the United Nations system strategy on ICT-for-development in Geneva on 24 July 2003. The resolution affirmed the need to use information and communication technologies as a strategic tool to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of the development programmes and technical cooperation activities of the United Nations system. In the resolution the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General, as Chairman of the CEB, to work closely with organizations of the United Nations system and with the ICT Task Force to develop a comprehensive information and communication technologies strategy for the United Nations system. This dialogue between IT managers and Task Force members launched the development of approaches and a framework for action. Participants recognized the need to distinguish – and yet build complementarity – between the two interrelated streams of activities in the system: one on the use of ICT for strengthening the work of the System, particularly in development, and the other the use of ICT as a strategic management tool. It was agreed that to follow up and to move forward on cooperation in the ICT area, work needed to be undertaken at a number of levels, and a multifaceted role for the ICT Task Force was identified. On the basis of consultation among CEB members and with inputs from the Task Force, a proposal for a system-wide strategy and an accompanying action plan will be elaborated and submitted to the Secretary-General during 2004.

The World Summit on the Information Society, occurring in two phases in December 2003 and November 2005, was envisioned as a unique opportunity for world leaders to agree to shape the future of the Information Society and to harness the ICT revolution for the effective achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including the MDGs, by promoting broad agreement to accord high priority to ICT in international development cooperation policies and programmes. The Geneva phase of the Summit (10–12 December 2003), to which the UN ICT Task Force contributed, served as a platform to galvanize the international community, working in concert with national governments, business and civil society to reverse the present trends of the growing digital divide and lay the foundations of a truly inclusive and empowering global Information Society.

Making the WSIS process a development-oriented one, rather than technology-oriented, and putting the MDGs at the "heart" of the Summit Declaration and the Plan of Action has been at the core of the UN ICT Task Force's persistent efforts during the Summit's preparatory process. The Task Force played a significant role in ensuring the success of the WSIS through its advisory function and promotion of the event. The Task Force helped to generate interest from Heads of State to participate in the Summit and to ensure that it was perceived as a "cabinet matter" rather than something to be dealt with exclusively by IT or telecom ministries. The Task Force also involved other key stakeholders from the private sector and civil society in the preparatory process through its extensive network. The ICT Task Force made a significant substantive contribution to the preparations for the Summit. In addition, the Task Force sponsored several regional meetings, organized a series of side events, participated actively in events organized by other stakeholders and hosted a pavilion in the ICT-for-Development Platform showcasing its various initiatives. A contribution of the ICT Task Force to the World Summit on the Information Society, *Challenges and Partnerships: Opening Up ICT to the World* demonstrated the vital role of ICTs in achieving the Millennium Development Goals by showcasing some of the major deliverables and initiatives the Task Force and its Members are

undertaking collectively and individually, and highlighted successful strategies that can be replicated to make the information society a reality.

In 2003, two volumes were issued based on the ICT Task Force's policy seminar series for ambassadors and diplomats. *The Role of Information and Communication technology in Global Development: Analyses and Policy Recommendations*, brings together selected outputs from ICT Task Force Working Groups examining the issues confronting the international community, national governments and local authorities as they seek to utilize ICT to improve people's lives. *Connected for Development: Information Kiosks and Sustainability*, explores the preconditions and critical components necessary for the successful use of telecommunications community centres and information kiosks for development, with the intention of sharing ideas and best practices amongst individuals and organizations endeavouring to provide universal access and services.

Furthering ICTD through activities and initiatives of its Working Groups and Regional Nodes

The Task Force had developed mechanisms at national, regional and subregional levels to facilitate a decentralized approach to cooperation on the basis of the identification of problems and gaps in existing activities related to ICT-for-development. Five thematical open-ended Working Groups, established soon after launch, have since attracted all the key stakeholders. Regional Nodes operate in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Arab States, Europe and Central Asia to assist developing countries and countries with economies in transition in identifying the most relevant ICT-for-development models and strategies for their specific needs. These two groups of subsidiary networks have accomplished a great deal in their areas of work and enjoy broad participation.

ICT policy and governance. The objectives of the Working Group on ICT Policy and Governance are to promote transparency, legitimacy and accountability of international governance processes and outcomes related to ICT, and to enhance developing countries' participation in ICT policy forums. To this end, the Working Group has renewed efforts on its ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) Initiative, aimed at improving developing countries' involvement in both the technical and policy aspects of ICANN's work by promoting capacity building and awareness-raising about it in developing countries. As part of this initiative, the Working Group has developed a proposal to support the establishment of Africa's Regional Internet Registry (AfriNIC) that would provide for increased technical capacity as well as greater decision-making power with ICANN for the African region. AfriNIC would be a crucial means of ensuring that regional Internet resources are being efficiently and fairly distributed and would lend more legitimacy and autonomy to the Internet governance process in the region.

Recognizing the vital role that e-commerce is increasingly playing in global trade, the Working Group is also spearheading efforts on a WTO Initiative aiming at assisting developing countries with e-commerce and ICT issues that may arise in the WTO's Doha Development Agenda and other trade negotiations. A report, titled "WTO and e-Commerce – From the Uruguay Round through the Doha Development Agenda", has been drafted for dissemination.

This report reviews ways to address the barriers and concerns of specific relevance to developing countries regarding the trade in electronic goods and services. The expected outcome is to build the capacity for developing countries to be able to position themselves and pursue trade negotiations to the best of their interest.

National and regional e-strategies. The focus of e-development strategies is to enhance development through effective deployment of ICT, putting in place the conditions necessary to achieve that end. Drawing on lessons learned from collective experiences in e-development strategies, the Task Force Working Group on National and Regional e-Strategies had developed a template and blueprint for action outlining 10 steps to guide governments in their endeavours. The outline covers areas of action and potential collaboration between stakeholders at the global and national levels. The approach is designed to stimulate the deployment of national and regional e-strategies and to create synergies, linkages, cooperation and coordination among the many existing and emerging initiatives on the ground, such as those launched by the World Bank, UNDP, ECA, ITU and others.

To disseminate this blueprint for action, the Working Group promoted and supported the organization of a series of regional meetings on e-strategies between September and November 2003 in Maputo, Mozambique; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and Baku, Azerbaijan. The purpose of the meetings was to take stock, facilitate peer reviews and draw lessons learned regarding national ICTD strategy development and implementation including linkages with Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The meetings aimed to facilitate the sharing of information and experiences on formulation and implementation of e-Strategies for development and to identify best practices in the different sectors and to identify and initiate partnerships between countries and with development partners in the implementation of e-Strategies for development. It also formulated and adopted declarations outlining recommendations and priorities of the countries of the region for presentation at the WSIS in Geneva.

Human resources and capacity-building are recognized by the Task Force as central to building an inclusive information society. The Task Force Working Group on Human Resources Development and Capacity Building is working closely with relevant United Nations agencies and other partners from the private and public sectors, together with educators and researchers in both developed and developing countries, to promote the use of ICT for capacity-building and human resource development. The Group has focused on three areas of ICT and technology policy issues, specifically: human capacity development, health and content.

The first area of focus, relating to human and institutional capacity development, deals with a key priority of the Group: "Enhancing human capacity development, knowledge creation and sharing" through ICTs which are directly applicable to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This area of focus aims to harness ICT for human capacity development and education, with particular attention to overcoming existing disparities in educational and training opportunities and achievements between men and women.

A key initiative of this group is the development and implementation of a UN Volunteer led "University Volunteer Network" under UNITes. This network is expanding and growing in a

very positive manner. This initiative is directly aligned with responding to one of the World Summit on the Information Society's key priorities, which is to harness ICT resources in efforts to reach the MDGs. Implied in the concept of ICT for development (ICT4D) are initiatives involving education, training, knowledge, and learning. Colleges and universities are major institutions in society that focus on these elements. In the 20th century ICT4D environment, these institutions have been relatively inconspicuous except in the invention of ICT hardware and creation of important software platforms. As we face the challenge of reaching the eight MDGs, the intellectual and capacity-building power of universities to apply ICTs to the achievement of the MDGs needs to be harnessed and a new space created to allow for their active participation and institutional representation. The objective of this initiative is two-fold (1) to identify the possible avenues for universities to be at the forefront of ICT4D and (2) to generate practical approaches that universities can use to assist development-related organizations in the application of ICTs toward reaching the MDGs.

Launched in December 2003 at the first phase of the WSIS, the Global eSchools and Communities Initiative (GeSCI) is a joint project of the Working Groups on Human Resource Development and Capacity-building (Working Group 3) and Low-cost Connectivity and Access (Working Group 5). Four founding government members – Canada, Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland – and private sector member McKinsey & Company are leading the initiative. GeSCI puts information and communication technologies to use in support of education in developing countries by working in partnership with local governments, private sector companies and civil society organizations to create effective end-to-end systems that have all the functions needed to deliver, operate and support the education solution identified by partners based upon the specific needs of their students. Leveraging tested technologies, new operating models, national/regional partnerships and global coordination, such end-to-end systems could deliver ICT solutions at potentially 10 to 20 percent of the cost of current approaches. The essence of the challenge is to transform today's fragmented, supply-driven, largely uncoordinated pilot efforts for ICT in education into efficient, demand driven, coordinated, end-to-end systems implemented by strong partnerships. GeSCI further aims to use the strengthened education infrastructure for empowering local communities by facilitating their access to global and local information and knowledge flows. This will significantly strengthen communities' capacity to benefit from e-health, e-commerce, e-government, e-democracy and other empowerment tools that ICTs bring about.

In the Working Group's focus on health, emphasis is placed on supporting the development and application of ICT to strengthen health-care systems and infrastructure to support the United Nations Secretary-General's initiative to combat HIV/AIDS and other infectious and communicable diseases. Working with WHO, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and UNDP, as well as community, state, national, and international partners, the Working Group is acting to raise awareness, gain support and foster public-private partnerships to address needs identified at the national and regional levels for scaling up or introducing new initiatives and mechanisms, using ICT in management and prevention efforts, research and development, treatment, distribution, monitoring, training and care. Initiatives to raise awareness included the showcasing of ongoing and successful ICT for health initiatives to participants at the 2003 World Health Assembly in Geneva.

An overview and analyses of experience and trends in harnessing new technologies for effective health action was sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency. The consultants who prepared this overview identified a broad set of programmes, analyses and research papers (e.g. "The costs and benefits of ICTs for direct poverty alleviation by Kenya") to be studied, summarized and used as the foundation for a critical analysis and policy piece targeted to decision makers.

The Working Group's local content subcommittee, Local Voices, actively supports the creation of local content in relation to both education and health to empower the poor and illiterate by making the Internet and ICT relevant to their lives. It is working with software/application developers, the open source community, manufacturers and vendors to provide content and applications important to, and usable in, developing countries. It collaborated with representatives of the WSIS Executive Committee and of the ICT4D Platform parallel event to present a cluster of activities relating to local content and minority languages at the World Summit on the Information Society. WSIS events included active participation in the CyberFestival, a "Local Voices" ICT4D Platform stand, a panel discussion on Local Content and other ad hoc appearances and presentations during the Summit. To ensure follow on, a Local Voices Consortium made up of minority language speakers, businesses, performers, development workers, NGOs and other relevant parties has been set up to disseminate good practice, focus research and development and evolve an agenda for the 2005 Summit in Tunis.

Other initiatives supported by this Working Group included the development of a "Portable Knowledge Asset Development System: A Tool for knowledge Sharing". This initiative was led by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). UNFPA, as part of its knowledge sharing strategy, developed a Knowledge Asset Development System (KADS), which is used for capturing and sharing knowledge within UNFPA. This tool is an internal Internet-based system used by UNFPA staff to develop knowledge assets in a step-by-step approach. Following requests, UNFPA, in a unique partnership developed an open source version of this tool in collaboration with University College Cork (UCC). This system was successfully launched at WSIS and is being developed into an enterprise solution for use in organisations.

Low-cost connectivity and access aims to raise awareness about, and investigate solutions for, providing increased access and connectivity to poor and remote people and communities at low cost. This includes looking at new technologies for connectivity as well as at innovative business models for sustainable access. The importance of giving priority to the African continent in the work of the Group has been reiterated and the aim of supporting the ICT component of NEPAD remains high on the agenda of the Working Group.

In collaboration between the Working Group, The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and Kista IT-University (a joint venture between the Royal Institute of Technology and Stockholm University) the Working Group also organized an "Open Access" workshop in Stockholm on 5-6 June 2003. The purpose of the workshop was to identify successful solutions and standards for access networks providing open universal access (First Mile), as well as sustainable business models for operation and maintenance of such networks that could be disseminated as best practices. The workshop will become an annual event, with the next one scheduled for 11-12 May 2004.

In a major initiative the working group has put together a series of papers on "Local Access and Connectivity: Local solutions" that describes examples of innovative technical and business solutions for local access and connectivity. The emphasis of the papers, each submitted from a different country, is on how local demand for information and communications media has been satisfied through the use of ICTs. The series shows that despite significant access and connectivity challenges faced by many people in the developing world, the demand and need for communication and empowerment through information is so great that it has spurred innovative and imaginative solutions at the local level. The publication was part of the Working Group's contribution to the WSIS.

The Working Group also contributed to the Summit through the leading role the Group's convener took in planning one of the five main themes of the ICTD Platform, "Innovating for Equitable Access".The Working Group further contributed to the WSIS by supporting an installation at the ICTD Platform called "The Comparative Access Installation". It showcased technologies for communication (land-line, wireless, and satellite) and estimated the speeds and costs associated with each kind of technology by region to highlight inequalities between the developed and developing world. The installation was intended to provide a hands-on educational experience for both technical and non-technical Platform participants regarding the options for and costs of digital connectivity by region. It informed and stimulated policy-makers how to better understand the inequalities faced in their region.

The Working Group has continued to look into the issue of the feasibility of Internet Exchange Points and is working with developing countries, the ITU and other public and private partners to create a network for raising policy awareness on this issue and on coordination among existing initiatives.

Business enterprise and entrepreneurship. Believing that entrepreneurship is a key driver behind economic growth with the potential to serve as an engine for innovation, job creation and wealth generation, the Working Group on Business Enterprise and Entrepreneurship is engaged in several initiatives that seek to foster entrepreneurship for sustainable social and economic development and poverty alleviation. The Working Group is composed of members of the public, private and non-profit sectors and includes representatives of the DOT Force Implementation Teams, the World Economic Forum's Global Digital Divide Initiative and similar organizations, with the aim to advancing work that is already under way. The Working Group places special emphasis on ICT solutions for small to medium enterprises and local entrepreneurs in the developing regions and is committed to inventing and applying sustainable information technology solutions that are appropriate to addressing the real issues and problems facing enterprises and entrepreneurs in the developing world.

Three programmes have been pursued by this Working Group. The first is a small, medium and micro enterprise (SMME) initiative, Enablis, which is intended to provide assistance to medium-sized enterprises in developing countries that use – or intend to use – technology as a tool in its business growth, starting with pilot projects in South Africa. It was originally created by a variety of private sector companies participating in the DOT Force and is now jointly led by Accenture, HP and Telesystem. Enablis is founded on the belief that the

intelligent application of ICTs enables entrepreneurs to develop stronger, more sustainable business models that have disproportionately beneficial impacts on their local economies. Enablis works with other enterprise support organisations to provide a holistic set of offerings, including loan financing, business and technical support and policy advisory services, thereby increasing SMEs' chances of being successful and sustainable. A South African operating unit in Cape Town was launched in late 2003, and future regional hubs are planned.

The Working Group's second initiative, the Global Giving Network (formerly the DevelopmentSpace Network), links pre-qualified social entrepreneurs and community-based projects in developing countries to individual donors who wish to make direct philanthropic contributions. The Network is committed to the proposition that civil society and the private sector, working in partnership with indigenous entrepreneurs and community-based organizations, can make a significant contribution to the collective creation of "public goods" and help to alleviate extreme poverty. It has been successfully used by corporations to encourage employee giving with global reach, often amplified by matching funds from the employers. By connecting entrepreneurs with donors through person-to-person links, the network dramatically enhances the patterns of corporate and private giving. Furthermore, the partnerships that arise out of the initiative improve the health and well-being of poor communities while enhancing economic opportunity and stimulating indigenous entrepreneurs throughout the developing world. Typical projects funded include provision of bilingual teachers for indigenous children in Peru, human waste treatment facilities in Mali, restroom facilities for school children in India and delivery of IT education in Nepal.

The objective of the third initiative is to champion a breakthrough in the reach and impact of financial services for the world's poor through the use of technology as applied to microfinance. Structured as a consortium comprised of representatives from micro-finance NGOs, IT companies and consulting firms, this project aims to connect clients efficiently with microfinance institutions and with capital markets by developing data and data-processing standards in the microfinance industry. Such moves would dramatically assist individual entrepreneurs, who face serious challenges in obtaining loans and financial assistance for their business development. To achieve this goal, the partners of the initiative are working to unite the resources of the commercial sector with the experience of the development sector and to increase the efficiency and decrease the cost of transactions. This initiative will also enable microfinance institutions to reap the benefits of scale without losing control, thus allowing them to reach more clients and expand the range of their financial services while also raising the overall visibility of the microfinance industry. A pilot programme was due to be launched in Uganda in January 2004, and other programmes may be considered for the future.

The Arab Regional Network seeks to coordinate, assist, facilitate, advocate, and promote ICT projects for economic and social development in the Arab World. A series of national e-strategies meetings has been planned with a view to contributing to the development of ICT policies and strategies in the Arab countries. The first of these meetings took place in Jordan and in Lebanon in 2003. The meeting in Beirut, for example, held in June 2003, was two days of intensive presentations, debates and consultations between national and international representatives from academia, the public and private sectors and civil society that produced a set of recommendations, which, once implemented, will provide a coherent framework by which

the Lebanese government can create an enabling environment and provide adequate infrastructure to give ICTs the opportunity to flourish in the country. A Working Group for the Arab region has also been established to coordinate and follow up all matters related to the domain names in Arabic, in coordination with the various Arab and international institutions and organizations, namely the Multilingual Internet Names Consortium (MINC).

The African Stakeholders Network, the African node of the UN ICT Task Force, is a network where members from different professional fields share information on major ICT-related activities and initiatives through the ASN discussion list, websites and country profiles. Coordinated by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the ASN aims to optimize common frameworks for partnership and resource sharing with existing ICT-for-development networks on the continent by building on current efforts and drawing on the experiences of regional and international institutions, including the UN, Partnership for ICT in Africa (PICTA) and the Information Technology Centre for Africa (ITCA). The annual meeting of the Steering Committee of the ASN was convened from 10-11 May 2003 in Addis Ababa with the support of the Task Force Secretariat. The meeting emphasized the importance of the ASN and its Steering Committee to deliver the African part of the UN ICT TF plan of action so as to ensure relevance to Africa; to share information on major activities and initiatives; to sensitize, involve and mobilize major actors; to link with African and international initiatives and programmes; to attract funds and investments to the ICT sector in Africa; and to coordinate with the UN ICT Task Force and its Secretariat. The ASN as well as its Steering Committee helped develop substantively the African contribution to the preparatory process of the WSIS as well as to the Summit itself. Activities of ASN members were also showcased at the ICTD Platform there. As part of preparatory activities to the second phase of the Summit, a pre-Tunis online consultation process was launched. The first of these online forums focuses on Internet Governance.

The Asia Regional Node. A secretariat of the Asia Regional Network was formally established in January 2003 in Shanghai. Hosted by the Regional Cooperation Office for City Informatization of the Municipal Government of the city of Shanghai, the secretariat provides substantive and organizational support for the activities of the ICT Task Force in the region. In particular, the secretariat is organizing the Fourth annual Forum on City Informatization in the Asia-Pacific Region, that was originally planned for June 2003 but was postponed due to SARS epidemic. It is now scheduled for June 2004. In conjunction with the Forum, the regional secretariat will organize a regional meeting on Internet governance that will bring together representatives of governments of the region, as well as of other stakeholders.

The Latin America and Caribbean Node focuses on articulating and organizing structures for ICT for development initiatives in this region.LACNET has tried to address, the most critical issue for "ICT for Development" to take-off in LA&C, namely, the articulation of distinct regional initiatives in the region. For such purpose, LACNET has carried out discussions with an ample range of institutions which operate at the regional level. As the main result, LACNET organized a Workshop with the WSIS Presidency on "New Models of Business: The View of the Private Sector". The event, attended by high-ranking representatives from the Business Sector in the region, aimed at allowing the ICT sector of the region to discuss ways to foster the offering of cheaper H&S products for lower income markets.

LACNET has also been active in the Global Electronic Schools and Communities Initiative (GeSCI). This activity involved, at its outset, the discussion of goals, constraints and focal activities of GeSCI, and the analysis and the selection of a small number of countries in Latin America as possible candidates to take part in Phase I of the initiative.

It participated in the formatting of the NetGrowth initiative together with Stanford University, the World Bank and other institutions and contributed to the initial articulation of the At-Large Advisory Committee (ALAC) of ICANN with the objective of creating a Regional At-Large Organization (RALO) in the Latin American region.

The Network has been operating in R&D regional projects and namely in the areas of Genome research, High-Speed Networking, Environmental Control, etc. The European Commission program @LIS has provided an interesting example in this area. In the framework of the @LIS program, LACNET has established a consortium involving 11 institutions in Latin America to submit proposals to the European Commission. LACNET is proposing to the Task Force to provide a political umbrella for this Consortium.

LACNET also articulated a number of regional projects on e-commerce and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the region with the support of the Inter-American Development Bank/Multilateral Investment Fund "ICT4BUS Program".

The planned activities for the coming months include among others the creation of a regional institute dedicated to R&D and innovation based on intensive use of ICTs; the planning, and execution of a "100% digital island" project in the Caribbean. The goal is to evidence that in the Caribbean islands full connectivity, with the adoption of fixed wireless systems, is a feasible task. Possible cooperation schemes have been discussed, with encouraging results, with several private companies; and the organization of a Regional Meeting on Internet Governance for stakeholders in the region, in cooperation with ITU, ICANN, UNESCO and others.

The Europe and Central Asia Regional Network (UN ICT TF EuCA) comprises representatives of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Great Britain, Italy, Kazakhstan, Poland, Russian Federation, Switzerland, and Ukraine and operates two geographic nodes. The Moscow Node, in close cooperation with the Geneva Node, was actively involved in the organization of the international conference "Partnership Networks as Tools to Enhance Information Society and Knowledge Economy" (Moscow, December 2002). This event brought together 100 decision makers and high-level experts from 19 countries from government, business, civil society, the research and education community, mass media, national and international associations, and international organizations including the World Bank, UNDP and UNECE. The participants were informed of many e- and k- ("knowledge") strategies and programs implemented worldwide and had an opportunity to exchange their unique, practical experience. The conference materials have been published in Russian and disseminated over a broad network in CIS and European countries. The Moscow Node members were further actively involved in the development of the city target program "e-Moscow". The program, an example of an early stage multi-stakeholder activity, has been affirmed by the Moscow Government and by the Moscow City Duma (Council) and implementation in underway. The Moscow Node is a promoter of Knowledge Economy (KE)

development in Russia and CIS. Two EuCA representatives were recommended to the UNECE Expert Group on Knowledge Economy. At a conference held in Vilnius, Lithuania, in August 2003, members of the Node presented a report on main indicators for a Knowledge Economy readiness assessment, which could form a basis for a system of indicators for preparing national KE reports for Europe and Central Asia.

As the working groups and regional nodes continue to develop and carry out their activities, the Task Force places great value on synthesizing and evaluating the results to draw out best practices and lessons learned and to ensure close alignment of the activities of the Working Groups and Nodes with the Millennium Development Goals.

Assessment, challenges and the way ahead

Since its launch, the Task Force has contributed to the efforts to harness the potential of information and communication technologies (ICT) for advancing development and for poverty reduction. It helped develop a common ICT-for-development (ICTD) agenda focused on the over-arching objective of the United Nations — the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration. It supported efforts to integrate ICT in development plans, programmes and projects, to promote ICT development and ICT applications in all sectors of the economy, and to utilize ICT as a strategic tool to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of the development programmes and technical cooperation activities of the United Nations system. Developing countries, in particular African countries and least developed countries, are the major focus of the effort.

Review of the Task Force's activities during the past two years proves its utility and shows both the potential and limitations of such a mechanism. A non-operational agency with a very limited budget, the Task Force works by mobilizing resources and efforts of many players and by facilitating partnerships of public, private, non-profit, civil society and multilateral stakeholders. It helps develop new models of leadership and collaboration to advance the global effort to bridge the digital divide and foster digital opportunity. The Task Force has proved its effectiveness in incubating action-oriented coalitions of its members and non-member partners that were able to mobilize and sustain significant resources – intellectual, institutional and financial – in pursuit of agreed development objectives.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Task Force, through its core activities and many subsidiary bodies such as Working Groups and Regional Nodes, has successfully served as a mechanism to facilitate and promote collaborative initiatives for the mobilization of resources and for supporting ICT programmes and projects, helped identify and mobilize new public and private resources for ICTD. It has also promoted collaborative initiatives, in consultation with national actors, at regional, sub-regional and national levels, as well as facilitated the pooling of relevant experience of both developed and developing countries and the sharing of lessons learned in introducing and promoting ICTs. Some of its activities have contributed to the development of local content and the use of ICTs for preserving and disseminating traditional knowledge. The Task Force has developed networking arrangements with numerous other mechanisms and institutions, both public and private.

Several projects conceived after launch came to fruition in 2003. Activities matured and increased in efficacy and impact. Task Force-sponsored networks expanded. One of the major accomplishments of the Task Force was its contribution to the successful Geneva phase of the World Summit on the Information Society in December 2003. The Task Force was instrumental in helping to place the development dimension of ICTs at the "heart" of the Summit.

Throughout this period, members of the Task Force and its Bureau continually reviewed and assessed the experience and the lessons learned. On the basis of these assessments, a Business Plan for 2004 was developed that provides a clear focus for the activities of the Task Force in near future.

The ICT Task Force successfully built upon the strong foundation it had laid in its first two years. In 2003, its Working Groups and Regional Nodes launched a number of new initiatives and furthered the international agenda on ICT-for-development. Its networks grew in size and strength, and its reach was extended throughout the many stakeholder groups, including the public and private sectors, civil society and international organizations, that are engaged in the development discussion and which partnered with the Task Force to work toward mutually agreed outcomes.

Although it is constrained by limited resources and its dependency on sovereign governments to actively cooperate and take ultimate responsibility for their national ICT and development environments, the ICT Task Force clearly demonstrated its ability to contribute to the development agenda, to build capacities among policy-makers to participate actively in discussion on ICT, to identify gaps in programmes or projects as well as opportunities for synergy among interested parties, and to stimulate action or coordinate collaboration as appropriate. As a non-operational entity on a limited budget, the UN ICT Task Force provides excellent value, leveraging a multiplier effect made possible through the reach of its members and their activities and enhanced by its high-level partnerships and also the Task Force's own activities, such as its biannual meetings and publication series. In effect, the body has created the organizational infrastructure within which to use ICTs to address the eradication of endemic poverty and to create new opportunities for people around the world. It has also proved its effectiveness in incubating action-oriented coalitions of its members and non-member partners that are able to mobilize and sustain adequate resources – intellectual, institutional and financial – in pursuit of agreed objectives.

The Task Force should now capitalize on the additional visibility and momentum created by WSIS in actively pursuing the agenda defined in its Plan of Action to advance the internationally agreed objectives related to ICT-for-development found in the WSIS Summit Declaration and Plan of Action. As the Business Plan stresses, the activities of the Task Force role must be focused and realistically reflect the actual capacity of the Task Force. They should therefore concentrate to those activities in which it has a proven record of achievement – specifically, linking ICTs and MDGs, building multi-stakeholder partnerships, addressing ICT policy and governance and contributing to the creation of enabling environment – rather than expand into any qualitatively new field of activity.

The challenges that the Task Force faces in its work are known. The global environment is extremely dynamic and complex, requiring an ability to respond effectively to change. Resources are only slowly becoming available again after a significant contraction. Ultimately, the future success of ICT-for-development depends on the commitment of Governments to good governance, the protection of human rights, sound economic policies and the fight against corruption and for the rule of law. The effectiveness of the Task Force in reaching its goals is also contingent on the sustained involvement of all key institutions and actors engaged in its work. The issue of bridging the digital divide and providing access for all is at the heart of the ICTD agenda and involves complex issues such as infrastructure, technological innovation, investment, education and training and content creation.

In order to achieve its objectives and fulfill its mandate, the Task Force must further strengthen what it does best – provide a representative and efficient platform for contributing to policy debate and for formulation of strategies for the development and use of ICT, support national and international efforts in developing sustainable and comprehensive ICT-for-development policies and programmes, and promote partnerships for results. To be effective, relevant and recognized, the Task Force must build further on its unique strengths, in particular its status as a multi-stakeholder, representative entity within the United Nations which can help forge a strategic partnership between the United Nations system, the private sector, financial trusts and foundations, donors, programme countries and other relevant stakeholders united by a common purpose – harness the development potential of ICT.

Taking into account real-life limitations, the only way to accomplish these tasks is to focus on a limited number of deliverables that would: a) address a concrete task that has an almost universal attractiveness (such as, for example, improving education); b) be formulated in very concrete, distinct and achievable terms with clearly identified inputs, timetables and benchmarks; and c) require particular comparative strengths of the Task Force to be achieved (things that would not have happened without the Task Force). Experience showed that unless all of these conditions are met, even tasks that are broadly appealing to many actors do not generate enough sustainable involvement and resources and, as a result, fizzle out without achieving tangible results.

In this context, five priority tracks of activities have been identified in the Business Plan on which to focus the UN ICT Task Force's efforts in a concerted and coordinated way.

Monitoring and Benchmarking Progress on WSIS Implementation. The ICT Task Force now has a vital role in the period between the two phases of WSIS. The multi-stakeholder character of the Task Force with its active global system of subsidiary bodies and networks position it uniquely for supporting the critical follow-up to the WSIS decisions. The regional networks, working groups, digital Diaspora networks and expert networks that the Task Force has assembled in its first two years provide an effective multi-stakeholder platform that can be used for immediate action in a number of priority areas. The ICT Task Force is poised to contribute to the preparation of Tunis event, monitor progress on attainment of the MDGs and support the implementation of the action plan. Its potential to add value is greatly facilitated by the extension of the Task Force mandate until December 2005.

The Task Force is already implementing, in accordance with its mandate and Plan of Action, a number of activities that may be relevant to the inter-phase work that the WSIS may decide to undertake. These Task Force activities include development of a system of indicators and benchmarks that would provide a basis for assessing the impact of ICT on achieving the internationally agreed development goals, facilitation of multi-stakeholder partnerships and capacity-building in ICTD areas.

The Task Force is advancing development of ICT Indicators and MDG Mapping under the leadership of Industry Canada. This work complements similar efforts being pursued by the World Economic Forum, the World Bank and UNDP, and by the Secretary-General's Millennium Project Task Force 10 on Science, Technology and Innovation and the implementation of the Millennium Declaration, with which the Task Force has been working closely. In September 2003, the Task Force presented a working document, "Tools for Development: Using Information and Communications Technology to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals", at its 5th meeting. The document presents a comprehensive conceptual framework on the role that ICTs play in the overall global development agenda, using the eight MDGs as a starting point, and mapping ICTs against each one of these goals. A more analytical piece is planned for 2004 on the ICT for Development Agenda, as well as a collection of examples, success stories and case studies that will provide illustrative examples of the role of ICTs in meeting the development challenge.

Promoting a dialogue on Internet governance and other policy issues. The Task Force is actively contributing to the key outstanding issues emerging from Geneva, and in particular the issues related to Internet governance. Building on its recognized strengths, the Task Force explores opportunities and mechanisms for bringing all relevant actors together in a productive dialogue on Internet governance and other policy issues created by the IT revolution. This work is based on the on-going activities in the areas of ICT Policy and Governance (Working Group 1) and e-Strategies (Working Group 2). The objective is to advance the international debate on this crucial set of issues, contribute to laying a solid foundation for a meaningful consensual debate, and thus make a tangible contribution to the second phase of the WSIS in Tunis.

Supporting an enabling environment. The recent WSIS in Geneva endorsed the decisive role of enabling environment in the propagation of ICTs and their consequent impact on development. The UN ICT Task Force works together with other stakeholders to facilitate the identification of best practices, which constitute the road map towards favourable conditions for the information society development.

In collaboration with different partners, including from the private sector, the Task Force will promote capacity building in ICT policy-making in developing countries and countries with economies in transition through building activities complementary to those to be supported in 2004-2006 through the Development Account project that is going to be led by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The major contribution by the Task Force will be in supporting the establishment of networks of policy makers and practitioners and in facilitating on-line training.

On-going activities. Several pilot programmes have now been successfully incubated and launched. In its third and fourth years of operation, the ICT Task Force will strive to bring those initiatives to scale.

The Global e-Schools and Communities Initiative that was launched at the WSIS is planned to focus on the first wave of countries - India, Bolivia, Ghana and Namibia in 2004 with the support of a dedicated secretariat in Dublin, Ireland. A second wave is expected to follow in 2006. The ICT Task Force will continue to play a role in policy direction and linking GeSCI to other activities and actors to ensure coherence.

The Task Force will be a vital partner to the Chief Executives Board of the United Nations system for coordination (CEB) in developing an ICT Strategy for the UN System as plans to develop approaches in a framework for a broad, coherent and effective strategy proceed. A proposal will be submitted to the Secretary-General in 2004.

The series on Policy Awareness and Training in Information Technology (PATIT) will continue in 2004 and will offer its full-scale Global eLearning programme for Senior Policy-makers in Capitals beginning in April.

The Wireless Internet Institute's ambitious WSIS programme, supported by the ICT Task Force and other partners, will take place throughout 2004 and 2005. It consists of an Arab World Seminar Series, an African Continent Series, a Municipal and Local Authorities Series and a series of Regulatory Workshops on Unlicensed Spectrum Policy in Support of Universal Access. Each will be composed of several workshops or meetings and will culminate in reports presented to the WSIS in Tunis.

The Task Force will encourage the Digital Diaspora networks to build upon the enthusiasm displayed at their launch events and support their efforts to develop and implement tangible initiatives to capture and focus the desire and determination of the Latin American, Caribbean and African Diaspora to make positive contributions to their home regions.

Strengthening supporting activities. The basis of the UN ICT Task Force's effectiveness is its power to bring influential stakeholders together to address common concerns. In order to attract the relevant players, its activities must be properly promoted and disseminated to reach the appropriate audiences. The Task Force has undertaken significant effort to raise awareness and mobilize support for the ICT-for-development agenda and contact civil society by organizing conferences and workshops, publications and articles in journals. The Task Force has also promoted its work at major international events, including most recently the World Summit on the Information Society, and intends to continue to do so. Nevertheless, the promotion and outreach activities could benefit from being reinvigorated and made more professional with a view to strengthening delivery of information about the activities of the Task Force. Public and media interest in the ICT Task Force must be promoted and nurtured more effectively through a media-savvy approach.

Fundraising is directly affected by the effectiveness of the Task Force's promotion and outreach. In order to ensure successful implementation of the mandate, Plan of Action and

decisions taken by the meetings of the Task Force, as well as for providing an effective secretarial support to Task Force activities and events, it is imperative to establish a stable, sustainable and predictable resource base. The Task Force is evaluating the feasibility of adding a full-time development officer to the Secretariat to ensure a systematic and effective fundraising effort.

Conclusion

We live under a still evolving but already distinctly novel paradigm of global society that is based on networking in pursuit of common interests and on the emergence of un-hierarchical, multi-lateral and multi-stakeholder approaches. ICTs are the nerve system of this new paradigm. They are used to monitor external environment and internal systems functioning, to transfer action impulses and provide feedback. The recent WSIS declared the need to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society]

However, at present the full potential of ICT in servicing and driving the new paradigm is far from being adequately harnessed. It needs to be utilized much more efficiently and fully. The ICT Task Force, due to its very nature, is well-positioned to contribute to making the new global paradigm work for development.

The effectiveness and the development impact of the activities of the Task Force and of its subsidiary bodies are predicated on the degree to which its members and partners are prepared to commit, in a meaningful and sustainable manner, their time and resources – intellectual, institutional, technological and financial – to the implementation of initiatives that the Task Force agreed on.

Notes

[1] E/2003/56. 28 April 2003.

[2] This section has been contributed by the International Telecommunication Union.

[3] See the website of the United Nations ICT Task Force http://www.unicttaskforce.org for these documents.

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