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Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,  
on Tuesday 3 July 2001, at 3 p.m.

President: Mr. SEIXAS DA COSTA (Portugal)  
(Vice-President)

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In the absence of Mr. Belinga-Eboutou (Cameroon), Mr. Seixas da Costa (Portugal), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

COORDINATION OF THE POLICIES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIALIZED AGENCIES AND OTHER BODIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM RELATED TO THE FOLLOWING THEME: THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS IN PROMOTING DEVELOPMENT, PARTICULARLY WITH RESPECT TO ACCESS TO AND TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE AND TECHNOLOGY, ESPECIALLY INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES, INTER ALIA, THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS WITH RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS, INCLUDING THE PRIVATE SECTOR (agenda item 4) (continued) (E/2001/59 and 91; A/56/86-E/2001/79)

Panel discussion on “United Nations - private sector partnerships in promoting access to knowledge for development: potential, current status, the way forward”

The PRESIDENT said that it had been agreed to hold a discussion on means, including private sector partnerships, for promoting access to knowledge for development, following presentations by a panel of experts from various United Nations agencies. The discussion would be moderated by Mr. Sarbuland Khan, the Director of the Division for Economic and Social Council Support and Coordination.

Mr. KHAN (Moderator of the panel discussion) introduced the four panellists: Mr. Roberto Blois, Deputy Secretary-General, International Telecommunication Union; Mr. Duncan Campbell, Chief a.i., World Employment Report Team, International Labour Organization; Mr. Philippe Quéau, Director of Information Society Division, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; and Dr. Michael Scholtz, Special Representative of the Director-General, World Health Organization.

Mr. BLOIS (International Telecommunication Union (ITU)) said that the gap in the transfer of information and communication technologies (ICT) was not simply in the equipment and technologies themselves but in acquired skills, especially in telecommunications. In particular, the shift of focus from engineering to operations, business, services and markets would require enormous retraining to provide new and updated skills.

The purpose of ITU was to promote peaceful relations, international cooperation and economic and social development by means of efficient telecommunication services. It was the only organization that dealt with all telecommunication and broadcasting issues, and was a meeting place for the world's administrations, regulators, operators, industries and research

centres. It was the specialized agency of the United Nations responsible for telecommunications regulation, standardization and development throughout the world, having a specific mandate to assist developing countries in building their capacity. In its work, ITU focused increasingly on the use of ICTs, including the training of tutors to develop online courses, based on the recognition that new modes of delivery and paradigms of learning meant that employee skills (“brainware”) would need constant upgrading.

The current relevant ITU projects, especially in knowledge and technology transfer, included the maintenance of centres of excellence in the various regions, operated on the basis of partnership agreements such as the agreement signed between ITU and ACACIA, Spectrocan and Nortel Networks in the case of the Centre of Excellence for Western and Central Africa, for which a further proposal, led by Thalès and supported by the French Government, would shortly be finalized. The total amount of contributions for the African centres of excellence was some US\$ 3.6 million from 1999 to 2001, some 35 per cent of which came from partnership contributions in cash and kind. Some Governments had provided similar inputs for some of the centres - for example those of Australia and Japan in the case of the Asia and Pacific region.

Other projects included technology transfer through new training material, the development of regional case studies, regional workshops and the delivery of modules over the Internet, as well as the Global Telecommunication Training Institute and the Global Telecommunication University. In partnership with private sector entities, ITU also provided an Internet Training Centres Initiative, aimed at establishing a worldwide network of centres for training on Internet Protocol networks by mid-2003. Such projects relied, of course, on the commitment and participation of the various partners.

A number of questions remained pending, however, particularly that of the level of contributions in cash and kind from the various partnerships, which fell short of the infrastructural needs in a number of developing countries, satisfaction of which must be recognized as a primary objective. It was not surprising that most of the world’s inhabitants remained excluded from the digital revolution, since half of them had yet to make their first telephone call. The objective of the Maitland Commission, established by ITU in the mid-1980s, to bring a telephone within easy reach of every citizen by the end of the twentieth century, was far from being achieved, despite substantial progress in narrowing the telecommunication gap. A concerted effort was urgently needed, therefore, to overcome the serious lack of infrastructure in many developing countries, by means of a comprehensive, coordinated and complementary

approach that avoided duplication of effort. Infrastructure development must be recognized as a primary objective of all initiatives to bridge the “digital divide”; to that end, ITU, with its 189 member States and over 660 sector members, would play a leading role.

Another important ITU contribution was the provision of ICT indicators to help measure the gap and assess how it was changing. ITU databases, Web pages and publications such as the World Telecommunication Development Report provided regular up-to-date information, and the previous year ITU had also launched a programme of country case studies to measure the degree of Internet diffusion and study the factors involved.

Efforts to bridge the “digital divide” had attracted worldwide attention at the highest level. In that regard, ITU had been designated, under the auspices of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the lead organization in preparing the World Summit on Information Society, to be held in two phases: the first in December 2003 at Geneva and the second in 2005 in Tunisia. He welcomed the comments made in that regard by some delegations, including those of Japan, Switzerland and the United States, at the Council’s previous meeting. A high-level summit organization committee had been established and would hold its first meeting in October 2001, and the work of the executive secretariat would begin during the current month, with the host country’s direct support. The ITU Secretary-General would make a statement on the summit and the preparations therefor at a meeting of the high-level segment.

Mr. CAMPBELL (International Labour Organization (ILO)), having congratulated the Secretariat on its excellent background document, said that the year 2000 had witnessed the start of many ILO initiatives to harness the potential of ICT techniques and improve its delivery of technical cooperation.

With its tripartite structure, ILO was the sole United Nations agency to include an important segment of civil society in its ambit and as a focus of its technical cooperation. Public and private partnerships had always characterized the method of work of ILO, which would benefit from the early stages of the digital era to strengthen its mandate of knowledge provision, advocacy and service. ICTs were changing the way in which the Organization related to its constituents in the service of development, through broader access to information, the widening of its scope for technical cooperation, especially in the training of human capital - so aptly dubbed “brainware” by the previous speaker - and lower barriers to networking on best practice.

The main comparative advantage of ILO lay in the provision of specialized information. Although it was traditionally abundant, the accessibility of such information had been constrained by time and space, a problem significantly diminished by the ICT revolution, with the various ILO Web sites providing instant information to its constituents and boosting its knowledge-sharing function.

First of all, for ILO, a private-public partnership implied not only an action-oriented activity with a measurable outcome, but also a more upstream role of creating knowledge and awareness of the importance of the ICT revolution for the world of work. The ILO report, World Employment 2001: Life at Work in the Information Economy, studied the impact of ICTs on the labour market: namely, job creation, quality of work and life, workplace relations, employer and employee organizations and existing labour laws. Since globalization was usually challenged on the grounds that it widened income inequality, much of ILO's interest was focused on the relationship between the digital divide and the potential for an economic divide.

Secondly, collation of the information in the report and the resultant policy decisions had been a private-public partnership endeavour in which ILO had worked closely with many private information firms and a number of international trade union organizations.

Thirdly, the report had also been a digital success, it being the first of its kind to appear on CD-ROM, thus affording instant access to the background studies, including 15 commissioned from the developing countries, and a range of upstream hyperlinks to the Internet. It was meant not only for information, but also for use as a policy tool. Indeed, ILO was organizing tripartite national seminars in many countries, using the report to identify practical technical-cooperation programmes and activities. For instance, although India possessed dynamic software technology, it needed to understand the implications of ICTs for employment generally and for its sugar sector in particular.

Turning to the technical-cooperation facilities of ILO, he said it focused more than other agencies on human capital formation in the form of education for the labour market, improving conciliation and negotiation skills, promoting small businesses and affording better access to vocational training. A key application was distance learning, one such venture being an interactive distance module to help workers integrate into the post-war labour market in Bosnia. A creation of the ILO International Training Centre in Turin was the Distance Education and Learning Technology Applications (DELTA) programme designed to modernize training

systems, disseminating ways in which ICTs could serve. The Centre held year-round training courses in various areas for ILO constituents from developing countries. Since such training was expensive, it endeavoured to train trainers, thus unleashing a multiplier effect.

A recent training project at the Centre had established that distance learning helped reach more trade unionists, providing pre- and post-course support and educational activities entirely on the Internet. Distance learning packages had been tested in Latin America, where countries met to exchange ideas in a “virtual” forum. The ILO Social Finance Unit’s technical cooperation for microcredit was currently online, allowing microcredit agencies and non-bank institutions worldwide access to techniques for disbursing small loans for business growth in the informal and formal sectors. That capacity to transcend constraints of time, money and people was particularly important for development growth in developing countries, where marginal gains from access to knowledge had the greatest impact.

The third area of ILO development-partnership endeavours was the promotion of networking in the public and private sectors. Its Infocus skills-development programme had established an International Network of Vocational Training Providers, public and private alike, so as to facilitate curriculum exchange and thus lengthen the reach of ILO’s technical cooperation. The programme, which should be available by the end of the year, would establish an online databank and Web site to facilitate interaction among trainers in different countries.

The programme entitled Decent Work and Poverty Reduction: Social Dialogue and Employment Promotion in National Poverty Reduction Strategies would establish an intercountry network of employers’ organizations in an effort to promote the exchange of information. A key aim of the ILO employer and worker constituents was to promote connectivity in their own organizations first of all, as well as Internet and ICT training.

Mr. QUÉAU (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)) said that although the information economy was in full spate, the increased saleability of information had caused it to become heavily skewed, with massive concentration and new forms of inequality of access to information.

Between 1988 and 1998, the value of data-processing business mergers and take-overs had increased tenfold in informatics and by 40 per cent in telecommunications. Increasing software outputs and networks were also typical of the new economy. While globalization of the information economy had spawned oligopolies and even monopolies, there was no worldwide

antitrust regulation, and regional antitrust legislation was enforced in conflicting ways. All the more so with regard to cognitive content, for which the industrialized world held 97 per cent of the patents.

Intellectual property played a crucial role. The 1999 report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) observed that the strengthening of intellectual property rights denied the developing countries access to the information economy and should be challenged. In the recent polemic concerning generic anti-AIDS drugs, a lawsuit brought against South Africa by pharmaceutical consortia underscored the impact of the globalization of intellectual property protection systems. Whereas the manufacture of generic drugs was legal in South Africa, the consortia had claimed that it was illegal under the World Trade Organization (WTO) agreements, even though the TRIPS agreement in fact authorized countries to adopt a compulsory licensing system in certain cases. In thus displaying their indifference to a serious humanitarian problem, the consortia had highlighted the ethical, political and social impact of intellectual property protection policies.

From the very outset, the protection of intellectual property had been conceived of as a balance between owners and users of information. That balance was currently being called into question. The duration of protection also defined the extent of the public domain. Extending that duration, as had recently been done in Europe or the United States, diminished the public domain accordingly and it was questionable whether that was in the general interest. It would seem that the continuous pressure to extend copyright took no account of the social imperative to create positive externalities, in other words, to preserve a strong and freely accessible public domain in the higher interest of the national or global community. In theory, knowledge and information presented all the characteristics of a “public good”. Moreover, knowledge and accessible information constituted a large part of those “positive externalities”, such as education, scientific exchanges and the raising of the cultural level of society, from which the market benefited substantially. Protecting and developing that public good would be good public policy.

At its 30th session, the General Conference of UNESCO approved resolution 30C/37, aimed at promoting multilingualism in and universal access to cyberspace, in which it invited the Director-General to submit a draft recommendation to it on that subject at its 31st session. Such a recommendation could well take the form of a draft international charter for a common public cyberspace, serving such political objectives as the adoption of laws on freedom of information,

regulations regarding online access to public data and their digitization and storage by means of systems guaranteeing interoperability, and lastly the encouragement of cooperation between the various international governmental and non-governmental organizations with a view to the establishment of a universally accessible body of knowledge. The recent decision by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to make all its courses freely accessible online was an example of action to that end.

The three main challenges to be faced were, first, to guarantee interoperability and the harmonization of digitization processes; second, to facilitate North-South and South-South technological transfer and the exchange of good practice; and lastly, to put systematically into effect means of promoting the widest possible access to the essential data of the cultural heritage of humankind.

The notion of the primary interest of the world community transcended classical international law. It should profit from wide debate, particularly through its diffusion on a global scale within the framework of those institutions charged with regulating trade and intellectual property. It was particularly important to define the notion of service in the general interest with regard to telecommunication. The aim should be to arrive at a positive definition of the notion of global public utility and the United Nations system was an appropriate place in which to start. In the current context of an information society, thought must be given to establishing a policy for a public cyberspace. That public space, consisting of the information, documents, data, software, standards and content that formed part of the common cultural heritage, would gradually constitute a global public library and programme depository. The domain would include the global public goods as well as public sector institutions, which played a considerable role economically. Their influence as consultants and their international networking capacity through their member States could help to support a public policy initiative aimed at defining the notions of “global essential service” and “global public utility” within the framework of the global information society.

Mr. KHAN (Moderator of the panel discussion) said that Mr. Quéau’s remarks on multilateralism in cyberspace and the way in which individual and private interests might be reconciled with the global public good had raised some very fundamental questions that the United Nations system would need to address.



Dr. SCHOLTZ (World Health Organization (WHO)), introducing his slide presentation, said that, of the many WHO activities for the transfer of health knowledge he had chosen to describe in detail the Health InterNetwork, an initiative that had been launched by the Secretary-General himself. In discussing health and information and communication technologies, three things came to mind. First there was the general lack of connectivity in the developing countries, not only in terms of access to the Internet but also in terms of communication with each other. Secondly, there was the question of content. Even where there was access to the Internet, the content was often inappropriate. It was chiefly expressed in English, which could be a problem in itself and the type of information available was not always what was needed. Thirdly, the way in which the information received was managed was also important. Management in turn involved the question of capacity in developing countries, not only in terms of training in computer use, which was relatively easy, but also in terms of understanding and application.

The goals of the InterNetwork were, first, to provide access to relevant and timely health information of high quality, and secondly, to provide a forum in which health professionals and policy-makers could communicate with each other. Throughout the project, therefore, the groups concerned would be consulted as to content. To enhance connectivity, the installation of some 10,000 to 13,000 new access sites was envisaged to ensure that the information arrived at the place where it was needed.

The project was directed towards three core groups: health-care providers, health researchers and health policy-makers.

One example of what could be provided was access for health researchers to scientific publications, many of which were currently unavailable in developing countries because of their cost. Another was access to health statistics for policy-makers.

WHO could not, of course, establish and manage such a vast project alone. It would work with a number of partners, first the specialized agencies of the United Nations system, followed by national public health institutions and academic bodies. It would also need partners in the private sector to provide the software and hardware that would be needed, as well as partners in civil society, such as foundations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to help with implementation and funding.

Certain principles would apply. The project would recognize that health work was primarily non-profit-making. The goal would be to take information that was already available locally and make it available electronically on a worldwide basis. Secondly, the content must be of a high standard in respect of quality and ethics. It was essential for the reputation of the United Nations that the information provided through the InterNetwork should be trustworthy and reliable. It must also be affordable and negotiations would be held with publishers to ensure that material offered through the InterNetwork would not be too expensive. There would also be negotiations with private companies for the provision of low-cost computers and software.

As far as the roles of the various partners were concerned, WHO would lead the cooperative effort, while UNDP would be responsible for connectivity. The other specialized agencies and funds involved and academia would be consulted with regard to content. NGOs would be involved in the implementation of the project and the private sector would be approached to provide hardware, software and training. Foundations would be approached for financial support.

The slide showing the governance structure of the Health InterNetwork illustrated a vertical arrangement headed by a Steering Committee, consisting chiefly of members of the ICT Task Force. There would be a secretariat to carry out the day-to-day work of implementation, supported by an advisory group on content and another on appropriate technology. Obviously, such a vast project would need to be implemented in stages.

A pilot phase of 6 to 12 months would focus on needs assessments in selected nations by stressing priority public health programmes (such as tuberculosis and tobacco in India, HIV/AIDS in Africa and the Western Pacific, and immunization in the Eastern Mediterranean and Eastern European regions). Providing the current funding shortage was overcome, and following a one-year operation and evaluation phase, the InterNetwork would be expanded to more than 100 countries over five years.

Ms. ORELAS (Mexico) said that despite the commendable efforts being made to bridge the “digital divide”, most developing countries were still grappling with such basic problems as illiteracy. Where a large majority of the population had no access to electricity or telephones, Internet access surely represented a utopian dream.

Mr. BLOIS (International Telecommunication Union) said that support was being provided to least developed countries in Africa and elsewhere to improve basic infrastructure, which was clearly a prerequisite for Internet access.

Mr. YEOMANS (United Kingdom) asked whether international development targets were being integrated into the ICT activities described by the panellists.

Dr. SCHOLTZ (World Health Organization (WHO)) said that the project had been planned in accordance with realistic time-frames, not potentially elusive targets.

Mr. CAMPBELL (International Labour Organization (ILO)) said that activities were being planned in accordance with various possible scenarios projecting the likely size of the labour market, the numbers of working poor and world productivity in 2010. It was to be hoped that improved ICTs would both stimulate employment opportunities in developing countries and provide better remunerated work, but the exact impact of ICTs on labour markets was difficult to assess.

Mr. QUÉAU (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)) said that the main obstacle to improving both infrastructure and content was a lack of political will. He would cite two examples. Although a high-capacity network currently connected Portugal and Malaysia, a number of countries along whose coastline it passed had yet to be connected. Réunion and Mauritius were linked to the underwater fibre-optic cable, but Madagascar, for instance, was not. The South Atlantic Telephone - West African Submarine Cable/South Africa - Far East fibre-optic network (SAT-3/WASC) was capable of transmitting data at 80 gigabytes per second, and was thus significantly faster and cheaper than any satellite system.

The second example was the fate of the Bibliotheca Universalis project launched in 1995 by the Group of Seven nations with the purpose of making the world's scientific and cultural heritage freely accessible to a vast public via multimedia technologies. Its founding partners had included the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Library of Congress and the British Library. The project had made little progress due to lack of funding.

Mr. BLOIS (International Telecommunication Union (ITU)) said that, although lack of basic infrastructure (including telephone cables) was the main obstacle to the spread of ICT, "content" problems, such as lack of information in local languages, must also be addressed.

Mr. KHAN (Moderator of the panel discussion) said that the panellists had argued the case for information and communication technologies (ICT) as tools for development. Indeed, ICT had the potential to provide poor communities with the information they needed to emerge from poverty. However, many countries were currently forced to choose between computers, medicines and bread. For the “digital divide” to be bridged, the world’s poorest must first be provided with the most basic services, and that required stronger political will and the involvement of all stakeholders, including the private sector.

The meeting rose at 4.50 p.m.