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Provisional summary record of the 3rd meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Thursday, 8 March 2001, at 9.30 a.m.

President: Mr. Belinga-Eboutou (Cameroon)

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The meeting was called to order at 9.50 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda and other organizational matters (continued)

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Task Force (E/2001/7)

1. **The President** said that the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in economic development and strategies to reduce poverty had been extensively discussed during the Council's substantive session in 2000. The discussion had given rise to the adoption of a Ministerial Declaration, which defined an approach for future action on the role of information technology in the context of the knowledge-based economy.

2. A key outcome of the Council's sessions during 2000 had been the recommendation that an ICT task force should be established to coordinate global efforts to use such technologies to promote development. Subsequently, an extensive, worldwide consultation process had been undertaken to obtain the opinions and ideas of Governments, the private sector and other stakeholders. It had resulted in a consensus that such a task force was urgently needed and that, although operating under the umbrella of the United Nations, it should have sufficient autonomy to be able to fulfil its mandate in a rapidly changing environment. A further consensus was that the mission of the task force should focus on economic development and alleviation of poverty in developing countries, the least developed countries and countries with economies in transition.

3. It was important to recognize that the digital divide was the result of other traditional inequalities, such as those in income and wealth, in access to education and health. Therefore, the question was how to harness ICT, which powered the global knowledge-based economy, in order to provide the poorest with new opportunities for education, health and work.

4. The ICT Task Force should give special attention to Africa, as it was the region of the world that was most excluded from the new economy. Numerous ICT projects were already under way there, and the Task Force should evaluate efforts to date, support existing projects and help the African countries become aware of the possibilities of ICT.

5. The Council had before it the report of the Secretary-General (E/2001/7), which was a milestone on the long road to harnessing the immense potential of ICT for development and to combat poverty.

6. **Mr. Figueres-Olsen** (Chairman of the Advisory Group on the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Task Force), addressing the Council by video link from Geneva, said that the intention in establishing the Task Force was to allow the United Nations to play an important and synergetic role in advancing ICT that had the potential to enhance development in many areas, particularly education and health. He recalled that the ministerial declaration of the high-level segment of the substantive session of 2000 of the Council had called for the creation of an information and communication technologies (ICT) task force and requested the Secretary-General to undertake consultations with Member States and all stakeholders. As a result, the Secretary-General had established a Group of High-level Advisers on ICT under the speaker's chairmanship, which had conducted a decentralized, worldwide consultation process, meeting with stakeholders from the different sectors.

7. The report that the Group had submitted to the Secretary-General called for the creation of a Task Force with a three-year mandate and recognized that ICT was not an academic exercise in technology per se but rather an extraordinary catalyst of development possibilities, which could help attain the goal set by the Millennium Summit of cutting poverty in half by 2015 by accelerating growth and empowering the poor.

8. The strategic framework for the ICT Task Force would encourage a decentralized approach to information gathering, knowledge-sharing and cooperation; it should be inclusive in nature and give ample representation to the private sector in those areas, endeavours and responsibilities where the latter could add value, and it should be complementary to other existing initiatives, in particular the Digital Opportunities Task Force (*dot force*) initiative launched by the Group of Eight countries (G-8). It also recommended delegation of the operational and programme execution aspects to the appropriate organizations.

9. The report mentioned priority areas where the Task Force should begin its work; they included awareness-raising at the political level; promoting

universal and affordable access; assisting Member States to develop national strategies; capacity-building; identifying new resources; and building partnerships with appropriate organizations and agencies.

10. As for its working methods, the Task Force should start by formulating an aggressive programme of action and interact and coordinate with other ongoing efforts. It would be supported by a small three- to four-person secretariat, seconded from participating United Nations system agencies, the private sector or non-governmental organizations.

11. The report had established the groundwork for a solid United Nations initiative in the field of ICT. Nevertheless, it was important to act rapidly. Other ICT initiatives were under way; if the Council adopted the report of the Secretary-General, however, the United Nations could establish the Task Force well before the *dot force* submitted its report to the G-8 meeting in Genoa in July 2001. That would open up the possibility for the Task Force to assume a coordinating and leadership role by implementing a progressive, worldwide ICT policy that would position the United Nations in the forefront in the quest to ensure that the ICTs fulfilled their potential for making a major contribution to development. He therefore urged Council members to adopt the Secretary-General's report.

12. **Mr. Asadi** (Islamic Republic of Iran), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, said that it was important to bridge the technological and knowledge gap between the industrialized countries and the developing world as soon and as fully as possible. The Group of 77 had only received the report a few days previously and would make more substantial comments on the matter at a later stage when it had had the opportunity to meet and discuss it.

13. **Mr. Desai** (Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs) said that he wished to express his gratitude for Mr. Figueres-Olsen's efforts in leading the consultations on the Task Force and the collaborative way in which the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other members of the system had worked together. The Economic and Social Council had launched an innovative way to move ahead on that question and had demonstrated its capacity to act quickly and decisively. The Task Force would be the first global forum with an

intergovernmental mandate to look at policy issues in the crucial area of information and communications technology. A timely decision on the matter was important in an industry where change was rapid and the key private sector participants were accustomed to quick decisions.

14. The report of the Secretary-General on the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Task Force (E/2001/7) focussed mainly on modalities. He drew attention to paragraph 20 of the report, which could be a starting point for discussion of the terms of reference, and to paragraph 27, dealing with the composition of the Task Force. Paragraphs 24 and 29 dealt with the sub-groups which would be established, and paragraph 31 discussed the proposed secretariat and funding modalities. He was starting from the presumption that Council members agreed that the Task Force should be established, and on the need for a quick decision. The Department viewed it as an experiment which would be evaluated after an initial three-year period.

15. It was legitimate to ask why information and communications technologies were being emphasized when many basic development needs were not being met. It was his firm belief, however, that ICT was the most important sector for development in the twenty-first century. That field of technology would make it easier to meet needs in such basic areas as health and education. A key example was the recent earthquake in India, where technology had dramatically increased the speed at which information on the situation was available and had allowed relief and assistance to be mobilized at a pace which would have been unimaginable a decade earlier.

16. The proposed Task Force would be a central element of the dissemination of technology for development. Information technology was a key medium for the dissemination of knowledge, and the issue should not be viewed as a choice between ICT and support for education, health care or other sectors. It was very important, therefore, for ICT to come under the umbrella of a Charter body like the Economic and Social Council.

17. **Ms. Lekvall** (Observer for Sweden), speaking on behalf of the European Union, said that it was very important for the United Nations to succeed in the area of information and communications technologies for development, which would help to raise its profile

around the world. In order to succeed, the Task Force must be effective, flexible and businesslike. The European Union welcomed the opportunity to integrate the private sector into the work of the Task Force; it stressed the need, however, to avoid duplication of other initiatives.

18. Some of the areas mentioned in the Ministerial Declaration of the Economic and Social Council, such as regional integration, cultural and linguistic development and regulatory questions, should be emphasized more in the work of the Task Force. Freedom of speech should also be considered during the Council's deliberations. Finally, the European Union had some questions on financing and the Trust Fund, as well as on the satellite nodes, which it would raise during the informal consultations.

19. **Mr. Widodo** (Indonesia) said that his delegation associated itself with the statement of the Islamic Republic of Iran on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. The ICT Task Force was being designed to be a vehicle for increasing awareness of the potential of ICT and to forge new partnerships between the public and private sectors. It should prove to be useful in steering the role of the United Nations system towards harnessing those technologies.

20. The proposals resulting from the consultations on the Task Force, as contained in the report of the Secretary-General, were worthy of support. The United Nations had a unique role to play, because of its universality, moral authority and representative character, in shaping the vision for ICT. Other initiatives outside the United Nations had also been launched for similar purposes. The challenge for the future was to see those technologies being fully utilized in the service of development and the eradication of poverty and to empower the world's poor and disenfranchised.

21. **Mr. Redman** (United States of America) said that his delegation welcomed the report of the Secretary-General as a good point of departure for a discussion of the proposed Task Force.

22. His delegation also welcomed the call to avoid duplication of effort and to seek synergies with existing programmes, including the *dot force* established by the major industrialized countries. With regard to the strategic framework, he noted that the Task Force was part and parcel of the overall international development effort, and as such, its impact and success would

depend primarily on an enabling domestic environment, which included good governance, the rule of law and sound economic policies. The Task Force should be part of the effort to achieve that environment and foster pro-competition ICT policies. One of its roles should be to assist Governments in promoting an open, inclusive and participatory approach to setting standards, establishing a regulatory framework and governance mechanisms.

23. His delegation agreed that the Task Force should be funded through voluntary contributions and supported the concept of the Trust Fund. It looked forward to participating in future discussions on the matter.

24. **Mr. Stanislavov** (Russian Federation) said that the initiative to form the ICT Task Force was timely, as it could play an important role in bridging the digital divide between developed and developing countries. All countries must have equal access to the advantages of those new technologies, and the role of the United Nations was to establish the necessary conditions to achieve that goal.

25. The report of the Secretary-General showed convincingly that measures must be implemented at the international level to create the conditions for dissemination of information and communications technologies. The report contained practical recommendations regarding the establishment of the Task Force, its operational modalities and financing. The great potential those technologies offered for development was not yet being sufficiently exploited in setting development policy. The mechanisms to coordinate such efforts were also inadequate, and his delegation agreed with the need to strengthen synergy and complementarity among the various initiatives in that area. One of the main objectives should be to provide real support to cooperation in ICT from the private sector.

26. The criteria for the establishment of the Task Force contained in the report corresponded exactly to the unique nature of that structure, which must ensure the participation of the scientific community, non-governmental organizations, United Nations bodies and Governments. The autonomy of the Task Force must be ensured, along with the participation of Member States in policy implementation and monitoring.

27. **Mr. Seki** (Japan) said that one of the main areas of focus for the Task Force should be the creation of

synergies with other United Nations activities. His delegation hoped that the Task Force would become operational at an early date and looked forward to further discussion of the subject of information and communication technologies.

28. **Ms. Girtel** (Canada) agreed that the Task Force should focus on synergies and avoid duplication of efforts. While the report was a good point of departure for the Task Force's work, it should have included even more direct references to the integration of ICT into development strategies within the broader context of efforts to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development. There were also a number of issues on which her delegation would welcome clarification.

29. It was not clear, firstly, how the ICT Task Force would add value to other existing initiatives and activities of a similar nature. More specific information on that subject would therefore be helpful. Secondly, the composition of the Task Force should include the Bretton Woods institutions as representatives of the United Nations system organizations. Thirdly, she would welcome information on how the Task Force proposed to interact with the *dot force* initiative launched by the Group of Eight countries (G-8). Lastly, given the rapid pace of developments in the field of ICT, the Task Force should submit its reports to the Secretary-General on a more frequent basis than the annual basis that was currently envisaged.

30. **Mr. Ji Fusheng** (China) welcomed the establishment of the Task Force, which he hoped would pay greater attention to the needs of developing countries and make a tangible contribution to efforts to bridge the existing digital divide. The Task Force should also report accurately on the impact of ICT on developing countries in the field of the dissemination of information.

31. **Mr. Osio** (Nigeria) said that the digital divide was a stark reality in Africa. He agreed with the representative of the United States of America on the importance of creating a domestic environment that was conducive to efforts to bridge that divide. ICT helped to create that enabling environment, especially in areas where technology was totally absent. An international effort on the part of all stakeholders, including the private sector, was needed to promote the use of ICT so that the people of the developing world could also enjoy their benefits.

32. **Mr. Mutaboba** (Rwanda) said that the Secretary-General's report on the ICT Task Force marked only the beginning of international efforts to bridge the digital divide. It was now time to move beyond mere words to action. He did not share the pessimism of those who believed that the divide could not be bridged. He recognized, however, that there was a fear of change in the developing world and that one of the Task Force's challenges would be to demystify technology and bring it closer to the people.

33. **Mr. Rahmtalla** (Sudan) said that in planning its programme of work for the following weeks, the Council should allow delegations sufficient time to prepare their contributions to the debate on ICT.

34. **Mr. Khan** (Director of the Division for Economic and Social Council Support and Coordination), responding to the questions that had been asked, said that the Secretary-General placed a high priority on ICT. The Group of High-level Advisers on ICT which he had established included not only ICT experts but also experts in the field of development, who were grappling with the challenge of how to link the two fields so as to enable people in the developing world to benefit from the ICT revolution.

35. As for how the Task Force would add value to similar initiatives and activities, it was the first time that a universal body like the United Nations had established a mechanism to discuss and implement ICT programmes and to take account of the relationship of ICT to development policies. An information revolution was under way against the background of a digital divide, and if the developing countries, particularly those in Africa, did not participate in that revolution the gap would only grow wider. Indeed, the link between development and ICT was a key element in attaining the goals set by world leaders at the Millennium Summit of the United Nations and at the recent major global conferences. In the pursuit of those goals, with particular focus on the poorest countries, including those in Africa, the United Nations had a clear competitive advantage as well as the vocation to bring the revolution to those who were currently excluded from it or in danger of being left further behind in the race for development as a result of the ICT revolution.

36. With regard to the composition of the Task Force, the World Bank had been engaged in the process from the very beginning. Indeed, the participation of the

Bretton Woods institutions as part of the United Nations system was absolutely essential. The Council worked closely with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) by offering its ideas and suggestions for the Programme's important digital opportunities initiative. It also worked closely with institutions outside of the United Nations, including in Africa, to promote greater synergies.

37. In its efforts to bring all players into the process, the Council adopted a decentralized and cooperative approach. One key outcome of its consultations with organizations in Africa, Latin America and Asia had been to ensure that the process took adequate account of the particular needs of the various regions through the establishment of regional satellite nodes that fed into the work of the global Task Force and around which resources could be mobilized.

38. Lastly, the Council must recognize the heightened expectations that had arisen as a result of the public dissemination of its ICT initiative and should strive to fulfil those expectations.

The meeting rose at 11.20 a.m.