



United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Distr.: Limited
24 April 2008

Original: English

Twelfth session

Accra, Ghana

20–25 April 2008

Agenda item 8 (c)

Summary of interactive thematic round table 5

Harnessing knowledge and technology for development

1. Under sub-theme 3 – “Enhancing the enabling environment at all levels to strengthen productive capacity, trade and investment: mobilizing resources and harnessing knowledge for development” – the round table addressed the role of knowledge and technology in development, and made recommendations, identifying specific measures and actions needed at the national and international level to integrate knowledge and technology in development strategies.

2. It was chaired by the President of the Conference, H.E. Joe Baidoo-Ansah, the Minister of Trade of Ghana, and moderated by Mr. Art Reilly, Senior Director, Cisco Systems. Dr. Supachai Panitchpakdi, the Secretary-General of UNCTAD, made an opening statement, which was followed by a keynote address by Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of Thailand.

3. Panellists included H.E. Mr. Benjamin Aggrey Ntim, Minister of Communications of Ghana; H.E. Mr. Fadillah Yusof, Deputy Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation of Malaysia; H.E. Mr. Frank Heemskerk, Minister for Foreign Trade of the Netherlands; Mr. Michael Rawding, Vice President, Unlimited Potential Group, Microsoft Corporation; and Mr. Gordon Graylish, Vice-President of Intel Europe, Middle East and Africa. Statements were also made by the following lead discussants: Mr. George S. Dragnich, Director, Office of Economic and Development Affairs, Bureau of International Organization Affairs, United States Department of State; Ms. Margaret Blamberg, Chair of the New York Non-governmental Organization Committee on Financing for Development; Ms. Tytti Nyahi, Service Centre for Development Cooperation (KEPA), Finland; and Mr. Ricardo Meléndez-Ortiz, Chief Executive, International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development.

I. Knowledge, technology, innovation and development

4. It was noted that knowledge, technology and innovation played a central role in the development process. Advances in science and technology had been at the heart of the marked increases in productivity and per capita incomes. Also, applications of science and technology had become central in facilitating the

achievement of most of the Millennium Development Goals, especially in such areas as poverty alleviation, health, education and the environment. It was felt that technological development should be inclusive and bring benefit to marginalized groups, especially women and girls.

5. The ability to acquire, adapt, diffuse and adopt existing knowledge was seen as crucial for every country, regardless of its level of development. To the same extent, the capacity to produce and use new knowledge was needed to find new and innovative ways to apply modern science to address local development challenges. In that context, participants stressed the importance of technology transfer, technical cooperation and the building of a solid scientific and technological base to allow the development and adaptation of those technologies to local conditions. They further noted the importance of support from the Governments of more advanced countries for technology transfer.

6. Measures at the national level to provide an enabling environment for innovation included (a) strengthening the national innovation system; (b) enhancing education and training in science and technology; (c) enhancing the technological capacity of small and medium-sized enterprises; (d) focusing on targeted research and development to generate new sources of growth; (e) nurturing a culture of creativity and innovation; (f) promoting standardization and quality assurance; and (g) improving international linkages, in order to tap global knowledge.

7. Participants emphasized the crucial importance of an enabling environment at the national and international levels, and a supportive, development-oriented policy and regulatory framework that reflected national realities. They also stressed the need for (a) building public-private partnerships; (b) maintaining competition; (c) attracting domestic and foreign investment; and (d) enhancing information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, ICT access and capacity-building for underserved communities. In many cases, strong collaboration between the public and private sectors contributed to enhancing the accessibility, education, connectivity and content of science and technology projects.

II. Opportunities

8. It was noted that ICTs could pave the way for innovation and investment. In fact, ICTs had the potential to put developing countries in a position to “leapfrog” stages of development. Participants highlighted in particular the fast growth of mobile telephony and broadband, and their contribution to development.

9. Beyond the use of ICTs in trade, it was noted that numerous examples existed in which ICT applications and the corresponding education for weaker groups of the population – such as children in rural areas, sick children, women, disabled people and prison inmates – had tremendous positive effects. Such initiatives enabled people to escape the poverty trap, finding employment in knowledge-based industries, or even generating their own income as self-employed business people.

10. Participants noted that other emerging technologies – such as biotechnology, nanotechnology and technologies for renewable sources of energy – could be important sources of growth. Collaboration between the research community and industry players could foster the development of those technologies and enhance their contributions to development.

III. Challenges

11. Participants noted that the benefits of advances in science and technology had not reached all countries and sectors of the population. Developing countries, and especially least developed countries, often lacked the capacity to harness the

benefits of technological advances. In spite of significant improvements in the deployment of ICTs across sectors and countries, the digital divide between and within countries remained a concern. There was also a digital divide regarding local content in the context of the globalized provision of news and information.

12. Participants noted with concern that broadband represented the new frontier of the digital divide. It thus deserved special policy attention. Improving the broadband infrastructure and delivering affordable and advanced ICT services to all was seen as the next major challenge for many countries.

13. It was felt that geography might pose challenges in relation to physical Internet connections, where rural areas found themselves isolated from the main global backbones, just as high-capacity connections to rural areas within countries might not be economically viable. Landlocked countries were put at a disadvantage when it came to sea-based global broadband connections.

14. Strong rules on intellectual property rights (IPRs) were felt to be possibly detrimental to the transfer of technologies. IPRs needed to enable investment and innovation in developing countries.

IV. The way forward and the role of UNCTAD

15. It was felt that comprehensive national ICT strategies should focus on a broad range of areas, including education, support to entrepreneurship, support to small and medium-sized enterprises, research and development, the promotion of standardization and international linkages, and general ICT awareness-raising. Developing countries needed to attach a high priority to education and capacity-building in the area of science and technology, thus empowering people to become economically independent.

16. Participants felt that UNCTAD could explore and identify good practices in using ICTs and facilitating the sharing of information. That would benefit from close cooperation with the private sector. UNCTAD also had a role to play with regard to consensus-building. One issue that might require more attention was the role of policy space in the area of technology development. It was felt that UNCTAD should also address the issue of intellectual property rights and their role in technology development and technology diffusion.

17. Participants stated that UNCTAD, as a knowledge hub, could assist developing countries in strengthening their capabilities to develop and implement national ICT policies and in putting in place a sound national system of innovation.

18. UNCTAD was also encouraged to consider setting up a network that would allow scientists and engineers from developing countries to interact with each other, exchange views, and share national and regional experiences in the promotion of science and technology for development.