

## **MOVING FROM DIGITAL DIVIDE TO DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY**

### **ECOSOC High-Level Segment 2002**

#### **Ministerial Roundtable Breakfast on “Information and communications technologies (ICTs) and human resources development”**

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**Prepared by UN DESA**

ICTs are a central issue for development in the “Information Age”. Not only are the new technologies a key to unlocking economic growth; they impinge on and can impact virtually all aspects of development. At the same time, a large portion of the world’s inhabitants are currently excluded from access. Cognizant of the importance of the issues involved, the High-level segment of ECOSOC in 2000 adopted a Ministerial Declaration that led to creation of the United Nations ICT Taskforce <[www.unicttaskforce.org](http://www.unicttaskforce.org)>. The Taskforce brings together senior participants from governments, private sector and civil society as partners in a multi-stakeholder concern.

Most recently the General Assembly convened, on 17 and 18 June, a meeting devoted to ICTs for development. This included presentations in plenary session, including by the President of Senegal, and informal presentations by prominent panelists. The panel participants focused on two main themes -- how to leverage development through ICT to meet the Millennium Summit Goals, building on multi-stakeholder partnerships; and the UN’s role in supporting efforts to promote digital opportunity, in particular in Africa and the LDCs. In grappling with these, participants representing governments, major corporations, foundations, entrepreneurs, and other institutions identified numerous issues, opportunities and challenges deserving further attention.

Taking the next step, during the current ECOSOC High-level segment, focus can be given to the aspects of ICT most relevant to the theme of human resources development, including health and education.

#### **Leveraging development, and multi-stakeholder partnerships**

At the General Assembly, panel participants emphasized that the key issues concerning ICT for development are not technological but pertain more to purpose, governance, mind-set, leadership, policy, vision, willingness and resources. ICT can have considerable leverage to promote development and reduce poverty, but there are many complications.

A very noticeable barrier is that created by high phone, connectivity and bandwidth costs in the countries most at the margins of telephone and internet usage. Then too, one finds not one digital divide but several – urban/rural, young/old, rich/poor, salaried/wage-earner, male/female, etc. Access problems can include electricity, infrastructure, computers and other devices, skilled users, and content. Moreover ICT does not stand alone; the impact for human resources development comes from integration into other efforts, with adequate financing and skills from various quarters. But ICT is not a luxury. Greater reliance upon this can do much to facilitate the work of governance, to promote economic opportunities and to improve education and health. ICT is not an alternative to other expenditure but is a requisite tool for development. It thus deserves priority attention even in conditions of limited infrastructure and budgets.

A particular concern is how to build partnerships that merge the goals of business and development. As business interests naturally focus on earnings, the market opportunities of development must be emphasized, making it evident that bridging the digital divide is good business, and produces higher living standards.

As suggested by the representative of a major ICT corporation at the General Assembly panel, in devising multi-stakeholder partnerships the United Nations and public officials might especially wish to call upon the technical expertise, networks and other competencies of the private sector. Participants agreed that a growing partnership among the United Nations, private sector and civil society is important for leveraging development through ICT.

Questions for discussion:

- What are some actions, under government health and education budgets, where greater use of ICT can have notable impact for human resources development?
- What are some prime areas for partnered efforts to facilitate growth of ICT, especially in the areas of health and education?
- What new mechanisms may be needed to encourage such partnerships?

### **The UN's role, especially in Africa and least-developed countries**

In the General Assembly panel discussion, speakers noted the value of the multi-faceted involvement of the UN in ICT, and considered it important to think how best to use the comparative advantage of the Organization. Particular merit was attached to the role of the UN in helping to elaborate frameworks of equitable rules, as well as helping to foster greater communication, consensus-building and policy coherence.

Speakers noted that international donor assistance would be a supplement, but the driving forces for expansion of ICT for development in Africa and LDCs, as elsewhere, would be the realities of government policies, and commercial, investment, and business and government requirements. Despite, and even because of poverty, geographic, infrastructure, institutional and other difficulties, many opportunities could be identified for greater use of ICT.

Main opportunities for the UN system, as seen in the panel, include: (1) helping to shape global policy making; (2) promoting dialogue and commitment in various international settings for work on ICT for development; (3) strengthening UN-Bretton Woods cooperation in support of the relevant public goods; (4) supporting capacity building in country settings; and (5) encouraging a greater sense of partnership among government, private sector, and civil society actors to work together for mutual advantage.

Questions for discussion:

- Drawing from the above, what are some immediate priority areas for UN work, in its areas of comparative advantage, for promoting greater access to ICT?
- How can the UN help to ensure the potential of ICT to increase gender equality? How can some of the greatest barriers to participation, in the several digital divides, be overcome?