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Agenda item 109 (c) of the provisional agenda

High-level dialogue on strengthening international economic cooperation for development through partnership

New York, 17-18 September 2001

**Responding to Globalization:
Facilitating the Integration of Developing Countries into the
World Economy in the 21st Century****Background note on sub-theme (b)****Enhancing the integration of developing countries in the emerging
global information network, facilitating access to information and communication
technologies for developing countries**

The United Nations has undertaken concerted efforts to bring information and communication technologies (ICT) to the service of development for all. The efforts have intensified in the last two years, as evidenced by a series of documents, events and activities geared towards harnessing the potential of ICT for advancing development. The following describes some of the highlights of the efforts made at the international level in promoting the United Nations' role in providing leadership and support in the area of ICT.

◆ *General Assembly 54th session*

The General Assembly, in its resolution 54/231 entitled "Role of the United Nations in promoting development in the context of globalization and interdependence", requested the Secretary-General to submit a comprehensive report containing action-oriented recommendations on promoting further the role of the United Nations system in the transfer of ICT to developing countries and also on its role in promoting policy coherence, complementarity and coordination on economic, financial, trade, technology and development issues at the global level in order to optimize the benefits of globalization.

In the same resolution, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to convene a meeting of a high-level panel of experts on ICT and to prepare a report containing recommendations on the role of the United Nations in enhancing the integration of developing countries in the emerging global information network, facilitating access for developing countries to ICT, including on preferential and concessional terms, where appropriate, and promoting the

participation of developing countries, including through infrastructure facilities, in knowledge-intensive sectors of the global economy.

◆ ***High-level Panel of Experts on Information Technology - April 2000***

A high-level panel of experts on information technology met from 17 to 20 April 2000 at Headquarters and called upon the United Nations to play a leadership and catalytic role in helping to bridge the digital divide and accelerate development by harnessing the development potential of ICT.

In its report¹, the panel presented its proposals and recommendations on how to bring greater coherence and synergy to the many activities undertaken by individual organizations of the United Nations system, including the World Bank, by the European Union, the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development and numerous other multilateral and bilateral organizations. The panel called on all actors to unite in a global initiative to meet the following challenge: Provide access to the Internet, especially through community access points, for the world's population presently without such access by the end of 2004. To this end, the panel proposed that the United Nations create, under the leadership of the Secretary-General but outside the United Nations organizational structures, an ICT Task Force to bring together multilateral development institutions, private industry, foundations and trusts and to facilitate, including by investment, the expansion of the market for ICT in developing countries, thereby helping to bridge the digital divide.

◆ ***Economic and Social Council substantive session of 2000***

The Economic and Social Council, in a Ministerial Declaration² adopted during its high-level segment on the theme "Development and international cooperation in the twenty-first century: the role of information technology in the context of a knowledge-based economy" in July 2000, recognized the key role of partnerships, involving national governments, bilateral and multilateral development agencies, the private sector and other relevant stakeholders in putting ICT in the service of development.

In preparing for the high-level segment, a series of panel discussions were organized on the key aspects of ICT for Development by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs in collaboration with organizations of the United Nations system (UNDP, World Bank, UNESCO, UNU, WIPO and UNCTAD). The President of Economic and Social Council requested the regional commissions to hold regional intergovernmental or expert group meetings on information technology for development in their respective regions and to report on the outcome of these meetings to the high-level segment of the Council in order to provide a regional perspective on the theme for the high-level segment.

All five regional commissions submitted brief reports³ based on regional consultative meetings or on views solicited from their Member States. The meetings of the ESCAP and ECLAC regions were hosted by the Governments of India and Brazil, respectively, on 20 and 21 June 2000. ECA held a high-level meeting, as the first African Development Forum, from 24 to 28 October 1999 under the theme "The challenge to Africa of globalization and the information age". ESCWA held its expert group meeting on 15 and 16 May 2000. ECE circulated a draft

¹ A/55/75-E/2000/55, paras. 9-11

² See A/55/3; chap.III, para. 17

³ E/2000/70, E/2000/71, E/2000/72, E/2000/73, E/2000/74

report to all its member States and comments received were integrated into the Commission's report to the Council.

The report of the Secretary-General⁴ submitted to the Council contained a number of recommendations calling for urgent and concerted actions at the national and international levels. The report elaborated on the key elements of a comprehensive programme of action to be carried out through global ICT partnerships and mobilization of the required resources and the UN's role in this regard.

The report also contained the statement by the Administrative Committee on Coordination to the Economic and Social Council on information and communication technologies and development, in which the Executive Heads of the organizations and agencies of the United Nations system reaffirmed their statement of 11 April 1997 on "Universal access to basic communications and information services". They also identified issues to be pursued and committed themselves to work, individually and collectively, towards making the goal of universal access to ICT a reality.

In its resolution 2000/29, the Council endorsed the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Informatics which recommended that an ICT task force be created with the objectives of providing overall leadership to the United Nations role in helping to formulate strategies for the development of ICT and putting those technologies at the service of development and, on the basis of consultations with all stakeholders and Member States, forging a strategic partnership between the United Nations system, private industry and financing trusts and foundations, donors, programme countries and other relevant stakeholders.⁵

◆ *High-level Advisers on ICT*

In order to assist him in carrying out this mandate (Ministerial Declaration and resolution 2000/29), the Secretary-General designated José María Figueres Olsen, former President of Costa Rica, as his Special Representative on ICT and established a Group of High-level Advisers on ICT, composed of representatives of Governments, the private sector, foundations, non-governmental organizations and the academic community under the chairmanship of Mr. Figueres Olsen. Several teams, headed by members of the Advisory Group, conducted wide-ranging consultations during October-December 2000 with Governments and other relevant stakeholders, including the private sector, in all regions. In addition, views and suggestions elicited from Member States and organizations of the United Nations system were taken into account in developing the Advisory Group's proposals and recommendations. At the end of January 2001, the Advisers adopted their report that was subsequently submitted in early February 2001 to the Secretary-General with a view to assisting him in formulating his recommendations to the Economic and Social Council on the establishment of an ICT Task Force. In its report, the Group of High-level Advisers on ICT identified a number of key elements of the role that the Task Force should play in harnessing ICT for development.

⁴ E/2000/52

⁵ ECOSOC resolution 2000/29, annex para. 1

◆ ***General Assembly 55th session***

In the Millennium Declaration⁶, heads of State and Government resolved to ensure that the benefits of new technologies, especially ICT, in conformity with recommendations contained in the ECOSOC Ministerial Declaration, were available to all.

Furthermore, in its resolution 55/212 entitled “Role of the United Nations in promoting development in the context of globalization and interdependence”, the General Assembly emphasized the technology dimension of globalization and the need to promote universal access to knowledge and information as well as the need to strive to bridge the digital divide and to bring ICT to the service of development for all so as to enable the developing countries and the countries with economies in transition to benefit effectively from globalization by full and effective integration into the emerging global information network. The Assembly encouraged the Secretary-General, in this regard, to continue the ongoing consultations on the establishment of the UN ICT Task Force.

The report of the Secretary-General⁷ on the above agenda item contained a number of action-oriented recommendations on further promoting the role of the United Nations in the transfer of ICT to developing countries, with emphasis on recommendations aimed at enhancing ICT components in regional and national capacity-building programmes of the United Nations system.

◆ ***Economic and Social Council resumed organizational session for 2001***

During its resumed organizational session in March 2001, the Council adopted decision 2001/210⁸ which took note of the report of the Secretary-General on ICT Task Force⁹ and requested the Secretary-General to undertake the necessary steps to establish the ICT Task Force, in consultation with the regional groups, as recommended by the report.

◆ ***Establishment of the ICT Task Force***

In implementing the mandate of the Economic and Social Council, the Secretary General has established, for an initial period of three years, an ICT Task Force. It is an innovative public-private partnership under the United Nations umbrella but with functional autonomy, in which Member States, the private sector and non-profit organizations participate as equal partners in spearheading the effort to bridge the digital divide and open up new digital opportunities for those who are currently on the margin or are being left behind.

One of the main guiding principles for setting up the ICT Task Force and developing its Plan of Action was ensuring complementarity and synergy with other initiatives in the area of ICT for development, in particular with the DOT Force and its successor activities launched in the framework of the G-8 process. Promoting coherence among ICT for development programmes and initiatives of individual organizations of the United Nations system is also a priority.

⁶ A/RES/55/2, para. 20

⁷ A/55/381

⁸ E/2001/INF/2/Add.1

⁹ E/2001/7

◆ *Economic and Social Council substantive session of 2001*

The Council considered the 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” at its coordination segment and adopted agreed conclusions¹⁰. The Council examined the experience gained by the United Nations system in assisting Member States in harnessing the potential of knowledge and technology for promoting the development goals of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, the International Development Targets as well as the outcomes of major United Nations conferences and summits.

The Council, in its agreed conclusions, welcomed the establishment of the ICT Task Force as a major recent practical step aimed at strengthening the United Nations’ role in bridging the digital divide. The Council stated that in order to overcome the gap between developed and developing countries, effective and meaningful collaborative efforts are required involving governments, multilateral institutions, the donor community, the private sector, civil society and other relevant stakeholders to enhance the development impact of ICT.¹¹

The report of the Secretary-General,¹² explored the theme in an integrated manner with a view to strengthening the development role of the United Nations system, the effectiveness of its development activities and its support for national development strategies and programmes by promoting access to and transfer of knowledge and technology, especially ICT, through building partnerships, in particular with the private sector.

Conclusion

It is envisaged that this second High-level Dialogue will further build on these achievements and provide an important impetus for promoting the use of ICT for development especially in light of the recently established ICT Task Force. Both the Ministerial Round Table and the Informal Panel on this sub-theme are expected to yield further practical and action-oriented ideas which can be incorporated not only in the work-plan of the ICT Task Force but also in the work of the Organization at large.

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¹⁰ E/2001/L.16

¹¹ *ibid.*, paras. 10-11

¹² E/2001/59