

**STATEMENT DELIVERED BY MR. JOSE ANTONIO OCAMPO, EXECUTIVE SECRETARY
OF THE ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN
(ECLAC), AT THE OPENING MEETING OF THE REGIONAL PREPARATORY
MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN
FOR THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY**

Bavaro, Punta Cana, Dominican Republic
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First of all, I would like to commend the Government of the Dominican Republic and, in particular, His Excellency the President and Her Excellency the Vice President of the Republic, who honour us with their presence here today, as well as the President of INDOTEL and his entire team, who have headed up the effort to organize and hold this conference. It has been a privilege for ECLAC to assist the Dominican Republic with this task. As always, Mr. President, it is a source of great satisfaction to be here once again with the hospitable Dominican people in this beautiful corner of the Caribbean.

This regional conference is part of the preparatory process for the World Summit on the Information Society, which has been convened by the United Nations General Assembly and is to be held in two stages: one which will culminate in Geneva in 2003 and the other in Tunis in 2005. It is our hope that the conclusions reached at this conference can be set forth in a document that reflects our region's vision of the information society and that this document will then serve as one of the core inputs for the World Summit.

ECLAC has been actively involved in the subject areas to be addressed at this conference, and particularly so since the Regional Meeting on Information Technology for Development was held in Florianopolis in 2000 in preparation for the debates on the information society conducted by the United Nations Economic and Social Council that same year. The analyses we have prepared to serve as inputs for these deliberations are outlined in the study entitled "Road Maps towards an Information Society in Latin America and the Caribbean," which has been drafted especially for this conference, and in the book authored by Martin Hilbert

and Jorge Katz entitled “Building an Information Society: A Latin American and Caribbean Perspective,” which is also being made available to you.

The digital divide in Latin America and the Caribbean

The concept of an “information society” reflects the far-reaching changes that are sweeping over the world today as new digital media for the creation and dissemination of information are developed and refined. Above and beyond their direct impact on information and communications, these media have engendered new ways of organizing society and production.

This process has opened up promising opportunities for developing countries, but it has by no means been free of difficulties. Information and communications technologies have paved the way for major strides forward in the field of development, advances that go beyond the sphere of economics to encompass education and research, health care, public administration, politics and a wide array of cultural activities. But they have also given rise to a new type of exclusion, the **digital divide**. There are two different dimensions of this divide. There is an **international divide**, which threatens to widen the abyss between developed and developing nations even further, and then there is the **domestic divide**, which is just as serious a threat in terms of the further expansion of the vast social distances that divide different groups of citizens within individual countries. In many ways, given the striking inequalities that mar our society, the domestic digital divide in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean is even sharper, and hence poses a more formidable challenge, than the international divide.

In fact, the impact of the international digital divide has been declining in our region. This trend is reflected in a variety of indicators, such as the rapid growth of Internet use in Latin America and the Caribbean, which has outstripped the growth rates seen in all others parts of the world in recent years. In the year 2002, 8% of the population had Internet access, compared to 9% worldwide. Mobile telephones are used by 18% of our region’s inhabitants, which is only one percentage point below the worldwide average. In contrast, the domestic digital divide has been deepening. It is estimated that 70% of the richest 15% of the Latin American and Caribbean population will have Internet access by the year 2004, versus the 10% estimate for

connectivity in the region as a whole. The domestic digital divide has to do not only with income strata, but also with the population's age and educational levels, people's ethnic identities and the backwardness of rural areas in our region.

The patterns of technological diffusion currently observed in Latin America and the Caribbean set the stage for the development of an information society composed of "islands" of sectors whose connectivity makes them full-fledged members of this new society amidst an "ocean" of sectors that are excluded from the benefits of this transformation. This process is creating an altogether new, **digital exclusion** within our societies, in addition to the many that already exist. We therefore need to take action to avert this situation, action whose chief aim is to ensure universal access to at least a basic minimum of information and communications infrastructure as a fundamental right for all.

The digital divide is not simply a matter of how many computers are connected to how many networks; it also has to do with the training that is needed so that individuals and communities can use this technological tool to meet their needs. The effort to build an information society should therefore involve much more than simply facilitating access to the relevant technology. We also need to develop appropriate means for incorporating the new digitally-based forms of social and productive organization into existing socio-economic structures. Thus far, the main areas of interest to Internet users in Latin America and the Caribbean have been general entertainment and information services, instant messaging and e-mail; the use of the Internet to conduct economic transactions is still quite limited. The transition from "soft" to "hard" uses of the new technologies to benefit our economies, together with the social, political and cultural networks and institutions in the region, will entail a learning process that must begin now.

This "hard" type of use involves much more than just economics. One of the objectives of this effort to build and develop an information society must be to enhance the citizenry's participation in public affairs. The tools it offers us can be used to create public goods, to allocate them more efficiently and to increase the transparency of government action. The digitization of communications and information flows opens the way for increased democratic

participation through the enhancement of legality and legitimacy in the public domain based on respect for human rights, particularly freedom of thought and freedom of speech. This facet of the process, which is now being referred to as “**e-democracy**,” can serve as an avenue for civil society’s involvement in achieving better, more responsible government while, at the same time, fostering a greater sense of responsibility on the part of all citizens.

The need for a shared vision

The transition to an information society is a complex process that calls for a multidisciplinary approach. ECLAC is proposing a tri-dimensional frame of reference as a means of structuring the wide array of issues it involves. The first dimension is, of course, technology. The “network of networks” is the backbone of the information society. It, in turn, is composed of telecommunications and computer hardware, on the one hand, and the generic applications that allow us to use this infrastructure, on the other. That infrastructure and those generic services are the pillars of the digitization of the “**horizontal layers**” of the information society.

Based on these technological foundations, the objective is to digitize communications and information flows in such spheres of society as business, education, health care and government. The sectors in which this digitization process takes place are, within this frame of reference, the “**vertical layers**” of the information society.

The digitization process is underpinned by elements associated with other areas of activity which, if ignored, could create bottlenecks. These **diagonal** areas influence both the horizontal layers of the information society and its digitized sectors. They include the regulatory systems that consolidate and define these new modes of behaviour, the financial mechanisms that support the diffusion of these technologies and their applications, and the human capital that is the driving force behind that technology. These three diagonal areas will be the main focus of this conference.

The model developed by ECLAC, which will be presented in greater detail during the next session of this conference, demonstrates the pressing need for an integrated management of

the many variables involved in the development of an information society in order to ensure that information and communication technologies will lead us towards our economic and social development goals.

Towards a regional action plan

As the worldwide information society matures, it is becoming increasingly evident that the key question to be answered by developing countries is not whether to attain connectivity or not, but rather when and how to do so. This is why the issue of development strategies for the information society must be a key item on the region's development agenda. In order for the Latin American and Caribbean countries to take swift action to integrate themselves into that society in a manner that will work to their benefit, the region as a whole must have a solid, broadly based strategy and must take forceful steps to eliminate the international and, in particular, domestic digital divides.

The starting point for this undertaking should be a **set of principles** to guide the transition to the information society. These principles should form the foundation for the development of a **strategy** and the creation of a **national authority** to coordinate the various public and private institutions involved in each nation's efforts to build the information society. Some countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have made considerable progress in this direction, while others are just beginning to do so.

Working within this frame of reference, ECLAC is proposing that an agenda be formulated within a conceptual framework based on the three dimensions of the information society: the technological requirements of its **horizontal layers** (infrastructure and generic services); the **vertical** sectors' institutional and organizational realities and requirements ("e-sectors"); and its **diagonal** areas (regulatory systems, financial mechanisms and human capital).

The relevant technologies should be regarded as a public good and should be treated accordingly. Public initiatives should therefore be undertaken to reduce individual access costs by providing shared modes of access in schools, libraries and "info-centres". Promising initiatives in all of these areas are already under way in a number of countries in the region.

Steps also need to be taken to provide simple, low-cost hardware and to design policy strategies for promoting open-source standards and software.

The key aim of policies focusing on the development of human capital should be to foster the higher cognitive functions required to access and manage information flows. This task should be divided into two main lines of action: user training (“**e-literacy**”) and the training and maintenance of a workforce capable of sustaining the information society. In the area of user training, special attention should be devoted to marginalized groups in order to ensure that all sectors of the population, all cultures and languages, are part of the information society.

Because of the transnational nature of the issues to be discussed here, **regional initiatives** need to be promoted in order to facilitate cooperation both among the national authorities and among civil society and the private sector in our countries. These policies should focus on four crucial areas of action: the establishment of common legal and regulatory frameworks, the implementation of financing mechanisms to ensure the continuity of the information society in the region, the creation and sharing of regional content, and support for the development of human capital. As part of this effort, a **regional observatory** for the information society should be created. Such an observatory could also serve as a tool for monitoring progress towards the goals to be established in 2003 and 2005 at the World Summit on the Information Society. The Regional Network for Latin America and the Caribbean (LacNet) of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, in which public and private institutions are actively participating, can help us achieve these objectives.

In considering these dimensions of the information society, I would like to underscore the urgent need to adjust the existing legislative and regulatory frameworks in order to **permit and encourage digital communications and transactions**. Security and reliability, certification and e-contracts, electronic payment systems and consumer protection are all issues that should be addressed in a regionwide debate within Latin America and the Caribbean.

The formulation of a regional strategy will help us to position ourselves at the international level and to influence the shape taken by the global information society. Within

such a context, the region can increase its bargaining power in respect of such vital issues as software licensing, the production of low-cost hardware and the introduction of third-generation mobile telephony and digital television.

At a time when people and countries are interconnected so much more closely than ever before, the Summit offers an unprecedented opportunity for the global community to discuss and decide upon a shared path for the future. This Regional Preparatory Ministerial Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean for the World Summit on the Information Society is an opportunity for our region to shape a strategic vision and form a unified front in this vital area.

I wish you every success in this important undertaking and assure you that ECLAC stands ready to continue supporting your efforts to meet the enormous challenge posed by the information society.