



**ADDRESS**  
**BY**  
**MR. ANWARUL K. CHOWDHURY,**  
**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL AND HIGH REPRESENTATIVE**  
**FOR THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES,**  
**LANDLOCKED DEVELOPING COUNTRIES AND**  
**SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATES**

**ON**  
***“THE NEW DIMENSION OF SOUTH-SOUTH AND NORTH-SOUTH***  
***COMMUNICATIONS”***

**AT**  
**THE IPS SUPPORT GROUP ANNUAL MEETING**

**RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL**  
**21 NOVEMBER 2006**

Friends, ladies and gentlemen:

It is a pleasure to join you for the IPS Support Group Annual Meeting, which is focussing on “The New Dimension of South-South and South-North Communications.” Coincidentally, last month I attended a meeting in Shanghai on the establishment of new global institutional structures for the strengthening of South-South cooperation. The meeting laid the ground for setting up a Global South Development Forum and Southern Leaders' Round Table. The two bodies are expected to provide a platform as well as brainstorming opportunities for new ideas on South-South and North-South cooperation, explored and advanced basically from a Southern perspective with the best interests of the common people of the South in mind.

I believe that flow of ideas is an important dimension of these renewed efforts to take South-South and North-South cooperation to a higher, more mutually beneficial level. It becomes more relevant as we advance the global efforts to articulate a world information society. If the proposed Global South Development Forum and the Southern Leaders' Round Table – or any other form of institutional set-up – are the wheels that are envisaged to drive South-South and North-South cooperation in the 21st Century, communication is the engine that will facilitate the movement. Without the “engine” of communication, movement towards better South-South and North-South cooperation will not have the needed traction. Without a dependable “engine”, the wheels of South-South and North-South cooperation may not be able to deliver us to the destination of poverty eradication, sustainable development and peaceful society.

I don't have to recount the dramatic developments that have taken place in the tools of communication over the last few decades. From the mobile phone to the Internet and satellite television, the communication revolution is changing the way we generate, disseminate, store, share, process, absorb and utilise information. Information has become a prized commodity, without which individuals and societies cannot keep up with the pace of the modern world. Knowledge society is now what we are all aspiring and preparing for. Information has become the power that drives not only the world's economy, but also its politics and its culture. In an irreversible process of globalization, information and communication have become the determining factors of your position, your standing as an individual, as an institution or as a nation. Unfortunately, this information revolution has,

thus far, by-passed many of the developing countries, most especially the Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

To illustrate, less than 1% of the population in the LDCs used the internet, compared to 30 percent in the developed countries. Only five people had a mobile phone out of every 100 in the LDCs in 2004, compared to 80 people out of every 100 in the developed countries. The implication of this is that the poor risk being marginalised even more than they already are due to lack of access to information. I should emphasise that access is not just about the availability and affordability of the tools of communication, but also their usability. For example, there is the issue of language. The fact that English is the default language of the Internet automatically excludes the millions of people who cannot communicate in that language.

Beyond the challenge of access to communication tools and information in the South, there is also the challenge of the appropriateness of the information. How relevant are the products of the information revolution relevant to the needs and aspirations of the people of the South? To what extent do they reflect and respond to their economic, social and cultural circumstances? Do they nurture or endanger the values that have ensured the survival and the wellbeing of these communities? Do they erode, rather than enrich, the cultures of communities of the South? Do we really have, at this point of time, two-way or one-way flow of information between the North and the South? The answer is obvious. Until we have a genuinely two-way flow of information, the information revolution will continue to benefit mostly the societies of the North. More negatively, the non-participatory, non-contributing role and voice of the South would work to the detriment of a stable, peaceful and collaborative world.

Another feature of the information revolution is that it has not really galvanised communication among the countries of the South. I believe that there is still more communication, albeit skewed communication, between countries of the North and the South than among countries of the South. Despite the improvements in communication infrastructure of the last decade, it is still easier, in many countries of the South, to place a telephone call to the countries of the North than to the neighbouring countries. And yet never before has the need and relevance of South-South communications been as evident as it is

today. Many countries of the South have emerged as centres of excellence in the fields of health, education, agriculture, the arts and modern technology. The growing power of trade of the South has resulted in the “new geography of trade”. In many cases, their knowledge, expertise and technologies are more appropriate to the needs of other countries in the South, as their conditions are more comparable. They therefore have a lot to share with their counterparts from South. Trade among countries of the South is also growing very rapidly, becoming a very important dimension of their economic development. Increased and improved South-South communication would greatly enhance these positive forces for the benefit of all.

There is no doubt, therefore, that there are many potential benefits of South-South and North South communications that are yet to be realised. But for these benefits to be fully realised, I believe the following needs to be done:

- a) Improve accessibility – in the broadest sense – to the tools of communication in the South, especially among the most marginalised.
- b) North-South and South-South communications shouldn't be for their own narrow national sake, but they should be directed towards serving the broader global agenda of poverty eradication, sustainable development, good governance, promotion of human rights and the culture of peace.
- c) Communication should be used to strengthen, rather than erode, the social and cultural values of society. I am not advocating for closing out information and ideas from the outside but rather, for taking deliberate steps to ensure that local ideas thrive alongside, and benefit from ideas from the outside. Communication should facilitate cross-cultural exchange and understanding.
- d) Take measures to promote the contribution of the South to the global wealth of information. The South should not only consume, but also produce information.

These important measures can only take place through genuine partnerships between the governments, civil society, the private sector and the media in both the North and the South. The mass media, especially the media from the South, has a particularly important role to play in setting the agenda for North-South and South-South communications. In its role of

informing, flagging and analysing issues, holding policy makers accountable, it can have a major influence in defining the path that North-South and South-South communications take.

Let me now share my thoughts with you on a dimension of information-sharing that, I believe, needs our continuing attention. Very often, international media coverage completely ignores or gives the world's poor unbalanced treatment, often distinguished by crisis-led news coverage, which only fuels a sense of perpetual desperation.

It is hardly a secret that a significant portion of international media coverage of the LDCs may be referred to as 'disaster journalism'. In recent times we have seen how the downtrodden are pejoratively reduced to nothing by a simple stroke of a journalist's pen or a television image. These "universal" but powerfully subliminal messages, beamed at global television audiences connote something perennially problematic, notably that these underdeveloped countries are essentially bastions of war, famine, poverty, and disease.

This, I strongly believe, should change and the global media needs to improve its ability to reflect the situation in LDCs in a more balanced and constructive way. This is not to say that the media ought to sanitize their coverage of the harsh reality of poverty. On the contrary, I believe that until poverty is finally eradicated, we must be consistently reminded of its presence. And of course, one cannot always expect 'sunshine journalism', but it is important to remember that under insurmountable difficulties, even the most downtrodden amongst us attempts to succeed.

I find that little is said or seen about the importance of the LDCs for industrialized nations; their relevance to world development; and their intellectual contribution to the wealth of nations. Even less is communicated via the media or anywhere else about the progress and achievements in these countries. Changing this situation, I believe, should be the objective of North-South and South-South communications.

In this regard, I believe that IPS provides a model worth emulating. As a media institution primarily focussing on development issues and providing a perspective of the South, it is making a major contribution towards presenting a balanced view with a diversity of perspectives and maintaining the needs of the poorest on the global agenda. Significantly and

importantly, it is doing this while maintaining its credibility as a news organisation. The need for such media institutions, whose focus is on the poor, the voiceless and the marginalised, has become even more important in the face of the proliferation and expansion of profit and entertainment-driven media entities.

In this spirit of partnership with the media to promote the development agenda, my office has recently launched an initiative called the “Global Media Compact.” The purpose of the “Global Media Compact” is to forge an alliance with media entities to focus more on issue of poverty eradication, peace and development, particularly highlighting the special needs of the the Least Developed Countries. I believe that such partnerships are vital in ensuring that the needs and aspirations of the poorest, the weakest are not drowned in the waves of the information revolution we are witnessing.

\*\*\*\*\*