Fifty-second session
Items 12 and 89 of the provisional agenda[*]
Report of the Economic and Social Council
Questions relating to information

Statement of the Administrative Committee on Coordination on universal access to basic communication and information services

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General, in his capacity as Chairman of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly at its fifty-second session the statement on universal access to basic communication and information services, adopted by the Committee at its session in April 1977, with a view to seeking the endorsement of the Assembly.

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[*] A/52/150 and Corr.1.

Annex

Statement by the Administrative Committee on Coordination on universal access to basic communication and information services

1.   The world is in the midst of a communication and information revolution, complemented by an explosive growth in knowledge. Information and knowledge have become a factor *sui generis* in societal and economic development, as generic technologies, information and communication technologies permeate and cut across all areas of economic, social, cultural and political activity. In the process, they affect all social institutions, perceptions and thought processes. Globally, the information and communication sector is already expanding at twice the rate of the world economy. Decreasing costs of increasingly powerful and reliable hardware and software, as well as the fact that much hardware has become a desktop item, will continue to drive the use of information and communication technologies, facilitating access by ever wider segments of society. That tendency can, however, have profound benefits only if gains in physical access are accompanied by the capacity to exploit those technologies for individual and societal development through the production and dissemination of appropriate content and applications.

2.   The communication and information revolution opens up entirely new vistas for the organizations of the United Nations system; it will bring about a dramatic shift not only in the way the organizations operate in the future, and deliver services and products, but also in the way they collaborate and interact with each other and other actors. Indeed, the multilateral system as a whole C specifically development cooperation C has reached a threshold at which its future orientations, strategies and activities must be revisited and adjusted to the new circumstances and opportunities. We are resolved to respond readily and effectively to those new challenges.

3.   We recognize that knowledge and information:

     (a)   Represent the lifeblood of the emerging global information society and its attendant infrastructure;

     (b)   Are the principal resources of the burgeoning information economy;

     (c)   Are at the heart of the intensifying globalization trends, and drive the emergence of a tele-economy with new global and societal organizational models (telework, telecommuting, teleservices, telemedicine, distance education, teletraining, teleshopping, telebanking, business facilitation, trade efficiency, trade information and so forth); in many instances, physical location is becoming irrelevant to the ability to receive or deliver products and services;

     (d)   Will increasingly affect the international division of labour, determine the competitiveness of corporations and national economies, and generate new growth patterns and paradigms;

     (e)   Will have strategic consequences for the global power constellation. Knowledge, more than ever, is power. Information about what is occurring becomes a central commodity of international relations, and determines the efficiency and effectiveness of any intervention, which is a particular challenge for multilateral actors.

4.   Information is not a free good. Comparative advantages will henceforth be expressed in the ability of countries to acquire, organize, retrieve and disseminate information through communication, information-processing technologies and complex information networks to support policy-making and the development process. Abilities in those areas may allow the prevention and resolution of regional and other conflicts, or may deal with new challenges, such as international crime, terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and environmental damage, by charting better informed decisions, all of which are of utmost concern to the organizations of the United Nations system.

5.   We are profoundly concerned at the increasingly inadequate distribution of access, resources and opportunities in the information and communication field. The information

and technology gap and related inequities between industrialized and developing nations are widening, so that a new type of poverty, information poverty, is being created. Most developing countries, especially the least developed countries, are not sharing in the communication revolution, since they lack:

(c)   Policies that promote equitable public participation in the information society, as both producers and consumers of information and knowledge;

(d)   A workforce trained to develop, maintain and provide the value-added products and services required by the information economy.

We therefore commit the organizations of the United Nations system to assisting developing countries in redressing the present alarming trends.

6.   Over the past decades, the organizations of the United Nations system have carried out many projects, at various levels, incorporating communication and information technologies. Today, however, we must acknowledge that such projects were often undertaken in a rather uncoordinated manner. We therefore perceive an urgent need for a more strategic and systematic approach to information and communication technologies and information management, based on a strengthened collaboration among the organizations of the United Nations system.

7.   We have concluded that the introduction and use of information and communication technologies and information management must become an integral element of the priority efforts by the United Nations system to promote and secure sustainable human development for all; hence our decision to embrace the objective of establishing universal access to basic communication and information services for all. Information and communication technologies and effective information management offer hitherto unknown possibilities and modalities for the solution of global problems to help fulfil social development goals and to build capacities to effectively use the new technologies. At the same time, infrastructure and services of physical communication, in particular postal services, are a means of communication widely and universally used throughout the world, particularly in developing countries. Postal services are vital and, for the foreseeable future, will remain essential to promoting trade, industry and services of all kinds. Indeed, the value of postal services will be further enhanced as new services, such as hybrid mail, a combination of electronic transmission and physical delivery, gain ground.

(a)   Affordable access to core information resources, cutting-edge technology and sophisticated telecommunication systems and infrastructure;

(b)   The capacity to build, operate, manage and service the technologies involved;

8.   Individually and jointly, our organizations are already carrying out, or are planning at the national level to embark on, various projects and activities to highlight the catalytic role that multilateral organizations can and must play in this increasingly vital area. We pledge to do more by joining forces in a variety of fields, such as agriculture, education, health, natural resources and environmental management, transport, international trade and commerce, employment and labour issues, housing, infrastructure and community services, small and medium enterprise development, and strengthening of participatory arrangements (see appendix). It is our intention and determination to demonstrate the viability and suitability of the new technologies and effective information management, especially by reaching out to and targeting the rural areas and most impoverished segments of society so often bypassed by the benefits of technological progress. Unless we are able to show that information and communication technologies make a difference and reach out to more poor people or deliver better services to larger segments of society, the potential of information and communication technologies and information management will remain unrealized.

9.   Harnessing and spreading the potential of the new communication technologies to countries, especially in the developing world, in a timely, cost-effective and equitable manner will be a daunting challenge. The telecommunication infrastructure is weak in virtually all developing countries. The 59 lowest income countries (which account for about 56 per cent of the world's population) share only 7 per cent of the world's telephone mainlines. Excluding China and India, the 57 lowest income countries (which together account for one fifth of the world's population) have one hundredth of the global telephone mainlines. Wherever there is connectivity, it is limited to major cities, the waiting lists are long and there is no indication that the situation will improve dramatically soon. Within the limits of its resources and priorities, the United Nations system stands ready to assist Governments in designing national policies, plans and strategies to facilitate and guide the development and management of an appropriate national information infrastructure, in accordance with their needs and traditions.

10.   Information and communication technologies hold the prospect of an accelerated introduction of certain state-of-the-art technologies, superseding the step-by-step process of transferring know-how and technologies that has dominated industrialization processes. Successful leapfrogging will allow

11.   We are equally conscious of the imperative to build human and technical capacities to enable societies to facilitate access and make best use of the new multimedia communication resources. The rapid expansion of the Internet and its interactive character have introduced a dramatic paradigm shift in the retrieval, handling and dissemination of information. Such technologies make it possible for those who need information and knowledge to look for it on an electronic network and download what they need when they need it. The explosion of the Internet and the World Wide Web have created an easy-to-use communication interface for linking together computers in every part of the world for communications, information and data exchange, that is, for those who can afford it.

12.   The emphasis on such networks as the Internet, however, should not distract from the potential role and contribution other information and communication technologies can make in advancing sustainable human development. Advances in CD-ROM technology, for example, have made multimedia and large-scale data transfers accessible to developing countries, even in areas where there is no telecommunication connectivity. Many of the multimedia options, especially the Internet, depend on the availability of reliable, powerful telecommunication connections with a sufficient bandwidth, as well as access to electricity grids or renewable energy, such as solar power, which are other limiting factors in the poorest areas. Widespread illiteracy, diverse cultures and linguistic differences pose additional obstacles for the introduction of new technologies on a universal basis.

13.   Massive investment in telecommunication networks throughout the world has helped to link most developing countries to international telecommunication networks, albeit in most cases only their capital cities. To date, that connectivity invariably bypasses rural areas and hinterlands of developing countries, where the incidence of poverty is highest. We believe, therefore, that the expansion of domestic telecommunication infrastructure to rural areas and its connection to reliable international networks must become a top priority for Governments, the private sector and multilateral and bilateral development organizations. Unless telecommunication systems can be expanded, access will be confined to an urban, literate elite in developing countries,

developing countries to advance, bypassing stages of technology development. Although aware of the considerable practical hurdles, we are nevertheless determined to assist developing countries in that quest.

bypassing rural areas and the poor. Here, rapidly emerging digital satellite systems offer new solutions.

14.   One indication of the magnitude of investment required is the estimate that in sub-Saharan Africa, raising teledensity to 1 telephone mainline per 100 inhabitants (from the current 0.46 mainlines per 100 inhabitants) would require an investment of US$ 8 billion. The estimate assumes, however, that the cost of a mainline closely mirrors prevailing international prices, whereas experience shows that, typically, the cost tends to be about three times higher in sub-Saharan Africa. The enormity and scale of the challenge to provide universal access in basic communication and information services to the developing world would thus make it advisable to focus on the community level and on reinforcing major development missions, such as education, rather than the household or individual level. Even so, harnessing and spreading the potential of the new information and communication technologies to developing countries will be a daunting challenge.

15.   The organizations of the United Nations system alone cannot undertake such a massive and exceedingly costly investment, which will help to alleviate poverty, create new livelihoods and open up new markets. We call upon the private sector, Governments, civil society and other development organizations to engage with us in a purposeful and systematic endeavour to shape and manage this process by:

       (a)   Establishing and promoting a common global vision and broad-based awareness of the changes taking place, and articulating a compelling vision and strategy of how new technologies can be made to benefit all countries, particularly the poorest;

       (b)   Building national human, technical and economic capacities to facilitate access to and utilization of information and communication technologies in developing countries;

       (c)   Promoting multimedia information and communication technologies in the delivery of programmes advancing sustainable human development, especially to rural areas;

(d) Promoting, with the participation of the private sector, the creation, management and dissemination of strategic information and data pertaining to the various dimensions of development at the global, regional, national and community levels.

16. We are conscious of the fact that modern communication links, especially Web-based approaches, will have a material impact on programmes, programme content, modalities and quality of delivery, and hence on the future of multilateral cooperation and technical assistance per se. For

17. In addition, we intend to harmonize and coordinate our strategies for modernizing and enhancing capacities and effectiveness. The objective will be to create a United Nations system-wide ΑIntranet@ (an Internet for internal usage) to facilitate cooperation among the organizations and ensure the integrated exploitation of the competencies of organizations and coordination at the national level. We shall seek to promote cooperation among our respective organizations through the use of compatible systems, which we already pursue through the separate mechanism of the Information Systems Coordination Committee. We aim to ensure the compatibility, accessibility and convergence of communications and computer-based systems.

18. All of this must be complemented by constantly updated and well-managed Web sites for each of our organizations offering hyperlinks to relevant Web sites both within and outside the United Nations system. This will confer competence and global authority to our organizations in the electronic age. Indeed, as assessing reliability becomes difficult, with more than 65 million Web pages on the Internet, the entities of the United Nations system should become Web focal points, each in their area of competence. We must strive to make our Web sites the foremost entry points for information on poverty, development and sustainability, and universal human values and heritage. The Information Systems Coordination Committee, which was established in 1994 with the intent of harmonizing the approaches of United Nations organizations and facilitating access to United Nations related information, has made a good start.

19. We also need to explore and comprehend the implications and potential of the error of information and communication technologies. Do rapid technological advances trigger the emergence of a right to communicate and a right to access information? What are the consequences for the global labour market, including the gender impact and the role of trade unions, and the international division of labour; the prospects for access to global markets for goods, products and services from developing country economies; the opportunities for global sourcing; the scope for participatory approaches involving youth, local and community groups,

our part, we will accelerate our ongoing internal reform and change processes to create modern, cost-effective and globally networked organizations, involving a strengthening of our in-house technical capacities and changing staff attitudes and perceptions, especially among senior managers. Another objective will be to strengthen ties and intensify communication among our remote offices, opening up opportunities for decentralization and for an instantaneous presence of technical back-up and support.

women and indigenous organizations, and other disenfranchised groups; the impact on the elderly; the consequences for traditional postal services; the dimensions of international copyright and trade in services?

20. At present, innovation in terms of choices, approaches and content responds by and large to the needs and perceptions of industrialized countries and their business sector. We suggest that innovations for both hardware and software must also become demand-driven and needs-driven so as to respond to development objectives and needs. Such a shift from supply-driven to needs-driven approaches must become a global priority, and must influence the direction and pace of future innovation. Only then can information and communication technologies take hold and make a significant impact in developing countries, which are after all the markets of the future. Among other things, this will require the design of products suitable for use in electricity-poor environments (including hardware independent of electric power, such as solar-based or crank-technology driven hardware) and for use by illiterate people (facilitating accessibility through iconographic software, and culturally and linguistically diverse content). Partnerships and alliances will, however, be driven both by technical and financial realities.

21. Thus, we are particularly concerned by the staggering financial needs required to narrow the present gap between those who have access to information and those who have not. A scarcity of funds and insufficient investment flows inevitably hamper the modernization of telecommunication networks and the introduction of promising technologies for advancing sustainable human development. As official development assistance flows are not projected to increase dramatically over the next few years, we must stimulate innovative approaches to raise a critical mass of resources.

22. In our view, the sheer magnitude of the task will necessitate the urgent formation of new and novel cooperative mechanisms:

(a) Industry alliances linking developed and developing countries;

(b)   Collaborative partnerships across traditional lines, that is, among the Government, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, foundations, academic entities, actors of civil society, and intergovernmental and international organizations.

23.   We, the heads of the organizations and bodies of the United Nations system, have agreed to pursue cooperatively and in a more systematic manner the development of strategic approaches to the broad issues of the global information economy and society; therefore, we have agreed to commit ourselves to improving universal access to basic communication and information services.

24.   In order to demonstrate our ability to bridge the information gap, we have agreed to undertake, through coordinated action at the country level, pilot projects in the broad areas indicated in the appendix hereto.

25.   The involvement of Member States is essential in responding to the challenges of change. We therefore invite the Secretary-General, in his capacity as Chairman of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, to bring the present statement to the attention of the General Assembly with a view to seeking its endorsement. Executive heads will also submit the statement to the governing bodies of their respective organizations.

Appendix

Indicative areas for possible pilot projects

1.   *Interactive long-distance education and learning.* Conventional teaching and learning methods are increasingly unable to respond to the rising demand for learning, driven by burgeoning illiteracy, a dearth of well-qualified teachers and faculty, shrinking public funds for the educational sector, and the growing acceptance of the concept of lifelong learning in a world driven by rapid change. At all levels of the educational process, long-distance education can become a viable complement to conventional schooling and training, in particular reaching out and delivering educational services to isolated countries and regions, which often are the poorest. Where even television may prove to be unaffordable, one must rely on radio and the development of community-based media, especially rural radio.

2.   *Telemedicine.* Telemedicine comprises opportunities for medical practice and education through the combination of telecommunication and medical technologies. Telemedicine allows interactive audiovisual communication between physician and practitioner in distant locations, facilitates the exchange of medical information for research and educational purposes, and enables diagnostic imaging and clinical analysis from a distance to compensate for a lack of specialists or to dispense advice to doctors. Electronic means may thus help to improve the quality and delivery of health and reproductive services to rural areas. Access to computer and telecommunication services can help to transform the role of health workers, and to enhance the quality and outreach of health services and preventive health care in underserviced rural communities.

3.   *Telebanking and micro-credit schemes.* Telebanking can assist banks in adjusting to the needs of the poor, communicating with the illiterate and poor at the village level and promoting micro-credit schemes. The available technology is tailor-made for a market characterized by a vast, impoverished and mostly illiterate rural population, high crime and widespread fraud.

4.   *Environmental protection and management.* Environmental protection and management is a wide field for various applications of information technologies, including sustainable forestry and logging practices, waste management and disposal, support to agricultural extension services, water resource management, managing irrigation and natural resource exploitation.

5.   *Participatory processes, arrangements and good governance.* Communication is not only a means to disseminate knowledge, information and values, it is also a basic component of all democratic societies. Its instantaneous character is bound to affect decision-making in the political, economic and business spheres. It will also have an impact on democratic (or autocratic) systems and governance structures, affecting their responsiveness, transparency and accountability, and will strengthen participatory and people-centred approaches within civil society, empowering especially women and youth. The technology is suitable for creating at the community level novel structures to manage individual and public affairs by all stakeholders in sustainable development and for empowering those most affected by poverty by providing broad-based access to information and partners.

6.   *Virtual laboratories for solving development problems.* New methods of work which were still unthinkable just a year ago are now possible. By combining the Internet, virtual reality, real time 3D computing, other telecommunication technologies, groupware and virtual team work, it is now possible to create permanent invisible colleges of scientists working on critical research subjects, at relatively little cost. The principal objective is to link researchers aware of the special needs and with knowledge of the developing countries to the infrastructure and practices already firmly established in the developed countries in order to provide access to scientific know-how and information more quickly, on a larger scale and in an interactive format, allowing for the most rapid dissemination of such information. Those techniques are one solution to the South-North brain drain, which would allow scientists from the South to be associated virtually with all key discussions taking place in the world research community.

7.   *Universal access to the world′s knowledge and culture.* Public information institutions, which are a natural focus for access to the information needed for development, have not been able to exploit their potential to the full in developing countries owing to the immensity of the needs involved and scarcity of resources. Information and communication technologies provide such institutions with a means to promote cost-effective, development-oriented information services for all sectors of society, building on networking at the national and regional levels. Of particular importance is information in the public domain that the information market seems to neglect, for varying reasons: insufficient potential profitability, small readership or, more paradoxically, the public nature of the original data. Such information should be inventoried, digitized and accessed with Internet servers, with the support of appropriate public policies on copyright issues related to information technologies, the development of electronic cultural industries and the promotion of the Internet as a public utility accessible to all at the lowest possible cost.

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