Presentation on 'Development-oriented policies for a socio-economic inclusive information society, including access, infrastructure and an enabling environment', Commission on Science and Technology for Development, UNCTAD

Hon'ble ministers, members of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development, and other distinguished colleagues:

It is my honour to address the commission and all the participants in the proceedings of its 11th session, which opens today.

Science and technology have been the primary instruments of human progress and their importance for new innovations for ensuring faster and more equitable development, and the need for capacity building in education and research, cannot be overemphasised. This is one of the two themes of the 11th session of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD). While I greatly look forward to deliberations on this broader issue, I will mostly speak today about issues related to the mandate of the commission of following-up on the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). This mandate is expressed in other main theme of this meeting, which is development-oriented policies for a socio-economically inclusive information society&

Information society represents a major epoch and discontinuity in our social systems and structures, and the commission meets during a period that may be the formative cusp of far-reaching transformation in our societies. It is at such times of transformative change, which could represent a tipping point for our civilisation s evolution, when both our individual and collective political strengths become important determinants of the kind of world that we build and move towards.

The CSTD as the apex body for coordinating global efforts in the information society arena, as the follow-up to the WSIS, is faced with this enormous challenge, as well as opportunity. Unlike the follow-ups of other global summits, both the context and the task are not clearly defined in the mostly unpredictable development of the information society, and this moving target situation places even greater responsibility on the commission. To top it off, few issues are as intrinsically global as those that get discussed under the rubric of information society (IS), which presents the need for a strong global anchoring of these issues. It is in this overall context and with such formidable responsibility that the commission meets for its 11th session.

As could be expected with regard to the forces that are shaping a whole new world, the policy terrain of the information society is very complex. We need to collectively grapple with this complexity in order to give the needed directions for the emergence of the inclusive, people-centred and development-oriented information society that was called for by the WSIS.

To make a somewhat simplistic characterisation, there are two key areas or thrusts of information society policies. The first one is of ensuring that the groundswell of autonomous forces of creativity and productivity that the emerging information society has unleashed are supported and encouraged, and not thwarted. And for this purpose we have to give our best support to the principal institution of our economic organising the market. A strong accent on innovation and competition is now almost the orthodoxy for ICT and IS policies. ICT, especially the telecom sector, had to be rescued from its statist conception of a strategic infrastructure, and a public utility with a natural monopoly character, which underpinned the policy view till the nineties. If not entirely in practice, in a very few lagging countries, certainly in principle, this dominant policy view changeover has now already taken place and is firmly established.

It will however be a monumental mistake to hope that merely by unleashing market-led productive forces and by giving a free stint to the market, we will be able to achieve a people-centred and

development-oriented information society. The economic policy orthodoxy of there being more for everyone in the brave new world, and relying on the trickle down effect to reach the disadvantaged, has today mostly been discredited. Let us not resurrect it and give it a new respectability and legitimacy through the information society policy space.

Therefore, a second thrust in IS policy arena must be of a policy regime that ensures equity and social justice in the emerging IS, and this must remain the principal preoccupation for policy makers and hopefully also of the CSTD during this session. While there is some merit in celebrating what is in any case happening, there is a much greater need to do something about what is not happening.

Within the economic domain, distributional justice has to accompany greater productivity, and this has positively to be ensured by appropriate policy regimes. Beyond the economic arena, social and human development are important aspects that need to be addressed by IS policies. These considerations cannot just remain peripheral, representing only some marginal corrections to the dominant policy model with the over-riding fear that the dominant IS apple cart may not be upset. Establishing the centrality of these concerns and necessary policy measures, in addition to the policies that support markets, is perhaps the single most important IS policy imperative that needs to be urgently addressed. We hope that the Commission, in its choice of development oriented policies for an inclusive IS as its principal agenda, sends this message out clearly, and the deliberations during this session will focus on these issues.

To briefly touch upon a much more specific issue, I found it a very welcome development when I noticed an early proposed draft for the Commission s consideration which speaks about a new digital divide going beyond the issue of simple basic connectivity. We need to go beyond the simplistic and uni-dimensional focus on spread of mobiles in developing countries that information society discourse seems to have taken up lately, to more complex issues which underlie the possibilities of a rich and equitable information society for all. In reaching connectivity beyond the tele-voice application that is the mainstay of mobile telephony, issues of rich local and contextual content and new applications become very important. And this may put the mobiles versus computers/Internet debate in a very different light. Whether the way to go ahead is content providers having to enter specific agreements with telecom providers which is the chief content model on the mobile platform or whether it is an open content model characteristic of the Internet as of present may be one of the most important policy questions today. This policy issue may determine how local and diverse, and affordable, available content will be and will therefore determine the demand for connectivity, which will ultimately determine connectivity roll-out across the new digital divide. These new complexities of the IS policy terrain need our urgent attention.

It is also important to note that while globalisation has effected an all-around squeeze on national policy spaces, this is even more so in the ICT space. ICT is typically a converged global phenomenon and national jurisdictions, especially the less powerful developing nations, have little real policy leverage in important ICT matters, even within their own national spaces. This makes the role of a global institution like the CSTD even more relevant and important. We do look forward to the Commission providing some significant policy directions towards an inclusive and development-oriented information society, a task that it has defined for itself for the 11th session.

A last few words on the nature of new global governance spaces. A global information society is also essentially something more than aggregation of national spaces, which makes a simple inter-

governmental model somewhat inadequate in the context of global governance of IS issues. WSIS set up some important precedents of multistakeholder practices in global governance that need to be preserved and nurtured, though we do realise that this is an evolving space and its possibilities and implications need to be understood better.

The business sector is the powerhouse of innovation and production, and policy making processes often need to rely on its knowledge and expertise. Policies must recognise this role of businesses and not stifle them, and in the fast changing arena of ICTs and IS it is difficult for policy makers to keep up. Not only can the business sector s presence help policy makers understand the ICT and IS phenomenon much better, its close cooperation in directing desirable change can also be very useful. The Global Compact is a great example of such cooperation. In fact we can look into the possibility of a global compact specifically in the area of ICTs and IS which brings new global issues to the fore. For instance, so much personal information is held by private companies that a commitment to certain standards of privacy can be one of the IS principles that can underpin such a new IS global compact. However, one must caution that such instruments do not replace the need for clear enforceable policies and can only compliment them.

Civil society brings in not only expertise of direct experience of working with people. More importantly it brings in greater democracy to the global process processes. It brings in the voices of people and groups who often remain un-represented or under-represented. UNDP s Human Development Report of 2002 on Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World spoke about a democratic deficit in global governance spaces and proposed that civil society has an important role in filling this gap. Participants from civil society look forward to working with the Commission in its mission for use of science, technology and ICTs for a better world.

Thank you.