

***World Summit on the Information Society, Geneva, 10-12 December 2003***  
**Statement**

**By**

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Communications, Royal Government of Bhutan**

Mr. Chairman;

Secretary-General, International Telecommunication Union

Excellencies;

Distinguished Delegates;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

At the outset, I would like to express my appreciation to the International Telecommunication Union for organizing the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society. I would also like to congratulate the Government of Switzerland for the excellent arrangements made for hosting this very important gathering here in the global city of Geneva.

Mr. Chairman:

Many of us here agree that the last two decades have witnessed unprecedented developments in information and communications technologies, more so, due to the ever-expanding markets of the developing world. It is also true that the benefits arising from innovative technological solutions, products and services have globally transformed and opened up new avenues for governments, private sector and civil society to work together.

For my country, Bhutan, having opened its door of isolation and launching into planned development activities only in the early sixties, the transition to the information society poses daunting challenges. Facilitating widespread access to ICT for all people on an individual basis is not an easy task. About 79% of our people live in remote and rural villages depending on subsistence farming. Harsh mountainous terrain and scattered settlement, with limited road and power infrastructures especially in the rural areas, low literacy rate and even lower ICT literacy of the general population, and lack of adequate financial capital, hinder overall socio-economic progress. We are also handicapped by the shortage of human resources to keep pace with the Internet and new ICT developments. Promotion of ICT is thus complex, especially when the need for further development of education, healthcare, safe drinking water, electricity and roads has to be met from the same limited resources. I am sure most of these are true for many other LDCs and developing countries.

Mr. Chairman:

The Royal Government of Bhutan, recognizing ICT as an enabler for socio-economic, cultural and political development, has introduced Internet and television in June 1999. These media have now become important and powerful tools for dissemination of information and knowledge, including the delivery of entertainment to the masses. For the first time in the history of our country, the enactment of the *Bhutan Telecommunication Act* by the National Assembly in 1999 enabled the creation of separate agencies for operational, policy, and regulatory functions.

The newly formed Ministry of Information and Communications has initiated the Bhutan ICT Policy and Strategy framework to concretize Bhutan's ICT Vision, Policy, Strategy and Action Plan. We have conducted studies on e-Readiness and media impact to smoothen our road to the information society. The Ministry is also involved in the development of the national language *Dzongkha* Unicode for incorporation into major operating systems to enable proliferation of local content on the Internet. The implementation of the Rural Telecom Master Plan 2003 aims to facilitate communication services to most of our villages by 2007.

Mr. Chairman:

In Bhutan, under the initiative of our King, we pursue a very distinctive development concept called 'Gross National Happiness' that seeks to enhance the happiness of our people through a balanced and equitable socio-economic development, good governance, preservation, protection and promotion of cultural heritage and environment. We are convinced that ICT is a powerful tool to achieve our goals.

However, the dangers of ICT becoming a force of exclusion, rather than a tool of progress, arise because new technologies are created in response to market pressures, and not the needs of poor people. Since ICT is a feature of globalization, it has come under scrutiny as an engine of creating disparities, a Digital Divide, among and within countries which could cause the further exclusion of the weakest groups in the global society. Rich countries are launching their next generation ICT infrastructures while poor countries are still grappling with mere access to simple voice telephony.

I would like to urge that the developed countries continue to extend their generous technical and financial assistance to developing countries, particularly to LDCs, to attain the goal of “An Information Society for All”. Such meaningful assistance would undoubtedly lead us towards realizing our common Vision of the Declaration of Principles and associated Plan of Action, which would otherwise remain a mere rhetoric.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to convey, through you, the gratitude of our Government and people, to the ITU and other developmental partners, for guiding us in our concerted efforts towards bridging the Digital Divide.

Mr. Chairman, I am confident that, under your able chairmanship, this will be a successful Summit. We assure you our full support and cooperation.

Thank you and *Tashi Delek*.