



**Statement by the Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern T.D.,
Prime Minister of Ireland at the Plenary Session,
United Nations World
Summit on the Information Society, Geneva,**

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It is a great pleasure to be in Geneva this morning and to speak at this the first ever United Nations World Summit on the Information Society. 'Information Society' is a phrase that is not used in the daily lives of people around the world. But the power of technology to change people's lives is understood and accepted by everyone wherever they live.

Technology is a tool and an enabler of change. However, it cannot and should not dictate how our societies are shaped and developed. What is most important in any society is its citizens. That is who we as governments serve and the ultimate goal of technology is to serve the citizen.

Today, our societies are divided in new ways - into those who have the ability and the means to access and use technology to achieve their full potential and those who don't. The Information Society presents each country with the same opportunities and challenges for economic and social development. But the difference between countries lies in their ability to grasp these opportunities and to confront these challenges. From Iceland to Idaho and from Mali to Moscow, citizens, governments, and businesses are dealing with the emergence of a knowledge-based information society. It is, therefore, timely to have a global discussion on the growth of this relatively new phenomenon. And how this should continue. We need to look at how the Information Society can benefit the global community. And how the global community can shape its future development.

Nearly, three hundred years ago, Edmund Burke, one of our famous Irish writers, said that ' a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.' Today that means of change is technology.

I firmly believe that we can only fully realise the power of the technology in close cooperation with the private sector. While governments can provide the supporting framework, the private sector has driven the development of ICTs

and their application. In areas such as distance education, e-health, wireless access and low cost connectivity solutions, progress depends on partnership with private sector companies, including a renewed focus on research into ICTs for development.

In Ireland, we want to tap into the huge pool of ICT expertise in Irish industry in a new partnership in support of poverty reduction. We will encourage and facilitate Irish ICT volunteers to use their skills in support of capacity building programmes in our partner countries. We will consult industry and Third Level institutions about new areas of research into ICT and development. We will work to develop new partnerships between Irish ICT companies and enterprises in developing countries.

Ireland's development cooperation programme works with the poorest people in the poorest countries of the world. Ireland will work with its partner Governments in our programme countries in support of their national ICT strategies. We want to see ICTs used to achieve the goal of universal primary education by 2015. We think ICTs can make a vital contribution to the implementation of HIV/AIDS treatment regimes in countries where millions face death because they have no access to life-saving drugs.

This week our Minister of State for Development Cooperation and Human Rights, Tom Kitt, launched a new ICT and Development strategy to be implemented by Development Cooperation Ireland, the Government's official development assistance programme. This strategy is based on the work of a Task Force drawn from the private sector, development specialists, NGOs and academics.

Development Cooperation Ireland will use ICTs as a new and powerful tool in its programmes of development cooperation. We will increase spending on ICTs in response to the needs of our partner countries. We will advocate

greater use of ICTs in national poverty reduction strategies. We will promote regulatory systems which encourage the open flow of information and widespread access to the Internet and other communications media.

In the broader development context, ICTs can support good governance programmes and the fight against corruption. These technologies increase transparency, help spread information beyond small groups to wider civil society and strengthen political and financial accountability.

In the second half of 2004, Ireland and the World Bank will co-host a conference in Dublin on the lessons learned from Ireland's experience in the development of a knowledge economy. We will invite key development partners to this Conference. We want to use our experience to support others who are working to use ICTs to underpin economic growth and development.

While ICTs hold out great promise for the future, and should help us in our common effort to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, we have to be realistic and pragmatic about their application. The digital divide in access to ICTs is a symptom of a wider development divide. Unless we tackle the root causes of global inequality and injustice, we will not bridge the digital divide. Fundamentally, as we agreed at Monterrey, we need better governance, sound economic management, more Overseas Development Aid, more debt relief, a fair world trade order and a relentless focus on the fight against HIV/AIDS.

The Information Society is about understanding problems and looking at possible solutions that technology makes possible – technologies that have opened up many new doors to rich sources of information and knowledge. As a global society, we must ensure that all our citizens enjoy the benefits and the opportunities that an inclusive people-centred Information Society offer. If we do not ensure this, we will be remiss in our responsibility and duty as governments.

I warmly congratulate the Swiss Government on hosting this the first phase of the UN World Summit on the Information Society. The Irish government is committed to ensuring that this Summit, of two phases, is a success and that its commitments to the world are delivered.

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