

10 december 2003

Carin Jämtin speech at WSIS 11 december 2003

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The vision behind this summit meeting can be summed up by the simple example of a few women. They are carpet weavers in Afghanistan. Using complex patterns and beautiful colours, they produce designs for the carpets they will later weave. They then photograph these designs and publish them on a homepage on the Internet. This is their new way of selling their carpet-weaving services. All over the world.

As – seemingly – simply as this, these women have harnessed ICT to take control over their own working lives. From their homepage they can access the world market. They bypass the factories, middlemen and bureaucracy that otherwise take a huge cut of their earnings.

These women in Afghanistan are an unusual but very bright and hope-inspiring example of the way in which globalisation and ICT can benefit the poor. There is an intrinsic force for freedom and growth in ICT. And – equally important - a force for democracy. And this is a force we must ensure the entire population of the world has access to.

In the year 2000, the Swedish Riksdag (parliament) set the goal that Sweden should be the first country to become an information society for all. Not only for the highly educated, for the urban population or for the young. For all.

This is why Sweden has taken an active part in preparing for this particular world summit. We share the vision expressed in the political declaration to be adopted tomorrow. Our common goal is to create a free and truly inclusive global information society now. For all.

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In our national ICT policies, Sweden is highly ambitious. We see the use of ICT as a major dynamic force in our society and its economy. Our focus, for some time, has been on investment in infrastructure. This is a challenge, as Sweden is sparsely populated with large areas in which very few people live.

For many years, Sweden has been at the forefront of ICT development. There are several explanations for this: people in Sweden can read and write, and are always early to adopt new technology and we have good experience of cooperation between Government, industry and end-users. Our long tradition of engineering and innovation has given us both an excellent telecommunications system and a cutting-edge ICT industry.

The global expansion of the Internet and its extensive use is clear evidence of the success that can come from providing an open political climate where innovation and growth can prosper to the benefit of everyone. Private sector leadership has proven its worth, and public-private partnership – especially in the technical coordination of the Internet – should continue.

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The link between ICT and poverty reduction is clear. The potential of ICT in helping to achieve the Millennium Development Goals is huge.

However, there are two factors that will determine progress – whether we can bridge the digital divide and whether we will be able to create digital opportunities for all. We clearly need to address – and redress – the unequal distribution of ICT in order to prevent poor countries and their people from lagging even further behind in global development.

But – as the example of the Afghan women illustrates – things have already started to change for the better. And there is no stopping this development. People's curiosity about ICT – and the enormous potential it embodies – are too great for societies wishing to create conditions for freedom, growth and welfare to be able to prevent its advance.

The emerging use of ICT is the beginning of a positive trend for the poor of the world. In our view, integration of ICT as a natural part of development cooperation is essential if our attempts to achieve economic development and broad poverty reduction are to succeed.

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ICT has the potential to contribute to economic development and democratisation – including freedom of speech, the free flow of information and the promotion of human rights. This potential should be used to the full.

There is also a clear link between ICT and gender equality, since it may prove to be a tool for faster integration of women into society, economically, socially and politically.

In Bangladesh, for example, some women have bought mobile telephones which they charge with solar energy and rent out. Their ingenuity combined with ICT has not only enabled these women to empower and support themselves financially, it has given them access to telephones in their villages and greater opportunities to control their own lives.

Sweden supports the Gender Caucus for the Nordic initiative focusing on “Gender and ICT”, both at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and as one aspect of long-term North-South cooperation.

Another important link exists between ICT and children's development.

Integration of ICT into projects focused on the younger generation should make a long-term contribution towards reducing the digital divide. This is also one of the reasons for our support of the “Global eSchools and Communities Initiative” launched yesterday by the UN ICT Task Force in the presence of Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

It is vital that we make real efforts in our international cooperation to spread ICT globally. But it is important to point out that each country must also take responsibility itself to secure its own development also in this field.

ICT has the potential to be, and should become, an effective instrument in our work for democratisation and poverty reduction. It is an instrument that will enable people's empowerment, handled correctly can create equal opportunities for economic development and strengthen human rights.

For this development to become a reality, we need to strive together for a free and inclusive information society. For all.

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Thank you for your attention.