

Address by H.E. Mr. Bernard Weston, Permanent Representative of Trinidad and Tobago to the United Nations and Head of the Trinidad and Tobago Delegation to the World Summit on the Information Society First Phase, Geneva, December 10-12, 2003

Madame President

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of the Government and People of Trinidad and Tobago I would like to begin by thanking the President and People of the Swiss Confederation and in particular the Canton of Geneva, for their most efficient arrangements for this Conference and the splendid hospitality over the last few days.

I would also like to thank the other organizers of this Conference, in particular His Excellency Mr. Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary General and the UN Family, the International Telecommunications Union, and the President and Government of Tunisia, for their tremendous contribution and service in furthering the cause of the Information Society.

This first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society comes at a particularly opportune time for my country. On Monday December 15, 2003, the Trinidad and Tobago National ICT Strategic Plan will be formally launched. The Plan will serve as a roadmap for the empowering of people, innovation, education, information technology and infrastructure, to create an enabling environment that will accelerate social, economic and cultural development.

What the process of formulating the National ICT Plan has demonstrated to us is that our situation in Trinidad and Tobago closely mirrors the issues, challenges, and opportunities which have been identified by many of the distinguished speakers over the past three days.

While Trinidad and Tobago's approach to ICT reflects our unique national circumstance and cultural identity, we are nevertheless comforted by the fact that we are in a position to benefit, indeed draw inspiration from, the experiences of the wider global community in general, and the initiatives emanating from WSIS in particular.

In this context, may I be permitted to make a simple observation. Trinidad and Tobago, a Small Island Developing State with a land area of just over 5,000 km² and a population of 1.3 million, is nevertheless internationally renowned for its cultural and ethnic diversity. Indeed, one can argue that our Steelband, our Calypso Music and our world famous Carnival are in many respects better established as an international brand than the name Trinidad and Tobago itself.

What we have found is that diversity, when properly harnessed to create a coherent national community of interest, can be a most formidable tool for national empowerment. However, the process of creating a national consensus is a complex, dare I say sometimes tortuous task which requires the reconciliation of many diverse points of view. I therefore wish to join those who have made such passionate and eloquent appeals for the inclusion of the perspectives of minority and special interest groups within the process.

The ability of the World Summit to promote the principles enshrined in the Millennium Declaration and thereby to effectively address such challenging issues as the need to achieve a gender equality perspective; take into account the special needs of older persons and persons with disabilities; and to effectively bring ICT to bear on the issues of poverty eradication and employment creation, will ultimately be the benchmarks by which the success of our deliberations will be judged.

Furthermore, in Trinidad and Tobago we are of the firm belief that, far from facilitating the emergence of a uniform and monochrome global culture as some people fear, ICT in fact offers a unique opportunity to preserve and indeed celebrate the vibrant diversity of the international community.

As Secretary General Kofi Annan so perceptively emphasized in his Address to this forum on Wednesday, the so-called Digital Divide is in fact several conceptually distinct “gaps” which all exist simultaneously. It is at once technological, infrastructural, economic, gender, commercial and geographical. For Small Island Developing states such as Trinidad and Tobago the issues of access and capacity building are particularly relevant.

It is in this context, therefore, that Trinidad and Tobago fully endorses the commitment to turn the Digital Divide into a Digital Opportunity which will provide the enabling mechanism to allow all of humanity to become part of the emerging Information Society.

We view the WSIS Process as the creation of an environment through which the full power of ICT can be brought to bear on the issue of Development, to the benefit of all. A high priority should therefore be placed on the formulation of mechanisms which actively encourage innovative ways in which to harness technology, as compared to focusing more on the establishment of the legal and functional framework through which ICT will be governed.

We believe that it is through the adoption of an **enabling** as opposed to a **regulatory** approach to the task at hand that the full potential of ICT as a tool for development will be realized. In this regard we in Trinidad and Tobago support the multi-stakeholder consultative process involving Government, Private Sector and Civil Society adopted at this forum.

Our national consultations reflect the conclusion incorporated into the Draft Declaration of Principles, that the development of an appropriate Information and Communication Infrastructure is a pre-requisite for a successful transition to the Information Society. To mention just a few of our initiatives, Trinidad and Tobago has undertaken such disparate tasks as:

- The incorporation of online access for the handicapped and disabled within our National Library system;
- taking the first steps towards planning and executing a national network of Community Access Centres, supported by appropriate local content; and
- the incorporation of ICT into the infrastructure and curriculum of what will eventually become a seamless education system that fully incorporates the principle of lifelong learning

Finally, Madame President, I would like to emphasize that Trinidad and Tobago shares a strong community of interest on the issue of ICT with other Small Island Developing States, and in particular with the other Member States of the Caribbean Community - CARICOM as we refer to ourselves.

I would therefore like to conclude by reaffirming the commitment of Trinidad and Tobago, and indeed of the entire CARICOM Region, to the initiatives begun at WSIS. We look forward to working with the ITU, the United Nations, and the Government of Tunisia, as well as other international, private sector, and civil society stakeholders, to meet the considerable challenge of translating these most laudable principles into the concrete initiatives that will take us all forward to the Information Society.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you.