

**Statement by Mrs. Brigita Schmögnerová
Executive Secretary of UNECE**

**in the Plenary Meeting of the
World Summit of the Information Society
Geneva, 10 December, 2003**

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The development of the Information Society is profoundly affecting economic and social life and dramatically changing ways of doing business. It is also one of the main driving forces behind the globalization process. ICT development is a key component of the growth of the Information Society, yet significant gaps subsist between countries' levels of progress in this area.

Our region is challenged more than most by this digital divide. The structure of the region gives a complex picture of the state of ICT development: the UNECE region includes many of the most digitally advanced countries as well as countries in Central Asia with some of the lowest levels of ICT development in the world. Despite the fact that most countries in the region have access to ICT there is evidence that the digital divide is widening. On the other hand, our experience shows that these gaps can be reversed.

The challenge of bridging the digital divide has an important regional dimension. In Europe interrelations are rapidly expanding between the more ICT-advanced countries of Western Europe, and countries with economies in varying stages of transition. UNECE works to help less-advantaged member States rise to Western European levels of income and wealth by encouraging regulatory convergence and approximation of norms and standards in the region.

UNECE is currently supporting the development of a global Information Society in many ways. We and the Government of Romania played a leading role in the Pan-European Regional Conference in Bucharest in November 2002, which adopted the Bucharest Declaration setting forth the fundamental principles and main strategic priorities for developing an inclusive knowledge-based economy and bridging the digital divide.

The principles and priorities of the Bucharest Declaration are already reflected in several of UNECE's regional and sub-regional activities. In 2002/2003, we launched a series of e-assessment reports to help member States, especially those with economies in transition, move towards a knowledge-based economy.

In the area of trade, we are working to facilitate electronic business, especially standards for electronic data interchange (UN/EDIFACT), web-based standards and the integrated use of paper and electronic trade documentation (UNeDocs project). We are cooperating with other organizations to develop methodologies for monitoring the Information Society. In the area of transport, UNECE is examining new technologies known as Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS) and introducing provisions on these new technologies into relevant UNECE Agreements and Conventions to make transport more efficient, safer and more environmentally friendly. Finally, and perhaps of most significance to your deliberations, the

UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) actively promotes the principles and priorities of the Bucharest Declaration, including an Information Society beneficial to all. Legislative proposals to implement this Convention were recently adopted by the European Commission.

As recognized in the draft Declaration of Principles, regional cooperation and action are, and will be, a fundamental factor in the use of ICT for development and in the implementation of decisions made at this Summit. We look forward to contributing to the next stage of the WSIS in Tunis (2005) by helping to organize a regional preparatory meeting which will provide regional inputs to the Declaration of Principles and develop the content of a Regional Action Plan. Along with other Regional Commissions, we will also look at how to assist member countries in implementing this Summit's conclusions.

Thank you for your attention.