Tunisia

Tunisian working paper for the second meeting of the Preparatory Committee of the World Summit on the Information Society

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The rapid developments witnessed during recent years in the field of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the direct impact of the digital revolution on the way of economic, social and cultural life mean that economic development is now broadly linked to the ability of countries to keep pace with and harness the resulting advances with a view to exploiting the new potential on hand.

The disparity among countries is also measured by the extent of the digital divide separating them. Bridging this divide is therefore a major challenge facing the developing countries in regard to economic revival and the guarantee of a secure future for their peoples.

Approved on an initiative of Tunisia at the Plenipotentiary Conference of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in Minneapolis in 1998, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) offers a timely and valuable opportunity for everyone to consider the subject of the digital divide in greater depth and highlight issues in connection with the relevant problems and strategic challenges.

Bearing in mind the importance of this subject, the preparation for WSIS is a matter now preoccupying countries and international and regional organizations working in a variety of specialist fields, together with governments, the private sector and civil society.

In Tunisia, ICT development and the harnessing of technological and scientific advances now constitute an intrinsic approach and represent a fundamental choice stemming from the strategic outlook of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, which is primarily based on mastering modern technology and strengthening Tunisia's openness to the surrounding environment.

Tunisia is consequently working within the scope of a comprehensive, integrated and ambitious plan intended to promote the communications technology sector with a view to supporting the country's development effort and fulfilling the requirements for boosting investment and opening up the economy to the outside world in the context of an external environment characterized by economic globalization, heavier competition and the scramble for markets.

In terms of the information society, one of the questions for discussion is concerned with identifying the nature, particular features and objectives of that society.

The fact is that the concepts held are as diverse as the number of concerned parties, cultures, interests and levels of development. One of the objectives of WSIS will therefore be to reach agreement on a united global vision of the nature of the information society and on harmonious procedures for its establishment through the development of political and regulatory approaches, as well as networks and services, in the various countries of the world.

Given that the communication culture is today a mainstay of the global society, the most appropriate way forward is to deal objectively with the issue of establishing and developing the communication and information society on the basis of two important principles, which can be summarized as:

1   The need to raise awareness of the new challenges which the world will face as a result of the concepts associated with economic globalization, including the adoption of strategies encompassing approaches and time-frames in line with the general pattern of development of the global communication and information society.

2   The inevitability of the integration of and overlap among the different areas of concern (structural, technological, cultural, economic and social) in developing the communication and information society, which calls for wide-scale consultation in the different areas of relevance among all stakeholders in the public and private sectors and among all components of civil society in general.

This document touches on three topics which, in the view of the Tunisian side, are significant to the remaining process of the preparation for WSIS:

–   evaluation of the digital divide;

–   Tunisian proposals for the Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action;

–   balanced integration between the two phases of WSIS.

I   Evaluation of the digital divide

With a view to the consideration of these different aspects and the adoption of any Declaration of Principles or Plan of Action in their regard, Tunisia sees the need for a study which evaluates not only the indicators relating to those aspects but also in particular the extent of progress achieved by the various countries in bridging the digital divide in all of its various components and forms.

In that connection, Tunisia proposes the establishment of a working group at the international level under the joint auspices of the WSIS Technical Secretariat and ITU to assume the task of drawing up standards for evaluating the development of the communication and information society and measuring the digital divide at the national, regional and international levels by means of a standardized indicator that takes into account all the relevant indicators.

II   Proposals for the Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action

It is Tunisia's view that the Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action should focus on the following four key issues:

1   The development of strategies, policies and awareness-raising in connection with the digital divide

It is clear from the experiences of both the past and present that the formulation of targeted strategies is an effective means of confronting the challenges arising from the need to promote the

communication and information society and trigger the notion of "the right to communication" as a prerequisite for championing awareness with a view to enhancing the participation of the individual as political, social, economic and cultural architect and furthering the participation of women and young people in the achievement of that objective.

The establishment of the culture of communication is likely to alter behaviour, not only in organizations but above all in the way in which individuals handle facts, with the aim of acquiring new skills which enable them to absorb more information, improve work performance and enhance their ability to take on new tasks and affirm their presence.

2 Access to ICTs and development of the infrastructure for communications, services and applications

It is an agreed fact that the communication and information society is essentially dependent on the provision of a communications infrastructure that can absorb the flow of information resulting from the use of new services and communications applications, as well as offer affordable access for users.

The capacity of countries to complete the necessary infrastructure is, however, greatly affected by the specific features typical of this field:

a)   the rapid and relentless technological innovation occurring in the ICT sector, which hinders the capacity of the developing countries to pursue their aim of establishing communication networks and which, at the same time, is seen as an opportunity for those countries to condense efforts through deployment of the newest and most beneficial technologies;

b)   the increasing need in the field of communication technology for massive investments which a number of developing countries are unable to balance, thus requiring recourse to new methods of investment;

c)   the need to develop content in order to build new information cyberspaces and not simply be satisfied with consuming what is produced by others.

In our view, the common denominator in tackling the revolution remains that of monitoring the strategic trends in the field of information science and new technologies and following up the developments and structural approaches relating to that field.

The question of access necessarily entails consideration of the ability of countries, communities and individuals to shoulder the costs of the peripheral equipment. This means that further thought should be given to the provision of such equipment at the lowest cost, taking into account the needs of those countries with economies in transition which are able to share in the development of programmes requiring the use of sophisticated equipment.

3 Reform, legislation and regulation

In the early 1980s, the communication and information sector was subject to plans and programmes for reform imposed as the result of significant events. The trends towards privatization on the one hand and the liberalization of communication and information at the global level on the other can be regarded as the starting point for this shift in political, legal and institutional circumstances.

The reform of the communication and information sector depends on characteristics and forms which vary from country to country in accordance with the specific situation and distinct circumstances of each and the definition of the broad plans for such reform, including in particular:

a)   the shift in the role of government in the regulation of communication and information from that of a direct stakeholder to that of the party responsible for regulation;

b)   the strengthening of the capacity to keep pace with globalization strategies in the preparation of communication and information policies and the promotion of strategies for integration;

c)   the progressive opening of the communication and information sector to free competition through adherence to strict regulations guaranteeing the sustainability of such competition.

4   Aspects relating to development of the communication and information society

Despite the chief focus on the above three main areas of concern, in order to build or enter the communication and information society, it is essential to give further consideration to other aspects fundamentally related to the effective achievement of objectives, more precisely:

–   the social and solidarity aspect;

–   the cultural aspect and the need to develop the content of communication and information;

–   the value-related aspect;

–   the economic and financial aspect;

–   the aspect of regional and international cooperation.

The social and solidarity aspect

This aspect concerns the relationship between communication institutions and the development process, which is a comprehensive cultural process aimed at raising both the material and moral standards of living in order to eliminate the subordination of society while simultaneously ensuring its interaction within the global environment and the awakening of its full cultural and economic energies.

Including its regional, international and local components, development lies on the scale of priority needs for the future, as does establishment of the attitude of mutual cooperation.

Furthermore, the social structure, its geographical distribution and the particularities of women and children within society mean that it is essential to bring rural areas into the information age and also respond to the needs of the family in general and women and children in particular. Appropriate plans should be drawn up to achieve these objectives, particularly since communication technology costs are no longer exorbitant.

The major changes today storming the world in a variety of fields should not heighten the sense of disappointment over the lot of development programmes in some regions of the world. Owing to those changes, however, the human race now urgently needs to implant the values and culture of mutual understanding, cooperation and solidarity among peoples as part of the dialogue of civilizations and the meeting of cultures, as well as develop the concept of full citizenship and create a global mechanism for solidarity in order to ward off all instances of marginalization, poverty and need.

The cultural aspect and the need to develop the content of communication and information

This important aspect concerns the relationship between culture and development and between the communication media and culture, as well as the cultural and development-related roles of the communication media, which play a major part passing on the cultural heritage from one generation to another. They also contribute to the cultural interplay inside any one country and have an active role to perform in regard to the protection of identity, the promotion of intellectual endeavours, the preservation of language and the development of language uses.

The interpretation of such a role demands a great degree of flexibility and capacity at the legislative and regulatory level, as well as a great degree of learned interest in culture and its role.

Attention should also be devoted to scientific research, both in generally and in the fields of communication and informatics in particular, provided that the technical and human aspects are each included in view of their role in "the establishment of knowledge" and hence in the establishment of technology production and the substance of communication.

Development of the communications infrastructure and computer accessibility are similarly insufficient as means of joining the information society and the virtual economy, as digital literacy is also instrumental to elimination of the digital divide. Individuals and institutions must be adequately qualified in order to absorb and use ICT technologies.

The rapid and profound technological changes under way also call for the establishment of new policies for investment in education and adoption of the principle of life-long learning, bearing in mind the differential advantage acquired as a result by workers, employees and citizens.

The value-related aspect

The issues relating to the policies, legislation and morals of communication are widely controversial as far as the moral aspect is concerned. Interest has begun to emerge in evaluating the impact of communication technology and in the methods of harnessing that impact in order to ensure that the desired values are met.

One method of controlling it is to enact legislation, formulate policies and identify the moral and value-driven attitudes which a healthy society should strive to achieve for the advancement of human life.

Of the problems which have come to light in the information age, the following in particular may be mentioned:

–   the capacity to ensure the fair distribution of information, as well as technical accessibility and accessibility of content;

–   the harmonization of individual privacy with the security of the community.

This problem will undoubtedly grow more acute when audio-visual communication by computer becomes possible.

In addition to these moral aspects, an important element now synonymous with the key for entry to the communication and information society in particular and to the global economy in general is the adoption of internationally standardized rules on the ownership of intellectual property, whether in regard to innovations in the field of information or to content.

The economic and financial aspect

Together with the thrust of innovation and technological advancement, establishment of the fundamentals of the virtual economy and its development through the optimum deployment of human resources and the adaptation of work methods, production, trade and service delivery will enhance the operational and competitive ability of institutions, individuals and national economies.

Although some countries are highly developed in the field of communication and information and have the capacity to finance their own needs, the remainder lack the financial resources required to develop their networks with the speed necessary to meet user requirements.

An alternative and noteworthy solution for the encouragement of private investment is to allow the private sector to participate in various ways in the communication and information sector, where an increasing number of developing countries are now running different experiments that permit comparisons and evaluations to be made before any decisions are taken concerning the ideal method

of participation by the private sector in a manner compatible with the legal environment specific to each country.

Several methods of private finance can also be used, including the distribution of revenues.

It is essential to identify the appropriate sectors in which the private sector can be effective by providing capital and the skills needed to ensure the delivery of communication services to consumers.

The establishment of markets and financial institutions can additionally have an enormous impact on the mobilization of financial resources from the private sector, particularly where national and regional capital are concerned. The priorities and overall objectives for the communication and information sector must therefore be determined.

The matter of the indebtedness of the developing countries also remains a prominent factor in the general dialogue on the establishment of the information society and will clearly form a main dialogue in the preparatory discussions for WSIS.

The aspect of regional and international cooperation

Given that elevation to the communication and information society leads to restructuring of the communication and information sector in the case of certain countries, new approaches to the subject of multilateral cooperation are necessary; in several instances, development of the communication and information society is now clearly being considered from the regional angle rather than from the national angle. This perhaps stems from a sense that the dialogue on the establishment of the communication and information society is strategic in character, relying essentially on the ability of countries to form blocs in order to keep their common denominators.

In considering the issue of the development of the communication and information society, it is also important to broaden the scope of the dialogue and draw up a framework for consultation on the development of the information society that includes the different stakeholders from the public and private sectors and from civil society, as well as representatives from the relevant fields in sectors such as education, culture, justice administration, scientific research and social affairs.

III   Balanced integration between the two phases of WSIS

Bearing in mind the particular nature of the approach to holding WSIS in two phases, the first in Geneva in 2003 and the second in Tunis in 2005, it is our view that the expectations of all parties concerning the themes and potential outcomes of WSIS must be explored in the interest of fulfilling the need to bridge the digital divide, which is now a foremost concern of all developing and developed countries. On the other hand, care should also be taken to ensure uniformity of the procedure adopted in holding WSIS in two phases.

In an effort to guarantee the success of the first phase of WSIS, we are ready to exchange views with the parties concerned in order to determine the harmonious division of roles between the two phases.

In regard to the second phase to be held in Tunis in 2005, we favour the view expressed by some parties that the period intervening between the two phases should be devoted to more in-depth consideration of the subject of the information society and that we should emerge with a long-term Plan of Action for the first quarter of this century, together with the charter for the establishment of the information society. The Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action to be adopted during the phase in Geneva should also be evaluated.

The second preparatory meeting offers a major opportunity to coordinate the preparation for WSIS, which we support, with a view to further exploring the different aspects of this issue and emerging with practical results.

The outcomes of this meeting will be fully noted by and receive the full attention of the Tunisian Government.