

**Speech by
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On the occasion of the third conference of the preparatory committee (PrepCom 3) for the
World Summit on the Information Society, held on 15 September 2003**

The spoken word is definitive

We are assembled here in Geneva today for the third conference of the preparatory committee for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). And I am also speaking to you for the third time at the opening of this PrepCom, as the host country minister and I am very pleased to be doing so.

Because our objectives and our motivations are firm and ambitious. And today these objectives are becoming increasingly well-known to the public and the world of politics. Some forty heads of government and heads of state have already announced their participation in the World Summit on the Information Society. The halls of Palexpo are almost fully booked to hold some 80 Summit Events and the private sector, after some initial hesitation, is now confirming its interest.

Just three months before the opening of the summit, what is there to report?

Let us speak first of the political process, the quality of which depends mainly on two texts: the Declaration of Principles and the Action Plan. The foundations have certainly been laid, but we are all agreed that a lot of details still need to be clarified. The drive for harmony is still too pronounced in the documents and the lowest common denominator is still too low. And let us not bury our heads in the sand: in their current state, these documents lack concrete proposals.

I know that it is a difficult undertaking, since as we get down to the nuts and bolts, more differences emerge between the different states. But let us not shrink from clarifying these differences. It is better to identify conflicts, discuss them openly and find political solutions rather than seeking to stifle them! Yes, we must show ourselves to be innovative and ambitious. Yes, over the next few weeks we need to seek – and find – concrete solutions. Let us not be content with merely listing general objectives, let us discuss our differences and find jointly defined common objectives.

I am thinking of clear objectives, with clear deadlines. Many objectives are highly desirable. For example, everyone would like all states to draw up a national strategy on the information society by 2005. Every government would like all its hospitals and universities to be connected to telecommunications systems by 2005. Everyone would like all health centres to have a telecommunications link by 2010 and all public authorities to have a website and an e-mail address by the same date.

These are worthy, ambitious objectives around which we can all unite. But if we list them in an Action Plan, we must do all we can to ensure they do not remain pious wishes. We need a joint strategy, a common political will to achieve them.

The current draft of the Action Plan contains some good starting points, proposals on how telecommunications technologies can be used to overcome some of humanity's major problems – for example, using the internet to transmit information on AIDS prevention, how people in rural areas can get access to universities via the internet, or how natural disasters can be detected more quickly, so that their consequences can be limited.

It is therefore necessary to clarify the question of how these projects can be realised and financed.

However, the focal point of the summit will be the question of access to information – and this means access in both the physical and intellectual sense. It is of little use if we highlight all the wonderful forms of applying these technologies when half of humanity has no access to a telephone, let alone the internet. And when a fifth of humanity can neither read nor write, internet access is just as irrelevant to them. This is why it is extremely important for the traditional electronic media, such as local radio, to play a major role in this World Summit on the Information Society.

It is a fact that with all these technologies there is a risk of being dazzled by their fascinating possibilities and of forgetting that these can be accessed by only a few, and that the great majority of the less privileged remain excluded from these developments.

The question of access to information is often viewed by the industrialised North and the private sector as a problem of development policy which is not directly relevant to them. This is wrong, firstly because the current crisis in the communications industry is a clear indication of how important it is for this sector to find new markets. Secondly, fair trade in the world is a prerequisite in the long-term for the well-being of the North too. But fair trade world-wide cannot be envisaged without access to the information society for everyone in the world.

Switzerland sets great store in solving the question of how such access can be financed. Our country has formulated some concrete proposals. Proposals which envisage a private-sector financing mechanism to build an infrastructure in those countries which need one. However, each country must remain free to decide on the implementation and definition of “universal access” for itself. Indeed, the needs and economic conditions in Gabon or Laos are different from those in Denmark or Australia.

The proposals in the Action Plan, on which we shall be working for the next two weeks, must therefore be concrete, and it must be possible to realise and finance them.

Both in Geneva and in Tunis, this summit will set its sights on a better world, a fairer world. It is eager to show the way towards a humane and fair globalisation. It wishes to indicate how the negative effects of a globalised economy can be compensated for, or even corrected, by technology: in the sense of greater cultural diversity, or of a free flow of information, or support for schools and hospitals in rural areas or impoverished urban areas. Geneva will therefore initiate a process with the aim of allowing everyone on earth to take part in this information society – not just us, the privileged.

Let us therefore dare to be ambitious in the Action Plan, let us dare to take the opportunity to demand concrete action and even to propose unorthodox solutions. So that after Geneva there will be clear guidelines, some of which at least will have been implemented before Tunis. Looked at in this way, the success of Geneva 2003 is also the success of Tunis 2005.

I am pleased to see a Prepcom which is being critical, inventive and even persistent in its intention to change the reality. Only in this way will this meeting be able to produce a politically relevant project!

I thank you all for your efforts and look forward to seeing you on 10 December!
