

ICT FOR A GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

How ICT can durably contribute to the wellbeing of all citizens around the world



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Speech

Friends,
Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

- We are living through one of the most challenging periods in human history – faced with a meltdown of the world's financial systems on one hand, and the prospect of irreversible global climate change on the other.
- Last year, the biggest speculative financial bubble in history finally burst – and this year we will all experience the consequences.
- Consequences that include unemployment for millions of people and a dramatic slowdown in investment.
- With US interest rates close to zero, and the Bank of England's rates at their lowest in the bank's 315 year history, there is also a real risk of deflation, and little further room for manoeuvre at the policy level.
- In a world where new financial business models have proved themselves totally inadequate to the needs of the real world, 'business-as-usual' is simply not an option.
- At such dramatic times, climate change may suddenly seem a less pressing issue.
- But climate change is also happening right now, and poses far greater long-term threats than the current financial crisis.
- We've had a cold couple of months recently, and last year was relatively cool compared to what we have become used to. But 2008 was still the tenth hottest year on record, and the past decade was the hottest on record – with global temperatures an average of 0.2 degrees warmer than the previous hottest decade (which was the 1990s).
- Climate change presents us with incredible challenges, including food and water security, with new forecasts suggesting that half the world's population could face climate-induced food crisis this century.
- Inevitably, most of those people will be the ones who are least well equipped to deal with such challenges – the peoples of the developing world.
- So, for climate change, as for financial crisis, business is also very much *not* 'as-usual'.

Distinguished colleagues,

- That makes this conference *uniquely* important.

- Fortunately, in this dangerous and frightening new world, ICTs can play an important – and indeed vital – role.
- They will help us – as Paradiso, the organizer of this event, has said – to ‘proactively promote a new concept of progress, based on revised social, environmental and economic objectives: a true sustainable development, more sustainable economic growth, more equally shared resources, and eventually the well-being of peoples around the world’.
- I am a true optimist.
- I firmly believe in the power of ICTs to make the world a better place – and most especially during these challenging times.
- ICTs are the great enabler of modern society, helping people communicate across distance and across cultural divides, facilitating trade, and providing access to vital resources – especially in health and education.
- In under two decades, ICTs have totally transformed not just the way we work and play, but the whole way we communicate, access information, manage health and produce wealth. They are at the very heart of all societies worldwide today, both in the developed and developing world.
- ICTs are ubiquitous. Indeed, the number of mobile cellular subscribers globally has just passed the four billion mark. And well over one and a half billion people now have access to the Internet.
- So ICT is now a significant sector in its own right – typically accounting for around 5% of global GDP and an even higher proportion of GDP growth, in addition to its important facilitating role in many other sectors.
- ICTs therefore have a key role to play in sustainability.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- In the current financial crisis, ICTs can help governments and industry alike weather the economic storm – by reducing costs, boosting efficiency and increasing productivity. And while economic crises come and go, the basic human need to communicate continues.
- Also, we should not forget that technological transformation is at the very heart of our industry. So while the crisis will inevitably be very tough indeed for many ICT businesses, I believe it will also revitalize the industry and enable new entrants with new technologies to thrive.
- It also makes sense to adopt ‘Green IT’, even when times are hard. The upfront investment – even with a relatively short ROI of just two or three years – might seem hard to justify in today’s economic climate. But look at the global climate – and climate change – and remember that our whole future is at stake here.
- Green IT helps businesses cut both immediate and medium-term running costs – through energy-efficient technology, server virtualization and reduced travel expenses, for example. And cost-efficiency is a critical factor in determining which players survive, in a tough economic recession.
- As the leader of ITU, the UN specialized agency responsible for ICTs, it is my mission to connect the world and ensure that all people, wherever they live, have access to the vast range of benefits ICTs offer.
- This of course presents not just a huge development challenge, but a huge ecological challenge too. Today, the ICT sector produces some two to three per cent of total greenhouse gas emissions; a share which is forecast to rise as we roll out more mobile and broadband networks.
- The pursuit of energy-efficient ICTs is therefore vital, and I am pleased to say that ITU is doing a great deal of work in this area – from promoting the creation of new energy-efficient devices and networks to developing technical standards to limit and reduce the power requirements of ICT equipment and services.
- ITU is also working to identify radiofrequency spectrum that can be used for climate monitoring and disaster prediction, detection and relief, and is a strong supporter of the Global e-Sustainability

Initiative, in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme and ICT service providers and suppliers.

- ICTs may themselves contribute to global warming, but they are also a critical tool in helping reduce global greenhouse gas emissions. Indeed, forecasts estimate that they could help cut emissions by 15 to 40% – by enabling intelligent transport systems, smart buildings and better supply chain management, for example.

Distinguished colleagues,

- Before I close, I would like to say a few words about a subject very close to my heart: ICTs and the developing world, and in particular the 49 UN-designated least developed countries, the LDCs.
- If we think ICTs are important to our society, and our sustainable future, then this is doubly true for the LDCs.
- Already, ICTs have brought remarkable change and progress to LDCs, particularly in the early years of the new Millennium.
- Since the year 2000, the number of fixed-line subscribers in the LDCs as a whole has risen almost 30-fold, from 3.8 million to 107 million. Mobile cellular subscriber growth has been even more rapid, giving LDCs a combined total of over 110 million cellular subscribers – up from just 800,000 mobile connections at the start of the Millennium.
- This is absolutely crucial for both social and economic progress.
- At both the macro-economic and micro-economic levels, it has been clearly demonstrated that mobile subscriber growth in developing countries directly supports economic growth.
- At the macro-economic level, Leonard Waverman, of the London Business School, has demonstrated that every extra 10% increase in mobile teledensity in the developing world leads to an additional 0.59 percentage points in GDP per capita.
- And at the micro-economic level, a Harvard University study found that Southern Indian fishermen's profits rose by an average of 8% on average – and consumer prices fell by 4% – once they had mobile phones.
- The next great ICT challenge for LDCs will be broadband, which is becoming essential basic infrastructure in a globalized economy – as vital to economic and social development as networks like transport, water and power.
- There are positive growth trends – with 11 million Internet users in the LDCs by the beginning of last year – but growth rates and access speeds are still nowhere near fast enough.
- Accessing information via a dial-up connection today is like being stuck on the hard shoulder on the Internet superhighway, watching the rest of the traffic rushing by. Locking users in developing countries out of the full online experience will come increasingly close to locking them out of the modern economy altogether.
- So ICTs can help us meet the Millennium Development Goals. But if we are to build a sustainable future, we must ensure not just any old ICTs for the developing world, but the latest, most energy-efficient, and cost-effective ICTs are developed, rolled-out and deployed for the benefit of all.
- This is only right and just. The world's poorest countries gained little from the global economic boom of the past few years and they generate only a minute proportion of greenhouse gases. Yet they seem set to suffer disproportionately from tighter economic conditions and the effects of climate change.
- Let me therefore make a heartfelt appeal to keep the developing world in mind during this conference and during our ongoing debates on ICT for a sustainable global future.

Thank you.