

"A Perspective on the World Summit on the Information Society"

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"In the new century, growth will be based on information and opportunity. Information drives markets, ensures a rapid reaction to health crises like SARS, and brings new entrepreneurial opportunities to societies . . . The keys to prosperity in an information economy are education, individual creativity, and an environment of political and economic freedom. An environment of economic and political freedom is the sine qua non for the kind of progress we are talking about."

Those were the words of Secretary of State Colin Powell spoken before the World Economic Forum in June of this year.

Secretary Powell with his experience in the military, industry, and now in diplomacy and international affairs understands that the freedom to innovate, create and share ideas is critical to development.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has become the new tool for achieving economic and social development. In fact, a growing global consensus has emerged in recent years that information-based technologies are fundamental to meeting basic development objectives.

The future prosperity and well being of all nations, including the United States, now depend in part on our ability to access and use these new tools effectively.

For much of the world, however, that remains an elusive goal. The number of Internet users in the world today exceeds 500 million but some 40 percent of that number live in the United States. Over the past 10 years, global telephone penetration rates have doubled, but there are still more telephone landlines in New York City's borough of Manhattan than in all of Africa. On the other hand, technology is dramatically changing things almost everywhere -- for example, there are now many more wireless phones in Africa than traditional landline phones.

World Summit on the Information Society

The upcoming United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), scheduled for December 10-12 in Geneva, will focus precisely on these challenges confronting the world.

The Summit, the latest in a series of U.N. summits focused on development, will be attended by

more than 50 heads of state and government from around the world. A second phase of the summit will be held in Tunis, November 16-18, 2005. Leaders from business, civil society, and international organizations are contributing to preparations for both phases.

The Summit's mission is to outline a clear vision and a concrete plan for putting ICT into the service of development.

What considerations should guide the Summit's work?

Development begins with freedom. The freedom to innovate, the freedom to create, and the freedom to share ideas with people around the world are the foundation of a global, inclusive information society. Our overriding vision for the information society is one that expands political and economic freedom by offering our citizens the opportunities to access and utilize information to better their lives. In the United States, therefore, we see this Summit at its core about the spread of democracy throughout the world through the opportunities available through information and communications technology.

Building Blocks for Development

The making of freedom possible and crafting an ICT-for-development agenda at the WSIS depends on three fundamental building blocks.

First, we believe countries should focus on creating a domestic policy environment that encourages privatization, competition, and liberalization, and that protects intellectual property.

Private investment is by far the largest source of funds for the development, deployment, maintenance, and modernization of the world's communications and information networks and facilities. Public policies that do not actively invite such investment simply delay development.

Second, it is critical to build human capacity. Users must have the ability to effectively use ICT tools. Without adequate education and training, infrastructure investments will yield little.

Teachers, school children, health professionals, citizens, and business people must have the knowledge needed to take full advantage of distance learning, e-healthcare, e-government, and e-business applications.

To be used effectively, ICT tools also must be adapted to local needs. Local content that reflects local culture and is in the language of the users' choosing is vital to sustaining the effective use of ICT. The U.S. government believes such content should be widely available.

At the same time, content restrictions must be avoided. Uncensored print and broadcast media provide independent and objective information and offer a vehicle for citizens to openly and freely express their opinions and ideas.

Artificial barriers that unnecessarily restrict the free flow of information and news are the enemies of innovation, retard the creation of knowledge, and inhibit the exchange of ideas that are necessary for people to improve their lives.

Third, users must be able to use ICT with confidence if the economic and social benefits of these technologies are to be achieved. Network security ICT tools and networks can never be made invulnerable to attack. But countries can protect their ICT infrastructure by adopting effective substantive and procedural laws.

Companies, consumers, and citizens can contribute as well by raising awareness and implementing widely recognized network security guidelines developed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Together we can create a global culture of network security that protects all users, no matter where they live.

In addition to creating the right policy environment, building human capacity, and protecting networks, governments also must avoid erecting new hurdles that will undermine efforts to harness ICT to development goals.

Whether it is weakening intellectual property protections, limiting press freedoms, or injecting governments unnecessarily into the technical management of the Internet, such misguided steps can quickly reduce choice, stifle innovation and democracy, and raise costs.

The Shifting Focus of the WSIS

What I find fascinating over the last few years has been the development of this Summit called WSIS as it has grown and changed. In 1998, the WSIS was approved at the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU) Plenipotentiary Conference (the "Plenipot") in Minneapolis. Many saw this proposal as an attempt by the ITU to reinvent itself in the new digital age. What many in industry feared was that the ITU would reinvent itself as a regulator of the Internet -- something industry precisely did not want.

As the WSIS shifted from a purely ITU event to a UN-hosted event with the ITU in a more supportive, logistical role, the fear of the ITU using it to regulate the Internet has lessened -- though some in industry still believe governments must be cautious due to the origins of the Summit.

At the same time the WSIS shifted from a more technical conference focusing on the improvement of telecom infrastructure in the developing world to one today focusing on information flows and how digital bits become information which then become knowledge. So we have shifted from a focus on infrastructure to how infrastructure can aid in the dissemination of knowledge around the globe.

That represents a profound shift as we have moved from a technical event to a political, policy-focused event.

That shift from a more technical ITU event to a knowledge-based event is now reflected in those planning to attend the Summit -- from heads of state and only their communications ministers to now including ministers of education, science, culture, and research and development.

We, thus, have seen a shift from those with a vested interest in preserving the ITU and finding a new role for that organization to those who have a different mindset to performing their work and respond to different domestic and multilateral constituents.

We are seeing the participation of not only the ITU, but also UNESCO, WIPO, infoDev, and a host of other organizations -- all with a role in the knowledge society.

During this transformation, we also seen the WSIS shift from a three-day Summit to more than a week of activities comprised of the Summit and other conferences and events, all devoted to the expansion of the knowledge society.

The host government of Switzerland has provided WSIS stakeholders (governments, international organizations, civil society entities and business sector entities) the opportunity to organize events in conjunction with the Summit from December 8-12 and will consist of meetings, discussions and workshops.

These events cover the full range of knowledge-based sectors, including:

1. CERN's (the European Organisation for Nuclear Research) 3 day meeting on the role of science in the information society;
2. UNESCO's High-Level Symposium;
3. World Electronic Media Forum;
4. InfoDev Symposium; and
5. ICT4D Platform at Geneva Palexpo which will focus on the effective use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for development

Changes in the Telecommunications Sector

When the World Summit was proposed in 1998 at the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference in Minneapolis, the sky was the limit for the telecommunications industry. Today the reality of the telecommunications industry has changed significantly. Today we see limited monies available for investment in telecommunications. It, therefore, is even more critical that countries, notably developing countries, get their houses in order as they compete for these more limited investment monies.

Partnerships for Development

Before I bring my remarks to a close, I want to focus on the fact that the U.S. Government's involvement in WSIS is only one aspect of our commitment to using ICT to foster development. Over the years, many of our assistance programs have incorporated ICT to achieve economic and social goals.

The Digital Freedom Initiative (DFI) is one of the leading examples of the U.S. government's (USG's) commitment to using the latest tools to achieve longstanding development goals. The program builds on previous USG initiatives, including the Leland Initiative, which was launched in 1996, and the Internet for Economic Development, which was launched in 1999.

The DFI promotes the use of ICT by entrepreneurs and small businesses in developing countries and leverages existing infrastructure to improve access to local, regional, and global markets. It also assists countries in creating a pro-competition policy and regulatory environment that will help entrepreneurship blossom.

The pilot program was announced in March 2003 at a White House ceremony and was first launched in Senegal. At the October 20-21 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting in Bangkok, President Bush announced that Peru and Indonesia would join the program.

Over the next five years as many as a dozen countries may be invited to join the initiative.

The U.S. government advances ICT-for-development through numerous other programs. These include:

- Literally hundreds of individual U.S. Agency for International Development projects that use ICT to address health, education, and capacity issues;
- State Department-sponsored "e-logistics" workshops that provide practical real-world advice to developing country business owners, especially small and middle size enterprises eager to improve productivity and expand into new markets;
- Regulatory and technical training programs sponsored by the Washington-based U.S. Telecommunications Training Institute (USTTI), which, over the past 20 years, has graduated more than 6,200 ICT professionals from 163 developing countries; and
- A \$30 million Internet Access and Training Program (IATP) that develops Internet skills and computer knowledge among diverse populations in Eurasia while promoting the free flow of information and ideas.

Whether it is these programs, a new initiative to promote the spread of wireless technologies, or efforts to raise awareness about the value of "electronic government," all our ICT-for-development programs rest on the building blocks outlined above.

We believe that these building blocks can help all countries achieve their digital progress and prosperity agendas, thereby helping the children and generations to come.

The World Summit on the Information will not be the culmination of our work in ICT-for-development, but it can be an important step along the way by having those countries present reaffirm their commitments to freedom: freedom of expression, freedom to innovate, and market-driven approaches to development.

Thank you.

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As Senior Counselor for International Communications and Information Policy at the U. S. Department of State, Mr. Finton covers a range of communications and information policy issues, including telecommunications trade and Internet and electronic commerce policy.

He is senior advisor to Ambassador David A. Gross, the U.S. Coordinator for International Communications and Information Policy. He represents the State Department in telecommunications negotiations before the World Trade Organization (WTO), as well as bilaterally with the European Union and its Member States. He has served as Chairman of the U.S. Delegation to the Committee on Information, Computer and Communications Policy of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris and has represented the U.S. Government before meetings of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in Geneva.

From 1993 to 1994, Mr. Finton worked on assignment in International Business Development with Honeywell Inc. where he handled export control matters and developed market opportunities for the various Honeywell business units world-wide.

Prior to the State Department, Mr. Finton served with the International Trade Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce. There he was Policy Advisor to the Offices of Telecommunications and European Community Affairs, as well as serving as Special Assistant to the Under Secretary for International Trade.

Mr. Finton is a summa cum laude graduate of Ohio University. He also has received a Master of Arts degree in jurisprudence from Oxford University and a Juris Doctor from The American University Law School. He is a member of the Bar of the District of Columbia. He can be contacted at the State Department at <fintontc@state.gov>.