The Convergence of the Global Information and Knowledge Society: Progress and Challenges

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We live in a world of 6 billion people who are geographically and politically divided in more than 220 countries over six continents; each with its social, cultural, economic and regulatory environment. For long, we have been claiming, advocating and characterizing this world, as moving towards the information, and later on, the knowledge society. Our claims however, have had implicitly a normative conception driven primarily by the information and communication technology and the process by which such technology is helping in the convergence of such a world with its multi-national boundaries, barriers and contextual differences.

Today, I would like to address three points. The first is about globalization and convergence, the second is about the nature of transformation towards the information and knowledge society and the third is about the barriers and boundaries in the process of transformation towards such paradigm.

One thing we know in 2004 that the internet revolution is providing everyday a more networked world "globally". The TV and satellite have provided also a borderless content into most homes around the globe.

To help better understand globalization, we need to go back to the basics. In the existing literature and the ongoing prevailing practices, at least five broad definitions have been articulated as Internationalization, liberalization, universalization, westernization / modernization, or deterritorialization. All having "ion", and none has captured the abstraction of the real "global" world.

First let me share with you one set of data as an example, over the last year and starting from the world's richest nations meeting summit in Evian in mid 2003

focusing on Africa, the issues of two worlds have emerged. The challenging questions to the one global world include, but are not limited to:

- o Average annual income in the developed world is $ 27,854 while in Africa the average is $1,690

- o Access to clean water is 100 % in the UK while in the Dem. Rep. of Congo it is 45%

- o Life expectancy in G8 countries is 77 while in Africa it is 48 years.

- o The annual spending per person on health in Canada is $ 2,534 while in Mali it is only $1

- o the number of people per doctor in Italy is 169 while Malawi is 50,000

- o The number of people who live on less than $1 per day is zero on G8 countries while 291 million people in Africa do so.

- o The Deaths under 5 (per 1,000) are 6 in G8 countries and 174 in Africa.

- o Annual spending on subsidizing western farmers is $311 bn while annual spending by G8 on aid for Africa is $13 bn

- o More than 50% of people on Earth have never made or received a phone call.

- o Internet penetration in US is 75% while it is less than 4% in the Arab world.

- o Installed PCs (per 100) average 22 in Europe and 1.5 in Africa.

- o Telephone Subscribers (per 100) average 96 in Europe and 2 in Africa.

My second point relates to the transformation towards information and knowledge society. The technology revolution, speed and diffusion resulted in more focus on ICT and less on content and its use. The transformation towards an information society is usually built on seven pillars: People, ICT, Data (content), Business Systems, Application, Information, and Policies. The absence of any one pillar impedes the speed of such transformation. Beside, the evolution of information towards a knowledge society requires knowledge based institutions and a knowledge – citizen at work and in life. It implies, by definition, quality

education, life long learning, functional and technical skills, cultural understanding, multilingualism, and openness, tolerance and flexibility.

My third and final point relates to the barriers and challenges of transformation. To me, they are many. Probably the most challenging one is in the mind.

- The right paradigm rather the right slogan needs to be adopted.

- The second is in the leadership that understands the multidimensional nature of such paradigm and the complexity and interdependence between such dimensions.

- The third is in the focus and bias to one or more of the seven pillars rather than addressing them in their totality…. comprehensively. The natural bias to technology and less to investing in people or content digitization, or to business re-engineering, the classic application development or the relevant policy adoption including standards, security, etc…

- The fourth challenge is in the regulatory environment and process deregulation including; management of the process, its transparency, fairness rules and involvement of private sector.

- The Fifth challenge relates to access, not only to technology, but also to information and knowledge.

- The sixth barrier is the growing digital divide coupled by an abrupt political divide fuelled by military tensions, terrorism and war zones in many parts of the world. In some cases coupled with the use and misuse of religion which transformed yesterday's relatively more perfect world to a global TV war and cowboy society where rationality and knowledge are secondary to bombers, tanks, warheads and arms dealers.

- The seventh barrier is in politically non democratic regimes where reform is secondary to status quo. By definition, democracy, information, market economy and knowledge are connected.

- Eighth, information is development and knowledge is growth. The results from the agreed upon "Millennium Development Goals" declaration and its

related implementation show that, accelerating development in relatively poor third world countries is still a wish rather than a national strive.

- Ninth, in many countries of the world, digitization and data capturing at institutional level, government and / or private, still represents a major challenge.

- Tenth, in may countries business process engineering or even business systems in it is basic form seem to be in its infancy contrary to the west. Eleventh, the value proposition for the use of Internet in E-Education, E-Health, E-Tourism, E-Society and E-World is yet to materialize.

These are just few examples of challenges and barriers that exist today. Now let me ask you again, is the world converging towards an information and knowledge society? To me, I believe we need jointly to try to provide the answer. The starting point is how to empower the new generation with knowledge to help shape a better and happier world.