

## **The Millennium Development Goals, WSIS and the United Nations**

Shashi Tharoor

*Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, United Nations*

In a play by George Bernard Shaw, millionaire arms dealer St. Andrew Undershaft describes poverty as “the worst of all crimes”. Of course, Shaw did not mean us to give any credence to Undershaft’s views, but rather to take issue with them.

Nonetheless, there is something criminal about the continuing existence of desperate poverty, some forty years after US President Lyndon Johnson declared that the end of poverty was within our grasp.

Of course, ending poverty is no simple task. In addition to the resources and tools, it requires, at a minimum, serious desire, commitment and action by people all over the world. And, just as the causes of poverty are manifold, deriving from history, from geography, from politics and from economics, so too what we must do to eradicate it is complex and will take time.

It was to ensure that, at the dawn of a new century, people everywhere were moving in the direction of, in the words of the UN Charter, “better standards of life in larger freedom,” that world leaders gathered at the United Nations in September 2000, adopted the Millennium Declaration – committing themselves and their nations to undertake a series of concrete actions to promote peace, development and human rights.

To add substance to those commitments, a set of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was created – time-bound and quantifiable targets, the achievement of which would address poverty. These targets sought to ensure that people everywhere were able to enjoy the human rights long ago established by the United Nations – the rights of each person on the planet to health, to education, to shelter and to security.

The eight Goals seek to: “eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development”. The target year States set themselves for achieving those Goals is 2015.

When Professor Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University, the Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on the MDGs, said that “this generation has the ability to achieve something that no other generation could have – the ability to eliminate poverty altogether by 2025, and to make the world safe and prosperous for all,” part of what he was referring to was the enormously powerful tools that we now possess as a result of new technologies.

The importance of access to new technologies for those in need was recognized by the 146 heads of State and government who adopted the Millennium Declaration. They promised to “ensure that the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies ... are available to all” (paragraph 20).

This broad commitment was rendered more specific in the Millennium Development Goals. Goal 8 includes a target to work with the private sector to make all the benefits of new technologies – especially information and communications technologies – available to people in less developed countries.

Indeed, it was clear to the world’s leaders in 2000 that information and communication technologies would make an invaluable contribution to meeting all of the Millennium Development Goals. They understood that greater access to ICTs, as they are called, would improve farming practices and assist micro-entrepreneurs, would help prevent AIDS and other communicable diseases, would promote women’s equality and would foster environmental protection. And our leaders were correct. All over the developing world, electronic commerce, distance education, telemedicine and e-governance are improving the quality of life for countless people.

So we have the commitments and the tools. What next? A report produced earlier this year (2005) by Professor Sachs and a team of experts, titled *Investing in Development: a Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals*, identifies the missing element as follows: “Billions more people could enjoy the fruits of the global economy. Tens of millions of lives can be saved. The practical solutions exist. The political framework is established. And for the first time, the cost is utterly affordable. Whatever one’s motivation for attacking the crisis of extreme poverty – human rights, religious values, security, fiscal prudence, ideology – the solutions are the same. All that is needed is action.”

### **The Millennium Development Goals and the World Summit**

One of the next steps towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals was to develop the means to manage and share the benefits of the information revolution of the late twentieth century. The information revolution, unlike the French Revolution, is at present one with much *liberté*, some *fraternité* and no *égalité*. And its twin, globalization, is yet to deliver the goods, or even the tools to obtain them, to many in great need. The 400,000 citizens of Luxembourg have access to more Internet bandwidth than Africa's 760 million citizens. The dividing line between North and South is not just the poverty line but the fibre-optic and high speed digital lines. If "digital divide" is a cliché of our time, it represents a reality that cannot be denied.

Governments decided to address this at a two-phase World Summit on the Information Society. The first phase of this Summit took place in Geneva in 2003, and the second will meet in Tunis later this year. The Summit's Declaration of Principles expressly sets out its challenge as "to harness the potential of information and communication technology to promote the development goals of the Millennium Declaration" (paragraph 2), adding, "we aim at making full use of the opportunities offered by ICTs in our efforts to reach the internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration" (paragraph 60).

The Plan of Action, like the Millennium Declaration, sets 2015 as the year in which it hopes to achieve its targets, which include linking, via technology, villages and communities, universities and primary and secondary schools, scientific and research centres, public libraries, cultural centres, museums, post offices and archives, health centres and hospitals, and local and central government departments (paragraph 6).

Other targets include improving the availability of information in all languages on the Internet, and ensuring that everyone in the world has access to television and radio.

The Summit targets encompass the broad array of issues that governments and people must address to put technology at the service of a better world. Information about all those targets can be found at the Summit website ([www.itu.int/wsis](http://www.itu.int/wsis)). But I will focus on two issues that, as the senior information officer of the United Nations, I am most involved in.

The first of these is the search "to encourage the development of content and to put in place technical conditions in order to facilitate the presence and use of all world languages on the Internet" (paragraph 6).

This is in fact three targets in one. It involves encouraging the development of local content, fostering technological development and expanding the presence of world languages on the Internet.

Developing countries have made strong progress in the number of Internet users, even if in 2002 around 20 per cent of Internet users were still accounted for by 20 per cent of the world population. Since there were no significant gains in computer distribution, gains in Internet access were mostly through shared access, such as community telecentres and shared public points of access. An expansion of Internet access in developing countries, including through shared access, offers hope of more widespread global distribution of Internet users.

The global figures are a little skewed because just one country accounts for much of the progress in the developing world. China accounted in 2001 for an estimated 22.5 million Internet users, and today it accounts for an estimated 520 Internet service providers and 600 Internet content providers. The growth of the Internet sector in China is likely to remain strong, if not explosive, with the number of users projected to eventually overtake the number of users in the United States.

That said, even Africa, which is often low on the connectivity scale, has been making progress. At the end of 2003, there were around 14 million Internet users in Africa, up from just 4.5 million in 2000, ITU reports. It is clear that the number of Internet users in Africa is growing at as fast a rate as any world region. South Africa accounts for one quarter of African Internet users, and North Africa now accounts for 35 per cent of the total.

We are, therefore, making progress in getting the world on-line. But all media principally reflect the interests of their producers, and whether we look at television, radio or the Internet, what passes for global media is really the media of the developed West. In 1999, OECD nations owned 93 per cent of Internet hosts, and this inequality had only slightly improved by 2002, according to a survey conducted by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

Information about the developing world, of course, is not missing from global media, but what passes for “my world” in the media of the West is too often the West’s perception of my world. Most of the globe’s Internet hosts are based in industrial countries, and most of the content is produced in, and for, Western countries, in Western languages. So while the developing world’s access to the Internet is improving, I fear this content divide might turn out to be more resistant to our plans and our entreaties – something the WSIS process must find ways to overcome.

Clearly, if the Internet is to live up to its potential to transform the lives of subsistence farmers, for example, by helping them learn about better crop techniques, or by improving their access to markets, then what is actually on the Internet must be comprehensible to them, and it must be suited to their needs.

With local commitment and international assistance, this content gap can be overcome. One developing country that has made a strong effort to promote local content is Mali. Mali is developing material for the web that will allow it to use information technologies to meet a strong demand among its citizens for higher education and to give them access to appropriate information about health and medical practices. It has also started to promote tourism and the sale of its arts and crafts over the Web. The Internet is used to relay weather information, financial news and training to farmers and entrepreneurs. Much visual and audio information is also produced to reach the illiterates in rural areas.

The efforts in Mali are also helping preserve that country's cultural heritage and providing its people with information about their history. The National Museum of Mali is using digital techniques to record and restore ancient manuscripts, and it is using the Internet to exchange information on the latest restoration and conservation methods.

Another example of a successful initiative outside the West is the creation of Internet Clubs in Egypt. These clubs make affordable access to the Web available to all Egyptians, especially those less privileged. Hundreds of clubs have been launched, each with an instructor available to train users in basic computer skills, software applications and web design. One result is that Egyptians are now creating their own knowledge pool, tailored to the concrete needs of users and community groups. To date, the clubs have allowed 100,000 Egyptians to use the web, and Egypt aims to establish the one thousandth IT Club by the end of 2005.

In my own country, India, a Wi-Fi bus is bringing connectivity to rural areas in a district of Karnataka. As the bus, which is equipped with Wi-Fi Internet access, drives around the district it stops at local villages and links to a communally-owned computer, housed in a computer kiosk.

There are many such examples across the developing world and they have improved lives – proof that we have it in our power to use technology to advance towards the Millennium Development Goals. But these successes remain the exception, rather than the rule, and our goal must be to find solutions for everyone.

The second World Summit issue on which I am particularly focused is freedom of expression. At the Geneva phase of WSIS, States described a free press “as an essential

foundation of the Information Society” (paragraph 4). It is a truism that “knowledge is power”, and as UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has said, “information is liberating.” The virtues of access to technology, of relevant information, and of content in a language you understand are all moot unless the legal and political infrastructure of your country allows you access to information.

There can be little argument that information and freedom go together. The information revolution is inconceivable without political democracy, and vice versa. In fact, the spread of information has already had a direct impact on the degree of accountability and transparency that governments around the world must deliver if they are to survive.

How much information technology can deliver economically is also linked to political freedom. To take full advantage of the international economic access that information technologies provide, countries need to open up to the outside world, to liberalize their mass media, and to resist government control and censorship of information. There is widespread recognition today that restricted access to the flow of information directly undermines development. And global interdependence means that those who receive and disseminate information have an edge over those who curtail it.

The United Nations has been in the forefront of the struggle to advance freedom of information. The legally binding International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is only the broadest of the international treaties and declarations the UN has developed to guarantee freedom of opinion and expression. We have set the standards, but we have not yet won the battle.

Let’s not pretend the issue of freedom of expression is easy. In the fight against terrorism, some countries have enacted or are considering measures that restrict press freedom or, more subtly, have used disinformation and misinformation in an effort to steer the debate. Here a delicate balance must be found between ensuring national security and maintaining an independent, critical press. The fight against terrorism cannot be won unless the media are allowed to play their crucial role of informing citizens and acting as watchdog.

In many countries, media concentration and media ownership by large conglomerates present another subtle challenge to a vigorous, independent press and endanger its role as a check-and-balance to political and economic power. Democratizing access to information can serve as a check not only on governments, but also on press barons and media magnates.

And all countries impose limitations on traditional media – through laws against slander and libel, for example. The Internet – a “media without a passport” – poses new challenges to

even the most benign governments as they seek to find the right legal environment to foster legitimate freedom of expression, without allowing other legitimate rights to be trampled. This is another issue that WSIS will grapple with.

Leaders of both developing and developed countries must take the information challenges faced at WSIS seriously, and recognize that infrastructure development is a priority. They must assess and support the most appropriate technologies, help promote access and training, and choose a legal framework that guarantees access to information.

In the words of the United Nations Secretary-General, “let us embrace these new technologies, but let us recognize that we are embarked on an endeavour that transcends technology. Building an open, empowering information society is a social, economic and, ultimately, political challenge.” If we succeed in meeting it, we will have helped make a better world.