WSIS: Challenges and Policy Issues in Latin America and the Caribbean

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A new knowledge-based economy and information society have emerged and are transforming the way people, societies and governments live, learn, work and relate to each other. At the heart of the digital revolution is the power of information and communication technologies (ICT), which allow people to access information and knowledge almost instantaneously, anywhere in the world.

In a competitive economy, increases in productivity that result from the combination of information technology applications and re-engineering of processes create conditions for economic growth. Debate continues as to whether or not this increased productivity and "new economy" is entirely new, or if technology is challenging us to understand more deeply how economies have always operated. Nonetheless, the message is clear: the role of information and knowledge in development must be better understood and effectively integrated into development strategies, policies, programs and projects.

The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) believes that information technology issues are, at their core, human development issues. Access to information and the tools needed to build and apply knowledge are essential to achieve social, political and economic objectives.

In the three years since the IDB adopted its first strategy on information and communication technology, the Bank and the countries of the Region have gained experience in applying ICT to addressing different development issues. At present, the IDB is working to promote ICT as a priority within the agendas of its borrowing member countries; create and strengthen existing institutional capacity; increase the number and quality of ICT projects and programs; develop mechanisms to transfer lessons learned, best

practices and training of human resources; encourage the establishment of public, private and civil society networks; and increase the level and quality of public expenditures assigned to ICT.

The ultimate success of Latin America and the Caribbean's political and economic reforms will depend in large part on the Region's ability to become a full-fledged participant in the information revolution. Democratic institutions can succeed only if citizens, firms and civil society organizations have the information they need to make informed decisions and to hold government accountable. In the economic sphere, full access to information will help the Region to compete in the global economy, while ensuring an equitable distribution of the benefits of development to all sectors of society.

While we recognize that the main challenges of the Information Society are global, we also acknowledge that the Inter-American Development Bank has a special role in implementing changes regionally and enhancing the capacity of the countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to develop according to their respective needs and vision, to build upon existing partnerships, and to redefine roles and responsibilities at the regional, national, and local levels.

The World Summit on the Information Society: The Road to Tunis

At the global level, the IDB played a significant role in the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), held in Geneva in December 2003. It is now helping to coordinate the contributions of the countries of the Region in the Summit's second phase, to be held in Tunis in November 2005.

The meeting in Geneva and the follow-up to it, with their largely open and participatory processes, proved how this Summit went beyond technological issues, embracing a discussion grounded in the larger picture of economic and social development, a discussion of technology as a tool for improving human life.

The Tunis Summit will be, as it has often been said, a *Summit of Solutions*: government, civil society and industry leaders will seek solutions on the ambitious targets set to be achieved by 2015, such as connecting remote villages with ICT and establishing community Internet access points; connecting all universities, secondary and primary schools, scientific and research centers, hospitals and health centers; and ensuring that more than half of the world's inhabitants have ICT within easy reach. These targets complement the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by world leaders at the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000 – to combat poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation

and gender inequality. Without the widespread and innovative use of ICTs, the MDGs may prove impossible to attain.

Nonetheless, this Summit is not meant solely as a "development conference", but rather as a gathering where the interests of both developing and developed countries will be taken fully into account, so that the voices of all countries are heard.

The Tunis phase of WSIS should stress the importance of the strengthening of the social, economic and political *adjustment mechanisms* that enable individuals, organizations and countries to make and implement decisions that ensure that development responds to the unique values, needs, conditions and resources of each country and that everyone participates and benefits from the development created by the widespread deployment of ICT. It should also emphasize how social and economic development is dependent on many factors, which should be addressed through an overall development strategy. Factors such as political stability, macroeconomic governance, transparency and accountability of national and local administrations, the rule of law, physical infrastructure, and basic literacy should also be addressed in an explicit manner, and ICT should not be seen as a substitute. However, the integration of ICT into overall national development strategies can help facilitate implementation, expand the scope and coverage, and increase the results for most of these factors.

In the objective of tackling the task of incorporating the Information Society paradigm into the development agenda, we should address some fundamental issues in Tunis:

1. identify the "building blocks" of an Information Society and the regional characteristics and particularities of the transition towards the Information Society;

2. identify the policies that can help the country through an "optimum" transition path;

3. encourage efforts and initiatives, especially regional ones, leading to the implementation of regional/national strategies and action plans; and

4. work together with the countries as well as regional institutions in order to provide adequate programs and financing tools likely to support strategies and action plans.

The Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action reveal a clear commitment and represent a significant foundation for the work we have ahead. We also welcome the work undertaken by both the United Nations Task Force on Financial Mechanisms and the

United Nations Working Group on Internet Governance and it will be key to integrate their conclusions and indications in our endeavors in the Region.

In the follow-up to the Summit, we think that it will be critical to devise a mechanism that is able to coordinate and ensure the implementation of WSIS and its conclusions, a truly efficient platform for policy and partnership dialogue, through the engagement and collaboration of all stakeholders.

The stakes are high. The digital revolution offers unprecedented promise to help meet the aspiration of people everywhere for a better life and can create real opportunities for poverty alleviation and wealth creation. One of our biggest challenges is to create a knowledge-based economy that helps to overcome, not exacerbate, poverty and inequality. Our goal is to put information technology applications at the service of efficient, equitable and sustainable development.

The Inter-American Development Bank and other organizations in the region and around he globe must act as catalysts to encourage an ICT revolution that will help us to achieve our ultimate objective, which is to reduce poverty and create opportunities for all citizens. We walked together with the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on the road to Geneva; we are now ready to walk with them on the road to Tunis, supporting them on the implementation of policies and goals that were established internationally.