

A STATEMENT BY



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Information And Communication Technologies:

A Priority For Africa's Development

On several occasions, the Secretary-General of the United Nations has seized the opportunity of the presence of key players and potential partners to advocate a global collective effort to deploy the versatile applications of Information and Communications Technologies in support of Africa's development efforts. One such address was to the Opening of the third meeting of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on September 30, 2002. Following is the text of the statement.

The past year has been marked by a great surge in the United Nations effort to build international consensus around the central goals of sustainable development and poverty eradication. The Monterrey Conference and the Johannesburg Summit have laid out an internationally agreed agenda for action by all key partners—governments, multilateral institutions, the private sector and civil society at large.

Great hopes have been raised. The challenge now is to translate them into reality.

Unfortunately, the past year has also witnessed deterioration in the world economy. Growth has been uncertain and irregular in most regions. Foreign investment has fallen sharply. The telecom and information sectors—which have always been pioneers in exploring not only new technologies, but also new avenues of growth and investment—have themselves suffered a sharp and persistent decline.

There is a vast potential for investment growth in the developing countries. Information and communication technologies (ICT) can help us turn this potential into concrete opportunities that will help the poor work their way out of poverty while, at the same time, benefiting the world community as a whole.

I am pleased that the Task Force has decided to place special emphasis, at this meeting, on ICT for development in Africa. Nowhere are the needs more acute than in that part of the world. ICT is a chance for Africa. It is not, of course, a magic formula that is going to solve all the problems. But it is a powerful tool for economic growth and poverty eradication, which can facilitate the integration of African countries into the global market. By making the development of ICT one of the priorities of the New Partnership for Africa's Development, African leaders have shown that they are committed to seize the opportunities of the digital revolution.

But bridging the digital divide, in Africa and elsewhere, is a formidable task that requires not only leadership, but also a major commitment of resources.

With innovations such as wireless fidelity—commonly known as Wi-Fi—and other low-cost technologies and business models that are now being explored, we should aim to provide cheap, fast and, eventually, free access to the Internet. But investments will still be necessary, not only to ensure that people have the technical skills and the literacy level needed to use information technology facilities and service them, but also to create content that reflects the interests of that part of the world.

Clearly, if we are to succeed, the process must engage all stakeholders: donors, the private sector, civil society organisations, governments, and especially those in the developing world itself. The Millennium Development Goals, adopted by the world community at the highest level, should help rally all stakeholders around a common agenda. ICT is a powerful instrument for speeding up the realisation of these goals, and the Task Force can play an important role in building alliances for action.

Indeed, it has already done a great deal of work to forge such coalitions. And it is working effectively with other international initiatives—including the G–8 Dot Force—to define a shared agenda for action. I applaud the dedication and the commitment of the Chairman of the Task Force, and of all its members, who have laid the necessary groundwork for action in less than a year.

Now is the time to think of partnerships and initiatives for concrete programmes and projects that will make a difference on the ground. Why not concentrate on a few key areas where specific information technology programmes and projects could be undertaken and then replicated? I am sure you have many ideas on how information technology can have an impact on development issues, from poverty eradication, to health, education and the advancement of women. I look forward to the results of your discussions. Be assured that you can count on my full support and personal commitment to your success.