



# The United Nations Information and Communications Technologies Task Force

## Background

“The Task Force belongs to all of us—governments, civil society, the private sector, and the organisations and agencies of the United Nations system. Let’s nurture it together.” This quote by Mr. Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, reflects the objectives the Task Force would tackle during its three-year term.

The United Nations Information and Communications Technologies Task Force (UN ICT TASK FORCE) is a new global policy body established by the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan to bring the benefits of the global digital revolution to the developing world. Launched on 20 November 2001, the Task Force brings together

high-level representatives of governments, the UN system, the private sector, non-governmental organisations and the academic community, and is the first United Nations endeavour to fully incorporate world business leaders able to offer a unique perspective and expertise from their respective fields. Through this system of collective input, the Task Force has already achieved a common understanding on priorities and tasks, as well as on most effective modalities for achieving the goals set out in its mandate.

The Economic and Social Council Meeting held in New York in July 5–7 2000, was devoted to the theme “Development and International Cooperation in the 21st Century: The Role of Information Technology in the Context of a Knowledge-based Economy”.

Besides stressing the role of information technology for future development, the meeting proposed a set of initiatives to be taken at international level. These initiatives would promote:

- a. Widened access to the digital economy;
- b. A more transparent and efficient government that offers online services;
- c. An enabling legal framework;
- d. The development of local content;
- e. Regional cooperation; and
- f. The creation of regional observatories to monitor the impact of information technology on the economy.

The General Assembly’s Millennium Declaration, adopted on 8 September 2000 at the Millennium Summit, set out an ambitious agenda in peace, security and disarmament, poverty eradication, the environment, human rights, protecting the vulnerable, meeting Africa’s special needs, and strengthening the role of the United Nations in the developing world. We in the United Nations strongly believe that ICTs are a potent tool for achieving the ambitious goals of the Millennium Declaration.

In March 2001, ECOSOC requested the Secretary-General to establish an Information and Communications Technologies (ICT)

Task Force, an initiative intended to lend a truly global dimension to the many existing efforts to put ICT at the service of development.

## **The Task Force**

Supported by the Heads of State and Government of all UN Member States that endorsed the ECOSOC Ministerial Declaration at the Millennium Summit, the UN ICT Task Force, since its formal launch on 20 November 2001, has worked to help create a conceptual framework for harnessing the power of information and communications technologies for advancing the Millennium Declaration. In particular, the Task Force is committed to the United Nation's goal of halving the number of people living in poverty by 2015.

The Task Force understands that this mission can be best achieved by empowering developing nations to establish their own national e-strategies, improving the existing national capacities and exploring new development areas.

The ICT Task Force has been working to establish and provide a global forum for integrating ICT into development programs and addressing such issues as strategy, infrastructure, enterprise, human capacity, content, application, partnerships, and policy and governance, issues related to the digital revolution at the regional and international level, facilitating the effective participation of all.

By harnessing the potential of ICT, the Task Force aims to reduce poverty, promote development, end marginalisation and give the poor the means for empowerment. The Task Force intends to create innovative and bold strategies that will enable developing countries to partake of the global digital opportunity. It will work to provide the majority of the world's population access to ICT, particularly the Internet. It will promote capacity building on the local level and work with software developers to encourage local applications that can be easily used in developing countries. The Task Force will support developing countries

in building human capacity in ICT and forging new livelihoods, especially for women in rural areas, and young women and men.

In order to implement its Plan of Action and to help stakeholders to share best practices and lessons learned in ICT, the Task Force decided on the creation of six Working Groups for collaborative action:

1. ICT Policy and Governance;
2. National and Regional e-Strategies;
3. Human Resource Development and Capacity Building;
4. Resource Mobilisation;
5. Low-cost Connectivity and Access; and
6. Business Enterprise and Entrepreneurship.

Additionally, several Regional Nodes were created to implement some of the basic principles of the *modus operandi* of the Task Force, such as decentralisation of the activities, an open and inclusive approach, and reliance on existing mechanisms. The Regional Nodes have already been established in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and in Arab States. They will be conduits for compiling and sharing accumulated experience, identifying region-specific goals and priorities, and for supporting best practices. They will also serve for providing regional and sub-regional perspective and guidance to the activities of the Working Groups and the Task Force as a whole.

### **The UN ICT Task Force and Africa**

ICT has unquestionably become one of the key development challenges for the African continent, and there is a need for strong partnerships and knowledge and information-sharing mechanisms to meet the challenges.

On 21–22 January 2002, the UN ICT Task Force held its first African Regional Meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in collaboration with the Economic Commission for Africa. The meeting concluded

with a number of initiatives for the African Stakeholders Network. It was agreed, amongst other things, that the ASN should employ various mechanisms to identify networks working in the Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) area and open dialogue towards establishing common frameworks for partnerships and the sharing of resources. It would also draw on the capacity-building experiences of regional and international institutions with proven track records, such as the UN system, the Association of African University (AAU) and the Partnership for ICTs in Africa (PICTA).

It was also agreed that the ASN should link-up with existing initiatives, such as the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), the G8 Dot force, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the World Economic Forum and other international initiatives and programs.

The UN ICT Task Force African Stakeholders Network looks at the unique challenges that Africa faces and is addressing major issues in the area of ICT for development: the role of government and the need to put in place a favourable legal, institutional and regulatory environment; the nature of connections to the richer countries, to their technology, capital and companies; and the need to train and retain skilled people, which begins with education but runs far beyond that to safety and living conditions.

To accomplish this will require certain specific objectives. They include making the promotion of the ICT a key priority of the political agenda of governments, creating and strengthening existing institutional capacity, increasing the number and quality of ICT projects and programs in the relevant regions, encouraging the cooperation and establishment of public, private and civil society networks, and increasing the amount and quality of public expenditures assigned to the development of ICT.

There is particular need in the African region to secure political will at the highest level possible for optimising the opportunities in an information and knowledge age for political, social, financial and cultural development.

The Task Force's ongoing efforts aim to demonstrate that the window of opportunity offered by ICTs will enable the region to address the structural roots of inequality and poverty by creating domestic prosperity and global competitiveness, and that this will contribute to a democratic process of efficient, equitable and sustainable development.

### **Digital Illiteracy**

ICT has been able to empower individuals through knowledge, level playing fields, and opportunities in multiple spheres. ICT has not only created a new world of opportunity for global businesses, but for civil society as well, because it enables wider dissemination of information and access to best practices.

This New World of opportunity, however, has been limited to the individuals fortunate enough to be able to access these technologies. Without access, history's exponential progress is evolving without global participation, resulting in what we today call the digital divide, one of the glaring inequalities of our modern society. Reducing these inequalities calls for, among other things, a vision of information and communications technology. Its success will depend on the participation and support of all players in different sectors of society, including government, the academic world, civil society, the private sector and Non Governmental Organisations.

In seeking to mobilise ICT for development in order to bridge the digital divide, we first need to know first how broad the gap is. We need to know what types of policies and programs will enable the disparate communities in the various regions to take advantage of the explosion of information available through the Internet and the opportunities promised by the new economy. We need to know how the use of information and communications technologies can help create more democratic, participatory processes.

Internet use today reaches less than ten percent of the world's population, a fact that must compel leaders around the world to address the impact of digital marginalisation on current government policy, international development programs, the organisation of civil society and the effectiveness of small enterprises.

Yet the question is not merely one of access to the Internet, but rather one of converting information into useful knowledge. In fact, the subject is not just the Internet or the World Wide Web, but the range of technologies that are reshaping communication, and their implications for business and the economy, politics and governance of societies and, ultimately, how societies organise themselves.

The impact of the information revolution touches all of society, and so the different dimensions cannot be really separated.

Just like all pillars, the structure of our digital bridge begins with its base. This movement is being led by the young adults of the world, on both sides of the digital divide. Young adults from developing countries are increasingly realising the wonders of foreign cultures and customs. The tools of information technology have provided the next generation with faces and customs of alien places. People in emerging countries, striving for knowledge, have led the call for ICT accessibility. Universities and small cafés are flooded with young adults attempting to find news not available to them in their city or village. They realise how important this Knowledge Economy will prove for their future.

A fundamental shift in the economics of information has been under way in the last few years, a shift that is less about any specific new technology than about the fact that a new behavior has reached critical mass. It is our challenge, responsibility and commitment to convert the access to, and the use of, the new information and communications technologies into enhanced participation, better education, more efficient public administration, and innovative business strategies. It is our mission to give societies the capabilities to seize these extraordinary opportunities and to transform the threat of digital marginalisation into digital inclusion.