

Report on Panel 1: Challenges and Best Practice in the Preparation and Implementation of National Strategies for the Information Society, WSIS, Geneva, 10 December 2003, 15:00 – 17:00 hrs

This Panel Discussion was part of a parallel event organized jointly by the United Nations Regional Commissions (UNECA, UNECE, UNECLAC, UNESCAP, UNESCWA), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, and the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force (UN ICT Task Force), during the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva on 10 and 11 December 2003.

Ms. Brigita Schmögnerova, Executive Secretary of UNECE, opened the meeting and delivered her welcome address.

There was also an opening statement from the Chair, H.E. **Mr. Bachir Al-Mounajed**, Minister of Telecommunications and Technology, Syrian Arab Republic.

The moderator of the panel, **Mr. Stephen Browne**, Director of ICT for Development, UNDP, introduced the panel and asked each member to answer a specific question on the subject of national e-strategies, which he would pose.

The first question was addressed to **Ms. Dhipavadee Meksawan**, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Information and Communications Technology, Thailand. It referred to Thailand's impressive progress in ICT for Development in recent years and the factors that had helped accelerate this. Ms. Meksawan informed participants about some of the key elements of the Thai national e-strategy, such as working with all stakeholders, in particular the business sector. For example, partnering with the Thai computer associations allowed the Ministry to bring low-cost PCs on the market, which could be afforded by poorer families.

The question addressed to **Mr. Richard Simpson** from Industry Canada, referred to the role of donor countries, like Canada, in supporting national e-strategies. Based on the G8 Dotforce and Canada's work in the past, a practical example for launching an international initiative to support the development of e-strategies in developing countries was "e-Pol-NET". This is an open, international network bringing together expertise and resources that can help policy makers in developing countries develop their national e-strategies.

Mr. K.J John from MIMOS Berhad, Malaysia, was asked about the development of the ICT sector in Malaysia, and how important it was for developing countries to develop a domestic ICT sector. In his response, Mr. John pointed to Malaysia's long history in building an electronic and electrical industry sector, as well as an automotive sector that today uses 30-40% ICT components. This experience, coupled with the convergence of the chip industry and the Internet has allowed Malaysia to produce high value-added products and thus contribute to national economic growth. Developing countries which do not have this experience and infrastructure may start by focusing on the software

industry or outsourcing, such as India or the Philippines. A domestic ICT industry was not a requirement for developing ICT, what was more important was to focus on ICT as an enabler for economic growth in all economic sectors and to provide an enabling environment for its wide dissemination and usage.

The question to **Mr. Martin Sandelin** from Nokia was "from a private sector perspective, how can governments best bridge the digital divide"? Mr. Sandelin mentioned the costs of telecommunications, which differ considerably between countries, and suggested that governments should analyze the respective value chain to understand where the costs come from that raise the affordability barrier for consumers. Policy issues that needed to be addressed include the regulation of the telecommunication and financial sectors, taxation and import duties, and infrastructure (e.g. electricity), all of which can raise ICT costs to the end-user.

The introductory remarks were followed by a question-and-answer session with the audience, moderated by Mr. Browne. Questions were raised by participants from Egypt, Malaysia, Thailand, South Africa and China. The following summarizes the main points that were made:

- In order to create ICT-based value, it is not sufficient to put in place a computer and access to the Internet. Rather, the question needs to be addressed whether ICTs can be used effectively, whether there is local content, whether businesses can carry out online transactions etc. Today, 70% of Internet content is still in English language.
- In the case of Thailand, the budget PC project was used to drive demand by offering cheap supply – 30% cheaper than other PCs in the market.
- It was important to understand that the digital divide was only the symptom of a problem but not the problem itself and that national e-strategies have to be well integrated with other national development strategies.
- It was important to monitor, measure and assess ICT access, usage and impact. While a number of countries have carried out e-readiness assessments, they need to go a step further and assess the intensity of ICT usage, for example in areas such as e-commerce or e-learning. This was important for evaluating e-strategies and for better targeting the specific ICT policies.
- While the choice of technology is a critical issue, the timing will never be perfect. Two criteria one may want to take into consideration when deciding on the type of technology, are (i) what is the degree of standardization, and (ii) is there a critical mass in terms of technology users? Pilot testing may be helpful before investing heavily in new technology. Some technologies will be able to sustain the changing environment, while others will not be able to keep up with new standards and technological developments and will thus have to be changed. The involvement of local companies in technology development is crucial.

- The design and implementation of national e-strategies requires strong leadership from the top (head of state) since mindsets have to change, especially at the senior officials level. A solid, long-term strategy laying out mechanisms for implementation and monitoring is preferred over one-time documents with no clear follow-up strategy or link to overall national development.