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Geneva, 21 May 2007 -- The Information Society can play an increasingly significant role in promoting sustainable development and a healthy environment. It can also be a tool for empowering the public and strengthening participatory democracy. However, its potential in these areas is not being fully realized, according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). In particular, efforts to close the 'digital divide' need to be accompanied by stronger measures to curb the growing negative environmental impacts arising from increased usage of information and communication technology (ICT) .

At the United Nations Regional Commissions event entitled "The Information Society – From Declaration To Implementation",[1] being held parallel to the annual session of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development, the Secretary to the UNECE Aarhus Convention[2], Mr. Jeremy Wates, will examine the challenges and opportunities that ICT presents to achieving a more environmentally sustainable future.

Closing the digital divide is a major policy goal of the WSIS follow up activities. It is estimated that the rate of growth in participation in the Internet will exceed 10 percent per year during the five year period 2005-2010. This has significant environmental implications, both positive and negative.

"The potential for ICT to reduce environmental impacts is considerable, e.g. through using teleworking or virtual conferencing to cut down on transport emissions," according to Mr. Wates. "However, ICT carries its own environmental footprint. Even as we seek to make the best use of the new electronic media, we must remain aware of the challenges ICT poses to achieving sustainable development, and make efforts to minimize the potential environmental damage."

These challenges include ensuring that the production of information and communication technologies is clean and efficient, and that the energy used to power the ICT sector – most especially the Internet – does not undermine efforts to respond to the threat of global warming. Another concern is the illicit movement of transboundary wastes that originate from ICT usage in the developed world and end up being dumped in landfills of the developing world. At least 100,000 scrapped computers are arriving in the port of Lagos, the Nigerian commercial capital, every month.[3] There are also more indirect effects, such as the use of the Internet to spread information that promotes unsustainable lifestyles and environmentally damaging choices.

The event will also provide an opportunity to explore how new forms of electronic communication are being used to promote greater transparency and facilitate public participation in decision-making. In the environmental sphere, the Aarhus Convention provides an international framework within which countries from throughout much of Europe and Central Asia have taken on a legal obligation to promote the availability of environmental information through the Internet.

"The Internet has allowed a dramatic increase in the exchange of information between citizens and their Governments. Yet the immense potential for electronic participation in decision-making has not yet been realised," say Mr. Wates, citing the findings of a recent survey under the Convention to assess the implementation of electronic access to environmental information.[4]

At the side event, the ECE secretariat will announce the launch of a new phase in the development of the Convention's Aarhus Clearinghouse for Environmental Democracy (http://aarhusclearinghouse.unece.org), a global electronic portal. The Aarhus Clearinghouse enables Governments and citizens to share electronically information on their activities promoting environmental democracy. It collects emerging practices around the globe in the areas of access to information, public participation and access to justice in environmental matters.

For further information, please visit www.unece.org/env/pp or contact:

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[1] The Regional Commissions event, which features panels on "ICT and Sustainable Development"

and “ICT and Globalization,” will take place on 21 May 2007, in Geneva.

[2] UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters was adopted in June 1998. The 41 Parties are: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Tajikistan, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the European Community.

[3]United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Executive Director Achim Steiner, speaking before the Eight Meeting of the Conference of the Parties, Basel Convention, Nairobi, Kenya, on *27 November 2006.*

[4] Summary report on the implementation of the recommendations of the Meeting of the Parties on electronic information tools (decision II/3*)*. Addendum to the report of the fifth meeting of the Task Force on Electronic Information Tools (ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2007/L.3/Add.2). UNECE. 12 April 2007.

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