

Ministerial Conference of the International Organization of la Francophonie on the information society

Rabat (Morocco), September 4-5, 2003

Contribution of the International Organization of la Francophonie to the World Summit on the Information Society

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We, Ministers and Heads of delegation representing the States and governments of the countries having the French language in common, meeting at a ministerial conference of the French-speaking countries' Organization at Rabat (Morocco), are determined to contribute actively to the success of the World Summit on the Information Society due to be held at Geneva in 2003 and at Tunis in 2005.

This Summit should mark an important stage in the achievement of the objectives of the Millennium Declaration. We are committed to a pluralistic conception of the information society which is based on democratic foundations, relies on genuine participation by citizens, and makes the concepts of communication, exchange and individual and collective acquisition of information and communication technologies its central concerns. The information society must be guided by objectives of peace, justice, equality and sustainable development.

We are convinced of the importance of participation by the public authorities, the private sector, civil society and all the other players in the building of an information society. We affirm the fundamental importance of working to reduce poverty through comprehensive, determined economic and social development policies. To this end, we think it is a necessity to promote digital solidarity through sustained efforts by the international community with a view to universal and general access to information and communication technology as an essential tool for reducing the digital divide and building the information society. We consider that information and communication infrastructure must be put in place and developed on affordable terms and must aim to improve connectivity, particularly in rural and isolated areas and underprivileged urban areas, by, among other things, organizing collective access points.

We think it necessary that equitable access to information, knowledge and ideas, both for individuals and for communities, should serve educational, scientific, economic, social and cultural purposes.

In this respect we call for support for local initiatives in order to encourage widespread acquisition and use of information and communication technology, with a view to sustainable development.

We underline the importance of the role of the international financial institutions and the private sector in mobilizing sufficient resources to upgrade communication infrastructure in developing countries, so that they can fully benefit from the new tools for development and growth and promote cultural diversity.

We advocate the establishment of legislative and regulatory frameworks that preserve intellectual property rights in particular and favour the creation of independent regulatory

bodies. Transparent practices are indispensable to the creation of a favourable environment for investment. Organized sharing of good investment practices, notably for infrastructure, is a decisive factor when it comes to implementing national access policies.

We call for international Internet management that is democratic, multilateral and transparent, takes account of all the players' needs and respects geographic and linguistic diversity. While confirming our desire to ensure the status, influence and promotion of French as a language of communication at the international level, we reaffirm our determination to unite our efforts to promote multilingualism.

We recommend a concerted effort to ensure network security and to combat cybercrime, while observing fundamental freedoms and protecting personal data and people's private lives. The same applies to protection of minors from content that may harm their development.

We would like to see close cooperation between international organizations in the building of the information society.

We recognize the right of every person to participate in and benefit from the building of an information society based on solidarity and characterized by diversity, without being excluded or discriminated against in any way. In this context special attention must be paid to women and rural populations so as to give them equitable access to the benefits of information and communication technology and to prevent the advent of the information society from perpetuating existing inequalities.

Similarly, young people must be able to act as catalysts of change and knowledge in the information society.

We think that, on the basis of our experience and after having consulted French-speaking civil society, priority must be given to the following topics:

Cultural and linguistic diversity

We agree that respect for cultural and linguistic diversity should be a founding principle of the information society. Consequently we think that information and communication technology must be used to affirm and promote cultural and linguistic diversity and to promote a dialogue of cultures, while respecting identities.

We underline the importance of supporting the production and circulation of content that reflects the diversity of these identities, among other things by using open-source software. People must be free to express themselves in French and their national languages. Similarly, the information society must fully accommodate our cultural heritage.

Democracy, good governance and the search for peace

We reaffirm that respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reinforcement of the exercise of fundamental freedoms, particularly freedom of opinion and expression,

are prerequisites for a democratic information society.

We consider that information technology must be used to serve good governance by furthering implementation of the principle of transparency as the rule by which institutions function. The information society must in particular foster citizens' participation in public life and the establishment of local democracy, which is an essential prerequisite for deepening the roots of democracy. In this respect information and communication technology must allow for greater participation by women, young people and rural populations in public decision-making. We consider that appropriate use of information and communication technology should contribute to better crisis and conflict management. It should also strengthen means of monitoring and prevention in order to consolidate peace. Moreover, it should be a vector and catalyst of national reconciliation and reunification.

Strengthening skills

While pointing out the fundamental importance of education and literacy, we emphasize the necessity of integrating the use of information and communication technology in education and training systems as of the level of basic education and on a lifelong basis, notably through distance learning. This is especially crucial for women, whose access to education must be promoted. The use of information and communication technology must become a basic skill so that everybody, both individually and collectively, can actively contribute to innovation and growth in their cultural, scientific, social and economic dimensions. It must also allow for better integration of the economic players into the global economy.

Similarly, information and communication technology must be regarded as a leading way for rural populations to gain access to knowledge.

The acquisition, control and widespread use of information and communication technology, the development of research and local production of content, applications and services, should open up enticing career prospects and help to combat the brain drain. In this respect, special attention must be paid to training trainers and teachers. Furthermore we must encourage young people, a growing number of whom are mastering information technology, to play a special role in promoting this new knowledge tool in the field among the various members of society and, in particular, their elders.

The development, dissemination and use of open-source software must be promoted.

We advocate the definition of indicators that make it possible to assess the degree of acquisition of information and communication technology and the establishment of national information society watchdog bodies to facilitate the exchange of experience. The use of North-South partnerships on the one hand and public-private partnerships on the other, as well as cross-cutting partnerships, is essential to the development of the economic fabric and skills; it also helps to mobilize the parties concerned for the rapid acquisition of information and communication technology.

The media

We consider it necessary to boost the independence and multiplicity of the private and public media and professional ethics and regulatory mechanisms in the information field so as to allow freedom of expression to be fully exercised and to encourage diversity in the content that is produced and disseminated, by combating excessive concentration in

the media and standardization of information.

We consider that the new possibilities afforded by synergy between communication services, equipment and technology can compensate for the developing countries' backwardness in developing the media and can make access to content more widely available.

We point out the importance of guaranteeing universal access to information while respecting and protecting people's private lives, human dignity, intellectual property, the general interest and public-service mandates. In this respect we are particularly committed to the development of locally-based information services.

We recall that the traditional media participate, in the same way as the new media, in building a free and democratic information society. In this context we encourage pluralism in international information.

We reaffirm the necessity of reducing the imbalances between the media of the North and South, particularly where infrastructure, technical resources and the development of human skills are concerned.

We,

Ministers and Heads of delegation of the States and governments of the countries having the French language in common,

Adopt the present contribution by the International Organization of la Francophonie to the preparation for the World Summit on the Information Society at Geneva in 2003 and at Tunis in 2005.

Request the Secretary-General of the International Organization of la Francophonie to present this contribution at the World Summit on the Information Society.

Rabat (Morocco), September 5, 2003