

Statement by Chief Ebitimi Banigo, Minister of Science and Technology of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, on behalf of the Group of 77 at the High-Level Segment of ECOSOC 2000

New York, 6 July 2000

Mr President,

On behalf of the Group of 77 and China, I wish to congratulate you and other members on your election into the Bureau of this historic session of the Economic and Social Council, ECOSOC 2000. The G77 is delighted to see you preside as President of the Council at a unique juncture in the history of the United Nations. We are rest assured that with your wealth of experience, diplomatic skill and commitment, ECOSOC 2000 will be a successful and landmark event.

I wish to thank the Secretary General and the entire staff of the Secretariat for the comprehensive and valuable reports, which are not only enlightening but also provide very useful insights into the subject before us. I have no doubt that these documents will serve as very useful reference points in our discussion. The G77, however, wishes to express its disappointment at the late release of these important documents, which in some measure presented some difficulties for some of our members in the preparations for the crucial issues before this High-level segment.

Mr. President,

The global shift to an information age, driven by the developments in the field of Information and Communication Technologies, (ICT) is indeed a revolutionary and definitive step in the history of our civilisation. Today's digital revolution as reflected particularly in the growth of the Internet, e-mail and e-commerce has become transformative and created today's knowledge based global economy, which is impacting on our lives almost on a daily basis. Such is the scope and pace of the changes in ICT today that it has also become the revolutionary challenge of our times. For G77, the colossal challenge is how to ensure that the potentials inherent in the digital revolution play a crucial role in accelerating growth, facilitating eradication of poverty and promoting sustainable development, particularly in developing countries. We, therefore, find it most appropriate that this Ministerial high-level segment of ECOSOC, has as its theme, "Development and International Co-operation in the twenty-first century: The Role of Information Technology in the context of a Knowledge based Global Economy."

Mr. President,

We are very aware of your commitment and tireless efforts in ensuring that the UN plays a central role in harnessing the benefits of ICT for humanity. Since the beginning of this year, we have all been witnesses to various programmes, in form of lectures, seminars, panel discussions and workshops here in the UN, to sensitise delegates and indeed the entire international community to the potentials and challenge of ICT. We appreciate the tremendous efforts by members of the Group in organising regional seminars in preparation for this High-level segment on ICT. It is therefore heartening that on the wings of ECOSOC 2000, that is, in the corridors of these conference facilities, there is an exhibition by an array of private companies in the field of information and communications. All are here to demonstrate, the immense possibilities of the digital revolution for the social and economic development in the developing world. We, therefore, look forward to this session of ECOSOC coming up with policy guidelines and initiatives on ICT. Of course, the ultimate objective is to ensure that our Organisation respond to a development, which continues to alter the world's economic landscape.

Mr. President,

The G77 has since come to the conclusion that it is imperative that developing countries must respond to the challenges of ICT revolution. And we must in fact do so fast. That realisation informed the decision of the G77 to address the issue of Knowledge and Technology as one of its sub-themes at the first-ever South Summit in Havana, Cuba last April.

In the Havana programme of Action adopted at that Summit, the G77 acknowledged that over the last two decades, there has been a shift from manufacturing to an information and knowledge based production activities with major effect on all areas of human endeavour. The Group, however, pointed out that while Information Technology is turning out to be one of the most powerful technological revolutions of our time, regrettably, countries of the South are lagging behind in the field of ICT. Consequently, there is an urgent need to bridge what has come today to be known as the digital divide. The Havana Programme of Action, therefore, called for measures and solutions to address basic infrastructure problems, such as inadequate electricity, poor communication facilities, all of which are impeding the efforts of countries of the South to benefit from the on-going information revolution. The objective, according to the Havana Programme of Action, was to encourage the institutions of countries of the South to fully exploit the potentials of communication and information technology for development.

Mr. President,

The position of the G77 as reflected in the Havana Programme of action demonstrates beyond all doubts the resolve of the countries of the South to face the challenges of ICT. We are also not unaware of the need for coherent policies and appropriate strategies, diligently pursued, at the national level, if countries of the South are to benefit from today's scientific and technological advances. But we face tremendous obstacles in our endeavour, principally due to lack of information infrastructure, inadequate long term external financial flows and adequately trained human resources. In addition, the very nature of the complexities of ICT makes concerted international cooperation an absolute necessity in today's interconnected world. It is, therefore, imperative for us to work together to eliminate the barriers existing in developed countries, which restrict the ability of developing countries to fully utilise and further develop the capacities for ICT for the benefit of growth and development for our peoples.

It is against this background that we see the central role of the United Nations. As indicated in the Secretary' General's Millennium report, the UN remains the sole universal and global institution with the legitimacy and the scope which derive from its universal membership and a mandate that encompasses all spheres of human endeavour. Of course, other members of the international communities, particularly the financial and development agencies, must assist the UN in this task.

Mr. President,

Our goals and expectations for the use of ICT in promoting international co-operation and development are clear. They derive from the primary concerns of members of the G77. They include the issue of poverty eradication, access to education, good health delivery system, transfer of technology and general advancement in the social, political and economic fields. While we are desirous of taking advantage of the great potentials of ICT in promoting development, certain basic issues and problems must be acknowledged and addressed.

It is necessary to acknowledge that the economic benefits and wealth generated by ICT have not been evenly distributed among countries in the world. Even within the developed countries the leaders of the digital revolution, the benefits have not been evenly spread. It is worse between the developed and developing countries. Therefore, it is important to ensure that in promoting wide use of information technology in the developing world, innovative approaches are adopted. It is in this light that we suggest that the emphasis should be on community connectivity instead of individual connectivity. In this way, the special needs of the

people of developing countries, who cannot afford the cost can be served through multi-purpose community centres as proposed in the secretary-general's report. Also such an approach will assist in pushing the frontiers of the digital revolution into the rural areas in the developing world. The ultimate and, indeed, the overriding objective is to provide such communities with access to education, expand the world wide economic opportunities through the Internet and in effect bring them into the information and knowledge-based society, in which they can prosper.

While connectivity is the defining characteristic of access to the information age, certainly for the developing countries, capacity and institution building are important prerequisites for the implementation of ICT related policies and the sustenance of access. In this connection, external debt problem and inadequate long-term financial flows, which have combined, and continue to hamper development in developing countries particularly in basic infrastructure such, as electricity and communication facilities must be addressed.

In the drive to mainstream ICT into the developing countries, the G77 wishes to emphasis the need for the development of local content. Such a strategy will help in popularising the use of ICT in developing countries while protecting the preservation of the culture of the people, assuage the feeling of anonymity and promote the sense of identity in a fastly globalising world.

Mr. President,

Undoubtedly, the efforts, which you have deployed this year to involve Private Corporations in our consultation and deliberation, derive from the fact that the moving force behind the ICT, today, is primarily the private sector. It is, therefore, important to devise strategies to forge a partnership between various segments of the society, that is, governments, private sector corporations, civil society organisations and international organisations. The fact that the private sector companies are at the frontiers of the cutting edge of ICT makes it imperative for such partnership. This must have informed the call for Global Compact initiative of the United Nations Secretary General. In this regard, we call on the private sector to contribute its expertise and resources towards bringing the information revolution to the marginalised regions of the world.

Mr. President,

In conclusion, the G77 wishes to reiterate that the international community, multilateral trade and financial institutions and the United Nations system truly have the primary obligation to ensure the full integration of developing countries, currently at the periphery, into an interconnected and globalised economy. It is indeed in the interest of humanity to ensure that no one part is left behind in the unfolding revolution in the field of information and communication technologies. In this regard, G77 supports the creation of an ICT Task Force by the United Nations. The outcome, should, however, be subjected to an intergovernmental process. International co-operation in ICT must, therefore strive, to do the following:

- Mobilising resources to assist developing countries in the development of necessary infrastructure;
- Assisting the developing countries in the development of strategic objectives in accordance with their national priorities;
- improving their capacity for the establishment of legal and regulatory frame works in the area of transfer of technology, capacity building and necessary investment in human resources and strengthening of institutional capacities for promotion of ICT;
- exploring ways, through the Global Compact Initiative, to ensure the reduction of cost of communication services and promoting the development of modern national and regional communication infrastructures and upgrading of information and communication network in the developing countries;
- encouraging investment by private sector ICT firms in the developing countries;
- establishing of a Trust Fund in which private sector operators in the area of ICT, international financial

institutions and global business associations will provide the resources;

- Supporting South-South co-operation in the field of ICT, including special net-work programmes, such as, Web of Information for Development (WID) under the auspices of TCDC of the UNDP.

Mr. President,

The foregoing proposals are certainly not exhaustive in the search for the solution to bridge the digital divide between the developed and developing countries. Neither are these measures "the cure it all" in the goal of reorienting information and communication technology to support international co-operation for development. They are proposals, which we hope, will aid this Council in its tasks of fashioning out appropriate policies in the field of ICT to promote development and international cooperation.

We also hope it will provide this High-Level segment of this Council the opportunity to fashion out measures which will ensure that the United Nations plays a central role in ensuring a global partnership to promote growth and development in the developing countries so that the peoples of the world can benefit from the opportunities inherent in the digital revolution.

I thank you.

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