Honorable Mr. Chairman,
His Excellency, Mr. Luis Echeverria Alvarez, former President of Mexico,
His Excellency, Mr. Carl Bildt, former Prime Minister of Sweden,
His Excellency, Mr. Al Gore, former Vice President of the United States of America,
Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of Mr. Nitin Desai, Under Secretary General, and the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), I wish to warmly welcome all of you to attend the 3rd High-Level Forum on City Informatization and sincerely hope that this two-days event would well achieve its objective and promote e-government development in the region and worldwide.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, as you all are aware, the impact of information and communications technology on our lives is enormous and pervasive. In particular, e-government has now become the most important and popular application domain of modern information technologies and has attracted the attention and concern of both developed and developing countries. According to UNESCO, among the member countries of the United Nations responded to the survey, 89% are taking actions towards developing an e-government. In fact, e-government has been put on the political agenda of all the industrial countries. In this significant domain, tremendous efforts are being made by the public and private sectors and citizens, ranging from pursuing more efficient and effective public administration and management, more accessible and quality government information for the public, better delivering public services, to putting government business transactions online and building partnerships for interactive and participative governance.

Various best practices have shown that e-government greatly stimulates the development of democracy. It facilitates government information services, provides more accessible and better information to the public, and accordingly, makes government timely
report to its clients and makes citizens better informed of their rights and obligations. E-government also provides a powerful means to build partnerships for interactive and participative governance. Interactions through the Internet between government and citizens as well as between government and businesses are more convenient than ever before. Electronic polling, referenda and voting, which are already used in a limited scale, can also happen eventually in a more wide scale. Consultation on national issues by private groups already takes place and there is on going discussions on allowing elections, either local or national, to be conducted through the Internet. In addition, e-government helps to foster transparency and accountability in government, and e-procurement provides powerful tools for anti-corruption and government saving.

On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that e-government is a powerful means for economic and social development as well. E-government changes the ways that government provides services to its customers; and, accordingly, has brought public administration and the public into a new era of setting up their relationships. New concepts of public services, such as “one-stop-shop”, “non-stop-shop”, 24x7 (24 hours a day and 7 days a week) and citizen relationship management, have been increasingly applied in delivering public services. Various online government information systems have greatly not only improved effectiveness, efficiency and productivity in government but also brought tremendous economic and social benefits to development, such as effective revenue collection, better financial management, achievable anti-corruption, a favorable environment for foreign investment, and prompt and convenient civil and medical services. In an increasingly knowledge-based economy, effectiveness, efficiency and ability of acquiring information and knowledge worldwide brought by e-government are definitely critical factors for government to be competitive in the global economy and for state to develop.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, while the efforts on e-government have attained phenomenal achievements in many countries and promised sound social and economic progresses, the up-to-date practices and experiences of many countries show that there are still some difficulties and constraints on e-government.

Digital divide and integration are the two main difficulties in e-government practices. Obviously, online public services require universal access to the Internet so that citizens are equal to enjoy advanced government services. However, hitherto the percentage of citizens’ access to the Internet, in the most countries of the world, is still far less then 50%, among which the majorities of the member states are under 20%. This means that sound endeavors and substantive measures are needed to bridge the digital divide within both developed and developing countries. We are pleased to see that many countries have taken various measures to reduce the digital divide, such as providing financial assistance for poor families to buy
computers, setting up free or low-charge access points to the Internet at public libraries or post offices, setting up kiosks on the streets with low-cost access to the Internet, and even providing free Internet access and e-mail services to all the citizens of city. I am optimistic and believe that human being will be smart enough to find the solutions for bridging the digital divide.

As far as the integration of government information systems is concerned, it is apparent that new public services, such as “one-stop-shop” and “non-stop-shop”, require integrated information and transaction services across government departments and agencies and, sometimes across geographic regions, and, accordingly, the integration of government information systems at various levels and between different governmental departments and agencies. Therefore, overcoming administrative barriers and hierarchical bureaucratic systems has become one of the main challenges to government if integrated government information systems and online services are being pursued.

At present, there exist two main constraints on e-government practices as well, i.e., privacy and security. While e-government is introducing new channels for public services and civil participation, it also raises concerns about protecting citizens’ expectations of privacy and data security. In some countries, citizens have expressed their wishes to slow down the development speed of e-government until protection of citizens’ data and privacy is well materialized. In this regard, governments need to develop criteria and establish a convincible legal and regulatory framework for the release of public information that may contain personal or sensitive data, and to develop standards for identifying users and ensuring the validity of official documents. Governments need also to accelerate the speed of developing digital signature-related technologies, including public key infrastructure and other authentication systems, in order to establish public trust and confidence in operational online transactions and services.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, even though there are some difficulties and constraints, e-government indeed offers all the nations, particularly developing countries and countries with economies in transition, dramatic opportunities to leapfrog ahead and reinvent their public administration. It can be seen from the experiences and lessons of many member states of the United Nations that the problem that hampers overcoming the digital divide in developing countries actually is not so much poverty, but how to properly and effectively use scarce resource available to the government. It also indicates that, as a matter of fact, modern information technology is in favor of developing countries because it provides them with low cost and low risk, as well as high benefit, high-strategies to develop their e-government.
Implementing e-government is, however, considerably more complex than a corporate introducing online sales or moving procurement to a trade exchange. The experiences and lessons from many e-government leading countries show that overall progress in e-government is not closely correlated with similar social, political or economic characteristics. Leadership, political will, commitment to deliverables and accountability for results are the factors that appear to have the greatest influence on progress. In fact, moving towards e-government involves more than just acquiring and use ICT, even though basic information infrastructure is indispensable. Specific policy choices, the ability to absorb new technologies and success in creating a national ICT culture are important variables. These critical prerequisites highlight the crucial role of political leadership and the role that only governments can play. In addition, in concert with the private sector and civil society, in particular, establishing a sound partnership between the public and private sector is also critical to successful e-government development.

Experiences also show that calls for government service delivery to migrate from in-line to online often overlook the complex social, regulatory and legal issues governments face in changing their service delivery models. As a matter of fact, regulatory reform is crucial for e-government success, both in terms of affordability and long-term sustainability, and, therefore, it is a “must do” to guide most e-government applications. For example, e-government requires the establishment of a range of suitable legal and regulatory measures that are aimed at integrating and sharing data systems within and among administrations and the use of this public information by third parties, especially the private sector, safeguarding privacy and security issues. Legislation should also identify types and standards for electronic signatures and electronic authentication and allow, but regulate, electronic record keeping. In cases e-government applications were developed outside the appropriate regulatory framework chances of their completion were greatly reduced.

According to their political, economic and administrative context, countries might adopt two alternative paths towards the implementation of e-government: a centralized approach, whereby a hierarchical, top-down mode of introducing e-government prevails, and a decentralized model, whereby only a coordination role is retained at the central level. Whichever the approach adopted, it is clear that the key factor for launching and implementing successful initiatives is the design of appropriate management and organizational mechanisms. In particular, the need to establish a high-level central coordination and support unit for e-government that might assume the form of either an agency or a dedicated ministry has emerged as crucial. Analysis of international best practices shows that the central coordination and support unit needs to be strategically placed and empowered to provide guidance at the top, to coordinate the overall implementation of
the e-government program, and to ensure that individual initiatives maintain cohesion among each other. In addition, it should involve all necessary stakeholders in the elaboration of the national e-government vision, strategic goals and the expected outcomes.

An enabled environment for e-government is one where the key stakeholders have accepted and understood the value that e-government can bring to society as an instrument to strengthen good governance, and overcome the notion that e-government is a luxury tool. In general, e-citizen participation does not come about by itself. A communication strategy needs to be put in motion to create interest and expectation towards the advantages held by e-government, addressing the interests of politicians, managers, employees, business and citizens. Such a communication strategy should be an essential part of the long-term e-government strategy, especially when e-government moves onto the stage of increased interaction between government and citizens and appropriate mechanisms need to be developed to foster citizen participation in the decision-making process. Integrating the message of government reform into the message on the value of e-government may help beneficiaries realize that they have a stake in regulatory reform as well and create the political support for that. Experiences also show that the different stages of e-government transformation process demand increasing levels of trust from individual government agencies, employees, trade unions, citizens and businesses in interacting with government.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, there are obviously urgent needs for actions to improve the capacity of all countries, particularly developing countries and countries with economies in transition, in order for them to participate into the development of e-government, including in education, information infrastructure, content development, transparent societies, and the policy and strategy framework. For the sake of global co-prosperity, internationally effective and collaborative efforts, involving governments, multilateral development institutions, bilateral donors, the private sector, the civil society, and the other relevant stakeholders, are required to enhance the development impact of ICT and e-government.

We, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, are very much encouraged by the consecutive holdings of the High-Level Forum on City Informatization in the Asia-Pacific Region, because such initiatives, under an overall international cooperation framework, can promote synergies and coherence of the efforts being directed to expand the development impact of ICT, city informatization and e-government, including:

- Constantly sharing visions and experiences throughout the annual event;
- Providing relevant up-to-date information and knowledge to all the governments;
Supporting national actions aimed at enunciating national vision, developing national policies, establishing national priorities and strategies, creating a conducive environment for the development of e-government, and capacity building.

We sincerely hope that the High-Level Forum and the corresponding regional and international cooperation for e-government and city informatization can provide global examples in bridging the digital divide and promoting digital opportunity, and in adopting a coherent system-wide e-government strategy in developing countries to enhance the development impact of e-government.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Development, under its Public Administration and Finance Programme, has been providing services to many developing countries and countries with economies in transition, through technical cooperation, to stimulate effective use of information technology in the public administration. We have been assisting developing countries in formulating ICT policy and strategy, building national and government information infrastructure, developing various government information systems and networks, creating favorable ICT-related legislative frameworks, and human resource development in relevant areas. It goes without saying that we will, as always, continue our efforts to cooperate with other international and regional organizations, donor countries, developing countries and non-government organizations to make contributions to the global development of e-government as well as bridging the digital divide.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, in closing, on behalf of UNDESA, I would like to congratulate once again on the holding of the third High-Level Forum on City Informatization and we are looking forward to continuously and closely collaborating with the Shanghai Municipality and the Chinese Government and all the countries and cities in the region to make sure that the High-Level Forum will be the most successful one in ICT and e-government for development. On behalf of UNDESA as well as myself I wish the Third High-Level Forum on City Informatization in the Asia-Pacific Region all the best.

Many thanks.