New Information Technologies supporting Urban Governance

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Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Distinguished mayors,
Ladies and Gentlemen participants,
Dear colleagues and friends,

Allow me first to congratulate and present my best wishes for success to the newly established United Nations Information Technology and Development Centre, located here in the great city of Shanghai. The Centre’s mandate is imperative and the tasks represent a challenge which can no longer be ignored. UNITAR, designing and conducting various training and capacity building activities in the field of new information and communication technologies, would be very happy to strengthen and develop cooperation with the Centre.

It has indeed been a pleasure to participate in the Third High-Level Forum on City Informatization in the Asia Pacific Region. In parallel, we have been able to conduct a Panel of Municipalities for Communication and Sustainable Development. This session is the third in a series of five regional fora organized by UNITAR in preparation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development due to take place this summer in Johannesburg. It is a joint initiative between two United Nations bodies, UN-HABITAT and UNITAR, in association with the World Association of Local Authorities, supported financially and in terms of substance by a major transnational private corporation, Vivendi Environnement.

The governance of cities represents a weighty and complex task. In its ancient etymological sense to ‘govern’ means to steer a boat, be it in calm or high seas, in fine or stormy weather. The word ‘government’ came into common use merging various concepts such as leadership, authority, planning and responsibility. The modern term ‘governance’ embraces the activities of public institutions but also includes a range of other actors contributing to the formulation of official policies. Governance is the mechanism which presides over the whole social fabric and ensures its continuity. At the level of local authorities, the system is particularly complex.

New information and communication technologies can obviously make a specific and essential contribution to this mechanism. Through its ability to collect, sort, merge and disseminate huge amounts of different data, electronic means are seen as workable and cost effective. Although they are not an ultimate panacea, since all human activity requires rigorous human control, they do constitute the innovative tools of the future.

Allow me briefly to share with you some reflections on urban management and city governance and new information technologies based on UNITAR’s experience in both fields.

Generally speaking, the main difficulties faced by city governance emerge from three factors: the multiplicity of issues, the variety of procedures and the divergence of stakeholders.
Multiplicity of issues: the growth rate of urban populations worldwide is far surpassing the growth rate of the overall population. Economic development and competitiveness between countries depend to a great extent on how the respective cities are managed. The population growth still leads to degradation of urban environment, with obvious implications for the sustainable development of the broader countries and a direct and visible impact on local public health in the cities, due to water shortages, inadequate sanitation, air pollution, disorganized collection and disposal of wastes, erratic transport system, destruction of marginal lands, etc. All these issues are closely interconnected.

Variety of procedures: good municipal governance implies an organizational setting dependent on the quality of the political leaders, the competence of the bureaucracy and the financial resources available. Good governance must, moreover, take into full account and integrate through legislative and administrative measures several other stakeholders: central and sometimes state or regional authorities, parastatals, private corporations, non-governmental organizations, political, religious, ethnic and cultural pressure groups, to name but a few. City governments are generally expected to take charge of public order and safety, parts of the municipal infrastructure and sometimes public health. In no case, however, do they enjoy exclusive power, due to the fact that their fiscal domain is limited. It often appears, at least in industrialized countries, that their degree of financial autonomy is directly proportional to their size. Urban policymaking thus remains highly fragmented and, in addition, the division of labor among the different stakeholders is vague and tenuous, in the absence of appropriate constitutional procedures.

Divergence of stakeholders: the narrow financial autonomy of municipalities has often contributed to the marginalization of their role in actual governance and their influence with other partners. In particular, the central States have occasion to interfere at municipal level, through their various independent parastatal bodies. The parastatals do not necessarily reflect the social views and development planning of cities and this can lead to ambiguity and even conflict. Moreover, the provision of urban services is taking place in a market increasingly open to private companies, from small informal initiatives to huge transnational corporations. The share of each actor is complex and far from being homogenous. The administrative arrangements often remain vague. By way of example, allow me to mention that the role of the private sector in public transportation is generally quite marked. In other fields, such as waste disposal - primarily the responsibility of the public authorities, or water supply - usually considered as the state monopoly, the private sector is being increasingly involved in the actual management.

At the present time, the governance of cities is linked to the development of legislative provisions and the strengthening of management capacity. It obviously goes beyond the mere supply of services and refers to the relationships between the authorities, society and the different stakeholders. The rapid and considerable shift to urbanization demands a new definition of the mandate of municipal authorities and the formulation of adequate regulations. It implies that they will be given the material means to avoid future ecological degradation, to combat poverty and its destabilizing effects on urban society and to integrate, in their capacity as local authorities, into the globalized world economy. Finally, modern information and communication technologies will have to be available as an important support tool for effective city management and governance. Indeed, these technologies represent the best means to tackle the growing complexity and difficulty of urban governance, considering the multiplicity of issues, of procedures and of partnerships. This leads us to the concept of so-called ‘e-governance’, as debated during the Municipality Panel held today.

Informatization or computerization of cities facilitates urban governance in providing a system for the collection, validation and circulation of relevant information, with a view to strengthening the participatory approach at both decision-making and operational levels, as well as linkages among the various internal actors and between municipal, regional and national authorities. New information technology supports good governance and promotes innovation. It also encourages social dialogue between decision makers and civil society in giving the latter the opportunity to access information and, in their turn, to share with the authorities their grass root concerns and needs. Over the recent years, UNITAR has been called upon to design and conduct such programmes to ease the
establishment of digital cities in developing countries and countries with economies in transition. The global goal of the projects was to increase the amount and quality of information available to municipal staff for planning and decision-making. A key activity is training elected officials and civil servants in the use of quantitative information for decision support. The development of on-line training is presently being contemplated. This would allow Local Authorities to access information regarding potential partners, sources of high-level expertise available in both the private and public sectors, existing data bases and training materials to assist in finding solutions to problems encountered – all this in a timely and cost-effective manner.

We have been particularly fortunate to organize today a Panel on Communication and Sustainable Development for municipalities. A reflection was conducted on the potential and concrete contribution of the New Information Technologies to urban sustainable development. Case studies of several municipalities in Asia led to the identification of the major issues, such as access to techniques, establishment of databases, production of training material, diffusion of information including internal networks of digitalized cities. Other case studies dealt with the pre-requisites for an efficient use of the new technologies for good governance, including field analysis, assessment techniques, methodological approach, etc.. The conclusions and recommendations of the panel will be integrated in the capacity building programme on ‘sustainable urbanization’, which will be presented during the forthcoming World summit on Sustainable Development, this summer in Johannesburg. Moreover, the potentialities for e-governance of cities will also be presented to the World Summit on the Information Society, to take place next year in Geneva and later in Tunisia. Our meeting in Shanghai and the intensive exchange of ideas and experience in just a day of discussions could undoubtedly contribute concretely to the deliberations to take place during the two forthcoming summits.

For this we are very grateful to our colleagues of the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), in particular to my colleague the Director of the Division for Public Economics and Administration. We appreciate the facilities given to us and to our invitees by the competent authorities of the People’s Republic of China. Last but not least, we wish to thank, very sincerely, the Mayor of this wonderful and peaceful city of Shanghai, the staff of the Municipality and the people of the city for their efficient assistance and kind and friendly hospitality.