Opening Remarks
By
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Y.E. The Mayor of Shanghai,
Y.E. The Chairman of ECOSOC,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the UN system and more specifically on behalf of UNDP as a co-sponsor, I welcome you to this third international forum on city informatization. We in UNDP are very glad to be associated with this work of the Municipality of Shanghai and to work in partnership with our colleagues in UNDESA. We believe that bringing governments closer to the public by using creatively the means and tools of modern information and communications technologies is indispensable in any country concerned about good governance.

During last year’s forum two schools of thought emerged, one more focused on the ability of the government to govern, the other putting more emphasis on promoting the participation of citizens in local government. Clearly – e-government has to cover both these aspects. With urbanization accelerating daily, the vast majority of the world’s people will soon live in urban areas. Their exposure to any form of government will be first and foremost at the local level.

Traditional government practices will not allow to coping with either the volume of transactions or the nature of services to be provided. In a world where the action lies mostly with market forces, governments have to set a regulatory framework and establish the rules by which each and every one is to play, fairly and squarely. In order to cope with the volume, ICTs offer unique opportunities, in fact they probably are the only viable answer for governments to provide quality service to their citizens.

In future every citizen should only have to step into a government office physically once. The rest can be done via the Internet, if need be across long distances. Similarly, changes in government procedures dictated by technological and economic advances can be communicated most easily through the use of ICTs. Take the example of the Beijing Olympics 2008, which cast a long shadow ahead. Quite rightly, the Beijing Municipality and the Olympic Organizing Committee have set up a website in several languages. This way anyone anywhere can know who is responsible for what and follow the preparations for these games which are meant to be a pacesetter not only for Beijing and China, but for the rest of the world in demonstrating how such a big international event can help to pull investments and organizations in the direction of sustainable development.
We live in a world of globalization and the rule of law. Hence the knowledge of laws and regulations, in particular when wanting to invest in or relocate to a new place of residence is vitally important. Not all of us can become lawyers in the process, hence websites, which offer such general knowledge, are effective guides for any business or individual to know what his/her legal rights and obligations are.

Often people say ICTs are the rich man’s toys. And in part this is true. We all know about the digital divide, but we also are in a country, which is proving this thesis wrong. China, quite rightly, is investing heavily in its national ICT infrastructure and has now reached a level of coverage, which allows even the remotest and often poorer parts of the country to log into the modernization process, in the field of education, business and many other fields of applications. In the beginning electronic systems will complement other more traditional modes of operation, but eventually they will dominate further changes and improvements. Not only is the investment in ICTs feasible in developing countries, it actually will be soon a necessity if governments want to be transparent and responsive in their actions.

Earlier this year a working group of academics and representatives of the IT industry published a roadmap for e-government in developing countries. I have brought a copy of the report and will leave it with the secretariat. Anyone interested in this publication can get a copy from there. The experts asked 10 questions and I believe question 4 is a crucial one to answer as is question 8. The all encompassing one is, of course, question 10.

Last year, UNDP published its annual Human Development Report with the theme “Making Technologies work for Human Development”. Interestingly enough, we were criticized by people in developed countries for promoting the idea that bio-technologies can be instrumental in fighting hunger and starvation, and by people in developing countries for advocating the use of ICTs in the development process, in particular to overcome poverty. I believe the expert group, which raised the 10 pertinent questions also gave a convincing response to such critics. In the end, it is a question of political commitment and common sense.

Permit me to close my remarks by giving a few pointers regarding the role of the UN in all of this. We in the UN system have no illusions what it is that we can contribute. It is little, but it may prove to be catalytic. Success breeds success, and we are in the business of breeding success, by sharing good examples and support networking. UNDP is funding three such initiatives in the Asia and Pacific region. The first is APDIP, which, for instance, was instrumental in bringing the Internet to Bhutan. The second is TUGI, a network of Asian and Pacific cities sharing their experience, especially with regard to their use of civil society organizations. And the third one is right here in Shanghai. This center, which was set up by the Shanghai Municipality is supported by UNDP financially to the tune of half a million US $ over a three year period. Among others we shall be soon fielding a training coordinator, whose primary task is to actively promote the sharing of experience
and to record the lessons learned.

Our hope is that this forum will end with an agreement on a series of next steps, which the Shanghai Regional Center for City Informatization will be called upon to assist in implementing. We are all in for a steep learning curve and I for one look forward to take away lots of new ideas and contacts from this forum. I sincerely hope that the same will be true for all of us.

Thank you.