

OPENING ADDRESS BY EXECUTIVE DEPUTY PRESIDENT THABO MBEKI TO THE INFORMATION SOCIETY AND DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE (ISAD) GALLAGHER ESTATE, MIDRAND 13-15 MAY 1996

13 May 1996

President Santer
Honourable Ministers and Commissioners
Your Excellencies Ambassadors,
Heads of Delegation and Representative of International and Regional Organisations
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am honoured to convey the greetings and best wishes of our President Nelson Mandela who also asked us to extend, the very warm welcome of the people of South Africa to all participants to this Conference, and especially to those who come here from far away lands. Welcome.

Some wishes do get realised! Fifteen months ago, addressing the G7 Conference on the Information Society in Brussels, we asserted that entry into the Information Society should not be reserved for the G7 members and other Developed countries, and that the debate about the information society is indeed of relevance to all humanity. On that occasion, we proposed that the G7 initiative therefore be broadened to include a wide cross-section of developed and developing countries.

Thanks to the determination and endurance of President Santer, the European Union, the G7 countries, our fellow developing countries, the various international and regional organisations involved, and the exceptional inter-ministerial team that South Africa assembled to prepare for the hosting of this event, here we are, and I take great pleasure in opening this crucial Information and Development Conference.

Since the G7 Brussels Conference, many events have occurred on the international scene as well as in South Africa. We wish to mention some of them here because we believe that they are of relevance to this Conference.

On the international front, we witnessed the birth of a bold United Nations-World Bank Initiative for Africa. This multi-billion dollar Initiative places people and education at its centre and attempts to refocus international aid away from traditional assistance patterns and towards more sustainable and interactive development models.

Last September, the ITU held its Telecom '95 Conference in Geneva during which President Mandela, addressing the Conference, insisted on the value of information, on the necessity of linking technology to people, and on the priority of education and training.

Telecom '95 presented the participants with ever advancing technologies and, at the same time, reminded us of the sad and ever widening gap between rich and poor, between literate and illiterate.

The path towards the information Society is not free of delicate and complex problems. We have observed the intricate and challenging discussions in the context of the World Trade Organisation on the provision of basic services. We regret that those discussions did not reach a positive conclusion.

Similarly, the issue of intellectual property rights continues to be a bone of contention among the nations and deserves, in our view, serious and fair consideration by the international community as a whole. Intellectual property, an important pillar in the building of Global Information Society, requires recognition, respect and protection.

In the midst of these and other difficulties, the corporate world is engaged in major processes leading to new mergers. Global alliances, with attendant restructuring, are being forged in various combinations, among hardware and software entities, telecommunications carriers, cable operators, satellite companies, publishing empires, broadcasting and media groups, and so on.

All these reorganisations are justified by their authors as natural and logical. Whatever the nervousness this activity may generate, it certainly demonstrates confidence in the future of the information and communication sectors as growth areas.

Like all of you here, we follow these developments and observe them carefully in the context of our own Reconstruction and Development Programme and our guiding principles in the information sector.

On the national front, as you know, our new Constitution was adopted by an overwhelming majority of South Africa's freely elected representatives a few days ago, on the 8th of May 1996. This historic document is itself focused on the development of a people-centred society, for whose realisation information and communication are central.

Incidentally, if you wish to consult our Constitution, you will find it at the following internet address: www.constitution.org.za.

As the South African government, we have issued two White Papers, one on broadcasting and the other on telecommunications. Both papers are now being circulated for comments. Several national fora on a variety of information and communication related topics have been established. They are essential participants in our policy making efforts, including the definition of our regulatory framework, which the White Paper seek to address.

Against all these activities the challenge of building the basic information and communication infrastructure, both in South Africa and in most developing countries, remains colossal and perhaps not even properly understood. For this reason the so called 'Media Revolution' seems to be substantially ignoring the developing world.

We need to ensure that the path to the Information Society does not widen the gap between rich and poor, developed and developing countries. The tragic irony we might confront, is that this technology which has enormous potential to benefit all humanity could serve to entrench and widen this gap.

Without seeking in any way to evolve an apocalyptic vision, we must contend with the nightmare that could derive from the consequent rebellion of the poor against the rich on a global scale.

The fundamental reason for this conference is to enable all of us as representatives drawn from both worlds, to grapple with these issues and not to allow the future of human society to fall victim to human ingenuity itself.

Of course, we are conscious that infrastructure will not be built overnight and that the access of the masses to information and communication tools will not become reality in a short time period.

But the time has come for all of us to act swiftly by focusing on the problems and to build common strategies on how to seize the technological opportunities presented to us today for the benefit of all nations, developed and developing alike.

Hence the timeliness of this Conference.

This Conference is unusual in many respects. Unlike most international conferences, specific in nature, drawing interest from particular industry or government sections, and often assembling participants from

one economic origin, (either developing or developed), this gathering is global and multi-disciplinary, as clearly reflected in the list of our honoured guests.

Another feature of this conference is that the topics to be addressed, while all coming together from information and communication perspectives, run across a series of traditionally separate compartments (education, health, trade and industry, management, telecommunications, broadcasting, culture, science and technologies, finance, etc.).

This diversity leads, we believe, to yet another interesting feature. Although equipped with our respective guiding principles and values, we all come to this Conference open-minded, ready to learn and to interact.

It would be folly if one attempted to participate in this event on the basis of pre-conceived ideas and ready made solutions. We wonder if that could even be possible given the ever changing nature of the scene, the complexity of the debate, and the novelty of the propositions at hand.

In exploring the structure and content of the Conference programme for both the Ministerial meetings and the Fora sessions, we find that it reflects the overwhelming richness of the Information Society and Development theme itself, and holds for us the perspective of an exciting and instructive outcome.

Behind the seemingly endless and diverse list of inter-related or totally desperate discussion items, there appear to be three distinct pillars around which this Development Conference is conceived: infrastructure, content and finance.

On the first one, as mentioned earlier, there would be no Information Society without proper infrastructure and delivery mechanisms adapted to the global development needs of the people.

We are not talking only of the rich neighbourhoods in major cities, but also of the small villages and townships, rural and remote areas; not only of residential, industrial and downtown business districts, but also schools, hospitals, colleges and universities.

Content in news, educational, cultural and entertainment programmes, songs, games, etc., plays a pivotal role in the building of the Information Society.

Therefore the creation, production and formulation of content must be encouraged at all levels, not only at the national level of all developing countries but, within the same nation, at the local and community levels, to ensure that developing nations do not remain information consumers of a content conceived by others.

Infrastructure allows for the transformation of people inspiration, creativity and artistic, literary and scientific skills into the production of education and entertainment works shared by all.

The third pillar of this construction is finance. I hope that the participants will find time to concentrate on this important question and engage in exchanges, irrespective of their national or social affiliation.

It would also be useful that, beyond the official government exchanges, the industry itself, as well as the banking and finance sectors, participate in this interaction among these three pillars, leads us to discuss the indispensable co-operation among the three players, government, business and communities.

It has been demonstrated that government plays a pivotal role in the building of the Information Society. If this vision is not shared within and outside government, then the road ahead becomes more difficult.

Ample examples exist from developed countries themselves where, in spite of the predominant doctrine for minimal intervention, government acts as a catalyst for the establishment and consolidation of the Information Society.

Often, and in co-operation with international and regional organisations, government contributes to the Information Society through tax and other incentives, using existing parastatal companies, regulatory agencies, educational institutions, etc.

There is, however, a crucial public policy dimension which rests on the shoulders of the government and on the people's elected representatives - ensuring that this Information Society supports and enhances the objectives of development, empowerment, economic development and preserves the constitutional values on which the whole national edifice is built.

One of the concerns we expressed in Brussels pertains to the lack of an adequate regulatory framework to deal with the overall flows of information and cultural products.

The realities of imbalance and domination between North and South must be dealt with more by empowering the South through co-operation and openness and mutually beneficial contributions rather than censorship and control.

This concern is still with us. Permit me, Ladies and Gentlemen, to in this Conference.

But government is not the only player. The private sector is entitled and indeed encouraged to play its role. Beyond the status of an information technology user, industry and trade must encourage training, foster internal communication by using modern technologies, invest in long term initiatives, and assist schools and hospitals with communication and information equipment and systems.

In turn, these actions benefit the people and the business community alike, making the people better and more educated workers, more powerful consumers, significant investors, better doctors, nurses, entrepreneurs and teachers, and increasing their numbers.

To government and business, one must add communities and organisations of civil society. From trade unions to churches and charitable organisations, to municipalities and civic groups, all these are part of this endeavour.

Their role is essential because they convey the untouched, unprocessed sentiments of parents, family, youth and women, and therefore instruct us on the reality, nature and magnitude of their true needs, aspirations and potential.

We, in South Africa, strive to nurture and consolidate the tenets of a people-centred-society, creating, while using the means of information and communication a Learning Nation where innovation and knowledge are promoted, protected and rewarded.

We wish success to all the participants in this Conference which we consider as a milestone on the road to better international co-operation. We trust that your conclusions, distinguished delegates, will be followed by concrete initiatives and renewed interaction.

And in spite of your heavy schedule, I urge you to find the time to enjoy our beautiful country. This is your home!

Thank you very much.

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