From Digital Divide to Global Digital Solidarity

By

Dr. Ioan Voicu*

Abstract

The first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (Geneva, 10-12 December, 2003) proved to be a diplomatic success and a genuine "venue of opportunity". This was the most important political event dedicated to the Information Society since the European Commission coined the title phrase in the mid-Nineties. A total of 11047 participants representing 1486 entities were registered for the Summit, including a unique meeting of leaders, policy-makers, ICT business people, voluntary and non-governmental organizations of every possible kind, and top-level thinkers and speakers. The three-days of Plenary meetings and high-level roundtables were supplemented by nearly 300 side-events meant to bringing the dream of an inclusive information society one-step closer to reality.

Negotiators from 192 countries had resolved during several preparatory meetings most of their disagreements over draft documents presented to Heads of State and Government. Following eleventh hour discussions, sticking points such as references to human rights, media freedom, intellectual property rights and Internet governance were overcome.

* Doctor in political sciences, (international law) of Geneva University (1968); doctor honoris causa in international law of Assumption University of Thailand (1998); alternate representative of Romania to the United Nations Security Council (1990-1991); ambassador of Romania to the Kingdom of Thailand and permanent representative to international organizations based in Bangkok (1994-1999); visiting professor in Assumption University since February 2000.

The globe's political and ICT leaders discussed the digital divide between the worlds's rich and poor. One focus of the conference was to find ways to boost Internet and mobile phone penetration in developing nations.

The Summit declared itself fully aware that the benefits of the information technology revolution are today unevenly distributed between the developed and developing countries and within national societies. It formulated the commitment to turning this digital divide into a digital opportunity for all, particularly for those who risk being left behind and further marginalized. The final conclusion of Declaration of Principles adopted by consensus and entitled *Building the Information Society: a global challenge in the new Millennium* was that we were collectively entering a new era of enormous potential, that of the Information Society and expanded human communication. In this emerging society, information and knowledge can be produced, exchanged, shared and communicated through all the networks of the world. All individuals can soon together build a new Information Society based on shared knowledge and founded on global solidarity and a better mutual understanding between peoples and nations. These measures will open the way to the future development of a true knowledge society.

For achieving that objective it is necessary to seek and effectively implement concrete international approaches and mechanisms, including financial and technical assistance. Therefore, while appreciating ongoing ICT cooperation through various mechanisms, the Summit invited all stakeholders to commit to the "Digital Solidarity Agenda" set forth in the Plan of Action. The worldwide agreed target is to contribute to bridge the digital divide, promote access to ICTs, create digital opportunities, and benefit from the potential offered by ICTs for development.

Consequently, the Summit recognized the will expressed by some States to create an international voluntary "Digital Solidarity Fund", and by others to undertake studies concerning existing mechanisms and the efficiency and feasibility of such a Fund. In fact, the minimal consensus was in favour of global digital solidarity, but there was no agreement on the actual creation of a special fund or on other modalities of action. Therefore, a cogent and topical appeal was addressed to all political leaders of the world to enter into forging a 'unity of purpose' in aiming to achieve universal access to ICT. If that appeal does not become operational, the remaining digital gap will widen.

The second phase of the Summit is scheduled in Tunis, on November 16 -18, 2005.