

Message by Mr Yoshio UTSUMI Secretary-General International Telecommunication Union

**World Telecommunication Day
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THE INTERNET: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND PROSPECTS

Each year on 17 May, the ITU celebrates World Telecommunication Day to commemorate its founding in Paris in 1865. This year, the theme highlights the promises and the challenges of the Internet.

The Internet has not only transformed the way we communicate, but it has also dramatically changed the way we work, do business, interact, play, seek information and learn. Do you agree? Think again. Internet users account for only five per cent of the world's population. 85% of them are in developed countries where 90% of all Internet hosts are also located. So there is a real problem.

What can the Internet do for those regions of the world that have only limited access to information and communication technologies? When resources are already stretched to the limit, can investment in the Internet be justified?

The promise of the Internet is to broaden and enhance access to information through a service that can be reached anywhere in the world that has connectivity. The Internet is a way of lessening the traditional disadvantages of the developing world. It can offer businesses the possibility to "leapfrog" into the development mainstream by allowing them to sell their wares and services globally and directly to customers. Disadvantages such as distance from markets, difficulty in accessing export distribution networks could become things of the past. The Internet also offers the hope of delivering basic services such as health and education more efficiently by allowing people to follow lectures by experts and participate in a learning exchange from their very own homes and communities.

To make this happen policy-makers, businesses, and even users will have to find ways to rise to a number of challenges.

The very first challenge is to expand access to the Internet at affordable prices. Today, the high cost of the service in many countries remains one of the main barriers to Internet diffusion in addition to that of the shortage of phone lines.

To reduce this cost, policymakers need to determine how to price bandwidth to spur Internet uptake, how to deploy infrastructure cost-effectively and to decide what technologies are best suited to network expansion. Legislative or regulatory measures as well as suitable pricing policies must be adopted so that the Internet can be made available for all segments of society. For example, low-cost Internet access can be provided to schools, universities, libraries, multipurpose community telecentres or public service institutions to stimulate wider usage and "wire" rural communities.

Programmes should be developed to increase technology and computer skills among young people so as to build, from an early age, an Internet culture. Greater awareness of the benefits of on-line access to information, goods and services must be actively pursued throughout society and in particular in small and medium enterprises. These are only some of the challenges raised by the growing popularity of the Internet. But perhaps the most fundamental issue is to ensure that the Internet does not become yet another element in a widening "digital divide". This is one of the key issues on the agenda of the world community today.

Turning the "digital divide" into "digital dividends" is at the heart of ITU's work. While ITU all by itself cannot bridge this divide, we can play a leading role in reaching out to all potential stakeholders and partners in an effort to achieve progress. We are committed to do so and, together with positive action by governments and business, we can.

The Internet is like a seed; with the right approaches we can plant schools with Internet access, grow web-enabled business, fertilize the public's imagination, and watch the buds of innovation blossom so that healthy fruits of products and services can ripen to enrich the lives of all citizens.

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