THE INFORMATION SOCIETY FROM THE CARIBBEAN PERSPECTIVE: OBSTACLES TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PLAN OF ACTION OF THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY (WSIS)

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Introduction

The manner in which people live, work, communicate, educate and entertain themselves today is completely changed from what obtained a dozen years ago. This has been no gradual evolution but a complete reframing of human interaction. The world has entered a new age, the digital age. But entire countries, whole communities and individuals within countries are being left behind, separated from the front of the pack by a widening digital divide. It is this aspect of the revolution that has captured the attention of the United Nations, which views the widening digital disparities as a serious threat to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU), therefore, in response to a proposal from Tunisia, took the initiative to place the holding of a World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) on the agenda of the United Nations. The decision was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly through resolution 56/183 in which the General Assembly:

> *Invites governments to participate actively in the preparatory process of the Summit and to be represented at the Summit at the highest possible level;*
> <u>and</u>
> *Encourages effective contributions from and the active participation of all relevant United Nations bodies, in particular the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, and encourages other intergovernmental organisations, including international and regional institutions, non-governmental organisations, civil society and the private sector to contribute to, and actively participate in, the intergovernmental preparatory process of the Summit and the Summit itself*

The full text of the General Assembly resolution 56/183 is available on the WSIS web site: http://www.itu.int/wsis

The first session of the WSIS convened in Geneva in December 2003 with only minimal participation from the Caribbean. The second session of the WSIS, scheduled for Tunis in 2005, will focus on assessing whether significant progress had been made towards bridging the digital divide and bringing the concept of a Global Information Society closer to realisation. The period between the first and second sessions provides a window of opportunity for the Caribbean to prepare to engage more meaningfully in the process.

One of the outcomes of the Geneva session was a Plan of Action, described in the document, as "an evolving platform to promote the Information Society at the national, regional and international levels".

As would be expected, given the diversity of interests involved in its compilation, the Plan of Action is quite comprehensive in its scope. It would be impractical for countries the size of those in the Caribbean to concentrate on all areas recommended for specific interventions. Caribbean governments, together with other stakeholders in the subregion, will therefore have to develop, prioritise and make plans to operationalize a plan of action, giving particular focus to those interventions which would do most to advance the development agenda of the subregion.

A useful first step would be for Caribbean stakeholders, especially governments, to increase their familiarity with the Plan of Action and the Declaration of Principles finalised at the Geneva session. To assist in this regard, this document will therefore critically explore, from the perspective of the Caribbean, what the transition to a Caribbean Information Society would entail in practical terms. It will link the goals of the information society to the development goals of the subregion and discuss what conditions must exist if the potential benefits associated with the information society are to be realised. In this context, the recently concluded first session of the WSIS will be discussed. Current and potential obstacles to the implementation of the WSIS Plan of Action will be identified and recommendations advanced as to how these obstacles might be overcome.

An information society - An understanding

An information society can be described in summary as a society in which the creation, distribution and manipulation of information has become the most significant economic and cultural activity. The WSIS describes the promise of an information society as "increasing our ability to communicate and share information and knowledge. [The transition to a global information society] will increase the possibility for a more peaceful and prosperous world for all of its inhabitants". The point is made, however, that the majority of the world's people will not be able to benefit from the information revolution unless they are deliberately and specifically enabled to participate fully in the emerging knowledge-based society.

Inherent in this promise is the conclusion that the constraining effects of small size and geographical remoteness would somehow be neutralised by access to and the affordability of information and communications technology. Frances Cairncross, in a 1997 trend-spotting study[1] elaborated this position, saying in effect that skills and productivity will determine where businesses activities are located - (not the quality of life or the cost of housing). Size will be less relevant. Small firms and even individuals with valuable ideas and viable business plans will attract global venture capital. The content of goods and services will be customised to suit the needs of individuals and there will be increased value in brands and niches.

Extending the scenario to governance and the corporate world, she predicted that corporations would become loosely knit entities held together by culture and communications. Business start-up costs will decline. Governments will find legislation and censorship inadequate to regulate cross border information flows. Cairncross also suggested that there would be a global redistribution of wages with persons whose skills were in demand earning

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[1] Cairncross, Frances (1997). Death of distance. Boston: Harvard Business School Press

similar amounts irrespective of geographic location. As a result, there would be less urgency for immigration.

Subsequent developments have validated many of these projections in a global sense, but to what extent do they reflect the picture in the Caribbean?

Ten years ago in 1994 one hundred and eleven countries, including several from the Caribbean, met in Barbados to discuss the special issues that had had the effect of curtailing the development of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Apart from issues pertaining to the protection and sustainable use of the islands' natural resources, several other development challenges were identified - insufficient access to primary and secondary health care; inadequacies in education; the unacceptably high level of poverty; the incapacity of small island economies to generate sufficient employment to retain its skilled population; the failure to develop appropriate technology; the inability to adequately secure national borders; increasing marginalisation in the international community and the high cost of basic infrastructure. These and other seemingly intractable problems of small island economies gave the lie, it was felt by many, to the new thinking that size and geographic location were no longer significant constraints to development.

The digital developments have created an opportunity for accelerated development, nothing more. Benefits will not be automatic. Countries must now position themselves to take advantage of the opportunity.

In practical terms, the Caribbean can be said to be well on the way to making the transition to an information society:

Access

1. When there is easy access to the Internet at affordable cost, a significant proportion of access being via broadband. For there to be a real benefit, more of the time spent on the Internet would need to be spent creating product, delivering services, utilising opportunities for education and training. Leisure and entertainment, although important, will not add to a country's employment or GDP.

Education and human resource development

2. When the education system has created a critical mass of technocrats, techno-preneurs and technicians who can energise and lead developments in the information and communications technology sector. To get an adequate return on the investment in education, the labour market must have the capacity to absorb, remunerate and retain these skilled people.

Research

3. When research in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is encouraged and rewarded and the commercialisation of research facilitated. As a follow-up there must be a structure in place to patent new products and facilitate their development through to commercial production and marketing. For example, the Simputer (a bare bones computer developed for use by poorer persons) recently launched in India was developed some three years ago, however, finding a company willing to manufacture and distribute the item proved more challenging than creating the product itself.

Enterprise development

4. When there are adequate structures and systems in place to encourage and support enterprise development in the information and communications sector. Enterprises must be nurtured and mentored in an atmosphere of trust until fledgling businesses become viable. The business incubator at the University of Technology in Jamaica is one example.

Governance

5. When government services are available online, where practical, and these services are used by a significant proportion of the population. Government information is also disseminated via the Internet and government departments can be reached via email. To benefit from the potential efficiencies that these changes are meant to achieve, they must be accompanied by other complementary public sector reforms. The staff displaced by these developments must be retrained and redeployed and processes streamlined.

Legislation

6. When there are laws and regulations in place to facilitate all aspects of e-business. The new requirements must be communicated and the necessary resources given to the persons on the ground who will have the task of implementing the new regulations.

Commerce

7. When there is a significant volume of online sale of goods and services and a measurable increase in the export of niche items. Caribbean companies and individuals are an integral part of the global supply network. Excessive consumerism, even if it is e-consumerism, will have no beneficial effect on the economy.

In other words, high ICT visibility alone will not create any meaningful transformation. There will be a true information society when there is a high degree of digital literacy and familiarity with the discourse of the digital age; when there is significant indigenous expertise in

ICT; when persons from all sectors of the society use the available online government and commercial services as a matter of course in the conduct of their daily lives; and when the information economy becomes a significant contributor to GDP providing, in the process, a significant number of employment opportunities in the ICT sector.

The WSIS Plan of Action is intended to guide countries towards the achievement of these goals.

WSIS Plan of Action - An overview

The Plan of Action approved by the first session of the WSIS has as its broad overarching objective, the creation of an inclusive information society, which would put the potential of knowledge and information and communication technologies, ICTs, at the service of development. The Plan addresses new challenges for the information society, at the national, regional and international levels, and uses as its basic platform, internationally agreed upon development goals, in particular, those outlined in the United Nations Millennium Declaration:

- Eradication of extreme poverty

- Universal primary education

- Gender equality and empowerment of women

- Reduction in child mortality

- Improvement in maternal health

- Effectively combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

- Environmental sustainability; and

- A global partnership for development

Ten specific targets have been identified in the WSIS Plan of Action. These are listed below:

a)   To connect villages with ICTs and establish community access points;

b)   To connect universities, colleges, secondary schools and primary schools with ICTs;

c)   To connect scientific and research centres with ICTs;

d)   To connect public libraries, cultural centres, museums, post offices and archives with ICTs;

e)   To connect health centres and hospitals with ICTs;

f) To connect all local and central government departments and establish web sites and e-mail addresses;

g) To adapt all primary and secondary school curricula to meet the challenges of the Information Society, taking into account national circumstances;

h) To ensure that all of the world's population have access to television and radio services;

i) To encourage the development of content and to put in place technical conditions in order to facilitate the presence and use of all world languages on the Internet;

j) To ensure that more than half of the world's population have access to ICTs within their reach.

Most of the targets identified relate to access and connectivity. None identify the necessary behavioural or attitudinal changes, since these would be difficult to benchmark and, subsequently, measure. However, it is the changes in behaviour that will be the most enduring signals that the transition to an information society is well underway.

The Plan of Action continues by outlining the actions to be taken by each of the stakeholders identified.

A role for governments

1. **Governments should develop national e-strategies** by 2005 which should take into account local and national needs and concerns, be assessed for sustainability, and should articulate what the government plans to do in relation to:

   - E-government

   - Electronic commerce

   - Human capacity building

   - The education system

   - Health care

2. **Governments must initiate dialogue** involving all relevant stakeholders:

   - Private sector

   - Academia

   - Non-governmental organization (NGO) community

   - Youth groups

3. **Governments should promote and establish partnerships**, establishing at least one functioning partnership to showcase their experiences in order that their success might have a positive demonstration effect on other countries.

4. **Multi-stakeholder portals for indigenous peoples** should be created at the national level.

5. **By 2005, all governments should have put in place a national e-strategy**, identifying mechanisms for capacity building and establishing public/private sector partnerships. Among the measures recommended for governments are the creation of incubator schemes, venture capital funds, investment promotion strategies and the support of research and development in the ICT sector.

Adequate information and communications infrastructure was also identified as an essential foundation for the information society, essential in bridging the digital divide. Governments are therefore urged to take action, within the framework of their national development policies to create the enabling environment necessary to promote investment in ICT infrastructure and develop new services. Part of this enabling environment would involve the efficient management of the country code top-level domain name. In addition, governments are urged to become model users and early adopters of e-commerce in accordance with their level of socio-economic development and raise awareness of the importance of international interoperability standards for global e-commerce.

Access was another area of focus. Here, the advice to governments is to develop policy guidelines for the creation and promotion of public domain information and to establish multi-purpose community public access points which would provide affordable or free-of-charge access for their citizens to the Internet and other information resources. It was recommended as well that governments actively promote the use of ICTs as a fundamental working tool and support the creation and development of digital public library and archive services.

The Plan of Action includes strong recommendations aimed at capacity building, the idea being that no one should be debarred from the benefits of an information society because of lack of skill. Of course basic literacy is a pre-requisite for e-literacy and governments are urged to consider alternative education delivery systems, including distance learning, with a view to empowering local communities, especially persons in rural or under-served areas. The need to improve e-literacy among professionals was also addressed and training programmes in the use of ICTs aimed specifically at this group were suggested as a way of dealing with that particular challenge.

Security was another area of concern and the recommendation here was that governments should establish legal and other instruments to allow for effective investigation and prosecution of cyber-crime. Confidence and security, it was suggested, were among the main pillars of the Information Society.

A thorough perusal of the WSIS web site http://www.itu.int/wsis/ is strongly recommended for persons who have an interest in the global information society and in the Caribbean's efforts to be a significant player in this evolution.

Obstacles to implementing the WSIS POA

Implementing the recommendations of the WSIS in Caribbean countries is a fairly complicated process. Governments will be faced with several challenges, not the least of which would be the questions that remain unanswered, the doubts that remain unresolved.

What is the current state of development of the ICT sector? What conditions must exist in the subregion for the potential of the information society to be realised? In a situation where the basic economic fundamentals continue to be unfavourable for a number of Caribbean countries, how vigorously should the transition to an information society be pursued? Will the information society create employment or will the growth that occurs be jobless? Will employment created be low wage? What mechanisms must be put in place to measure the impact of ICT on productivity?

How must one calculate the benefits of an information society in the context of the Caribbean? Will the benefits outweigh the costs? With the subregion already paying a heavy price to support its appetite for imported items, can it afford to have a steady stream of foreign exchange being transferred to manufacturers of cell phones, computers, digital cameras, scanners, and the other "must have" paraphernalia of an information society?

An accurate analysis of the current status of the Caribbean vis à vis the information society will be an important early step. Not only will this assist in forward planning, it will provide a source of comparative data for other Caribbean countries. The second major obstacle therefore is the data gap.

The third obstacle has to do with priority setting and, essentially, coming to grips with the issues. In an effort to be seen as making progress in support of the WSIS Plan of Action, countries have been known to pursue a course of action that is relatively uncomplicated and easy to implement - drafting legislation and appropriate policy statements, for example. But unless these initiatives are accompanied by an appropriate formula for transforming legislation into policy and policy into subsequent practice, no real significant progress will be recorded and no increase in economic activity will result.

Also, if there is inadequate technocratic expertise and negotiating mechanisms to address the challenges that could arise in response to new legislative arrangements, the feeling of powerlessness against entrenched multinational interests will persist. So there is a skills gap as well. Essentially, the information and communication agenda is externally driven. Because of its relatively weak negotiating capability in this area, the Caribbean posture has tended to be responsive, even reactive. The interest in offshore data entry is a reflection of this. The intellectual engagement inherent in such a course of action is minimal, and, not unexpectedly, so

too are the returns. Offshore jobs at the higher end of the sector are going increasingly to Asian countries, especially India.

There is no integrated indigenous vision of what an information society would be like and very little connection drawn between the economic and social challenges faced by the subregion and the promised benefits of an information society. For example - health care delivery, the Acquired Immuno-deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) epidemic, youth unemployment, disaster mitigation, natural resource management, marketing of agricultural products - if there is no clear strategy for using information and communications technology to address specific challenges in these areas, such benefits as might be derived from an investment in ICT might accrue to other countries. This obstacle could be identified as the planning gap.

A role for the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat

Societal change is essentially "people" change. To get people to participate in the realisation of a vision, there must first be a vision - a vision shared by all major stakeholders and communicated to the population at large in a sustained and systematic way.

Development organizations in the subregion have been actively trying to complement the efforts of national governments to ensure that the subregion's people take advantage of the development opportunities provided by new and emerging information and communications technologies. As part of this thrust, the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat has drafted a proposal aimed at supporting the transition to an information society and is currently in the process of identifying resources to facilitate wide-ranging dialogue on the issues and to undertake the activities explained below.

One of the first activities identified as necessary to support the Caribbean during its transition to an information society is a study on the status of and obstacles to implementation in the Caribbean of the Plan of Action coming out of the WSIS (Geneva 2003). The ECLAC/CDCC secretariat would wish to commission such a study and make the findings available to governments. Subsequently the secretariat would convene a meeting of experts to critique the study to determine which ICT issues were most important to the Caribbean at this time; and make specific recommendations for government policy.

Then, ECLAC would wish to convene, jointly with the ITU and other stakeholders, a meeting of CDCC member governments, private sector and other stakeholders in the Caribbean to discuss the implementation of the WSIS Plan of Action in the Caribbean and the policies that are relevant to this issue, including a strategy for the collection of appropriate information society indicators.

A series of national consultations (involving public sector, private sector, youth and civil society) to raise awareness of the benefits, and the challenges associated with becoming a part of the global information society would also be useful. Once resources are identified, the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat would wish to facilitate this process. These consultations would also be used as a forum and an opportunity for information sharing within each country, to solicit

inputs for national e-strategies and for highlighting sources of information that could subsequently be tapped to create and keep current ICT profiles for each country.

The ICT profiles (from primary sources, where necessary, and from secondary sources, where available) for each of the 23 CDCC member States would include the following information:

- Per capita spending on ICT
- Enabling legislation
- Computers for 1000
- Government agencies web sites
- Government agencies with responsibility for ICT
- Telephone lines per 1000
- Mobile phone penetration
- Private sector firms engaged in ICT sector
- E-government services available (including statistics on use)
- Internet service providers
- Cost of Internet access
- Number of persons with Internet access
- Telecommunications cost
- E-learning initiatives
- Enabling environment for e-commerce
- Number of persons employed in IT sector
- Synopsis of relevant policy (including fiscal and other incentives)
- Summary of government ICT programmes and projects
- List of contact persons

Based on the findings, the secretariat would then prepare a report with recommendations for submission to CDCC member governments.

One of the ongoing initiatives already undertaken by ECLAC is the Caribbean Digital Library cdl/eclacpos.org. This facility is used to organize and disseminate development information in digitized format. The ECLAC/CDCC secretariat would wish to take this initiative further and provide technical assistance to information specialists in the subregion in the management and maintenance of digital collections.

One of the most persuasive methods of changing behaviours is to showcase positive results of similar behaviours. In this connection, the secretariat will commission a short film on successful ICT activities and initiatives in the Caribbean with a focus on young entrepreneurs in the sector.

Finally, the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat is committed to liaising with other organizations and individuals active in the development of ICT in the subregion to share information and avoid duplication of effort.

Conclusion

From the perspective of the developed world, any increase in digital awareness in countries such as those of the Caribbean would translate into increased sales of hardware and software exported from the developed world. Seen through that lens, the global information society is a market opportunity. "Let us do what we can to assist the region in developing legislation to enable e-commerce, so that they can purchase our goods online in ever increasing quantities". This surely must be an important part of the thinking.

The Caribbean perspective must be different. Decision makers with input from all stakeholders must select from the WSIS Plan of Action those recommendations that would contribute the most to achieving a Caribbean vision of an information society. One area that will need early attention is data gathering. Without a reliable mechanism for assessing the subregion's status, it will be impossible to chart a sensible course. Plans would have to be put in place even now to conduct household surveys and develop other instruments to assess the status of the information society and the current value of the information economy. Some Caribbean countries have already begun this process.

The subregion has, to some extent, already seized upon the opportunity to promote the Caribbean culture, character and personality. More needs to be done in this regard, especially in the area of marketing.

The most important recommendation highlighted in the plan of action is the need for capacity building. Policy makers and other stakeholders must have the necessary training and information to be in a position to speak with knowledge and confidence and raise awareness in the general population about the many issues involved. The enabling legislative environment should focus on how to sell, and not just facilitate consumption of imported electronic items. The extensive and influential Caribbean diaspora should be enlisted in this effort.

In conclusion, most discussions surrounding the concept of an information society begin with the assumption that the goal is both desirable and achievable. The point of departure is usually the digital divide, which must be bridged as a matter of urgency. But this is not the most useful place to start. Information and education on the issues should be the starting point. There is a skills gap and a knowledge gap to be bridged in order that stakeholders in the subregion could become familiar with the language of the information society and be in a position to confidently discuss the implications of each new development, assess options critically, and then make choices. The subregion must not accept the script written for countries at different stages

of development and with different domestic needs and development agendas, without fully engaging in an in-depth discussion of the issues themselves. In other words, the vision of the Caribbean Information Society must be placed squarely within the framework of a broader vision of Caribbean development and Caribbean society as a whole.

Information sources

Other information resources that will be useful to Caribbean policy makers as they reflect on the benefits and challenges of an information society and the status of the region in this regard include:

- Road map towards an information society in Latin America and the Caribbean. ECLAC LC/G.2195 December 2002.

- Caribbean Policy response to the information age: ECLAC LC/CAR. 676. November 2001.

- The nature of the information society: a developing world perspective. Madanmohan. Rao (for the International Telecommunications Union) 2002.

- Country framework analysis for CARICOM States on their e-readiness for e-business: Alwyn D. Singh. Georgetown Caricom Secretariat: 2001

- Exploiting information technologies for electronic commerce and better public sector management. Robert Schware and Paul Kimberly. World Bank. 2000. In: Small states in the global economy: Commonwealth Secretariat. 2001.

- Towards a vision of a Caribbean Information Society: a contribution to the WSIS from the Caribbean ICT Stakeholders Virtual Community (CIVIC). February: 2003.

- The Plan of Action and other documents emanating from the WSIS can be found at the Summit web site: http://www.itu.int/wsis/

- Towards Caricom connectivity: Agenda 2003 and Platform for action. Georgetown: CARICOM Secretariat: 2002

A more comprehensive list of documents dealing with issues of relevance to the Caribbean Information Society can be accessed through the Caribbean Digital Library at: http://cdl.eclacpos.org