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The Global City Informatization Forum (CGIF) - ICT for Sustainable Urban Development

E-Government in Bridging the Urban Digital Divide

Shanghai, 25 September 2010

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Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure and honour to address this important Forum on ICT for Sustainable Urban Development.

I would like to begin by commending the Shanghai Municipal People's Government for its on-going commitment to hosting such forums, and for supporting our shared mission to promote local, regional and international cooperation in and dialogue on bridging the urban digital divide. In that context, my comments here are intended to encourage public administrators and facilitators to utilize e-government processes and make the advantages and benefits of ICT available to all citizens, especially to the vulnerable and disadvantaged.

It is well known that the United Nations is an advocate for the rights of disadvantaged groups including: the poor, disabled, illiterate, women, children and

youth, migrant workers and minorities. These groups need help accessing government information and services, and their needs must be met to protect them from experiencing even worse outcomes.

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As shown from the outcomes of the United Nations E-Government Surveys, which are published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs through my Division, e-government processes can contribute substantially to enhancing governments' capacity for accommodating urban populations, particularly those that are marginalized.

According to the latest issue of the Survey in 2010, much progress has been made in e-government development across the 192 UN Member States, during the period of 2008 to 2010.

Allow me now to update you on the current status of e-government development, in particular, through the four assessment indices:

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1) infrastructural development in ICT; 2) human capital development; 3) public e-service delivery; and 4) e-participation. We believe that these four indices are pivotal to tackling the problem of the digital divide and to promoting citizen-centric and inclusive public service delivery.

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At the global level, as you can see from this slide, high-income countries still enjoy the top rankings in e-government development. The Republic of Korea received the

highest score followed by the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

Regionally, Europe received the highest score, followed by the Americas, Asia, Oceana and Africa.

Now let me turn to the main findings from each of the four assessment indices mentioned earlier.

First, Infrastructural Development in ICT

The mere availability of modern technologies and online services has, unfortunately, little effect if the majority of citizens do not have access to the Internet. The challenge for the government is, therefore, to develop the necessary infrastructure to help citizens particularly those marginalized groups that lack access. It is encouraging to note the exponential progress of Internet connectivity in recent years. The number of Internet users is now close to 2 billion, and it is estimated that another 1 billion will be online by 2015 – half the world's population.

Out of every 100 habitants, 58 are Internet users in the developed countries, compared to only 23 Internet users in the developing countries and 4 Internet users in the least developed countries. The digital divide remains wide – with Africa and Arab States lagging behind Europe, Asia and the Americas. According to a study conducted by ITU, by the end of 2009, fixed broadband penetration, which is essential for countries to be able to offer advanced e-government services, stood at 23 per cent in the developed countries, compared to only 4 per cent in the

developing countries.

One of the most noteworthy developments is the rapid emergence and spread of mobile technology as a powerful tool for public service provision and delivery. Today, 67 per cent of the world's population, or about 4.6 billion people, are mobile subscribers – a significant increase from one billion in 2002. This is well over twice the number of the world's population with Internet access. In developed countries, mobile subscriptions are over 100 per cent of the population, meaning that there are more mobile devices being used than there are people. In developing countries, with 78 per cent of the population being mobile subscribers, the uptake is also significant considering that other technologies are scarce. Mobile subscriptions also drive wireless broadband growth, with mobile broadband growing faster than fixed broadband lines and second only to mobile phone growth itself. As we found from the Survey, many governments have proven to be highly successful in implementing mobile services in addition to online services.

Second, Human Capital Development

Countries are improving in their overall literacy rate and combined gross enrolment ratio in education, as seen from this chart. However, there remains a challenge for citizens in understanding the true benefits of e-government, even with the recent proliferation of e-services provided by the government. Website statistics have shown that the actual usage of e-services in some developed and most developing countries is still low. Very often, citizens may not even be aware of the existence of online government services. One of the causes for this lack of awareness, which is worth-noting, is the lack of governments' capacity in promoting and marketing their e-services.

Third, Public e-Service Delivery

There has been steady progress in the implementation of e-government services in both developed and developing countries, and by now the benefits and efficiency gains are well known.

Our examination of online and mobile public service delivery is in four progressive stages: 1) information services, 2) enhanced services, 3) transactional services, and 4) connected services.

Concerning the emerging stage

Today, 98 per cent of governments have an Internet presence. Most disseminate large amounts of public information and have progressively advanced beyond basic websites to portals, which serve as gateways to their ministries and departments where citizens can access an increasing number of information services, such as public policies, laws, regulations and relevant documentation.

On the enhanced stage

Thirty-seven per cent of countries provide static online forms. In some developing countries and in several of the least developed countries, application forms for government services can be downloaded but must be completed manually and submitted in hard copy to the relevant ministerial office.

Regarding the transactional stage

Approximately 18 per cent of countries provide online mechanisms for tax payments, 19 per cent provide for registrations, and 17 per cent provide for permits, certificates and identification cards. 28 per cent provide online submissions and 17 per cent provide online application for government benefits. Most countries are still limited in their offering of full-fledged transactional services. In the least developed countries transactional opportunities are not available online.

With reference to the connected stage

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16 per cent of countries provide single sign-on, while very few countries actually provide fully integrated or life-cycle services through a single portal. Citizens from most countries still need to know what each government agency offers and how to find those online services.

Fourth, E-participation

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In the Survey, governments were assessed through a 3-stage e-participation framework. It includes: First, the **e-information stage**, in which government publishes information about online participation; second, the **e-consultation stage**, in which government encourages citizens to engage in consultations concerning its services and policies; and third, the **e-decision-making stage**, in which the government actually invites citizens to participate in and influence policy decision and implementation. Citizens are encouraged to become engaged in public policy-making when they sense that their governments are genuinely receptive to their inputs. Moreover, governments can provide better services if they clearly understand what their citizens want.

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The Survey concluded that the general inclination of governments towards citizen engagement is encouraging but that there is still room for improvement for them to become more inclusive and citizen-centric. Developed countries scored 38% in the e-participation index, while developing countries other than LDCs scored 18%. In general, governments are still in the infant stage of facilitating e-consultation and e-decision-making.

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Based on the above, it is our view that bridging the digital divide is not only about bridging the technology divide but also about bridging the human capacity divide. Both need to be addressed at the same time. E-government has a direct effect on sustainable socio-economic growth, particularly with reference to urbanization in view of its positive influence on business processes, households and citizens. There is a need, therefore, for governments to continue investing in infrastructure development, human capital development and the provision of effective and efficient online and mobile services. At the same time, e-participation should be expanded to include more interactive and pro-active ways of engaging citizens, especially those from the marginalized groups, in the decision-making and implementation process.

The responsibility now rests with all of us to work together in further developing e-government services that are inclusive and citizen-centric, which will in turn help bridge the digital divide and improve the quality of life for all.

Thank you.