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Internet Governance

Madam Chair,
Distinguished Ministers,
Ladies and Gentleman,

Let me start by thanking you for this invitation. It is a great honour and privilege for me to interact with this important conference. The term 'Internet governance' may seem far removed from the theme of this meeting - "a new notion of media" – yet it is closely related, if not at the heart of your deliberations.

We are all struggling how to deal with the borderless nature of the Internet. The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) has structured its discussions along two pairs of related themes: access and diversity as well as security and openness. In addition, it has identified critical Internet resources as a fifth theme, with development and capacity building as cross-cutting priorities. These themes provide a good mix between technological and societal issues.

A very central part of the debate is the search of a balance between security and openness. Ultimately, this is about what kind of Internet we want. Do we want an Internet in which security prevails or do we want an Internet that is open? The historical lens might be helpful in addressing this question: let us remember that the Internet was not built to be secure, but it was built to be open.

The concept of the IGF emerged between the two phases of WSIS. The intention was to fill "a vacuum within the context of existing structures" and to address "issues that are cross-cutting and multidimensional and that either affect more than one institution, are not dealt with by any institution or are not addressed in a coordinated manner". The second phase of WSIS in Tunis requested the Secretary-General of the United Nations to convene the IGF with the mandate to deal with the broad range of issues, as defined by the Tunis Agenda in the section relating to Internet governance, from paragraph 22 to 82.

Through dialogue, the IGF seeks to develop a common understanding of these issues and raise awareness of the development dimension of Internet governance. By setting development and capacity building as its cross-cutting and overarching priorities, the IGF made it clear that Internet governance is not an end in itself, but should be responsive to the economic and social dimensions of development.

This development orientation is more relevant than ever today, during a period of unprecedented economic downturn. Our current economic difficulties should not let us lose sight of achieving the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed development objectives.

The IGF is not a traditional United Nations process. Its purpose is to bring people together from all stakeholder groups. They are to meet as equals, neither to make decisions nor to negotiate, but to discuss, exchange information and share good practices. While the IGF may not have the power to make decisions, it informs and inspires those who do. The forum develops a common understanding of how we can maximize the opportunities the Internet offers, how we can use it for the benefit of all nations and peoples and how we can address the risks and challenges.

In general, the IGF is seen as a successful experiment in international cooperation and its new approach to multi-stakeholder cooperation has spread to other organizations and forums. Last year also saw the spread of the IGF model at the national and regional level, from Latin America to East and West Africa, as well as Europe.

Some common threads emerged from the discussion. Multi-stakeholder cooperation was seen as a pre-requisite to tackle all existing problems. All users were part of the Internet and all actors had a shared responsibility to find solutions.

While it was recognized that there was a need to discuss Internet governance issues globally, it was felt that there was a need for acting locally. There was a general understanding that there were no 'one size fits all solution'. All countries had to find their own solutions, which correspond to their own situation. Through the sharing of best practices and the exchange of information, they could find solutions that were adapted to their needs.

The fourth meeting of the IGF is scheduled to take place in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, on 15-18 November 2009. The preparatory process is well underway. It started with two rounds of open consultations in Geneva in February and May and two meetings of the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG) held immediately after the consultations.

"Internet governance – creating opportunities for all" is the overall title and agreed on the wording of an agenda to be proposed for the 2009 meeting. The proposed agenda is as follows:

- Managing critical Internet resources
- Security, openness and privacy
- Access and diversity
- Internet governance in the light of WSIS principles
- Emerging issues
- Taking stock and the way forward – on the desirability of the continuation of the Forum.

Initially, the IGF was given a provisional lifespan of five years. The Tunis Agenda, in Paragraph 76, specifically calls on the Secretary-General "to examine the desirability of the continuation of the Forum, in formal consultation with Forum participants, within five years of its creation, and to make recommendations to the UN Membership in this regard." These consultations will be held at the Sham El Sheikh meeting to allow for a timely decision by the United Nations Membership before the five-year deadline expires. A broad based consultative process has already been started and a questionnaire is available on the IGF Web site. Among other things, stakeholders are invited to let us know what has been the impact of the IGF, either directly or indirectly, and whether it has acted as a catalyst for change. Any contribution received will be posted ion the IGF Web site and the contributions will be summarized in a synthesis paper that will be submitted as an input into this "formal consultation". Based on the outcome, the Secretary-General will make recommendations to the UN Membership.

Leading up to the process, it will be necessary to assess the IGF's strengths and weaknesses. Paradoxically, what many see as a weakness – the lack of decision-making power – may turn out to be a strength: the lack of decision-making power will make sure that the IGF will not make mistakes that might turn out to be costly. The Internet, according to many leading experts, is still in its infancy. It may not yet have reached 15% of its potential. It is therefore important to make sure that we do not stop developments by developing legal frameworks that may turn out to be too constricting and stifle technological innovation.

There are no easy solutions to the challenges we are facing, due to the borderless nature of the Internet. There may be the temptation to ask for the development of new legal instruments. However, as it has been pointed out with regard to sustainable development, there is a need to enforce existing treaties first, before negotiating new treaties. There is also much merit in the analysis of how existing legal instruments apply to the Internet.

I would like to take advantage of this opportunity and pay tribute to the Council of Europe's involvement with the IGF and thank it for its important contribution, based on its core values rule of law, human rights and democratic participation.

The IGF provides a platform for the Council of Europe to present its work to a global audience. The Council of Europe has much to contribute to the global debate on Internet governance and it is my hope that the Council of Europe will remain committed to the IGF process and will step up its involvement in the discussions related to Internet governance.