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The future of 'the information society'

Last week, over 1,600 delegates from across the globe gathered in Geneva, Switzerland, for 'the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) +10 High-Level Event'. A major report published at the event indicates that significant progress has been made over the last decade in increasing mobile cellular coverage, with all rural communities in the world likely to be covered by 2G mobile cellular signals by 2015. However, internet connectivity remains a challenge and access to broadband continues to be unequal.

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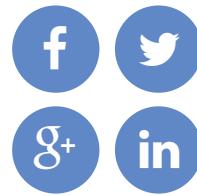


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Interview with ITU Secretary-General Hamadoun I. Touré. Video courtesy ITU. Front page image © ITU/C. Montesano Casillas, courtesy ITU Pictures, Flickr (CC BY 2.0). This image has been cropped.

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week, over 1,600 delegates from across the globe gathered in Geneva, Switzerland, for 'the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) +10 High-Level Event'. The event was held to review the progress that has been made in achieving the telecommunications targets set out following the the first two WSIS events in 2003 and 2005.

"World leaders at the World Summit on the Information Society in 2003 agreed to promote the use of ICTs for the achievement of internationally agreed development goals and targets," says International Telecommunication Union (ITU) secretary-general Hamadoun I. Touré. "Ten years after the WSIS, the issues are still alive — that's very important."

Last month's event saw the launch of the Final WSIS Targets Review, a report prepared by the Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development, of which ITU is a founding member. The report indicates that significant progress has been made over the last decade in increasing mobile cellular coverage, with all rural communities in the world likely to be covered by 2G mobile cellular signals by 2015. However, internet connectivity remains a challenge and access to broadband continues to be unequal, with penetration rates around four times higher in developed countries compared to developing ones. "Today almost everyone on Earth

lives within reach of a mobile cellular network and nearly three billion people are online; we must now ensure that everyone also has access to broadband connectivity," says Touré.

Bridging the digital divide

"Information and communication technologies have long been recognized as key enablers for bridging the digital divide and achieving the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic growth, environmental balance and social inclusion," says Ban Ki-moon, secretary-general of the UN. "We must do everything in our power to increase access to ICT and broadband connectivity across the world, including reaching people in remote areas, land-locked countries, small island developing states and the least developed countries. This will empower millions of people and enable us to meet our development goals in the post-2015 era."

The report also states that while some countries have successfully integrated computers in schools, less than 10% of schools in many of the world's poorest countries are connected to the internet. The proportion of teachers trained to use ICT in the classroom is increasing, but fewer than 10% of teachers in low-income countries have been trained to effectively use ICTs in their classrooms. Today, almost all scientific and research centers have broadband internet access and the total number of national research and education networks (NRENs) has improved significantly. Meanwhile, libraries, museums, and archives are now important

providers of online content related to culture.

Nevertheless, a lot remains to be done in terms of digitizing cultural heritage and making it available online.

"This report is a major milestone in tracking the information society worldwide," explains ITU deputy secretary-general Houlin Zhao. "It shows that while significant achievements have been made in the last decade, the digital divide remains a major barrier to an inclusive information society.

We are determined to continue to plan, develop and implement large-scale ICT projects as we accompany countries on their development journey."

"Today we are in 'the information society' and we are now moving towards the next step, 'the knowledge society,'" explains Touré. "Everyone needs not only access to information, but also to use information, create information, and share information." He concludes: "We need to make sure ICT gets a permanent role in the post-2015 development agenda."

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