INFORMATION NOTE

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NOTE BY THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

ACC statement on universal access to basic communication and information services

1.   At its First Regular Session of 1997, held in Geneva on 10-11 April, the United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) adopted a statement on Universal Access to Basic Communication and Information Services, and invited the Secretary-General of the United Nations, in his capacity as Chairman of the ACC, to bring the Statement to the attention of the General Assembly with a view to seeking its endorsement.

2.   The ACC members agreed for their part to submit the Statement to their respective governing bodies. In complying with this decision, the Executive Director presents to the WFP membership the above-mentioned statement. As the ACC has released the document in English only, the WFP Secretariat has translated the document into French, Spanish and Arabic.

3.   The Executive Director takes this opportunity to inform the Executive Board on the efforts that WFP has been making on in this connection since the establishment, in May 1996, of its Central Information Management and Statistics Branch.

4.   WFP was one of the first United Nations organizations present on the Internet when it opened an official Website in May 1996. Since then, WFP has contacted the other United Nations organizations on the Web. In addition, as a first step towards developing a United Nations-wide Intranet, WFP provided links from its Website to all United Nations Websites. Similar links have been set up to facilitate access to other partners such as NGOs and international organizations active in the field of development and relief aid. The Website provides information to donors, recipients and the general public on WFP policies and all aspects of WFP's operational activities. The number of users has increased steadily. In March 1997, near 5,000 individual users visited the site, and a total of about 22,000 documents were read.

5.   WFP participates in data sharing activities among United Nations agencies through the Internet, i.e., the Relief Web, which is regularly updated with WFP's country-specific vulnerability analysis information. In the near future, all WFP country offices will have access to a new internal Website through Internet. This will improve considerably the rapid exchange of information between headquarters and country offices; it could also serve as a valuable source of information for government counterparts in developing countries, where the lack of communication infrastructure is often a major obstacle in accessing information.

6.   In 1997, all Executive Board documents were made available on the Website for access by delegates and observers, who were given password restricted access. Since January 1997, about 1,000 Executive Board documents have been read or downloaded by delegates. The statistics show that these users represented mainly North American and European countries. In order to promote Internet access among the Rome-based representations, with a special emphasis on developing countries—which often lack adequate technical backstopping—the information management unit prepared and distributed a booklet entitled "COME AND SURF THE WEB WITH US" that gives practical advice on related hardware/software questions and a selection of available local Internet service providers. In order to also provide the necessary training support to partner representations, a series of free Internet presentations were advertised; these met with an enthusiastic response. The presentations were held in April-May, with 86 participants from a total of 38 representations; of these participants, 67 were from developing countries.

ANNEX I

ACC STATEMENT ON UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO BASIC COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION SERVICES

1.   The world is in the midst of a communication and information revolution, complemented by an explosive growth in knowledge. Information and knowledge have become *a factor sui generis* in societal and economic development. As generic technologies, information and communication technologies (ICT) permeate and cut across all areas of economic, social, cultural and political activity. In the process they affect all social institutions, perceptions and thought processes. Globally the information and communication sector is already expanding at twice the rate of the world economy. Decreasing costs of increasingly powerful, reliable hardware and software, as well as the fact that much hardware has become a desktop item, will continue to drive the use of information and communication technologies, facilitating access by ever wider segments of society. But this tendency can have profound benefits only if gains in physical access are accompanied by capacities to exploit these technologies for individual and societal development through production and dissemination of appropriate content and applications.

2.   The communication and information revolution opens up entirely new vistas for the organizations of the United Nations system; it will bring about a dramatic shift not only in the way our organizations will operate in the future, deliver services and products, but also collaborate and interact with each other and other actors. Indeed, the multilateral system as a whole - and specifically development cooperation - has reached a threshold where our future orientations, strategies and activities have to be revisited and adjusted to the new circumstances and opportunities. We are resolved to respond readily and effectively to these new challenges.

3.   We recognize that knowledge and information:

   –   represent the life blood of the emerging global information society and its attendant infrastructure

   –   are the principal resources of the burgeoning information economy;

   –   are at the heart of the intensifying globalization trends - and drive the emergence of a tele-economy with new global and societal organizational models (telework, telecommuting, teleservices, telemedicine, distance education, teletraining, teleshopping, telebanking, business facilitation, trade efficiency, trade information etc.); in many instances, physical location is becoming irrelevant for the ability to receive or deliver products and services;

   –   will increasingly affect the international division of labour, determine the competitiveness of corporations and national economies and generate new growth patterns and paradigms; and

   –   will have strategic consequences for the global power constellation. Knowledge, more than ever, is power. Information about what is occurring becomes a central commodity of international relations - and determines the efficiency and effectiveness of any intervention which is a particular challenge for multilateral actors.

4.   Information is not a free good. Comparative advantages are henceforth expressed in the ability of countries to acquire, organize, retrieve and disseminate information through communication, information processing technologies and complex information networks to support policy making and the development process. Abilities in these areas may allow the prevention and resolution of regional and other conflicts or deal with new challenges like international crime, terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and environmental damage by charting better informed decisions - all of which are of utmost concern to the organizations of the United Nations system.

5.   We are profoundly concerned at the deepening mal-distribution of access, resources and opportunities in the information and communication field. The information and technology gap and related inequities between industrialized and developing nations are widening: a new type of poverty - information poverty - looms. Most developing countries, especially the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), are not sharing in the communication revolution, lacking as they do:

–   affordable access to core information resources, cutting-edge technology and to sophisticated telecommunication systems and infrastructure;

–   the capacity to build, operate, manage and service the technologies involved;

–   policies that promote equitable public participation in the information society as both producers and consumers of information and knowledge; and

–   a work force trained to develop, maintain and provide the value added products and services required by the information economy.

We therefore commit the organizations of the United Nations system to assist developing countries in redressing the present alarming trends.

6.   Over the past decades, the organizations of the United Nations system have carried out many projects at various levels incorporating communication and information technologies. However, today we must acknowledge that often this was done in a rather uncoordinated manner. We therefore perceive an urgent need for a more strategic and systematic approach to ICT and information management, based on a strengthened collaboration among the organizations of the UN system.

7.   We have concluded that the introduction and use of ICT and information management must become an integral element of the priority efforts by the United Nations system to promote and secure sustainable human development for all; hence our decision to embrace the objective of establishing universal access to basic communication and information services for all. ICT and effective information management offer hitherto unknown possibilities and modalities for the solution of global problems to help fulfil social development goals and to build capacities to effectively use the new technologies. At the same time, infrastructure and services of physical communication, in particular postal services, are a means of communication widely and universally used throughout the world, particularly in developing countries. Postal services are vital and will remain, for the foreseeable future, essential to promoting trade, industry and services of all kinds. Indeed the value of postal services will be further enhanced as new services, such as "hybrid mail" combining electronic transmission and physical delivery, gain ground.

8.   Individually and jointly, our organizations are already carrying out or are planning at the national level to embark on various projects and activities to highlight the catalytic role multilateral organizations can and must play in this increasingly vital area. We pledge to do more by joining forces in a variety of fields, e.g. in agriculture, education, health, natural

resources and environment management, transport, international trade and commerce, employment and labour issues, housing, infrastructure and community services, small and medium enterprise development and strengthening of participatory arrangements (see attachment). It is our intention and determination to demonstrate the viability and suitability of the new technologies and effective information management - especially by reaching out to and targeting the rural areas and most impoverished segments of society so often bypassed by the benefits of technological progress. Unless we are able to show that ICIs make a difference and reach out to more poor people or deliver better services to larger segments of society, the potential of ICTs and information management would remain just that.

9. Harnessing and spreading the potential of the new communication technologies to countries, especially in the developing world, in a timely, cost-effective and equitable manner will be a daunting challenge. The telecommunication infrastructure is weak in virtually all developing countries. The 59 lowest income countries (which account for about 56 percent of the world's population) share only seven percent of the world's telephone mainlines. Excluding China and India, the 57 lowest income countries (which together account for one-fifth of the world's population) have one-hundredth of the global telephone main lines. Wherever there is connectivity it is limited to major cities, the waiting lists are long and there is no indication that the situation will improve dramatically soon. Within the limits of its resources and priorities, the UN system stands ready to assist governments in designing national policies, plans and strategies to facilitate and guide the development and management of an appropriate national information infrastructure in accordance with their needs and traditions.

10. ICT hold the prospect of an accelerated introduction of certain state-of-the-art technologies superseding the step-by-step process of transferring know-how and technologies which has dominated industrialization processes. Successful leapfrogging will allow developing countries to advance, bypassing stages of technology development. While being aware of the considerable practical hurdles, we are nevertheless determined to assist our developing country partners in this quest.

11. We are equally conscious of the imperative to build human and technical capacities to enable societies to facilitate access and make best use of the new multimedia communication resources. The rapid expansion of the Internet and its interactive character have introduced a dramatic paradigm shift in retrieval, handling and dissemination of information. The technologies make it possible for those who need information and knowledge to look for it on an electronic network and download what they need, when they need it. The explosion of the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) have crested an easy to use communication interface for linking together computers in every part of the world for communications, information and data exchange for those who can afford it.

12. The emphasis on networks such as the Internet should however not distract from the potential role and contribution other ICT can make in advancing sustainable human development. Advances in CD-ROM technology, for example, have made multi-media and large scale data transfers accessible to developing countries, even to areas where there is no telecommunication connectivity. Many of the multimedia options and especially the Internet - depend on the availability of reliable, powerful telecommunication connections with a sufficient bandwidth - as well as access to electricity grids or renewable energy (e.g. solar power), which are other limiting factors in the poorest areas. Widespread illiteracy, diverse cultures and linguistic differences pose yet different obstacles for the introduction of new technologies on a universal basis.

13.   Massive investment in telecommunication networks world-wide has helped to link most developing countries to international telecommunication networks, albeit in most cases only their capital cities. Thus far this connectivity invariably bypasses rural areas and hinterlands of developing countries, where the incidence of poverty is highest. We believe therefore that the expansion of domestic telecommunication infrastructure to rural areas and its connection to reliable international networks must become a top priority for governments, the private sector and multilateral and bilateral development organizations. Unless telecommunication systems can be expanded, access will be confined to an urban, literate elite in developing countries, bypassing rural areas and the poor. Here, rapidly emerging digital satellite systems offer new solutions.

14.   An indication of the magnitude of investment required is seen by the estimate that in Sub-Saharan Africa raising teledensity to 1 telephone mainline per 100 inhabitants (from the current 0.46 mainlines per 100 inhabitants) would require an investment of eight billion dollars. The estimate assumes, however, that the cost of a mainline closely mirrors the prevailing international prices, whereas experience shows that typically the cost tends to be about three times higher in Sub-Saharan Africa. The enormity and scale of the challenge to provide universal access in basic communication and information services to the developing world would thus make it advisable to focus on the community level and on reinforcing major development missions such as education, rather than the household or individual level. Even so, harnessing and spreading the potential of the new information and communication technologies to developing countries will be a daunting challenge.

15.   The organizations of the United Nations system alone cannot undertake this massive and exceedingly costly investment. Such investment will help alleviate poverty and create new livelihoods and open up new markets. We call upon the private sector, governments. civil society and other development organizations to engage with us in a purposeful and systematic endeavour to shape and manage this process by:

   –   establishing and promoting a common global vision and broad-based awareness of the changes upon us and articulating a compelling vision and strategy of how new technologies can be remade to benefit all countries, particularly the poorest;

   –   building of national human, technical and economic capacities to facilitate access to and utilization of ICT in developing countries;

   –   promoting multimedia ICT in the delivery of programmes advancing sustainable human development, especially to rural areas; and

   –   promoting with the participation of the private sector, the creation, management and dissemination of strategic information and data pertaining to the various dimensions of development - globally, regionally and nationally and at the community level.

16.   We are conscious of the fact that modern communication links - and especially Web-based approaches will materially impact on programmes, programme content, modalities and quality of delivery - and hence on the future of multilateral cooperation and technical assistance per se. For our part, we will accelerate our ongoing internal reform and change processes to create modern, cost-effective and globally networked organizations involving a strengthening of our in-house technical capacities and changing staff attitudes and perceptions, especially among senior managers. Another objective will be to strengthen ties and intensify communication among our far-flung offices opening up opportunities for decentralization and for an instantaneous presence of technical backup and support.

17.   Beyond, we intend to harmonize and coordinate our strategies for modernising and enhancing capacities and effectiveness. The objective will be to create a United Nations system-wide Intranet (Internet for internal usage) to facilitate cooperation among the organizations to ensure integrated exploitation of competencies of organizations and coordination at national level. We shall seek to promote cooperation among our respective organizations through the use of compatible systems which we already pursue through the separate mechanism of the Information Systems Coordination Committee. We aim to ensure the compatibility, accessibility and convergence of communications and computer-based systems.

18.   All this must be complemented by constantly updated and well managed web-sites for each of our organizations offering hyperlinks to relevant web-sites both within the UN system and outside. This will confer competence and global authority to our organizations in the electronic age. Indeed, as assessing reliability becomes difficult with more than 65 million web pages on the Internet, the UN system should become web focal points, each in their area of competence. We must strive to make our web sites the foremost entry points for information on poverty, development and sustainability and universal human values and heritage. The Information Systems Coordination Committee, which was established in 1994 with the intent of harmonizing approaches of UN organizations and facilitating access to UN related information, has made a good start.

19.   We also need to explore and comprehend the implications and potential of the ICT era. Do rapid technological advances trigger the emergence of a right to communicate and a right to access information? What are the consequences for the global labour market, including the gender impact and the role of trade unions, and the international division of labour; the prospects for access to global markets for goods, products and services from developing country economies; opportunities for global sourcing; the scope for participatory approaches involving youth, local and community groups, women and indigenous organizations and other disenfranchised groups; the impact on the elderly; the consequences for traditional postal services; the dimensions of international copyright and trade in services?

20.   At present, innovation in terms of ICT technology choices, approaches and content responds by and large to the needs and perceptions of industrialized countries and their business sector. We suggest that innovations for both hardware and software must also become demand- and needs-driven to be able to respond to development objectives and needs. This shift from supply driven to needs driven approaches must become a global priority and influence the direction and pace of future innovation. Only then can ICT take hold and make a significant impact in developing countries - after all the markets of the future. Among others, this will require the design of products apt for use in electricity-poor environments (including hardware independent from electric power such as solar-based or crank-technology driven) and for use by illiterate people (facilitating accessibility through iconographic software and culturally and linguistically diverse content). But partnership and alliances will be driven both by the technical and financial realities.

21.   Thus, we are particularly concerned by the staggering financial needs required to narrow the present gap between information haves and have-nots- A scarcity of funds and insufficient investment flows inevitably hamper the modernization of telecommunication networks and the introduction of promising technologies for advancing sustainable human development. As of official development assistance flows are not projected to increase dramatically over the next years, we must stimulate innovative approaches to raise a critical mass of resources.

22. In our view, the sheer magnitude of the task will necessitate the urgent formation of new and novel cooperative mechanisms:

    – industry alliances spanning across developed and developing countries; and

    – collaborative partnerships across traditional lines - between the government, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, foundations, academic entities actors of civil society and intergovernmental and international organizations.

23. We, the heads of the organizations of the United Nations system, have agreed to pursue cooperatively, and in a more systematic manner, the development of strategic approaches to the broad issues of the global information economy and society; therefore, we have agreed to commit ourselves to improving universal access to basic communication and information services.

24. In order to demonstrate our ability to bridge the information gap, we have agreed to undertake through coordinated action, at the country level, pilot projects in the broad areas indicated in the Annex.

25. The involvement of Member States is essential in responding to the challenges of change. We therefore invite the Secretary General of the United Nations, in his capacity as Chairman of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, to bring the Statement to the attention of the General Assembly, with a view to seeking its endorsement. Executive Heads will also submit the Statement to their respective Governing Bodies.

ATTACHMENT

INDICATIVE AREAS FOR POSSIBLE PILOT PROJECTS

1.   Interactive long-distance education and learning: Conventional teaching and learning methods are increasingly unable to respond to the rising demand for learning, driven by burgeoning illiteracy, a dearth of well-qualified teachers and faculty, shrinking public funds for the education sector and the growing acceptance of the concept of life-long learning in a world driven by rapid change. At all levels of the educational process, long-distance education can become a viable complement to conventional schooling and training - in particular reaching out and delivering education services to isolated countries and regions, which often are the poorest. Where even television may prove to be unaffordable, one must rely on radio and the development of community-based media, especially rural radio.

2.   Telemedicine: Telemedicine comprises opportunities for medical practice and education through the combination of telecommunication and medical technologies. Telemedicine allows interactive audiovisual communication between physician and practitioner in distant locations, facilitates the exchange of medical information for research and educational purposes and enables diagnostic imaging and clinical analysis from distance to compensate for a lack of specialists or dispense advice to doctors. Electronic means may thus help to improve the quality and delivery of health and reproductive services to rural areas. Access to computer and telecommunication services can help transform the role of health workers and enhance the quality and outreach of health services and preventive health care in underserviced rural communities.

3.   Telebanking and micro-credit schemes: Telebanking can assist banks to adjust to the needs of the poor and communicate with the illiterate and poor at the village level and to promote micro-credit schemes. The available technology is tailor-made for a market characterized by a vast, impoverished and mostly illiterate rural population, high crime and widespread fraud.

4.   Environmental protection and management: Environmental protection and management is a wide field for various applications of information technologies, including sustainable forestry and logging practices, waste management and disposal, support to agricultural extension services, water resource management, managing irrigation and natural resource exploitation.

5.   Participatory processes, arrangements and good governance: Communications is not only a means to disseminate knowledge, information and values, it is also a basic component of all democratic societies. Its instantaneous character is bound to affect decision-making in political, economic and business spheres. It will equally impact on democratic (or autocratic) systems and governance structures, their responsiveness, transparency and accountability and strengthen participatory and people-centred approaches within civil society, empowering especially women and youth. The technology is apt to create novel structures at the community level to manage individual and public affairs by all stakeholders in sustainable development and empower those most affected by poverty through broad-based access to information and partners.

6.   Virtual laboratories for solving development problems: New methods of work which were still unthinkable just a year ago are now possible. By combining the Internet, virtual reality, real time 3D computing, Net-phone technologies, groupware and virtual team works it is now possible to create permanent "invisible colleges" of scientists working on

critical research subjects, at relatively little cost. The principal objective is to link researchers with the special needs and knowledge of the developing countries to the infrastructure and practices already firmly established in the developed countries, in order to provide access to scientific know-how and information more quickly, on a larger scale, in an interactive format and to disseminate it most rapidly. These techniques are one solution to the South-North brain drain, allowing scientists from the South to be associated virtually in all key discussions taking place in the world research community.

7. Universal access to world's knowledge and culture: Public information institutions, which are natural foci for access to information needed for development, have not been able to exploit their potential to the full in developing countries due to immensity of needs and scarcity of resources. Information and communication technologies provide the institutions with the means to promote cost-effective, development-oriented information services for all sectors of society, building on networking at the national/regional levels. Of particular importance is public domain information that the info-market seems to neglect, for different reasons: insufficient potential profitability, small readership (or more paradoxically), the public nature of the original data. Such information should be inventoried, digitized and accessed with Internet servers through the support of appropriate public policies on copyright issues related to information technologies, the development of electronic cultural industries, and promotion of the Internet as a public utility accessible to all at the lowest possible cost.