

ROAD MAP TO PROGRESS

We have, of course, got to be aware of both our national context as well as the global context. And it is in that global context that it is useful to remind ourselves that we are approaching the first World Summit on the Information Society which will be held in two phases. The first phase of the summit will be held in Geneva, in December this year, with the second phase scheduled for Tunis in 2005.

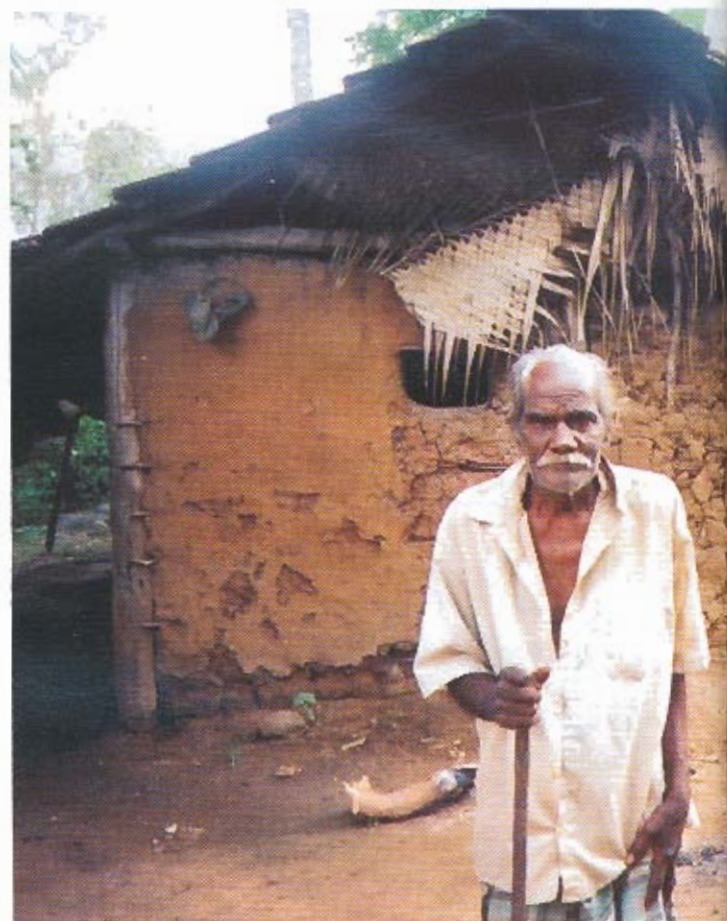
This summit, at which I hope Sri Lanka will be adequately represented, seeks to address a host of issues surrounding the speed at which the global information society is evolving – as telecommunications, multimedia broadcasting, and information and communication technology converge. It aims to agree on a clear statement of political will and a concrete plan of action to achieve the goals of the information society. Among the proposals being discussed in the preparatory process are the development of e-strategies for all countries, the launching of a Global Digital Compact and an ICT Development Index, which will be a set of benchmarks to measure progress. While I am aware that this is an inter-governmental conference, all stakeholders have to be involved; and I hope that the private sector and civil society in Sri Lanka will be represented and will influence the position of our delegation.

No government or political party can claim a monopoly over wisdom. Nor are they the sole interpreters of the national interest. We are in the midst of strong currents transforming the industrial society, which we have had since the 19th century, into the information society of today. We need to understand these trends and try to manage them before we are all swept off our feet. We need to devise global standards and mutually beneficial co-operative arrangements.

All human endeavours and inventions are inevitably two-edged. They have their propensity for positive and negative results. ICT is no different; for while it undoubtedly expands the horizons of knowledge and increases the speed of communicating knowledge and information, it has also the capacity to be misused for criminal and exploitative purposes. Global standard-setting and 'rules of the road' are therefore vital.

There is another danger, and that concerns the 'digital divide' between the haves and the have-nots: the technologically empowered and the technologically excluded. This gap threatens to aggravate the North-South divide that already exists in the world as a threat to international peace and security. A decade after the Cold War between the West and the East ended – and despite all the rhetoric of globalisation – we face the danger of another Iron Curtain falling between

The private sector has a vital role to play in says **Jayantha Dhanapala**. Excerpts of a



the North and the South. A North where agricultural subsidies in OECD countries total US\$ 311 billion, while aid to all countries is about one-sixth of that, at US\$ 52 billion; where the annual dairy subsidy in the European Union is US\$ 913 per cow and in Japan US\$ 2,700 per cow; while the average annual income in sub-Saharan Africa is US\$ 490 per human being.

In a globalised world, we have a shared responsibility for the stark fact that one in five persons in the world lives in absolute poverty –

DHANAPALA ON CRIME...

While emphasising the importance of restoring political stability in this country, wherein there would be no return to violence in the next few years, Dhanapala also underlined the importance of ensuring law and order. "One reads, particularly in the newspapers, of underworld activities which seem to make

Sri Lanka very much what Chicago was under Al Capone. And the inability of the authorities to control this – and the suspicion that there are links between the mafia and the political parties – is also disturbing," he professed.

Dhanapala remarked that whether or not these suspicions were founded, there do exist "many perceptions"

about them, urging that "firm and decisive action" must be taken to control the situation. He asserted that the ordinary citizens of Sri Lanka must be confident that they can walk the streets "without being caught in the crossfire between rival gangs" – or fearing that their businesses would be subject to "some kind of attack" because they haven't paid "pro-

tection money to somebody". He said, "All this is basic law and order, which every citizen is entitled to have. And the fact that it is not enjoyed by Sri Lanka not only militates against the confidence that foreign investors have in Sri Lanka, but more importantly, that of the citizens of our own country in the governing process..."

(Excerpted from BENCHMARK)

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making us a 'smart people of a smart island', recent speech made at the IICS Convocation 2003.



MEDIA SERVICES PHOTO: SWASAKRITHI FOUNDATION

surviving on less than US\$ 1 a day. The world needs to address these asymmetries in development through multilateral co-operation and the Cancun Summit [was] one opportunity. At the same time, ensuring capacity-building in the developing countries is a responsibility we must take upon ourselves – utilising the human and intellectual resources we have. This must take place without in any way interfering with the cultural identities of developing countries or diluting the richness of their indigenous languages and traditions. I am re-

minded of what Immanuel Kant – the 18th-century German philosopher – once said: "Science is organised knowledge. Wisdom is organised life." We must therefore strive to achieve this wisdom while using science and technology as essential tools.

Among the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations – which the unprecedentedly large gathering of heads of state and government committed themselves to in 2000, in the historic Millennium Declaration – there is the goal of developing a global partnership for development. Under that, there is the target of making available the benefits of new technologies – especially information and communications technologies. Now this is a most laudable objective. But the latest Human Development Report issued by the UNDP shows a wide disparity among Internet users in the world. In 2001 – just two years ago – Iceland had the highest number: 599.3 Internet users per 1,000 population. At the other end of the spectrum, the Democratic Republic of Congo was the lowest – with 0.1 per 1,000. A huge gap lies in between. This is the infamous 'digital divide' which we all want to bridge – but which remains with us.

Now where does our own country figure in these statistics? The UNDP report shows that we had eight Internet users per 1,000 population. That was above the South Asian average of 6.3, but well below the global average of 79.6. It is a salutary reality check for us Sri Lankans – who usually pat ourselves on the back about our social and economic indicators in the South Asian context – to know that Maldives had the highest figure in South Asia: 36.5 Internet users per 1,000 – and we came second to them...

But I am also concerned about the digital divide within Sri Lanka. We have, in recent times, seen urban-centred – and indeed Colombo-centric – development. And, may I add, conspicuous consumption – with too little reaching the rural provinces, even as trickle-down. Central Bank statistics show that almost half the GDP derives from the Western Province, where industry and commerce are concentrated – but where only 28.6 per cent of the population live.

May I take this opportunity to commend the Lanka Monthly Digest (LMD) for its superb coverage of poverty in our country, in the August issue of this journal? A recent UNDP study reiterated that nearly 90 per cent of the poor in Sri Lanka live in rural areas – largely dependent on agriculture. Moreover, the study notes that 70 per cent of the country's communication infrastructure is concentrated in the Western Province. The high cost of Internet access, lack of proficiency in English, computer illiteracy, and technical difficulties are identified as the obstacles preventing greater proliferation of ICT outside the Greater Colombo area.

...AND COHABITATION

This career diplomat feels that it is "unfortunate that the two major personalities of the country" – the President and the Prime Minister – "are not ready to sit down for an effective dialogue". He lamented, "This is a great pity, as both of them are extremely gifted and have a great deal to do to con-

tribute to the national good of the country." Dhanapala said that if they could work together and enter into agreement on a common policy platform, the LTTE would then have an assurance that even if there was to be a change of government, there would be one policy "as far as peace is concerned".

He further said, "The current mistrust that exists be-

tween the parties (the government and the LTTE) must be reduced... because this is a matter of survival as an independent, sovereign nation with territorial integrity..."

With regard to rumours of a snap poll (then doing the rounds), Dhanapala said that though the President is "constitutionally bestowed with the prerogative of dissolving parliament", he did not fore-

see any decisive victory for any party at this stage, should the country be called to vote. He said that the manner in which the constitution has been structured, and the proportional representation system, would ensure that there has to be a coalition of parties. "I think that a snap poll would not be in the interest of political stability," he said.

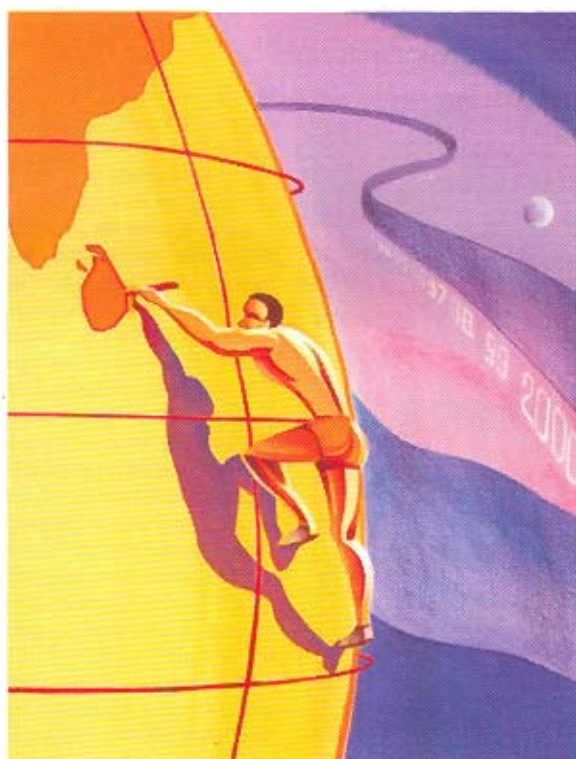
ROAD MAP TO PROGRESS



While I applaud the government for the launch of the ICT Development Roadmap and the effort to make us all 'smart people' in a 'smart island', we also need a strategy to use ICT as a development tool to raise people above the poverty line – especially by the application of ICT to agriculture. The E-Sri-Lanka vision does include this objective, but the achievement of this should not be left to the government alone. The private sector, which controls an estimated 75 per cent of the national economy, has a vital role to play.

I am encouraged by the number of initiatives that have been taken already. The Lanka Academic Network's 'Wired To The Future' programme has an excellent pilot project with the Niwaththaka Chethiya Maha Vidyalaya in Anuradhapura. In Matale, the Municipal Council has a training programme for youth in computer use. With regard to ensuring gender equality in access to ICT and empowering women through IT, the Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR) has created a women's electronic information network and also converted NGO resource centres in rural areas into telecentres with Internet facilities and computer training. I have no doubt that there are many more such examples.

E-learning must not, of course, be confined to youth alone. All of us need to be trained in the use of IT – and I recall with gratitude the lessons I learned from my daughter, which made me computer literate just a few years ago. It is all a part of the capacity-building that is a key element of ICT. No one must be left behind. The connectivity provided by ICT is especially important in overcoming ethnic, religious and regional differences – and forging a national identity. Information about how the conflict has affected the various regions of the country at grass-roots level and the practical benefits of the peace process can be communicated speedily and effectively as a means of reinforcing the peace and making the process irreversible.



MEDIA SERVICES ILLUSTRATION

"I applaud the government for ... the ICT development road map, and the effort to make us 'smart people' in a 'smart island' – The 'Regaining Sri Lanka' vision has to be buttressed by implementing the ICT road map."

ICT is no panacea for poverty, but it has the potential to be used as an effective tool in poverty alleviation programmes. For example, Internet cafes in villages can provide up-to-date information on market prices for agricultural products. Local language content must also increase to ensure Internet and ICT access for all. I would like to see the day when every village in Sri Lanka has a computer centre [that is] freely accessible to all.

The UNDP study I have referred to tries to supplement the ICT road map and makes several recommendations... [These] include using unemployed, educated youth to take ICT to the grass roots. It is an investment in human resource development, quite apart from being a political insurance policy. Bringing down the cost of using ICT is another recommendation, and the expansion that this will cause in the number of users, will more than compensate for the loss of revenue. I know that, despite my greatly reduced income, I pay more for my private access to [the] Internet in Colombo than I did in New York – and with a lot more aggravation from breakdowns, unexplained delays, et cetera!

There is a widespread consensus that we have reached a critical phase in our political and economic develop-

ment. Political and economic developments are mutually reinforcing. The 'Regaining Sri Lanka' vision has to be buttressed by implementing the ICT road map. In this task, IICS and its graduates have a vital role to play. To you – the graduating class of this year – you begin an exciting new journey. No one can give you an infallible compass or a road map to guide you through life and its challenges. The Spanish have a proverb: "Traveller, there are no paths; paths are made by walking." And so I wish you all success, self-fulfillment and happiness in your individual journeys, as you make your own contribution to our nation-building process. I am confident that your generation will ensure that our country's future is shaped by the microchip – and not by the T-56...

ON CANDIDATURES...

On Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Tyrone Fernando publicly announcing his candidature for the UN's 'hot seat', Dhanapala observed that the former is "the only one in the world to have publicly announced his candidature for the Secretary-General's post". Acknowledging that there has been public speculation

about his own candidature, Dhanapala said, "I have myself not made up my mind as to what I would like to do. Three years is a long time, and I think it is vastly premature. We have to see how the international situation evolves – and, of course, we have to see what the government of Sri Lanka is waiting to do."

The international civil servant said that as far as he is

aware, the Sri Lankan government has still made no decision regarding the candidature for the post. He expressed a belief that it is "discourteous by Kofi Annan to begin to speculate as to who is going to take his seat", especially as he still has three full years of term in office to complete.

Dhanapala remarked that, first, Asia would have to de-

cide whether to submit "one candidate or a slate of candidates" in 2006. However, he felt that if there is another "outstanding candidate from an Asian country who is clearly meeting with the consensus of the international community, then Sri Lanka would have very little chance". He added, "But, on the other hand, Sri Lanka as a country is highly regarded..."