



3rd United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries Brussels, 14-20 May 2001

Connecting to a digital world

The world's least developed countries are at a natural disadvantage in the high-tech realm, but the digital revolution may yet prove to be a springboard to development.

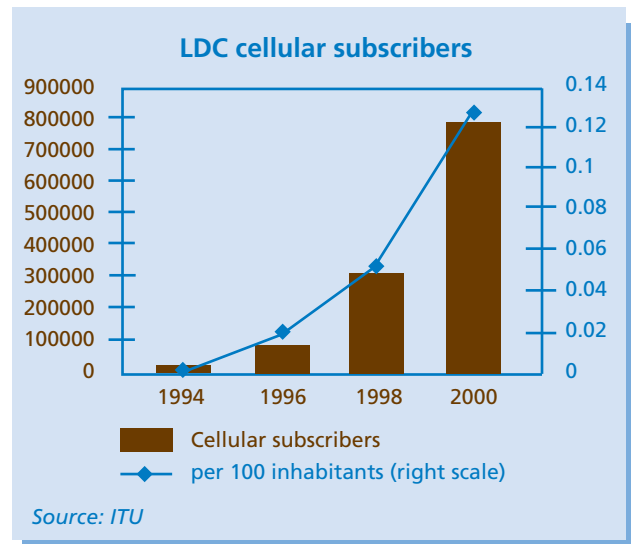
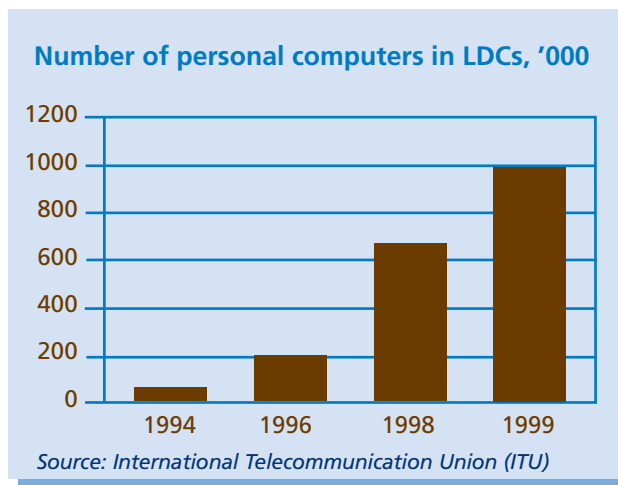
The issue of how to extend the benefits of the Internet revolution to the LDCs – located primarily in Africa and South Asia -- will feature high on the agenda of the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, which will take place in Brussels from 14 to 20 May 2001. At the Conference, LDC policy makers and development partners will work on approaches to help these countries connect to an increasingly technology-driven world.

The difficulties that the LDCs face in this field are well known and include lack of telecommunications infrastructure; low levels of computer literacy; inadequate regulatory frameworks; and lack of a critical mass of on-line consumers.

What is less often noticed is that many LDCs are taking the challenge of access and connectivity very seriously. And despite the odds stacked against the LDCs, many proponents of digital development are already seeing signs of an “electronic Spring”. Starting from an extremely low base rate, access to computers and the Internet is growing rapidly.

Investment is strengthening base telecommunications infrastructure in these countries, but increased telephone use is overwhelming existing capacity. The slack is being taken up by cellular phones, use of which is growing at an exponentially faster rate than that of land-line connected sets.

New wireless application protocols (WAP) enable Internet access via wireless telephones, and new software is being developed to allow connectivity between handheld devices and desktop computers. Some proponents of digital development anticipate that the shortage of fixed-wire telephone lines can be turned to an advantage, as investment that would have had to be made in maintaining older telephone land lines can be channelled instead into wireless or advanced fibre-optic systems.



Development strategies

"The information and communication technologies [ICTs] and globalization offer technological leap-frogging opportunities to LDCs, and the rate at which these technologies are being adapted is phenomenal. Mobile services and the Internet are the major successes, but applications such as telemedicine, tele-education [distance learning] and e-business are multiplying the benefits of ICTs and taking them to rural and remote areas, thus encouraging the extension of other socio-economic infrastructures."

- Hamadoun Toure, Director, ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau

A meeting of ICT pioneers from the public and private sectors of developing and transition economies was held in New York, April 2000, under the auspices of the UN General Assembly and the UN Economic and Social Council. The report of the panel of experts was incorporated in a process which led to the founding of an ICT Task Force, chaired by former Costa Rican President Jose Maria Figueres and reporting directly to Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Among the high-level panel's recommendations for actions by less developed countries and development partners:

- ◆ establish a supportive legal and regulatory framework, including intellectual property rights and liberalization of telecommunications services;
- ◆ grant tax and customs incentives and loans at concessional rates to the ICT-based services sectors;
- ◆ focus on strategic entry points in education, health and public administration, thereby improving public services, building popular confidence in ICT, strengthening local skills and capacity and opening up markets for outside companies;
- ◆ foster local Internet content and use of local languages;
- ◆ make a determined effort to extend telecom and Internet services to rural populations; and
- ◆ establish public access points, such as cybercafés and community and e-business telecentres.

"The experience of a number of countries, including . . . some working under conditions of a severe shortage of resources, complex political environments and acute socio-economic problems, demonstrated that bold actions in bringing their countries into the digital age paid off and brought tangible, positive results in economic and social terms. . . . These countries, by extensively and innovatively using ICT for their development, were able to extract value from globalization, rather than watching globalization extract value from them."

- Report of the High-level Panel of ICT Experts, New York, April 2000

Other important initiatives are under way. The Digital Opportunities Task Force, or "dot force", created in July 2000, is a historic partnership between the Group of 8 industrialized nations, the developing countries, the private sector and non-governmental organizations. Acting in cooperation with the ICT Task Force, it will provide a mechanism for assessing and bridging the global digital divide. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank are the joint hosts of the dot force secretariat.

Success stories

- ◆ Three programmes developed, implemented and supported by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) use ICT to assist the LDCs in improving the efficiency of their international trade. They are: the Trade Point Programme, which is designed to provide a physical and/or virtual one-stop centre for international trade services; the ASYCUDA customs reform and automation programme, designed to reform and modernize the management of customs administrations; and the Advance Cargo Information System (ACIS), which utilizes ICT to improve transport efficiency by tracking equipment and cargo movements.
- ◆ The United Nations Volunteers and UNDP have joined in a strategic partnership with Cisco Systems, the United States Peace Corps and others to train students in 29 LDCs and provide skills necessary to build and maintain the Internet infrastructure. UNDP, through its various programmes and initiatives, has already deployed the first Internet (IP) networks in more than 40 countries and trained more than 25,000 organizations and institutions.

For more information:

Tim Wall, UN Department of Public Information, telephone: 1-212-963-5851; e-mail: wallt@un.org

Erica Meltzer or Alessandra Vellucci, UN Conference on Trade and Development, telephone: 41-22-907-5828, 5365 or 4641; e-mail: erica.meltzer@unctad.org or alessandra.vellucci@unctad.org

Cassandra Waldon, United Nations Development Programme, telephone: 1-212-906-6499; e-mail: cassandra.waldon@undp.org