

We Can Say That We Are Now Entering the Real Information Society

Exclusive interview to the *Information Society* journal, Russia, given by Dr. Hamadoun Touré, Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union, on 17 May 2012 in Geneva

Interviewer: Tatiana Ershova, Chief Editor of the *Information Society* journal

Tatiana Ershova: Thank you very much, Dr. Touré, for this opportunity to talk to you directly on this particularly day, the World Telecommunication and Information Society Day, and at this particular place, where the WSIS Forum 2012 is taking place. It is a great honor for me to transmit your views to the audience of *the Information Society* journal, Russia's oldest journal dealing with a broad variety of issues related to ICT use for development.

My first question to you is the following. *In your message on the occasion of the World Telecommunication and Information Society Day you announced the theme of this year: "Women and Girls in ICT". What was the reason to choose this very important topic among other very important topics?*

Dr. Hamadoun Touré: As you know, information and communication technologies play the key role in our social and economic development today. ITU is the oldest organization of the UN family celebrating 147 years now. The theme "Girls and Women in ICT" had been chosen by ITU Council because of the need to ensure that the half of the population, which are women, are taking full advantage of this technology for their own social and economic expansion. But also because we encourage women and girls to aspire to professional careers in the ICT sector. And I may say that we have been very much encouraged by the overwhelming response that we received from our member states and the many private sector companies we are dealing with. As you could see, yesterday we handed the World Information Society Award to three very prominent ladies, the President of Argentina Mrs. Kirchner (Kristina Fernandez de Kirchner) and Madame Sun (Ms. Sun Yafang), the CEO and Chairman of Huawei in China, and to Geena Davis, who is not only a very talented Hollywood actress having won many awards, but also an accomplished athlete and very significantly, a woman who advocates tirelessly for more positive portrayals of women in the media. We are very pleased to have presented these three role models among many others. There are of course many other role models that the countries will be highlighting, so that women and girls continue to make use of the information and communication technology and choose this as a career. And we also want equality. We want equality at all layers of the pyramid, we would like to make sure that women are as equally represented as men.

Tatiana Ershova: *One of the goals of yearly WSIS Forums is to review what has been achieved since Tunis 2005. From your point of view, what are the major successes and major challenges of the follow-up process?*

Dr. Hamadoun Touré: Every year we can see growing and growing interest from our members to come and report on what they have achieved. Every year we sit down together here in Geneva to review what has happened. This year we have seen the tremendous number of countries involved in WSIS activities – now they are 160. Many companies also come to present what they have done. We can say that now we are entering the real Information Society. More than 6 billion users of mobile phones, more than 2,4

billion users of the Internet... One could declare that the digital divide has been bridged. But we are trying to avoid another divide, which is the broadband one. We want to make sure that broadband has reached everyone. I think this is one of the greatest challenges that we are facing today to make sure that there is no new divide. Other challenges are to put a necessary legal and regulatory framework in place, to have the right investment, to have an environment that is conducive to growth and job creation.

We know that ICT has been a very big enabler for all that. That was why we did something very special this year: we have created the World Information Society Award for projects that have been implemented. I can tell you, it was a difficult task to determine the winners because very many outstanding projects were presented. But we were limited to 18 only. So, 18 very solid projects won the Award. I think that that this activity has been a key catalyst for encouraging people and countries to do more. We have reviewed all the eleven WSIS Action Lines (C1 to C 11) from the Tunis Agenda. Among them, I can say, one is the most challenging: C5, which is dealing with Cyber Security. For ITU it is very important for one simple reason: security has to do with content. There is a vision “privacy and security”, there is a vision “freedom and security”, and there is a vision not to cross them. And we need to make sure that security in fact is protecting both – freedom and privacy. We are debating endlessly on issues of security. Unfortunately, criminals are working against our children, our schools, our governments and our companies. Under these circumstances we must build together the framework, which will enable us to cooperate effectively to resist cybercrime.

Here one common denominator has been identified: Children. Everyone understood that children are the biggest users of the Net. Unfortunately, we have seen cases of cyber bullying of children, we know about children committing suicide because of something coming from the cyber space. They need to be protected. So, when I created the Child Online Protection Initiative (COP) it was received very well by all ITU members. This is an issue for all of us; this is common for every country in the world, no matter the religion or ideology. There are a lot of initiatives that have been shown in Geneva this week dealing with this, so we believe positive forward momentum has been achieved.

Tatiana Ershova: *It was a great achievement of the World Summit on the Information Society to launch the multi-stakeholder consultations while designing the international development agenda. From my point of view and from the point of view of many other people, this approach has proven its productivity. How do you think should be the ways to deepen and broaden the processes of multi-stakeholder collaboration to make it more efficient?*

Dr. Hamadoun Touré: We are already approaching the WSIS+10. So, we are trying to put in place a review mechanism to see what results have been achieved, and what the way forward is. 2015 is just around the corner – 2.5 years from now. We have decided with UNESCO that they will be organizing a high-level event on their action line, Science and Culture, in 2013. In 2014 another big high-level event will take place bringing all the stakeholders together to have a WSIS extensive review. The reason to do it a year earlier is that the target year, the 2015, coincides with the final objective of the Millennium Development Goals, (MDGs) and we hope that the overall process of WSIS will fit into the MDGs. Because we have been helping to accelerate using ICT in many key spheres like education, healthcare, commerce, government, etc. to meet the MDGs. The WSIS review process will be an important catalyst, and while we are setting some objectives for ourselves 2.5 years before the next Summit stage, I believe that we will be able to report something good.

Tatiana Ershova: *ITU together with UNESCO and other UN agencies created the Broadband Commission. When and where can we expect some breakthrough results and what may they be?*

Dr. Hamadoun Touré: When I created the Broadband Commission, I invited the Director-General of UNESCO to join me in putting it together. She kindly agreed to be Co-Vice-Chairman of the Commission together with me. The two very prominent Chairmen, jointly chairing the Commission, are Paul Kagame, President of Rwanda, and Carlos Slim Helú from Grupo Carso in Mexico. Over 60 very high-level commissioners have accepted to be part of this Commission. They are doing a fantastic job.

The reason for creating this Commission was a Call from the UN Secretary-General Mr. Ban Ki-Moon who asked the UN agencies to help him move forward the agenda for the MDGs. I said, Goal no. 8, which is dealing with ICTs, was the one likely to be met ahead of time. How about using that goal as a tool to encourage other sectors to accelerate meeting their goals?

The ITU's constituency is normally dealing with infrastructure, the UNESCO's – with content in science, education or culture. My position was to bring together content and infrastructure to be able to achieve a massive effect. And that is what is really happening. The same solution has been found with the World Health Organization with whom we created the Commission on Information & Accountability for Women & Children's Health. Again, ICT is being used as a tool for increasing progress in this area. These are good examples to show how we can work together not only on the Member-States level, but also with private sector, which is eager to work with us.

Coming back to the Broadband Commission, its primary goal is to create a great opportunity for every country in the world to have its own national broadband plan, to ensure that these national plans be harmonized, to ensure exchange of best practices and good experience. Though knowledge on bad experience is also very important – having been informed on that, people hopefully would not make the same mistakes. While tackling these issues we can move faster. Today we are really satisfied with the work of this Commission. We have handed over our first report on its activity to UN Secretary-General on the eve of the General Assembly of September 2010, which was discussing the sustainable development. This report was very well received. It gave ten key recommendations that many countries are following today. The Commission has continued its work – we decided to go beyond just one report and tackle some thematic issues like youth, unemployment, science, culture, education, climate change, health and so on. In such a way several key thematic groups have been created, which are now presenting their reports.

At the last meeting of the Commission last month in Macedonia we prepared an open letter that we sent to Rio+20 Secretariat as our contribution to recognizing ICT as a key enabler for sustainable development.

Tatiana Ershova: *We know about your long relationship with Russia. Do you follow the information society development in our country somehow? And what could you wish to all of us?*

Dr. Hamadoun Touré: Yes, I have been trained in your country. I did my Master's Degree in Saint-Petersburg and my PhD in Moscow. Again, last year I received an Honorary Doctor's Degree from my old university, the Saint-Petersburg State Telecommunications University named after Prof. M.A. Bonch-Bruевич (Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет телекоммуникаций имени проф. М.А. Бонч-Бруевича), which I am very proud of, as well. I also have many good memories of my stay. And I still maintain a very long and good relationship with Russia.

I have seen the growth of information and communication technology in your country in a phenomenal way. I witnessed the Soviet Union in the 70-ies, and all the things that are going on now make me think that Russia today is a completely different world. I am happy that my former classmate, Leonid Reiman,

who was minister for many years, was the architect of the ICT development in Russia. Minister Shchyogolev also came with such an energy and enthusiasm and was able to have a great vision for the country.

Russia's success in mobile telephony penetration and with new government services applications is quite impressive. The recent important and great success was a very fast publication of the elections results thanks to ICT use. The Ministry of Information Technologies and Mass Communications has played a key role in this, and I sent a congratulations message to minister Shchyogolev at the end of that process.

Russia is a very active ITU member. It was a founding member and has been a very active member of the Board, of the Council and of the many subgroups of the Union, such as the Radio Regulation Board, which is chaired by your country's representative today. Russia is also involved in some other working groups in different ICT sectors. The TDAG, the Telecommunications Development Advisory Group is chaired by Professor Minkin, whom you know very well. Over the past 50 years we have had tremendous contributions from people like Professor Krivosheev, who is father of digital television and an icon in the ICT sector. He put forward an idea inside the ITU to have a special group on digital television and was its first chairman. Russia is sharing its experience with other member countries, and we very much appreciate it.

I know that a lot of work in the field of research and development is taking place in your country today. I am very proud that in my two universities – Moscow Technical University of Communications and Computer Science (Московский технический университет связи и информатики, МТУСИ) and Bonch-Bruевич University – really many commendable things are being done.

Tatiana Ershova: *Thank you very much, Dr. Touré, for your continuing interest for our country. We hope that now we will develop even faster in terms of information society development.*

Dr. Hamadoun Touré: Yes, in our field your pace is simply tremendous. It is important for government to put in place the right legal and regulatory framework. It is crucial for private sector to be given an opportunity to invest. And, of course, they will make profit out of it, there is nothing wrong about that. It is necessary that government comes back to put some e-services that would trigger the demand for more services, and private sector re-enters and re-invests again. That is what is happening in Russia today. I hope that there will be more work in R&D and in the telecommunication industry as well. All know that there are enough brains in Russia, and the power of the academic institutions is quite great.

Tatiana Ershova: *Let me express my sincere gratitude for this interview. We really appreciate your time and your ideas.*

Dr. Hamadoun Touré: My pleasure. Thank you.