

## E-Society Conference

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### ADDRESS DELIVERED BY MR MIGUEL BERMEO, RESIDENT REPRESENTATIVE, UNDP, SRI LANKA

Hon Prime Minister, Mr. Lalith Weeratunga, Hon. Milinda Moragoda, Mr. Manju Hathotuwa, Mr. Dilanthe Withanaga, distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am very pleased to be here this morning at the inaugural session of the e-society conference and exhibition. I greatly appreciate the efforts of the Hon. Prime Minister's Office, ICT Agency, Ministry of Education, and Graduand Foundation for organizing this important national conference and exhibition to promote the goals of the Information Society.

One of the promises of the Information Society lies in the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) – telephony, radio, TV, computers, Internet -- to facilitate the spread of social and economic development in our emerging economies, including in the areas of poverty reduction, basic healthcare, and education.

It is fitting therefore that this conference and the following exhibition will raise awareness on the potential of ICT for human development and also provide a forum for knowledge sharing to face the challenges in realising the objectives of an information society.

To participate effectively in the information society, one of the pre-requisites is basic literacy without which the use of tools such as computers and Internet will become impossible. With the sustained efforts of successive Government leaders, Sri Lanka has always nurtured education. As a result, the country now has a high literacy rate of 92.1 percent (2004 HDR data) placing Sri Lanka almost at par with developed countries. I also understand that there is a plan to make IT education available in the "A" levels to all schools. This high literacy rate coupled with an increasing focus on IT education will place Sri Lanka at an advantage over its neighbours in becoming an information society.

However, there are many other pre-requisites that Sri Lanka needs to address in this ambitious endeavour. In this respect, UNDP sponsored the preparation of a report in close consultation with government and other key stakeholders led by Mr. Chanuka Wattegama. This report, "Promoting ICT for Human Development in Asia 2004: Sri Lanka", was part of a regional effort to examine the potential for use of ICTs in realising the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The main recommendations of this report are –

1. **Focus more on human beings, not machines:** Raising computer literacy and changing negative perceptions on the spread and use of ICTs is as vital as putting in place computers and other communication tools.
2. **Bring down costs:** The high costs of telecommunications and internet access discourage usage of ICTs. Preferential rates for schools and universities will enable them to become regular users of Internet.
3. **Involve the rural sector in ICT projects:** ICT tools have not spread to the rural areas as much as in the urban areas in the country. Particular attention must be paid to mobilizing ICT tools to solve problems of productivity, employment and income generation in rural areas where poverty is widespread.
4. **Create an enabling legal framework:** Establishment of laws and regulations to resolve issues relating to copyright, data security, and cyber crime is an urgent priority to build confidence among ICT users.
5. **Pay special attention to North and East:** The accelerated development of the physical infrastructure as well as human resources in conflict-affected provinces will be essential to consolidate peace.
6. **Promote development of local language fonts, standards and software:** This is required for the development of content suited to the local context and in local languages.
7. **Use ICTs to meaningfully decentralise government:** ICTs can be used for efficient management of government systems and delivery of citizen services.
8. **Use the mass media to create an ICT-based society:** The conventional mass media of radio, television, and newspapers should play a major role in raising awareness on ICTs and popularising their use.

As this conference illustrates, Sri Lanka has laid for herself an ambitious roadmap under the e-Sri Lanka initiative. Mr. Prime Minister, I take this opportunity to present this report to you with the sincere hope that it will be of use in the implementation of this far-reaching undertaking.

The United Nations Development Programme is pleased and proud to be associated with these efforts in Sri Lanka, and wish you the very best of luck for every success in your way ahead.