

ICT and sustainable growth

Speech for Maria Da Graca Carvalho

Introduction

**Dear Members of Parliament,
President of European Parliament,
Commissioner Reding,
Secretary General ITU
Ladies and Gentlemen:**

- I would like to thank the organizers for the invitation to the Bureau of European Policy Advisers of the Commission to be here today.
- The role of ICT in boosting economic growth is today well known. ICT has fostered the restructuring of markets and changed the ways we do business, and continues to offer a great opportunity for innovation.
- We need to invest in ICT as one of the main pillars to foster growth and create jobs, especially in the context of the dramatic economic downturn that the world economy is facing.
- But this conference is not just about growth but also about sustainability. And if the role of ICT in fostering

the growth is rather obvious, much more can be said about sustainability. ICT can play a crucial role in the making of a more sustainable world.

- Such a role is not new. ICT had a major impact not only on the growth of wealth but also on its distribution.
- The ICT revolution is fundamentally distributed in nature. It allowed an increasing share of individuals and organizations to play an active role in the economic, political and social life.
- Such a trend towards distributed intelligence and power will not just continue but will also change in nature. As many have argued, from the information world, the ICT revolution will move "outside" to be increasingly embedded in our reality. And this is already happening.
- We will increasingly live in an "intelligent ambient" in which humans will be surrounded by intelligent devices embedded in everyday objects for the health and comfort of human society.
- These ICT enhanced realities give us the possibility to address today's global challenges in new ways. Challenges that, today more than ever, are at the same time about growth and sustainability.
- Let me start with the major challenges of our century and how ICT might contribute to address them.

Global challenges and the role of ICT

Health and ageing society

- A first challenge is about the ageing of our societies and how this impacts not just on our capacity to grow, but also on our health and social protection systems.
- Thanks to sixty years of peace, advancement on research, medical progress and better living conditions, a growing proportion of people are now enjoying longer and more active retirement.
- But ageing also poses a series of social risks such as old-age dependency and loneliness, the need for informal care, and poverty particularly for those exposed to low pensions as a result of incomplete careers.
- But thanks to ICT we can improve the life of older people at home, in the workplace and in society in general; allow them to stay active for longer and leave independently.
- And ICT can also dramatically improve our capacity to deliver home care services in health, with a reduction in hospital stays, reduced costs and an increased quality of the service.

Poverty and social exclusion

- A second challenge is about poverty and social exclusion.
- Only in Europe 78 million Europeans are at risk of poverty. Poverty strikes in particular the unemployed, the disabled and the elderly; women are disproportionately at risk. Even employment is not a guarantee against poverty: in-work poverty is on the increase, with some 8% of employed people at risk of poverty.
- There are barriers preventing or discouraging certain groups from gaining full access to employment, training, education, housing and health-care. Of course such an issue requires policies and actions that go far beyond ICT, ranging from labour market integration to investing in knowledge and life-long learning.
- But ICT can help here. On the other hand, for many people at risk of exclusion due to physical and cognitive disabilities, ICT offers essential tools for overcoming barriers to social and economic integration.
- ICT also plays a fundamental role in the developing world to bring information, education, health to people in remote places.

Climate change

- Last but not least, a third major challenge is Climate Change and the consequent need to move towards a greater energy efficiency and role for renewable forms of energy.
- Such a move has far reaching environmental, but also social and economic implications. Renewable energies are everywhere. This implies that there will not just be few locations where energy is produced and stored, but there will be also an increasing number of distributed energy power plants.
- But this also means that energy will become an opportunity for many to play an active role in its production and benefit from its value. Distributed energy means distributed wealth.
- And here ICT will play a fundamental role. Through ICT and grid technologies, an increasing number of actors will be able to produce renewable energy locally and use it off-grid for their own electricity needs.
- But ICT can also increase the efficiency of our energy consumption. ICT will assist us in organizing our cities, working places in a complete different way with the objective to achieve a low carbon society.
- Furthermore, ICT is crucial for the energy efficiency in buildings, in industry and in the transport sector.

Critical issues

- But we have to bear in mind that ICT is a tool. And like any tool, they can be used in positive and negative ways. Only if we look also at the critical aspects of ICT we can better understand how they can be used to address major challenges. I would briefly go through three of them.

1. ICT as part of the problem

- A first issue is that the more we move towards information and knowledge based economy and society, the more those that do not have access to information and knowledge will suffer from poverty and social exclusion.
- For this reason I believe that, besides policies to foster technological development, we have to pay an increasing attention to those that ensure diffusion and access to technology.

2. The illusion of control

- A second issue is that having more information does not mean necessarily to be more informed. Information overload is one aspect but not the only one. Yet our increased access to information can also give us the illusion to be more informed and to be able to control the situation more than we actually do.
- For this reason I believe that, besides having more information, we need to think about new ways to ensure the quality and reliability of information.

3. All becoming big brothers

- A third and last issue that I would like to refer is related to privacy and ethics. The risk of losing our privacy caused by ICT has been already outlined by many. But I think that the more ICT will be embedded in our daily life, the more this problem may exacerbate.
- The same concern goes for ethics. The capacity of ICT together with other technologies to control, extend and model human life poses a series of ethical issues on the obvious side effects of such a possibility.
- In this sense, I believe that we should take in due consideration, the ethical implications of our ICT policies.

Conclusions

- To conclude, I would like to stress that ICT are tools and not ends. As such they need to serve a purpose which today is and should be broader than the simple growth of our economies. They should assist us in the process of building a healthier, cleaner society, with more social justice and where people feel happy.

Thanks.

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