

## Opening Plenary

# ITU Telecom World 2003

Geneva, 12th of October 2003

## **José María Figueres Olsen**

Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, amigas y amigos:

I recall visiting Telecom 1999 four years ago – in the midst of an industry mood were not even “the sky was the limit”.

Today in rather different circumstances, I therefore want to begin by thanking all of you for being here, in spite of the challenging times we have gone through. It is indeed an honour to be in your company – you all remind me of “Darwin’s survival of the fittest”, and participate together in this opening session of the ITU Telecom World 2003.

“Helping the World to Communicate” has never been so important and so relevant as it is today. I would like to focus on what I would portray as another possible engine of growth for your industries, which at the same time can do wonders in terms of development: I’m talking about providing “Connectivity for the next Five Billion”, which is the equivalent of giving the disenfranchised population of this world a technology based passport for travelling out of poverty and into wellbeing! And I would like to tackle this issue both from the supply and the demand side.

From a supply perspective, I’m sure that in your exhibits here at Palexpo we will find many alternatives of how this could be done with different products and services. However I would offer this thought. Most of your products cater to consumer’s in the developed world. The logic of course is flawless: they are

the ones that have the money to pay. And they also have a constant appetite for broadband, wireless, the last version of software, the more powerful microprocessor, and the latest designed PC. All of this is great, and many of us absolutely enjoy it! We all have heard of the saying “the difference between man and boys, is the price of their toys, and he who has most toys when he dies, wins”.

But let me pose a couple of questions. What is our “connectivity” equivalent of what Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, or Banco Sol in Bolivia, are to financial services? They and many others like them that are tremendously successful. They re-invented micro-credit and are making handsome results from the millions of thousands of very small loans that traditional banks would never touch. What is our “connectivity” equivalent to the two day portion of shampoo that costs a fraction of the cost of the family two week bottle, and which enabled global manufacturers such as Unilever to crack open the huge markets of India’s rural poor? With these approaches, other sectors of the global economy are not only creating new markets and capitalising on new business opportunities, but they are also enabling people to unleash their sense of entrepreneurship and contributing to their own well being! So what’s the “connectivity” equivalent of having sophisticated financial services in Manhattan, and starting with Grameen and Banco Sol in their parts of the world? What’s wrong with shampoo for the week in a family size container in the more affluent markets, and starting with shampoo for the day in the less well to do markets? In the case of technology, does it have to be the latest version all the time, for all markets? Or can we adequately “connect” and empower the poor of the world – at a good profit, with less than the last version of everything?

Now let me tackle this issue – “Connectivity for the next Five Billion”, from the “demand side”.

I come from a developing nation. As President of Costa Rica I put in place strong programs to deploy ICT for health, education, smart card applications, environmental programs, government services, and even foreign direct

investment. It paid off handsomely in terms of job creation and economic growth. Today as the Special Representative for ICT Issues of Secretary General Kofi Annan, I also chair the UN ICT Task Force. From both experiences I know that the challenges in deploying ICT are not entirely economic – I submit that even the poorest of nations can redirect towards investment in ICT some resources being deployed with far less strategic importance. Nor are the challenges technical – and I would submit that by visiting your exhibit stands we can confirm this. The barriers to universal ICT deployment are cultural, meaning by that a lack of understanding on the part of decision-makers with respect to how ICT can turbo charge the cause of development. There is a need to work collectively in order to broader understanding in the developing world with respect to what ICT can do. And there is also a need for leadership and commitment do to so at all levels. Allow me to share some examples:

1. At the grass-root level we need to build up human capacity with respect to ICT, and we should do so by relying more on civil society organisations such as “World-Links”, and their extensive networks.
2. At the national level we need to strengthen multi-stakeholder coalitions for ICT deployment, as it is too important an issue to be left in the hands of a single sector alone. Such approaches would help ensure a continuation of ICT policies independent of the gyrations of the national political process. Business and academia should be particularly involved.
3. Rich countries should mainstream ICT deployment in their overseas assistance funds. The same should be done by development agencies, and regional organisations such as the EU that are generous with the developing world. Those of you that come from the developed world, should all go back from this Telecom, and talk to your government and regional officials about doing so!

4. International organisations should help build capacity within national regulatory bodies of the developing world, in order to create the right framework and environment to attract national and foreign investment in connectivity.

And for both the supply and the demand side, we should all be more systematic in measuring our results. That is why at the World Economic Forum we have taken it upon ourselves to publish the Global Information Technology Report (GITR). On a yearly basis, this report ranks countries on how they are deploying ICT, and what this means in terms of their competitiveness.

Amigas y amigos, ladies and gentlemen,

At the end of the day, the critical challenge we all face is whether by our actions and leadership we are going to advance in the direction of a global society that is more inclusive, more expressive of solidarity, more sustainable, and therefore also safer? Or if by our actions (or even worse lack of action) we will move in the direction of a society that is more fractioned, meaner, more wasteful and unsustainable, and therefore more dangerous!

All of us here today and millions around the world would want to move in the first direction I have described. That is not so simple, for different circumstances make it a complex endeavour. I will list some:

1. The process of globalisation has left many with a sense of being excluded from the benefits it's supposed to produce.
2. There is a growing sense of citizens being disenfranchised from the political decision making process.
3. Lack of attention for the "global common goods" frustrates many.
4. The seeming inability of the international organisation architecture to solve today's problems.

This only reinforces what we sometimes say in Spanish: "si el desarrollo fuera fácil, todos seríamos desarrollados", meaning "if development were easy, we

would all be developed". But I am an optimist. As insurmountable as these challenges may seem, we're all privileged to be living in the midst of this wonderful Technology Revolution, and to know first hand what we could achieve with its universal deployment to help poverty alleviation!

The WSIS, to be held here in Geneva next December, is a tremendous opportunity to advance this worthwhile cause. That, together with the necessary leadership to drive the process forward, from both the supply and the demand side, will carry the day and allow us to advance in the direction of a world with less poverty, and more opportunities for all!

Thank you.