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Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting

Meeting on 10 November 2003

**Background brief on
issues related to building a digitally inclusive information society**

Purpose

This paper summarizes Members' past deliberations on issues related to building a digitally inclusive information society.

Background

2. The development of information technology (IT) has enabled many people to lead more productive and rewarding lives and accelerated the growth of an information economy. However, the widespread adoption of IT has also presented new challenges. Those who have no access to IT skills and knowledge gradually become less capable of participating in a society that is increasingly technology-driven. This gap between those who are capable of accessing and using IT and those who are not is commonly known as the digital divide. It is one of the major tasks of many governments worldwide to take measures to bridge the divide and build a digitally inclusive society. In the case of Hong Kong, the Administration has stated, in the context of its Digital 21 Strategy, that it is committed to driving the wider use of IT in the community and building a digitally inclusive society.

Major issues of concern

3. Issues related to digital divide and digital inclusion have been examined by the Panel at its meetings on 12 March, 14 May, 9 July 2001 and on 13 May 2002. The Panel has exchanged views with non-government organizations (NGOs) on ways to bridge the digital gap. A motion urging the Government to effectively address the issue of digital divide has also been passed at the Council meeting on 6 June 2001. In general, Members are keen to ensure that the community as a whole are able to benefit from the development of IT.

Policy responsibility

4. Members of the Panel note that issues relating to building a digitally inclusive society straddle a number of policy areas ranging from IT training to improving web accessibility for people with disabilities. Members have sought clarification on how efforts on different fronts are co-ordinated.

5. In this regard, the Administration has confirmed that the Communications and Technology Branch of the Commerce, Industry and Technology Bureau (CITB) (formerly the Information Technology and Broadcasting Bureau) is responsible for the overall co-ordination of policies and strategies. However, in recognition of the needs of different sectors of the community, individual government departments, which have direct contact with the respective community groups served by them, are responsible for implementing measures targeted at different community groups.

6. On whether a dedicated committee on digital divide should be established, the Administration has advised that various task forces have already been set up under different departments. Some examples are the Joint Committee on IT for the Welfare Sector chaired by the Director of Social Welfare and the Central Coordinating Committee on the Promotion of IT Usage among Women chaired by the Director of Home Affairs. The Administration has considered that it is more effective for the task forces to focus work on their respective sectors while the CITB will continue to provide the overall policy steer.

Penetration and use of IT

7. Members have noted that according to the results of annual thematic household surveys conducted by the Census and Statistics Department, there has been a steady increase in the overall penetration rates of personal computer (PC) and Internet in households, up from 60.6% and 48.7% respectively in 2001 to 62.1% and 52.5% respectively in 2002. Notwithstanding, the rates remain low among socially disadvantaged groups. For example, as revealed in the 2002 thematic survey, the PC penetration rates among low-income households, elderly persons and less educated persons stood at 27.1%, 2.8% and 17% respectively. Their Internet usage rates were even lower, at 19%, 1.9% and 14.4% respectively among the three groups.

8. During the discussion at the Panel and at the motion debate, Members are concerned that despite the pace of informatization in Hong Kong, the socially disadvantaged groups remain marginalized in terms of their knowledge and ability to use IT. Members have urged that the Administration should actively monitor and gauge the extent of the digital divide in the community.

9. In response, the Administration has undertaken to continue to monitor the adoption of IT in Hong Kong through conducting annual surveys on IT usage and penetration in households and the business sector. In this connection, the Panel has expressed support for the Administration to conduct the surveys on an annual basis.

Collaboration with NGOs

10. Members have considered it important for the Administration to partner with NGOs in assessing the needs of various sectors and in devising appropriate measures to drive the building of a digitally inclusive society.

11. The Administration has assured members that it is fully aware of the need for collaboration with NGOs and will continue to work closely with the IT industry, the academia, private organizations, charitable and non-profit making agencies to organize a wide range of activities to facilitate the learning and use of IT. For example, in cooperation with IT professional bodies, the Administration has recruited volunteers to help conduct IT awareness training courses at the district level. It has also collaborated with NGOs under the Community Cyber Points project to provide free access to IT facilities for use by service clients of the NGOs at the latter's premises.

Bridging the digital divide faced by disadvantaged groups

12. Members of the Panel have followed up with the Administration the practical difficulties faced by disadvantaged social groups in the use of IT. On improving web accessibility for disabled persons, members have noted that the Government has taken the lead in adopting and promoting barrier-free website design for delivering electronic services. It has also sponsored the Internet Professionals Association to launch the Web Care Campaign to promote the design of barrier-free web sites in the private sector.

13. As regards the availability of computer facilities to those who may not be able to afford them, members have noted that PCs with Internet connection for free use by the public have been provided at convenient locations including District Offices and public libraries. The Social Welfare Department has also secured funding to install PCs with Internet connection for use by the elderly at various social centres.

14. Members are fully aware that sustained effort is required and will continue to monitor the wide range of initiatives to drive the building of a digitally inclusive information society.

Latest position

World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

15. The WSIS is an event to be held by the International Telecommunication Union against the background of a widening gap between the information "haves" and "have-nots" amidst growing importance of information and communication technologies. The Summit will be held in two phases. The first phase will take place from 10 to 12 December 2003 in Geneva and the second phase, in November 2005 in Tunis, Tunisia. An information note on the WSIS prepared by the Research and Library Services Division of the Secretariat is at the **Appendix**.

Follow-up by the Panel

16. In consideration of the concerns which may arise from the forthcoming WSIS and to follow up past discussion on building a digitally inclusive information society, the Panel has decided to invite deputations to submit views at the meeting to be held on 10 November 2003. The Administration will also be requested to update members on the latest progress and the way forward in building a digitally inclusive society, as well to brief members on its role, involvement and participation, if any, in the WSIS.

Council Business Division 1
Legislative Council Secretariat
4 November 2003

INFORMATION NOTE

The World Summit on the Information Society

1. Background to the World Summit on the Information Society

1.1 The idea of holding a World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was first conceived at the conference of International Telecommunication Union (ITU) convened in 1998. The conference adopted a resolution calling for holding WSIS against the background of a widening gap between information "haves" and "have nots" amid growing importance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) at the political, economic and cultural spheres. In 2001, ITU decided to hold WSIS in two phases, with the first phase to be held from 10 to 12 December 2003 in Geneva of Switzerland and the second in 2005 in Tunis of Tunisia.

1.2 ITU will hold WSIS together with the United Nations (UN). In December 2001, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution which endorsed WSIS to be held under the patronage of the Secretary-General of UN, with ITU taking the lead role in the preparation of the summit.

2. Participants in the World Summit on the Information Society

2.1 WSIS is designed to actively involve the global community. As such, WSIS is expected to be attended by key stakeholders, such as heads of state, executive heads of the UN specialized agencies and other international organizations, the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and media.

2.2 No accreditation is required for the representatives of the governments, UN specialized agencies and other international organizations to attend WSIS. However, the private sector, NGOs and media representatives have to submit accreditation requests to ITU should they be interested in participating in WSIS.

2.3 According to ITU, it will compile a list of participants in the summit and post it on the WSIS website¹ during the third week of November.

¹ The website address of WSIS is www.itu.int/wsis/.

3. Geneva phase of the World Summit on the Information Society

3.1 The Geneva phase of WSIS aims to provide a global platform for all key stakeholders to develop a common vision and understanding of the information society. WSIS will address a number of inevitable issues raised by the development of the information society, which are of particular relevance for policy formulation as well as socioeconomic and technological developments. These issues include building the ICT infrastructures, providing universal and equitable access to the information society, addressing user needs, and adapting the school curriculum to meet the challenges of the information society.

3.2 The anticipated outcome for WSIS is to adopt a Declaration of Principles and a Plan of Action for implementation by all key stakeholders to cope with the new challenges posed by the ever-evolving information society, especially identifying ways to reduce the digital divide.

Declaration of Principles

3.3 The Declaration of Principles should embody a set of principles and rules of conduct required for establishing a more inclusive and equitable information society. In particular, the Declaration will set out the common vision of the information society, which is characterised by, among other things, universal access to ICT infrastructures and services.

Plan of Action

3.4 The Plan of Action should be the expression of a consensus among governments, the private sector and other major stakeholders on the roadmap for the way ahead. In particular, the Plan will contain operational proposals and concrete measures, for instance, on the elimination of bottlenecks hampering the bridging of the digital divide. The Plan will also contain measurable milestones/benchmarks for monitoring and evaluation against the goals set at WSIS.

4. Tunis phase of the World Summit on the Information Society

4.1 Development themes will be a key focus in the Tunis phase of WSIS. The summit will also assess the progress that has been made and refine the Plan of Action adopted in 2003.

5. Preparation for the World Summit on the Information Society

5.1 Three Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meetings and several regional conferences have been convened for the preparation of WSIS. These meetings/conferences were attended by government representatives and other non-government stakeholders (e.g. NGOs) to define the agenda and themes of WSIS. Most recently, the third PrepCom meeting was held during 15-26 September 2003, which worked on, among other things, finalising the draft Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action for the approval in the Geneva WSIS.

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Reference

1. Website of the World Summit on Information Society, www.itu.int/wsis/.