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Text of address

by

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The views presented here are the participants’ and do not necessarily reflect the views and position of the United Nations or the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
Mr Chairman, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to this auspicious audience. It is indeed a great privilege and honour to do so. May I take this opportunity to firstly thank the Government of Malaysia for being such wonderful hosts, and secondly congratulate the excellent work of the commission to date.

We have already heard from many distinguished speakers on how important a role ICT plays in the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, in the achievement of universal primary education, in the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women, in health issues and in the attainment of a more peaceful and prosperous world.

I would like to share with you, for the benefit of everyone, progress since our meeting in Geneva earlier this year and the issues we as an NGO have faced how we have tackled these issues and what successes we have achieved thereby. I have also been asked to explain how we can sustain some of our projects, which I will briefly touch upon.

**Background of Humanity First**

First of all, a brief overview of who we are.

Humanity First is a UK based charitable trust established to promote and safeguard the preservation of human life and dignity. It is a non-political, non-sectarian international relief and development agency that works with the world's poorest and most vulnerable people. Humanity First was established in the UK in 1994, and now has operations in 25 countries. All aid workers and the management of Humanity First are unpaid volunteers and our administrative expenses are negligible. We are able to deliver significantly, more aid value in the field to the funds we raise because our labour costs are very low. Our current figures approved by the UK Charity commission show that 93% of donated money goes directly towards the project intended for.

**Development-oriented policies**

We know that the Millennium project is directed towards ensuring the United Nations achieves its stated goals. In order to achieve these goals, we also know that a huge amount of investment is required. So, let us look at an average village where implementation of these goals needs to take place today.
Let’s say the population of this village is 3 to 5000. There is a water well about 5 km away, and perhaps electricity is available but only to those who can afford it. The nearest big town is 30 km away. There are primary and secondary schools around but they have inadequate learning facilities and tools. Children as young as 5yrs have to get water for their family, and if the children are orphaned, education will most likely be compromised.

I ask all of you, which business is going to invest in this village, and why would they? Would they get a return for their investment, now, or in the near future? And what about governments? Do the bottom 50 countries listed in the Technological Infrastructure Index all have adequate finances to meet the MDG's? All of us here know the answers to these questions. Humanity First works in 15 of these bottom 50 governments on the index and I can tell you that we see no evidence of finances set aside for the purposes outlined above. Why, because they are fighting immediate battles of hunger first however much they may want to concentrate on hopping on to the digital bandwagon. ICT just isn't the priority we sitting in this room want it to be in majority of African villages, and that's something we have to face up to today.

So there is a definite problem that needs addressing quickly, otherwise I am afraid many of the villages in Africa particularly, will be deprived of the digital age, and the gap will get wider still. Humanity First has identified 4 main areas and our projects are making a real difference to people at grass root level, and I want to share these with you.

**Investing in the future: Educational Projects**

We ensure there is an educational standard that is maintained and developed. We invest in teachers by providing them scholarships for ICT Training, and have already provided thousands of scholarships for Orphans. We provide assistance to schools in deprived areas by the opening of libraries. Yes, S&T education should be promoted at all levels as we heard repeatedly yesterday, but let us ask ourselves, how many village primary and secondary schools in Sub Saharan Africa have basic science lab equipment? Just last month, I had the opportunity of opening an IT Training centre in the Budaka district of Uganda. This district has over 50 primary schools and 12 secondary schools. The schools don't have adequate science lab equipment. If any of the students from this district were to reach the Makrere University in Kampala, none of them would be properly prepared for the challenges of University life. Humanity First is now in the process of acquiring the basic science equipment for these schools. Following the conference in Geneva earlier this year, and a number of meetings with Mr Mongi Hamdi, we worked closely with UNCTAD to send 150 computer systems to the government of Lesotho to be used in their schools. 50 more will be sent to Ghana very shortly, again through UNCTAD. We are thus grateful for the guidance provided by UNCTAD and particularly the direction given by Mr Hamdi in this respect.
This may be considered to be a small project in the grand scheme of things, but it can make a difference to hundreds of lives. But we don't want to stop there and following further discussions with His Excellency Mr Mothetjo Metsing, the Minister of Science and Technology from Lesotho who is here with us today, we will expand on these humble beginnings and provide further assistance to his government in the coming months and years. We will soon formalise the processes with UNCTAD by agreeing a memorandum of understanding. Mr Chairman, I am pleased to report to you that in the last year alone, Humanity First has sent out over 350 computers, and has educated over 1400 deprived people in the field of ICT.

**Water for life Project**

Where the village is in need of clean water, we have invested in the village by drilling water wells. Now the children of the village don't have to spend half a day fetching water. Those women who want their children educated and thus go and fetch the water themselves can now learn new skills and become self supporting should they want to. In Burkina Faso for instance, we are working together with another charity "Water Aid" in providing 100 water wells in the most deprived areas of Sub Saharan Africa.

**Infrastructure**

We agree that the road transport network needs to be in place, electricity must be available, communication systems must be accessible etc etc, but that doesn't stop us helping out today, and why should it? As they say, where there is a will there is a way. Take for instance a road that is built next month just for this purpose. Tell me, how long will the road survive in some of the harsher climates of Africa? Was it the weather, or did the contractor take short cuts on materials, or was it a combination of both? The answer we all know. The first seasonal rains start eroding the roads so much so that by the end of the rainy season, the road is almost unrecognisable in some of the countries we are working in. We thus can't have this as a pre-condition, otherwise we will be waiting for a long time before we can do anything in the poor countries. In the discussions yesterday, there was much mention made of this, and some comments were made on once the ICT knowledge has been saturated, the roads become a hindrance to expand the business, and we agree with this too. However, many villages are 5 to 10 years away from this stage, are we going to wait for the roads to be built before we help them? Surely not. And what about electricity. Majority of villages in Sub Saharan Africa don't have electricity, and those that do, the supply fluctuates so much that it is impossible to maintain equipment. The answer thus lies in alternative sources of energy, and Humanity First, in partnership with IAAAE, has a team of engineers working on this as we speak. We have had some success, and take this opportunity to request through UNCTAD for partners in this field so that we can achieve the stated MDG's together, and more importantly, quicker.
ICT Training and Employment
Consider a village that has no access to information technology. This village and other villages around it have 50 primary schools and 12 secondary schools, but no libraries, no books and no computer access for any of the students. I'm sure this scenario is familiar to many of us here in this room. Most of the IT Training centres Humanity First has setup are in such areas, and from very humble beginnings, these centres are now flourishing. We don't need to erect a £50,000 building and supply brand new computers each costing £500 and make sure there is electricity and satellite network and public transport in place before we can start teaching IT skills. The provision of clean drinking water, a small generator, a donation of 20 computers, a decent size room donated by the local district council, an IT Trainer willing to sacrifice some of his or her time to do a train the trainer session in the village, and an employer (perhaps from the nearest city) is all it takes. This is a very important strategy that has produced some wonderful results for us in many countries. Not only does the government become a partner, but other businesses look towards us to provide them with customised training and then recruit these poor students. On one of my visits to Burkina Faso a few years ago, I happened to ask a poor boy who had attend our Training centre and subsequently got employment whether he could now support his family. "My family?" he asked almost with complete bewilderment written all over on his face, "no, I can now support my whole village" he said. In less than 5 years of starting these projects, we now have 20 IT Training centres in Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Uganda, The Gambia, Liberia, Mali, Benin, Guyana and Ghana where formal IT Training is given.

Practical and innovative solutions
We have identified a seven stage solution which I share with you for the benefit of all.
1. Identify village through the government.
2. Identify what infrastructure already exists in the area. If need be, drill a water well or wells if possible, both for clean drinking water, and for farming. If electricity doesn't exist, investigate solar/wind energy, if not feasible, use of generator should be the solution.
3. Investigate what level of education exists. If English language is a problem, send volunteers to teach English. Identify S&T weaknesses. If lab equipment doesn't exist, send donated lab equipment from schools and Universities in the developed countries.
4. Open an IT Training centre offering scholarship training to teachers and orphans. The rest of the villagers pay a minimal amount to sustain the running expenses of the centre. Ensure government and public sector involvement by offering customised training courses to suit. Advanced courses will enhance income, so that another IT centre is opened in the country, and the model repeated.
5. Open a Library, irrespective of whether broadband or satellite network exists. Load encyclopaedias on library computers and offer free access to all students and teachers. Add books to library based on government curriculum.

6. Ensure Train the Trainer sessions continue on an annual basis for skills upgrade. Trainers volunteer from developed countries.

7. Audit done by external company to ensure stability and progress.
Financial sustainability:
Another point raised in yesterday's discussions was financial sustainability of the projects. In the last 5 years, Humanity First has sent out over 1500 personal computers to 12 African countries. As I have mentioned earlier, the entire organisation of Humanity First is run and supported by volunteers and as such we are able to use over 93% of the funds donated to us towards the actual projects. The setup costs are minimal comparatively and within 2 years on average, the centre becomes self sustaining due to partnerships with governments and private partnerships. The centres are not designed to make wholesome profits as such, and rely on local ownership and local motivation for support. There are regular external audits that are done ensuring stability and progress. That I believe is how we can sustain these projects in the long term, both from a financial point of view as well as from a quality perspective.

Achieving common goals
Mr Chairman, I am pleased to inform you that we have so far trained 14,600 people in ICT mostly in Sub Saharan Africa, and have thereby contributed significantly to the vision of the World summit on the Information Society (WSIS) including thus the Millennium development Goals.

Conclusion
Mr Chairman, we are committed to realizing our common vision of the information society for this generation and for the generations to come.

We recognize that the young are the future workforce and earliest adopters of ICT's. They must therefore be empowered as learners, developers, contributors, entrepreneurs and decision makers.

We are resolute in empowering the poor, particularly those living in remote, rural and marginalized urban areas, to access information and to use ICT's as a tool to support their efforts to lift them out of poverty.

We recognise that building an inclusive information society requires new forms of solidarity, partnership and cooperation among governments and other stakeholders ie the private sector, civil society and international organisations.

Under the umbrella of the commission, together with governments and other partners, (and here I particularly refer to partners in alternative energy sources so that we can provide ICT in areas not normally possible) we can all make a difference and achieve our common objectives.
We at Humanity First are wholly committed and affirm categorically that we will continue to assist you in achieving your stated objectives in promoting the building of a people centred, development-oriented and inclusive information society.

We care passionately for the future of Humanity, as is embedded in our name "Humanity First". We have proven this from our projects and our activities since our inception 13 years ago. Once love for Humanity becomes the underlying principle of a project, all roads become passable, all hurdles seem insignificant and a way, however difficult it may be, can be found to help the poor who need our help more so today than ever before.

Let us all work together to achieve the MDG's and I welcome any suggestions you may have which will enable us to do so, and to alleviate poverty from the world.

I thank you for your attention.

**Intervention: Friday 30th Nov 2007.**

I also take this opportunity to thank Charles Geiger for his comprehensive and frank report. I have three points to make.

Firstly, I would like to enquire about the digital library Charles mentioned. Is this available now, and if not, when will it be available so that we can spread the message.

Secondly, Charles mentioned the problem with the timeline with respect to discussing problems a year later after been raised as there is no mechanism in place at present.

My suggestion is as follows:

- Invite proposals/problem areas for discussion in the annual meeting in advance, say 2-3 months and have a cut off time for this. Ofcourse, CSTD can add to this list too.
- Let the CSTD decide which proposals are relevant for discussion, and send out the approved proposal list one month in advance to all delegates. This will speed up the problem we had last year where proposals were been discussed during the meeting, rather than solutions and action points.

Thirdly, I am pleased to inform the house of a very fruitful discussion we had over the last two days with Turkey, Austria and Lesotho, of a Mobile Science/ICT lab, and hope to discuss this further with CSTD to finalise plans and an implementation road map.

Thank you for your attention.