Remarks by Hon. Minister for Information and Communications of Nepal Dr. Minendra P. Rijal at the Ministerial Roundtable on ‘Review of Progress made in the Implementation of World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Outcomes’

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Mr. Moderator,
Fellow Panelists,
Secretary-General of UNCTAD
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and privilege to participate in this roundtable on a topic of much relevance to the entire people of the world. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are the real enablers for building global inclusive societies demanded by the age of intense globalization and interdependence. The condition of peace, security and stability, coupled with equitable progress, freedom and justice, is attainable globally if all people living in various parts of the world are cross-connected in relations of mutually beneficial exchanges. In this connection, the commitments and plans of action that came out of the World Summit on the Information Society held under the auspices of the United Nations in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005 are noble endeavours to foster the establishment of an inclusive information society. The Geneva Plan of Action in particular has provided clear targets and indicators to measure the progress and achievements of countries and communities in their journey towards connectivity and digitization.

As we represent Nepal, a Least Developed Country (LDC) and also a Landlocked Developing Country (LLDC) at the same time, we have been facing all the challenges of a society struggling at the bottom rung of the development ladder. There are several specific areas requiring immediate attention and targeted interventions. Nevertheless, we have registered some encouraging results which, we think, must be enhanced with multi-stakeholders participation.

What stands out as a pressing problem for us is the still yawning digital divide between the rural-urban, poor-rich, genders, able-disabled and liberal-conservative segments etc. A clear imperative of this is to improve both the quantity and quality of access to ICT facilities, and increase affordability to the ever-changing technology and innovation to broaden the frontiers of knowledge and applicability. Being able to do so will greatly enhance our capability to meet the challenge of eradicating poverty through productive capacity building and reducing the imminent vulnerabilities. As highlighted in the Istanbul Programme of Action for the LDCs, countries like us are in urgent need of enhanced support and enabling environment to overcome the challenges and vulnerabilities, and of being able to build capacity for achieving robust and sustained economic development to catch up with the rest of the world. The issue of graduation of LDCs is inextricably linked to the increased establishment of ICT infrastructures and connectivity, as well as an efficient and effective use of these facilities by an increased proportion of people, irrespective of their classes, status or origins.

A recent evaluative study on the status of World Summit for Information Society targets in Nepal reveals that nine of the 49 indicators have already been achieved, and there is a good possibility of attaining the seven other indicators by 2015. However, we face a serious challenge to be able to achieve 33 of the remaining indicators by the targeted date.

Mobile telephony has increased impressively in the rural areas over the years with cellular network covering around 60 percent of the rural population compared to 87% coverage for the nation as a whole. Availability of computers and access to Internet at schools is still very low which is not sufficient to stimulate youths in diffusion of knowledge and information. There is a huge dearth of ICT-qualified teachers, and Internet assisted education at schools as less than 4 percent are enjoying such facilities at present. We have been endeavoring to devise and implement “Broadband Rollout” policies and programmes to advance the Nepal Research and Education Network. Though the policy and legal framework in the health sector have been satisfactorily established, more efforts are
needed in framing and executing them. Hospitals and health centers are still overcrowded, and many of them lack the system of individual patient's information management through Internet. Household ownership of radio and television is less than 50 percent. When it comes to e-governance, most of the central government entities are connected to the basic Internet and have their individual websites. However, only a few government organizations possess intranet capability for interactive service delivery.

There are around 123 spoken languages in Nepal, but the use of language for web pages has been limited to only a few languages. As most of the knowledge and information available in Internet is in English language, less educated, non-English speaking people, women, youths and the disabled cannot benefit much from such knowledge depository.

Nepal ranks 167th position in terms of telecommunication infrastructure index based on estimated internet users in the UN e-government survey. Recognizing the need for a concerted effort in bridging the digital divide, we are now at the initial phase of drafting a new Information and Communication Technology Policy. An important element of the new policy would be a cohesive national strategy to build information and communication infrastructure. We recognize the merit of ensuring level playing field as far as operators' access to infrastructure is concerned. This, we believe, will be an important step in expanding telephone and Internet access in rural areas. Following up on new policy outcome, we will revise our legal and institutional regime to ensure multiple stakeholders, including the public, private and civil society will be able to play a catalytic role in the promotion and increased use of the ICTs.

I would now like to point out what a country like Nepal needs to do, and for which enhanced international support is warranted:

1. More investment is necessary for building ICT infrastructure to increase internet and cellular phone accessibility. We provide incentives and facilities to welcome foreign investments in these areas.

2. We call for serious efforts to bridge the digital divide in societies and organizations across regions and social groups by continued implementation of successful and targeted programmes.

3. Increased broadband connectivity is vital for wider diffusion of knowledge and information and empowerment of people through freedom of expression.

4. Emphasis must be laid on multi-stakeholder participation in implementing all action lines.

5. Focus should be placed on capacity building on new technologies for practitioners, as well as women, youths and the less educated masses.

6. Increased use of ICTs as a power tool for improvement of global governance needs to be prioritized.

7. There is a need to define and enforce ethical standards to regulate the use of Internet and ICTs in the global, regional and national contexts.

8. In order to respect cultural diversities as an asset for the world, it is of critical importance to promote multi-lingualism in web design that helps in preservation of cultural identities of the people.

9. Most importantly, it is essential to create an enabling environment for making ICTs vital drivers and essential tools for the creation of jobs, for the delivery of healthcare and for giving people access to knowledge and education.
10. The least developed countries' capacities in IT and internet-related subjects should be strengthened, extending these facilities to business communities as well.

11. As per the mandate of the WSIS, ensuring gender equality and gender-disaggregated data to assess progress in the making of information society is critical.

12. Last but not the least, utilization of the full power of ICTs to make direct impact on better livelihood of human beings is paramount.

I thank you for your kind attention!