INTRODUCTION

May I at the outset express my great appreciation to the Executive Secretariat of the World Summit on Information Society, The Summit Bureau, UNESCO, the Organizers rom BASMA and to the Government of Tunisia, a gracious and experienced Host of this Summit.

It is truly a great pleasure to have the opportunity to be in the land of civilization and wisdom, Tunisia, and address one of the most crucial international conferences of our time: the World Summit on the Information Society.

The Summit and its preparatory conferences have been tackling with such intensity and industry daunting challenges the international community faces in the 21st century: those ranging from increased poverty and inequity, escalating situations of armed conflicts, and the continuing threat of the AIDS epidemic, to important technological advances,
particularly in information and communications, for which we are here today.

At the same time, global integration, driven by the new information and communications technologies and other global forces connect all human beings and place them in contact with each other. However it maintains and widens the divide between different groups of countries and between peoples within countries.

It is of common knowledge that a global knowledge and information society is connecting all regions of the world and affecting economies and corporations, division of labour, changing patterns and processes for employment and sustainable livelihoods.

This complex situation requires more sophisticated norms, processes, institutions and mechanisms capable of effectively addressing varying needs of individuals and communities worldwide, such as in the context of the mandates of the World Summit on Information Society. We need to incorporate varying needs of individuals and communities in all aspects of our work in building a “New Information Society” - a Society without “digital barriers” and individuals from both developed and developing countries reap the benefits of the
ICT and contribute to this Society as productive members.

Challenges and Opportunities for Global Information Society

There is no doubt that we are faced with the multifaceted challenges and opportunities of the global information and knowledge society and economy. They are here to stay. All societies and individuals now must equip themselves with the ability to access generate and organize new knowledge to their own needs and aspirations for future. There is also no doubt that we need to use effectively the ICTs if we are to achieve our collective and individual goals.

All of us have the following question: how can we then use the information technology and communications as a Great Equalizer for “Society” and “Societies” around the world as well as a Facilitator, Promoter, Producer and Provider of social and economic goods and services, in other words, opportunities for all regions of the world?

To my mind, our endeavours in this Summit to create a non-exclusive and open information society should be dedicated to this profoundly important question of our time.
Disability, Human Rights and a “New Information Society”

The true, universal digital revolution for the humankind should be pursued by, for and with all stakeholders, the poor and the rich, in both developing and developed countries. In this context, I shall discuss one of the most prominent issues of the international development agenda today—disability.

It is estimated that there are at least 600 million persons with disabilities worldwide, of whom approximately 80 percent live in less-developed countries.

As a result of discrimination, segregation from society, economic marginalization, and lack of participation in social, political and economic decision-making processes, this substantial group has been left out of development, impairing one of the core democratic values: full participation of all citizens in all aspects of society and development. This systematic exclusion has had significant consequences for both securing individual human rights and the overall development process. In this way, while denying people with disabilities a voice and felt-presence in society, it has deprived societies themselves of essential human resources critical for economic and social development. The accumulated social and economic cost of segregating and excluding more than
10% of the world’s population would have substantial adverse effects on a new “Information Society”, which is presently in the making.

The Current International Efforts to Codify the Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Now I should like to discuss evolution of the international normative frameworks on disability.

In 1970s the international discourse on disability was gradually changing, adopting “the rights language”, examining disability issues in developmental contexts, and promoting social policies for inclusion. It was, however, not until 1982, when the United Nations unanimously adopted the groundbreaking policy document “The World Programme of Action for Disabled Persons” and clearly defined disability as a human rights and development issue. During the United Nations Decade, persons with disabilities gained a political momentum – organizations of persons with disabilities were establishing coalitions nationally and worldwide, taking up new advocacy roles for social inclusion through the human rights approach. To further advance the rights of persons with disabilities, another policy instrument based on the human rights perspective entitled, “The Standard Rules on
Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities” was adopted by the United Nations in 1993. Although it provided the technical guidelines for legislative and policy action and impacted on a number of national disability policies and programmes, protection of the human rights of persons with disabilities still encountered a number of obstacles in claiming their rights in the context of the universal human rights. Growing understanding of this reality finally led to drafting of an international convention on the rights of persons with disabilities by the United Nations Ad Hoc Committee on international and integral convention on the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities since 2001. The convention process was initiated in the context of addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion to create a just and equitable society based on the participation of all citizens as stakeholders. This process demonstrates another crucial endeavour of the international community to realize the universal human rights and development principles, promoting justice, equity and inclusive society for prosperity. It is significantly indicative that the Summit’s objective as declared by the International Leaders at the World Summit for Information Society in December 2003 and the goal of the Convention are mutually reinforcing: "our common
desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

**Nexus between the Disability Rights and the ICTs**

How could the Summit’s work promote and facilitate the implementation of this envisaged international convention on the human rights of persons with disabilities and vice versa?

*Ensuring persons with disabilities and their communities become an integral part of the Digital Revolution – which will also become an entry point for inclusion of other disadvantaged groups in our society.*

Persons with disabilities are overcoming obstacles and societal barriers that once seemed insurmountable to them and to society. As the former Chairman of the Ad Hoc Committee, I witnessed firsthand how persons with disabilities
and their organizations have expertly “guided” the Committee. They are strategically working with their new and traditional partners and pursuing their equal access to employment, health care, transport, housing, education, culture and other fundamental rights. These rights inevitably require specific measures to ensure implementation, in which accessibility to the ICTs plays a major role.

In the current draft text of the Convention, one of the key articles is concerning “accessibility” to the information and communications as well as references in other draft articles. (available on the UN Internet site www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable)

The access to the ICTs is a fundamental vehicle to promote the rights by itself and in incorporation into all other draft articles in the envisaged convention. In this context, a consultative group, consisting of interested stakeholders may be established to examine how the ICTs could facilitate progress of its contents and future implementation. In this process, a working partnership with the non-governmental community, particularly disabled persons' organizations as well as the private sector would greatly contribute to development of strategic options.
The Ad Hoc Committee is expected to continue its work elaborating the Convention during two planned sessions—January and August— in 2006. There are many opportunities—now and following the adoption of the Convention for interested parties to initiate new collaborations.

Future of the Convention and Building of a "New Information Society" by, for and with Persons with Disabilities: Standards and Indicators of Progress

"Creating a New Universal Language of Inclusion"

What is the critical significance of the new convention for the agenda of the world summit on Information Society? The Convention will transform our society into a new community of stakeholders in disability rights through establishment of international legal standards on disability rights. It will clarify the content of human rights as applied to persons with disabilities, providing an authoritative and global reference point for laws and policies, including those concerning the ICTs. And, importantly, it will provide mechanisms for monitoring States’ achievement in this area, providing standards of assessment and a framework for international cooperation. Currently a number of consultations are taking place within the disability rights community about possible
monitoring mechanisms and indicators of progress, providing the international community with innovative ideas for negotiations of the convention in 2006, such as inclusion of environmental norms and standards and utilization of developmental instruments and their monitoring systems. As already mentioned, there are a number of options for stakeholders in both the “New Information Society” and the disability rights community to collaborate in this area.

We may say that drafting an international human rights instrument is, in fact, an act of creating a new “universal language of Inclusion” for discussing the ways in which human rights and development can be effectively realized for all persons. The Summit’s achievements would have major impact on this process. Communicating of the “experience” of how persons with disabilities are living their reality in their lives into in a new language will promote an international dialogue about diversity of contexts and communities. This approach can be an entry point for realization of a society that values difference and respects the equality of all human beings regardless of that "difference".
Effective Implementation and Monitoring of the Future Convention: Building a new digitally-sensitized disability community and disability-sensitized information community

Through the treaty-drafting process, both governmental and non-governmental communities have strongly demonstrated their firm commitment to rectifying the egregious neglect and dehumanizing practices that violate the human rights of persons with disabilities. Future implementation and monitoring of the envisaged convention must be grounded in this unwavering commitment to remove the tangible and intangible “barriers” societies placed in the path of persons with disabilities, including the “digital” barriers, contributing to the creation of a fully inclusive society for all persons.

The effectiveness of these efforts, however, hinges upon how we strengthen the capacity of society, especially through the ICT—and particularly the capacity of persons with disabilities—to use international human rights conventions in conjunction with international, regional and local human rights system as well as within the broad development context. To do this, we must focus on (1) incorporating the disability perspective into the broader development mandates and discourses, such as those of this Summit; (2)
strengthening our knowledge base on a wide range of disability issues and other critical issues of our time, such as information and communications, promoting transdisciplinary approaches to examine disability issues; (3) building the capacity of policy-makers, disability rights advocates, scholars and practitioners in disability rights and other stakeholders; in considering the focus on “capacity-building”, we must also keep in mind that it is not only gaining access to the ICTs and to information, but more importantly developing capacities to link between knowledge, its organization and development. In a number of studies on this issue, such as those of United Nations Development Programme, the capacity building for development does not focus only on training at the individual level and on organisational strengthening, but should also take place between individuals, in the organizations, communities and networks that they create - facilitated by the ‘social capital’ that holds societies together; and (4) promoting an open dialogue, well-informed consensus, and collective action—creating a “new community” of stakeholders to bring forth new changes necessary for a “New information society”, where disability matters no more as its valued members.

Conclusion
Some of the artificial distinctions between different types of rights or public policies, are rendered meaningless in the reality of individuals in poverty.

First and foremost we must protect human dignity—the human dignity of persons with disabilities—which also is our own dignity.

Each person has a crucial role to play in this historical process toward realization of the universal human rights through the ICTs. We are part of the newly emerging “disability-focused information community”, part and parcel of the “New Information Society,” which consists of traditional and non-traditional stakeholders. In this new movement, we have our own distinct roles. We may be policy makers, ICT specialists, disability rights advocates, human rights specialists, social workers, scholars, family members of persons with disabilities or simply concerned individuals, but each of us can provide "an answer" in our own way as to how best we can contribute to the “New Society”. The envisagd
Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and its future implementation will be an essential building block in this effort.