

**Remarks by Alicia Bárcena,  
Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America  
and the Caribbean (ECLAC), at the opening session of the Fourth  
Ministerial Conference on the Information Society in Latin America and  
the Caribbean**

Montevideo, 3 April 2013

José Mujica, President of the Eastern Republic of Uruguay,

Diego Cánepa, ProSecretary in the Office of the President of Uruguay,

Mario Campolargo, Director of DG Connect.E of the European Commission,

Jean Paul Joulia, Head of Unit, EuropeAid,

José Clastornik, Chair of the Presiding Officers of the e-LAC2015 follow-up mechanism,

Ministers,

Delegations from the countries of our region,

Colleagues of the United Nations system,

Friends,

It is a great honour for me to address you at this opening session of the Fourth Ministerial Conference on the Information Society in Latin America and the Caribbean, to speak on behalf of ECLAC at this meeting, to sum up briefly our view of this challenging and relevant agenda and to do so here in Montevideo.

One of the most illustrious residents of these quarters, stated in his trenchant prose that “Back around 1890, a traveller who visited Uruguay’s capital could still pay homage to the city where the houses that faced the street were red, yellow, blue.

Shortly thereafter, those in the know explained that such a barbaric custom was not proper. To be civilized, one had to be serious. To be serious, one had to be sad. However on those years Uruguay was the epicentre of Latin American audacity (...). The country had free secular education before England, women's suffrage before France, the eight-hour day before the United States and legal divorce seventy years before it was restored in Spain. President Jose Batlle, "Don Pepe", nationalized public services, separated church and state and changed the names on the almanac".

In this concise narrative, Eduardo Galeano traces with delicate strokes the colours of his homeland, which, today, extends to us its invariably warm hospitality. We thank you, President Mujica, and your assistants for the welcome reserved for us and for your support in this initiative.

The precursory spirit of the Uruguayans, which we have just highlighted, is not a nostalgic memory, it is a resolve for both the present and the future. Uruguay is currently carrying forward an ambitious plan for expanding broadband penetration, the objective being to provide fibre-optic connectivity to 500,000 households by the end of this year. This initiative complements the advances of the CEIBAL Plan, an unprecedented initiative, which has succeeded in combining equity, learning and technology. The CEIBAL Plan offers equal opportunities, fosters the development of new learning and teaching tools, and gives society the chance to establish a new relationship with technology. Its main achievement is that, six years after the Plan was launched, having a computer and access to Internet is a right, rather than a privilege, for every child.

My visit today to the Casa de la Internet in Montevideo was a source of great satisfaction and a unique experience. This centre, which brings together seven organizations from the region, headed by the Latin American and Caribbean Internet Addresses Registry (LACNIC), is a model of best practices and a creator of synergies and dialogue between the various stakeholders involved in the development of this platform.

Impressed by these auspicious signs, which have been multiplying across the length and breadth of the continent that we call home, we declare open these meetings, which are being held at a crucial time for the development of the countries of the region.

The current global economic uncertainties find the region displaying growth rates above the world average (3.8% compared with 3.1%). This, together with macroeconomic stability and advances in poverty reduction, convinces us that our region is prepared not just to continue with the sound policies which in recent years have underpinned its development but also to break with the patterns of the past, which have tied us to social and production gaps that make Latin America and the Caribbean the region with the sharpest inequalities in the world.

Facing up to these challenges calls for structural change for equality, with a vision of the future, incorporating the intensive use of digital technologies as elements inherent in economic and social activity, without overlooking the fact that these technologies must be harnessed in the service of citizens and not the other way around.

We live in a hyperconnected world in which mass penetration of information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially the most sophisticated, is speeding up the transition to knowledge based economies, in which cutting-edge manufacturing and state-of the art services are transforming the way businesses are run and the way people interact. We live in a digital economy.

The Latin American and Caribbean region is at a turning point, with progress in some areas and lags in others, resulting in two vastly different technological speeds. Progress in the digital economy has not been homogeneous owing to different paces in the process of dissemination and development of its basic components: telecommunications infrastructure, particularly broadband networks, ICT industries (software and applications, hardware and ICT services) and the degree of digital literacy of users.

In many countries, following decades of implementation of strategies and policies in support of ICT dissemination, ECLAC has observed that these technologies are causing a positive impact on economic growth, technological investment, production patterns and the behaviour of businesses and consumers. In Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico, the four countries of the region for which comparable data are available, the digital economy contributes at least 3.2% to GDP. This is a significant figure bearing in mind that in the 27 countries of the European Union, its contribution is 5%.

In other countries, however, citizens, businesses and governments still have not attained the minimum threshold of access and use of these new technologies. Thus, for

example, the development of critical infrastructure is highly asymmetrical: mobile broadband penetration in the three most advanced countries is 15 times higher than in the two least advanced countries of the region. Therefore, the progress of the latter is slower and this lag means that ICTs do not have the expected impact on investment, growth and productivity and that the positive repercussions on employment, wages and equality usually associated with improvements in these indicators are absent.

Promoting the digital economy in order to boost growth calls for measures applied simultaneously to both supply (telecommunications services and ICT industries) and demand factors. The key demand factor is digitization of economic activity, since it can triple the infrastructure coverage thanks to increasing returns.

The process of digitization and structural change does not occur spontaneously. It occurs in institutional contexts that foster innovation, promote development in ICT sectors and disseminate new applications rapidly to the non-ICT sectors of the economy. Differences in productivity between countries are due not just to access to and dissemination of new technologies, but also to complementary factors at the level of the firm, the industry and the industrial context that generate positive externalities throughout the economy.

To this end, new industrial strategies must be devised in tandem with technological policy strategies. Broadband infrastructure must be established in our region, along with access to and use of ICTs by all individuals and firms, and the development of a globally competitive regional software and applications industry. All of this is crucial for consolidating an integrated ICT platform and for ensuring that all countries, productive sectors and segments of society can enjoy the benefits of the digital economy.

The digital economy is a crucial force for driving structural change, reducing inequality and building the societies of well-being which our countries need to aspire to instead of contenting themselves with being mere consumer societies. Its role as a catalyst for change calls for the participatory construction of complementarities and underpins the necessary leaps that the society requires in services, including government services, health and education. The world is reflecting on these very matters both in the framework of the review of the implementation of the World

Summit on the Information Society, which will be held in two years' time, and in the discussions that accompany the definitions of the post-2015 development agenda.

The process of implementation of the Plan of Action for the Information Society in Latin America and the Caribbean (eLAC) has opened up this path by providing guidelines for the formulation of ICT policies and as a platform for political dialogue and cooperation, generating common forums for promoting new development paradigms which will foster growth with social inclusion based on the adoption of ICTs. The three plans of action adopted since 2005 (eLAC2007, eLAC2010 and eLAC2015), demonstrate the importance of the issue of technology in the development agendas of the Governments in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The submarine cable laid 130 years ago beneath the Atlantic between Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon ushered in the era of interregional telegraphic communication. Instead of thirty days of sailing, it was possible in a flash to be part of the same human community. The new technologies of that era built bridges between Europe and America, prefiguring subsequent links.

As we take stock today, with positive results, of the progress achieved through eLAC, our common history confirms that this plan has lost none of its relevance. The support of the European Union has been indispensable in this process; indeed, the European Union's cooperation for the digital development of the countries of Latin America was sustained over a period of ten years during both phases of the Alliance for the Information Society (@LIS).

Thanks to this Alliance we have been able to launch significant initiatives such as the Regional Dialogue on Broadband, which, over two years of implementation and thanks to the commitment of the ten member countries, has triggered a 67% reduction in broadband rates and significant quality improvements: data download speeds have increased by 150%, while upload speeds have improved by 195%. These data were supplied by the Regional Broadband Observatory, which has consistently delivered up-to-date indicators on service development and has made them available to the countries of the region as an input for designing and monitoring broadband policies.

In addition, thanks to the support of European cooperation, over 120 seminars and workshops have been held on the information society and over 30 studies have been conducted, which have helped to generate an enabling environment for the

formulation of public policies on digital issues; indeed, almost all the countries in the region have been active in this area. Thus, since the launch of eLAC in 2005, 83% of the 23 countries concerned have drawn up digital agendas, and have addressed typical information society issues and cross-cutting issues such as education, health and government services.

In addition, new, pressing matters such as the digital divide between men and women and the impact of ICTs on the environment have been included. In the case of the former, the @LIS programme, has helped to build awareness of the issue by generating studies and indicators, as a result of which the main theme chosen for the twelfth session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, to be held later this year, is economic empowerment of women, gender equality and information and communications technologies. The idea is to mainstream the gender perspective into digital public policy.

As regards ICTs and the environment, steps are being taken to promote a platform for discussing and sharing experiences on the management of electric and electronic waste in the region, with efforts to build awareness of the issue and to encourage the adoption of policies for the sustainable use of ICTs.

These advances have alerted the countries of the region to the need for a stable mechanism for advising Governments and assisting them with the design and implementation of their digital policies. Thus, at the thirty-fourth session of the Commission, held in San Salvador in August 2012, the countries of the region approved the establishment of the Conference on Science, Innovation and Information and Communications Technologies as a new subsidiary body of the Commission, which will start to function in 2013, thus creating an institutional framework within which to address the development of the digital society.

It would be remiss of me to close this address without recognizing the generous and wholehearted support that the European Commission has given us throughout this process. Their commitment to the development of Latin America and the Caribbean has been an incentive for us to work harder and more efficiently to boost economic and social development in this decade, which abounds with opportunities for the region. Only in this way will we be able to build the momentum needed to achieve structural change for equality.

Dear friends, it is important to discern between the means and the end and to bear in mind the ultimate objectives. A few months ago at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) a remarkable person spoke out, using plain language, to remind us of this, and I take the liberty of quoting President Mujica, who said then that “development cannot go against happiness. It has to work in favour of human happiness, of love on Earth, human relationships, caring for children, having friends, having our basic needs covered”.

Thank you for your attention.