Remarks at the APEC Forum on Shared Prosperity and Harmony

Korea, March 30 - April 1

I am very happy to be with you today and to participate in this meeting, and I want to say how happy I am to share the podium with Minister Chiu, Minister Lin, Mr. Horiguchi, my colleague Sri Ram Aiyer, and most particularly Alvin Toffler, who, in his works, has for more than 20 years pointed to the revolution which has brought us into this new third age of development.

I also remember with great enthusiasm the speech that was made last November by President Kim when he talked about productive welfare, when he addressed the recent challenges that had faced Korea, and spoke particularly of the recovery and of the future. And in that address of such enormous proportions, he pointed to the technological challenges that face not only his country but the region and the world.

It is, therefore, very exciting for me to be able to participate in this third segment of your meetings, although I must tell you that I look with some hope and some nostalgia at the meetings that were held in the afternoon, I believe yesterday, on the new financial architecture for preventing the recurrence of economic crisis. There was a time when I used to get asked to participate in those discussions, and so I feel rather more modern now, being invited to participate in a segment which addresses issues of technology.

But it is not surprising that one should move from issues of finance to issues of technology when you are involved in an institution like the World Bank which is concerned with development. For it is not just finance alone which brings about development, which allows us, together with the governments we serve, to address the questions of poverty. It is, in fact, a whole mix of issues which come together to lead to effective programs that can affect the lives of the poor. And nothing is more important, as we think of the future, as thinking in terms of the impact of this remarkable revolution.

We look at it, of course, within the background of a global population of 6 billion people, growing in the next 25 years to 8 billion, with 3 billion today living under $2 a day and a billion two hundred million living under $1 a day. But those statistics are known to you, the more significant statistics for today include the following.

It is that half the world’s population has never made a phone call; that 90 percent of the Internet hosts reside in high-income countries with only 16 percent of the world’s population; that New York has more Internet hosts than the whole of Africa; that Finland has more hosts than the whole of Latin America and the Caribbean; and perhaps, most challenging of all, that the OECD countries are estimated to invest $115.54 per capita in modern information infrastructure, when the rest of the world invests only $19.28 per head.
Now, this presents a very significant challenge, because we believe at our institution and I am sure all of you believe that the key to the future in terms of peace and prosperity in our planet is the way in which poor people are able to be exposed to opportunities which they will grasp. It has been very clear to us for many years that poverty is an issue which is not faced by charity. This is an issue which President Kim very well understood in his address.

Charity is not the issue. It is opportunity. It is the chance for people, wherever they are, to have access to knowledge and resources to allow them to make better lives for themselves and for their children.

Our recent study of "Voices of the Poor" makes it very clear that what people want is opportunity. And the key to that opportunity is, in fact, knowledge that can allow people to grasp opportunities which they learn of through communications and information.

Now, we have the technology today that can pass knowledge to everybody on this planet, and what we have to do, of course, is to bring about partnerships between governments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and institutions such as our own, to bring about systemic changes that can allow for the hardware and the framework in which knowledge can be transferred.

It is not just a technical problem. The technology, of course, is changing. But the technology already exists for the transference of knowledge. What we have to understand as we approach this revolutionary age is that the solutions will be found in a mix of public and private policies -- a mix of institutional reactions, of regulation, of reform, of education, of setting an environment in which this enormously powerful technological development can be converted into a social movement that can affect the lives of people everywhere.

It requires a comprehensive approach in the most real sense, and it is to that focus that I believe this conference will be addressing much attention. Certainly our institution is not just knowledgeable in the areas of technology, but we are reaching out to try and find ways in which we can extend our knowledge of technology to make it applicable to the issue of poverty and, may I say, to the issue of peace on our planet.

InfoDev, one of our creations, the institution which not only originated in the Bank, but which draws its strength from private sector and even some government participants, who have put together both the knowledge and the funding to allow us to have innovative programs throughout the developing world, to support and sponsor those innovators who have ideas and commitments to bring about new ways in which knowledge can be transferred and used.

We also have a program that involves schools, our so-called World Links program, which is getting to more than 30,000 teachers and students in more than 15 countries in the developing world, linked to an even greater number in the developed world, where we bring together students from one
side of the world with the other, with teachers, to try and have them learn together utilizing this technology.

We have a program of the African Virtual University in Africa. We have established a system, which is growing, of global distance-learning networks in which we establish facilities, where, wherever it is in the world, there are classrooms of 30 or 40 people adjacent to another classroom where we have 30 or so computers. We link both with screens and with computers, and the people in those countries with participants, partners, teachers, and students in other parts of the world so that we can give effect to this exchange of knowledge.

And, finally, we are working now on what we call a global development gateway, which will bring together public and private sector to try and see how we can establish a mechanism in which we can all share in the knowledge and experience that each one of us has, with no one dominating, but having a basis on which there can be a ready exchange of information, views, best practice, and knowledge, in a way never previously dreamed of.

I was told just this week of an example in India where a technology company put on the wall between its operations and a slum a screen and a pad, a touch pad, for people to use. They put up a camera to record what happened. There was no training. There was no one there to explain to anybody what this could be used for. And it was put in one of the poorest districts in India.

By the end of the first day, children came to that facility and already had made contact with the Disney network. By the second day, they had a broad range of access which the kids themselves had worked out how to do. And within a month, they were downloading material, and they were preparing websites.

And as you saw from the films that were taken, it was not just adults. In fact, there were few adults. It was kids, aged 14, 15, 16, coming along, and they were bringing youngsters, 5, 6, 7, 8 years old, putting them on a box and teaching them what was going on. The impact of this was quite remarkable, and they have also set up one in a rural area. In the city, we are pushing for equal access for boys and girls so that children can teach themselves. The power of this technology is quite remarkable.

Another colleague recently in Ethiopia was addressing a group of Ethiopians about Internet trading, about the possibility of using the computer for e-business, expecting that he would then have to explain the basics. He asked the group, "Is there anyone here who knows about websites?" And a gentleman put up his hand and said, "I have a website." And he said, "Well, what do you do with it?" And the man replied, "Well, although there arent many hosts in my country, there are a lot of Ethiopian taxi drivers in New York, in Chicago, and in Washington. And they like to send goats and presents home to their families here in Ethiopia. So I have opened a website, and I do business every day with this group in the United States, and I sell goats on the Web."
We do not need to dot every "i" and cross every "t" in terms of the use of information technology. What we need to do is to create an environment in which the knowledge, experience, and enthusiasm of younger people and of communities can take advantage of the new technology. This requires changes in policy; it requires openness; it requires trust in the people that we are seeking to serve.

It is not a question in development of whether countries should adapt to this new age. It is only a question of when. Countries that do not grasp this challenge will clearly fall back. Countries that do grasp the challenge have within their hands an unprecedented opportunity to affect the lives of hundreds of millions of people and enfranchise those people to help themselves.

This is part of the dream of President Kim. It is part of the dream which should encourage all of us and give us enthusiasm and confidence for the next century.

I want to thank Peter Sullivan for moderating this session, and I wish you very good discussions during the afternoon.