

**Keynote Speech by
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The theme of "Rising to the Challenge in the New Millennium" for Asia and the sub-themes dealing with the environment, technology, and culture are indeed very appropriate at a time when the region is emerging from one of the severest crisis it has ever faced. Before you hear from the distinguished panelists on individual issues, particularly technology and culture, let me first of all begin with the overall picture of the development process and the challenges that are facing the region today.

Let me take you back to the 20th century when Asia was seen as the most successful region in terms of development. Indeed, international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund talked about the Asian miracle; about a region that has managed to create prosperity for its people. And yet, three years ago with the financial crisis hitting Thailand and then subsequently other Asian nations, there was much talk about the sources of fundamental weaknesses that are also present in the region. And then, only two or three years later many observers, particularly outside observers, were equally surprised by the resilience that was demonstrated by the region in emerging from the crisis and putting itself on the path of recovery. So we should look back at these events and try to draw some valuable lessons that tell us about the challenges that we will face, and approaches that we should take as we enter the new millennium.

Let me first point out that much of the success of the development of Asia, particularly Asian economies, is attributed to the fact that we have always adopted a very open and outward-oriented approach - that we decided earlier on in the stage of development to open up our countries, to open up our economies, to deal with people outside the region whether in terms of trade, investment or other cultural exchanges. And it is on the basis of this approach that we have adopted that we were able to put to good use the market mechanisms to create economic growth, and to create prosperity. And at a same time, other regions, which have adopted a different approach, that of protectionism, discovered that sooner or later, that such an approach was not sustainable. That is one important lesson that we must learn; that by opening up, by creating greater opportunities, we can do much to exploit such opportunities to improve the quality of life of our people. And it is through this rapid progress that we made, particularly in the realm of the economy, that we manage to lift millions of people out of poverty, to provide them with basic needs that for so long have been absent.

Yet at the same time, we now know that the rapid progress that Asia made also comes with very high costs. There are costs in terms of the depletion of our natural resources and a deteriorating

environment which put into question the sustainability of this rapid progress that we have made. And I am glad to see that people and governments all over the world now recognize that this factor must be taken into account in adopting any kind of policies or measures that gear countries and societies toward growth.

Secondly, while there has been much progress made in terms of eliminating much of poverty and increasing the standards of living, the situation concerning distribution of income and opportunities has not improved. Indeed, in a number of countries, it has in fact deteriorated. It means that we must appreciate that there is no guarantee that an efficient economy will be a fair economy for all. It means also that in a number of countries, despite the increase in absolute income, you will find that people are not getting happier because their relative incomes have not improved, and poverty is a relative as well as an absolute concept.

And thirdly, it should be noted that despite the progress we made in terms of prosperity, and despite the end of the cold war, we still see violent conflicts all around the world, and they are now conflicts of more fundamental natures. Ethnic conflicts, religious conflicts - the kind of conflicts that we thought were things of the past. So despite all the success, as we enter into the new millennium, we must take into account the kind of problems that we face that still follow from our development approach.

We must first of all recognize that the approach that we have taken, while some of it has been driven by policy, the force of changes of the last two or three decades has been technology, particularly the advancement of information technology and bio-technology. That should provide or give us a clue, that in order to move forward, we must take technological progress as a given. Whether we like it or not, it doesn't look like the pace of technology progress will slow down in the near future. If anything, it is perhaps even accelerating. And when I use the word 'whether you like it or not' I am trying to emphasize that we cannot deny the reality of technological progress when we try to map out our development strategy.

Once you invent something, you cannot dis-invent it. It is going to be here with us. So it is really up to us to decide how we should use technology and deal with technological progress. And this, I think, is the biggest challenge that we face because the way we approach, deal and use technology will determine the kind of society that will evolve.

One of the biggest concerns that we must have now, not just in Asia, but also at the global level, is this possibility of the digital divide. A division between those who have and those without access to information technology that can make a world of difference about the progress that we can make in terms of quality of life in various communities. So with that in mind, it means that

when we deal with technology, we must have our objectives clear. We must ensure that new technology is not just going to fall into the hands of the elite where instead of using these as vital tools to equalize opportunities, technology becomes a tool that will accelerate or exacerbate inequality further. That is a real threat, because by nature you require certain basic infrastructure to allow people from all communities and all walks of lives to access this technology.

And by nature in this sector, the infrastructures sector, particularly in telecommunications, there is a tendency towards monopoly and concentration. Therefore, any government, any society, must realize that to really make good use of technology to improve the quality of the majority of people, there is a need to create a kind of level playing field for all through a fair dispersion of infrastructure, and to allow fair access for all to make use of this technology.

But that is only one part of the problem. Even if you have the necessary physical infrastructure that will allow people to make use of this technology, there is still going to be inequality in terms of human capital because all of us are not equally equipped to make use of this technology. So, what we really need is to ensure that we create a society where we are all well equipped to learn, to adapt to changes, to be able to deal with new technology - both hardware and software; to be able to cope with the flood of information that will flow in this globalised age. And that society can learn to solve problems and face challenges which will change every day.

That is why to ensure that any society is well equipped to make good use of technology, we must ensure that an adequate system of education is in place. And by education, I do not mean formal education. I mean life-long learning for all. I mean the ability of people to understand the changes in the world, and to be able to adapt their ways of life. To do that, obviously, certain policies will need to be pursued to reform the system that we have in Asia. We must change certain ways of doing things, particularly in the learning process. For too long, there has been far too much emphasis in the education in Asia for people simply to memorize, to learn to know but not to learn to learn, or not to learn to live. That is one fundamental change that we must try to put in our society to enable our people to cope with the challenges of the future. And to do that of course, there has to be some fundamental changes ranging from the extension of opportunities for people to learn, to the improvement and guaranteeing of quality in the learning process that happens inside and outside schools and classrooms; and to get the relevant professionals - teachers, administrative assistants - to change their attitude to allow this form of learning to take place. That is the kind of agenda that we should all pursue. But it is all well and good to say what needs to be done, or for us here know what is to be done. However, it will all be useless unless the people who have the power recognize this and pursue the agenda.

So, it is not just the question of dealing with the technicality of how to use technology, or to know what the right policies are to enable the society to become a learning society. You also need the political will and the political leadership to ensure that this will happen. And to get that political will it is also clear from past experience, that a more open political process is what is needed to get the right policies, to get the right agenda to be pursued for the good of the people in a long term. Again, here in Asia we live in a transition period. There has been great trend toward democratization all over the region but progress has also been uneven. We are stepping out of an age where democracy is threatened by forms of dictatorships like military dictatorship, but we have not been able to step out from the threat of money politics and patronage politics in Asia. That is a big challenge for all political systems in the region.

And again, if we can use information technology to educate our people so they can make informed political decisions, that is the best guarantee that we have that an appropriate political system evolves and that the right public policies ensue. And just as I talk about the political system, we must also recognize that ways of doing things must also change in other fields. So when there is an emphasis on good governance, it does not deal simply with the public sector but the private sector also. Because as I mentioned before, the threat to democracy now is one of money politics which basically involves creating the appropriate relationship between business/private sectors, and government/public sectors so that we can eliminate conflicts of interest. And to ensure that those directly involved in the political process will have public interests on top of their minds. So in the private sector, a lot of changes too, must happen.

The private sector - which has been the engine for the growth of Asia - must continue to adapt to ensure that it too plays a part in providing training and education not just for the work force but for the citizens in general and to act as good citizens. Leaders in the private and public sectors alike may play a vital role in providing a kind of education that is still needed to create the right values in society. That is educating by leading through example. So good corporate governance, good private sector governance and leaders from both sectors displaying the right moral values are absolutely vital. These values must be improved. Of course, when we talk about the changing of values we may feel that this is a threat to our culture. This is a final point to which I will now turn.

When we say changes will affect our cultures, there is often a tendency for our people to look at culture in a very static sense and to feel that to defend our culture, one must necessarily be conservative. I don't think that this will be the right approach. I don't believe that culture is static but I believe that culture is dynamic and one of the strengths demonstrated in the past in Asia is that we are able to evolve our own culture, by dealing with the changes that we face both from

within and from outside. We must continue to make sure that our culture remains dynamic. When I say that, I do not mean that changes in our cultures, changes in our attitudes, changing in our standards, must necessarily follow a particular model. Particularly, there is no reason why it should follow a Western model. We can certainly create new values, create new culture and call them our own, make them our own. And, we should look back and see, for instance, through the crisis that there are certain strengths, certain identities, and certain values that we already possess which are our strong points.

For instance, outside observers are often surprised by the fact that the social impact of the economic crisis in many Asian countries is not as severe as they have anticipated. And that is because we have the institution of family, which remains far, far stronger than our counterparts in the Western world. We can preserve and create social safety without making our people totally reliant on the welfare state.

There are all kinds of factors that we must take into account to strike the right balance. The right balance between accepting changes that are necessary while at the same time preserving our strengths.

If we can do that, I believe that Asia will continue to be a major force in a global economy and global community. My hope rests on the younger generation - a generation that will be prepared, taking the fresh ideas of their generation to continue the good traditions that we have held. I hope that discussions in this conference will tackle the fundamental issues dealing with technology, culture, and environment and come to some concrete conclusions about what kinds of institution, what kind of society, what kind of rules we want to live with to enable all of us to become good leaders to lead our society to the benefit of the majority of our people in improving their quality of life and creating peace and prosperity.

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