

**Statement by Anita Gurumurthy, Executive Director, IT for Change<sup>1</sup>,  
at the closing ceremony of WSIS plus 10 review  
held by UNESCO from 25th to 27th February, 2013**

Dear fellow-citizens of the world;

On the occasion of this initial meeting in the WSIS+10 review process. I would like to take us back in time to the decade of the 90s and the particular sentiments at the turn of the millennium that framed the World Summit on the Information Society. In the late 90s, the power of the digital revolution was seen as heralding a new hope for addressing long standing challenges in development. At the same time, world leaders were also concerned that the digital divide at international and national levels could lead to shaping a new class of those who have access to ICTs and those who do not. As we stand at this milestone of the WSIS plus 10 review, we have the responsibility to go back to this concern. The Internet – as the future social paradigm – is already yet another axis shaping exclusion and power.

The WSIS Declaration of Principles titled 'Building the Information Society: a global challenge in the new Millennium' avers in its preamble that no one should be excluded from the benefits the information society offers. It notes – with conviction interlaced with caution that - 'under favourable conditions', these technologies (that is, ICTs) can be a powerful instrument, increasing productivity, generating economic growth, job creation and employability and improving the quality of life of all.

This is the moment of reckoning – for all of us – to ask if we stand at the threshold of a new positive future for all and if indeed, the global and national governance and policy architectures of the new techno-social paradigm have created the 'favourable conditions' for the good life that seemed plausible in 2003.

- The economic crisis of the recent years, in the developed world, is a serious indictment of the macro economic pathways of neo-liberal growth and its policies. Recent research in Europe suggests that serious attention needs to be paid to the inequality in work - wages, working conditions and social cohesion - and its microeconomic implications.
- Even in Latin America, despite relative economic stability and reduction in poverty in many countries, a recent research by the UN says that the richest 20% of the population on average earn 20 times more than the poorest 20%. There is a considerable job deficit and a large labour informality affecting mainly the young and women. Colombia, Paraguay, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Argentina and Guatemala have all seen an increase in inequality in the past decade.
- The Asian giants China and India, often touted as rising economic powers, face huge challenges in socio-economic equity – the consuming middle class may but be a smokescreen that hides the livelihoods crisis for the majority.

All this has happened in the same decade that the Internet ought to have been equalising social and economic opportunity. We need to sit back and reflect, *what went wrong?* Why did the Internet, and the Information Society phenomenon not do what it was supposed to do? This is the principal question that the WSIS review process must answer.

If the good life is also about democratic transitions, then the miracles of technology may certainly be

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counted as harbingers of deep change in the past decade. Authoritarian states have had to come to terms with the power of interconnection in the network age. The Occupy Movement gave new hope to social movements. Yet, new configurations of power in mainstream spaces have more or less seen the political elite make way for a new class of economic elite – information society democracy remains as exclusionary as its predecessors. Perhaps more, with little place for women and others in the margins, and oblivious of new forms of violence and misogyny in the open and ostensibly emancipatory corridors of the virtual world.

Those of us committed to build a people-centred, inclusive and development oriented information society have to come to terms with and interrogate the roots of these crises – the unfavourable conditions that seem to have jettisoned the equalising propensities of the Internet.

The crisis today for the information society agenda is two fold – it is economic and it is cultural. The neo-liberal juggernaut has – at an unstoppable speed – usurped the power of connectedness. As some cyber enthusiasts continue to sing peons to the power of the supposedly decentralised, non-hierarchical and inclusive Net, the human predicament in real terms is far from this idealised picture. Today, a handful of colossal corporate mega-giants rule private empires - the top 10 Web sites accounted for 31 percent of US page views in 2001, 40 percent in 2006, and about 75 percent in 2010...”

Centralization is the name of the game – the most powerful weapon in neo-liberalism's arsenal. Consider Google: when it comes to user data, today Google runs a much more centralized operation than five years ago where individual searches, youtube video histories, and calendars combine to generate individualised and targeted ads. The Internet market place atomises the consumer-user, coopting her persona as a commodity in a logic that may not be self evident to Internet enthusiasts unwilling to see the realpolitik.

The cultural crisis is deeper. What the architects of the WSIS documents perhaps underestimated is the way the information society would precipitate a normative crisis. As the Internet market place broadens its horizons, we see the individuals, communities and nations, fragmented by increasing self interest. The seamless geographies of the connected world are images of the Internet's economic paradigm – where membership for marginalised individuals, social groups and nations is a simple binary - assimilation or decimation. The talk of diversity and multilingualism notwithstanding, there is much less we can aspire today out of the promise of the networks society for collaboration and horizontalism than seemed plausible ten years ago. We need to pause and ask – are our normative frameworks – infoethics and info-civic imaginaries – adequate to ensure that every person, the last woman, can be a global citizen in the interconnected global world.

What we are witness to instead of a reflection around the basics of democracy in the interconnected world, are anxieties of nations states that make ancient tribal chieftans seem like impeccable upholders of freedoms and the rule of law

The various international summits of the UN, Rio-Earth Summit in 1992 , Cairo in 1994 on population, Copenhagen in 1995 on social development, Beijing in 1996 for women – pursued problems confronting humanity with the resolve to find progressive solutions. Today these have contributed to the broadbasing and democratisation of civil society engagement. There are some lessons here for civil society in the information society space.

Also, as we move towards the WSIS + 10 review, we need to be cognizant of the competing demands of the Millennium Development Goals Review (Post 2015 Development Agenda), the processes to set the post-Rio+20 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the 20-year review of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD+20). These overlapping inter-governmental processes are bound to render the ideals of the WSIS declaration obscure unless we are able to pitch for

a review that can offer analytical and pragmatic segways for the other UN reviews.

The WSIS plus 10 review is a historic opportunity therefore to review the state of democracy – and I qualify, the state of global democracy. Here – we have two tasks

1. Re-interpreting human rights, equality and sustainability in the information society. This is a dialogue that must inform the other UN reviews and discussions on the crises of food, fuel, finance and climate change, poverty and deprivation, inequality and insecurity, and violence against women.
2. The second task is to explore the favourable conditions that can make the Internet an equaliser. As a global public good, the policy issues pertaining to the Internet are simultaneously global and national. Discussing the global policy issues around the Internet should be a principal aim of the WSIS plus 10 review process.

We stand at cross-roads. The promise of community has never been greater in theory, but the risk to the collective never higher in the brazen pursuit of economic self interest and aggrandizement of power. For civil society the modus operandi of organising is clear. We need to ask how best we can sieze and use the decentralising possibilities of the network age to craft new forms of organisation; how we can define the core issues that reflect honestly our analysis of the crises. The WSIS plus 10 review process must indeed take a leaf out of Jo Freeman's essay - 'The tyranny of structurelessness'. Let not the ideals of democracy in multistakeholderism be reduced to shadowboxing – where emerging hierarchies are denied and those that wield power escape with no accountability.

Multistakeholderism is a framework and means of engagement, it is not a means of legitimization. Legitimization comes from people, from work with and among people. We need to use this occasion of the WSIS plus 10 review to go back to the the touchstone of legitimacy – engage with people and communities to find out the conditions of their material reality and what seems to lie ahead in the information society. From here we need to build our perspectives and then come to multistakeholder spaces and fight and fight hard for those who cannot be present here.