Dear Friends,

On behalf of IT for Change, I welcome you all to today's seminar **'Mapping Gender in the Information Society: From Reality to Discourse'** organized by the WSIS Gender Caucus, UNDP and ITfC in partnership with IDRC and UNIFEM, South Asia.

By re-affirming that the 'Political is Personal' Anita emphasized that if we do not engage with the global spaces, those already disadvantaged have even more to lose. At ITfC therefore, we have consciously committed our energies and focus on WSIS, in its deliberations towards the creation of what the WSIS 2003 Geneva Declaration of Principles, in its very first paragraph termed as **'Our Common Vision of the Information Society.'** Allow me to read to you this inspiring paragraph.

Quote – "We, the representatives of the peoples of the world, assembled in Geneva from 10-12 December 2003 for the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, declare our common desire and commitment to build a **people-centered, 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".

As a part of my welcome address, with around a fortnight to go before the WSIS Tunis summit, I will speak a little about the WSIS over the last two years to set a context to today's seminar, and about what ITfC has done in this area. The format of WSIS, spread over two summits, with 'prepcoms' or preparatory committee meetings has enabled the larger participation of civil society. At the Geneva 2003 summit, ITfC participated in two panels. While one panel, organized by the Gender Caucus was on **'Critical Voices : Women's Perspectives on the Role of the Information Society in Fostering Human Development,** the second panel organized by ISIS was on **'Globalize media and ICT systems - Globalization, Fundamentalisms and Militarisms'**. Attesting to our belief that ICT in being a key factor in the processes of globalization, militarism and neo-liberalization has serious implications for gender justice.

Geneva 2003 left two issues to be resolved through the 'prepcoms' for Tunis, the issue of Financing of the Information Society and that of the Global Governance of the Internet. In both, ITfC has been advocating pro-South perspectives.

As an input into the "Task Force on Financial Mechanisms", set up by the WSIS process to look into the issue of financing ICTD, ITfC carried out three case studies, supported by UNDP, on Akshaya, e-seva and Dhan projects in India, which aimed at setting up community telecentres. Our research on **'Community Models for ownership and management of ICTD infrastructure and superstructure'** helped us understand the necessity of public policy and public support for ensuring both last mile connectivity as well as access. Pure market-driven telecentre models largely, have either not achieved their basic goal of 'financial viability', or they have not had 'equity' as their cornerstone

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(such as the well known 'e-choupal' initiative of ITC in India). In developing country contexts such as India, given the complexities of existing feudal structures, with their implications for poor social capital, the need for public policy and affirmative action on the part of the Government is an imperative.

We also took these insights to Prepcom 2 in Geneva in February 2005, where, as a part of the 'Informal Coalition on Financing', as well as through the WSIS Gender Caucus, we advocated for strong public policy and Government intervention for financing infrastructure and including connectivity. On our intervention, the chapter on financing, which had threatened to become a neo-liberal handout celebrating market forces, now has a paragraph on role of public finance, and I read it

31. We recognize that public finance plays a crucial role in providing ICT access and services to rural areas and disadvantaged populations including those in Small Island Developing States and Landlocked Developing Countries.

39. We recognize the **central role of public policy** as the main framework in which resource mobilization can take place.

We held a seminar in April 2005 on **'Gender Perspectives on the Information Society'** where feminists, discussed the new battle field of the Information Society. We have here a 15 minute video document on some of the significant points made in that seminar. In this seminar, ITfC presented a paper titled **'Cakes for the North and Crumbs for the South'.** This took off on an article in the Economist, whose argument boiled down to claiming that while computers and internet were required in the developed world, the developing countries, at least at present, really needed only cell phones which the market was adequately providing; ignoring that it is the internet and not telephony that gave birth to the concept of an Information Society. The implication of course is we should wait for the markets to herald the Information Society for the South, when it thinks we are ready for it!

Prepcom 3 in September in Geneva debated Internet Governance and Implementation mechanisms and as a part of the 'Informal Coalition on Financing' and the WSIS Gender Caucus, ITfC advocated for opening new public policy spaces for dealing with Information Society issues which often defy easy fitment into the mandates of existing UN organizations. We led a campaign in the Civil Society, condemning attempts by countries of the North to close WSIS without putting any follow–up structures in place. This debate is now re-opened and new text is being negotiated. At the prepcom, ITfC also made a presentation on the **'Political Economy of the Information Society: a View from the South'**, a briefing paper of which is being circulated here.

On the Internet Governance issue, the US continues to insist that it is not going to give up what it calls is its historic role in keeping the key aspects of Internet Governance solely with itself. A recent statement by a US senator speaks of US's mindset on the issue. **"The United States is uniquely positioned in the world to protect the fundamental principles of free press and free speech, upon which the Internet has thrived."**

Such a mindset is dangerous. The same argument can, as easily, be used to take over all the UN systems as well. Just because we have numerous countries and very different ideologies and outlooks has not stopped us from relying on a global governance system that is multi-lateral and has legitimate representations from all parts of the world. Internet Governance is a complex issue and we need to approach it with a new mindset, and new institutional frameworks, but without abandoning the honored and accepted principles of multilateralism, equal representation of all, as well as of equity and social justice.

One thought on Civil Society participation at WSIS. WSIS has provided significantly higher level of Civil Society participation as compared to earlier UN summits, including Civil Society members sitting through and in formally stating Civil Society positions to official sessions and we need to acknowledge the efforts of ITU and WSIS organizers in making this possible. On the other hand, we found that the Civil Society at the WSIS tended to take positions that are closer to those of Governments from the North. For example, the dominant Civil Society that engaged with Internet Governance issues was quite close to the US position, because more than anything else there was a fear of Governmental controls on the internet. While we do appreciate their genuine concern, the position they were taking, in favor of **'privatized governance'**, denying the legitimacy of public policy in vital area of Internet Governance, was so de-politicized as to be dangerous. ITfC's advocacy in this area was directed towards bringing the views from the South to the table; both in internal consultations within the Civil Society and as written submissions to the official process.

Our analysis of the above is that, in the absence of good representation from the South and lack of required capacities of Southern Civil Society on Information Society issues, Civil Society spaces get dominated by Civil Society from the North. Possibly some governments from the South also take this as an excuse to speak against giving greater room to Civil Society participation. **It is important, not only to represent Southern views, but also for the legitimacy of the whole global civil society that the capacities of the Civil Society in South to deal with Information Society issues are adequately developed**.

The struggle has however not ended, nor can we afford to abandon the field. This seminar, we hope will help us feed into our energies and partnerships to work for a people inclusive and development-oriented Information Society. ITfC once again welcomes you to today's seminar, and looks forward a day filled with engaging discussions. Thank you.