This is the address made by Ms. Anita Gurumurthy, Director, IT for Change, at the closing ceremony of IGF 2008.

Good afternoon

I am honoured to be part of the closing ceremony of the IGF. The IGF is a unique institution attempting to measure up to the realities of a transnational political community. As a UN forum, it allows people excluded from other spaces and arenas where internet policies are being shaped… to participate equally in the dialogues implicating their own lives.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish to pull your attention… away from the IGF for a moment ..to reflect upon something else - the global financial meltdown. As Jeffrey Sachs said recently, poorest countries and people already struggling to cope with the food crisis, would highly likely also feel the impact of the global credit crunch through diminishing global aid. This sobering reality allows us to think of how the economic ideologies and technical logic underpinning global social systems are not phenomena out there….. they are palpable, real experiences of countries, communities and individuals.

So how can this historic moment inform us at the IGF? I recall from one of the open dialogue sessions a reference to India as the land of Mahatma Gandhi. I think Gandhian thought provides a very useful point of departure to take stock of the role and relevance of the IGF, and I quote Gandhi - "Before you do anything, stop and recall the face of the poorest most helpless destitute person you have seen and ask yourself, 'Is what I am about to do, going to help him?'"

I think we at the IGF have a responsibility to ask – and I take the liberty to modify Gandhi in a spirit that he would have completely appreciated – "How is the IGF going to help the poorest, most helpless destitute woman?"

The Internet as we know it - is not just a connector bringing everybody together – it is also the paradigm that has shifted points of governance farthest from the immediate realities of people. We have seen this paradox come alive in the discussions of the past 4 days – in the debates on cyber-security, access to knowledge and freedom of expression. Undeniably, we are a global community and yet, we do not have the arrangements that are adequate and accountable to the poorest woman.

So where do we go from here, at this mid-point in the IGF?

If the IGF is in fact about the Internet and development, then it also follows that… as in all areas of development, a rights and citizenship based approach be used to discuss policies for the Internet as well. Civil society actors have felt that one of the steps forward during this igf – has been a concerted effort towards getting a grasp of such an approach.

A starting point in this search for a rights based approach to Internet Governance would be to jettison patronage – poor women do not need largesse; they want rights. They also don't want experts thinking on their behalf. After all, technical expertise has not only failed to bail them out

IT for Change, December 2008

of hunger; but as the recent financial meltdown shows, it is likely to also take away the little that would have allowed them to live. This is not empty rhetoric.

As Mymoena Sharif – manager of egovernance from Cape Town says simply and powerfully : "If the city wants to succeed in offering people internet access, it must be offered free. Citizens, especially previously disadvantaged citizens, are not going to spend R10 for 30 minutes at an internet café when that money is needed to put bread on the table."

At this mid-point in its career, what the IGF will mean to the poorest woman and her rights will be the singular litmus test for its success.