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Presentation at the Plenary Session on Access

ANITA GURUMURTHY:

 I'd like to start by saying that questions of access and governance are inextricably connected. They are two sides of the same coin and part of the very critical agenda on human development and the Internet. We know enough now to be able to say that sustainable development is not about people's access to goodies, but people's control over systems of governance. And therefore, access is not just a peripheral theme in the IGF. Recent research on ICTs and their development impact points to how social impacts of ICTs are perhaps no different from the impact a couple of decades ago of ICTs on business. As has been said ever so often, computer-induced productivity was seen everywhere initially except in the statistics. This notion of productivity paradox in the adoption of digital systems in business is more than relevant to development. You don't see the impact for a long time. You cannot invest in ICTs for development and begin desperately to look for results. And if I may add, the returns on investment that are so passionately sought through business models may never be realized. Why do I say this emphatically? Because I am presuming that the most meaningful ICT models for the poorest are not just about creating demand loops for individual users to pay, but models that address systemic and institutional change through ICTs. Demand cannot be generated unless the supply sets up a virtual cycle. It's like public libraries. Where ICTs get embedded within systems - within public health, public education, governance, women's livelihood projects, et cetera, change towards human development and rights begins to happen in an almost unbelievable, exciting, nonlinear, and systemic way. And since we have been told that there's no such thing as a free lunch, the question to ask is, who's to finance this systemic approach? And here I would like to quote from an extremely inspiring submission to the IGF by the Council of Europe. Quote begins: The Council of Europe advance the concept of public service value of the Internet, and the council defines public services from the Wikipedia; public services is defined in the council's document as a term usually used to mean services provided by government to its citizens, either directly through the public sector, or by financing private provision of services. The term is associated with the social consensus that certain services should be available to all, regardless of income. The submission goes on to saying that this notion of public service value should help provide responses to many public-policy questions that arise under the IGF themes, inter alia, in respect of engendering confidence, sustainability and sustainability of the Internet. It should be stressed that for the many people who are at present information-poor, access to the Internet is a legitimate aspiration linked to their very prospects of development and democratic citizenship. This is a clear example where states have an essential role to play in providing a framework for the private sector to operate. Developing and promoting islands of trust on the Internet, for example, by means of content provided by public service media or public authorities is one important way forward which we are currently examining and developing at the Council of Europe. Quote ends. The idea here is to see ICTs not just as commercial or business infrastructure, but also as development infrastructure, where the public aspect is separated clearly from the rest, just as it is in the case of public health or public education. Basic access calls for the essential role of the state in creating that comprehensive ecosystem which makes access meaningful

enough. But then why do we see many northern governments defy this consensus articulated so eloquently in the Council of Europe submission in global policy fora that discusses access for developing countries? While public sector monopolies in communications can be legitimately critiqued in many developing countries, there is no basis to negate the role of public finance in these countries that in many ways has shaped what the information society is in the north today. But many governments of the north take a stance that seems to contradict this wisdom in forums like IGF, preferring to focus on privatization. Invocations to the notion of public goods heard last year in Athens and in the opening speeches yesterday cannot just be mere assurances that warm our hearts. They need to be taken to their logical policy ends. It's noteworthy, and perhaps rather disconcerting, that references to public infrastructure and the role of public financing in providing access, as well as to non market structures and alternative business models, that were present in an earlier version of the

IGF's synthesis document in the month of May disappeared in the final version. The section on access is, of course, logically consistent; only it has been sanitized and standardized completely into a privatization, liberalization, competition story. Very ironically, the concepts that disappeared were direct references from the original WSIS documents. There's obviously no intention here to allege a conspiratorial angle at all, but to say that agenda-setting in Internet governance needs a bit more imagination and vision from the global community that has space not just for those serviced by the market, but also for those who may never be. My last point pertains to access and community ownership. It is the nature and manner of the use of technology by communities that needs to determine infrastructure policies and frameworks of governance. So far, the business use of technology has monopolized policy frameworks and the development use has often been contorted as extended business use. The governance of technology, including Internet governance, derives from imperatives for development. Governance cannot be a pre-given into which development concerns are forced to fit. The poor may not have the time or the energies to understand the politics of governance, but they are indelibly impacted by the principles of governance. The most vulnerable populations of the world may not care too much about intellectual property regimes, but they do care about life-saving drugs. If a public goods to ICTs approach is acknowledged as enabling development and when the infrastructure design begins to look at more and more systemic uses for development, going beyond individual user-oriented conceptions, then the nature of Internet governance is bound to be different. Much here, of course, depends on the courage to set our agenda differently. The chairperson of this panel began by describing the IGF as a unique initiative in democracy and balance. From the perspective of access to ICTs, we need to also hope and push for it to be an experiment in imagination and courage. We need to think of the 6.6 billion people in the world and not just the next billion.