Submission to the UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF) Consultations
31st March 2006

IT For Change proposed and submitted the theme 'Defining and fostering the 'public-ness' of the Internet – issues of public interest, public domain, public infrastructure and public good in the context of the Internet' in response to the call by IGF for its first meeting at Athens later this year.

[NB: The below is in the standardized format agreed by the civil society Internet Governance Caucus for IGF theme submissions from its members]

Suggested theme for the first meeting of the Internet Governance Forum:

Defining and fostering the 'public-ness' of the Internet – issues of public interest, public domain, public infrastructure and public good in the context of the Internet.

Proposed by IT for Change, India, with support of the following civil society organizations.

1. World Radio and Television Council
2. Comunica-ch, the platform of Swiss civil society for the Information Society
3. HIVOS, Netherlands
4. African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET)
5. Foundation for Media Alternatives, Philippines
6. Public Affairs Foundation, Bangalore
7. Alternate Law Forum, Bangalore
8. femLINKPACIFIC: Media Initiatives for Women, Fiji Islands
9. International Gender and Trade Network – Asia
10. IP Justice
11. United Nations Association of Uganda
12. Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)
13. Third World Institute (ITeM), Uruguay
14. Association for Progressive Communications
15. Isis International-Manila
16. Madhyam, Bangalore
17. The Centre for Women's Research, Sri Lanka
18. Action Aid International-India
19. Panos Institute West Africa
20. Danish United Nations Association
21. Voices, Bangalore
22. Mahila Samakhaya, Karnataka, India
23. Mazdoor Kissan Shakti Sangathan, India
24. Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan, India
25. Abhiyan, India
26. Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, Commonwealth of Learning

a.   A   concise   formulation   for   the   proposed   theme
In determining global public policy issues and directions for IG, it is important to first define and characterize the Internet. Its essential public and egalitarian nature must be

asserted as basic principles through open discussions at the IGF. And these principles can then be interpreted in terms of specific issues that face us today - content issues (protecting and promoting the public domain, network neutrality) infrastructure issues (universal access, public infrastructure, open spectrum, Internet as public good), as well as many other issues.

b.   A   brief   description   of   why   it   is   important
The Internet, as understood by most of us, is what it is basically because of its egalitarian and public nature. It is important to articulate these fundamentals of the Internet strongly, and use them as the guiding principles to debate and develop global public policies on IG. WSIS was an arena that required quick resolutions for consensus positions. This imperative did not allow sufficient informed debates on developing public policy principles for IG, including characterizing the essential public and egalitarian nature of Internet as the technology that promises a 'better world for everyone'. IGF is the right forum for initiating this process, and taking it forward in a sustained manner. Formulating these 'essentials' of the Internet, and due exposition of their implications in various contexts, will enable better global policy responses to pressing issues including network neutrality and universal access. If these essential principles that define the Internet are not discussed and settled urgently, the Internet is likely to disintegrate, along both political and economic lines. Even if it is going to be a difficult and protracted process, discussing and resolving this   is   essential   and   the   IGF   is   the   right   forum   to   initiate   it.

c.   How it is in conformity with the Tunis Agenda of the World Summit on the Information   Society   (WSIS)
The WSIS Declaration of Principles assert "… … our common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, 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……   ".
The earlier mentioned issues of characterizing the global resource of the Internet fall within these overall ideals agreed at the WSIS. Para 31 of the Tunis Agenda declares "We recognise that Internet governance, carried out according to the Geneva principles, is an essential element for a people-centred, inclusive, development oriented   and   non-discriminatory   Information   Society."

d.   How it fits within the mandate of the IGF as detailed in para 72;
Discussion on the stated issue is important in order to develop guiding principles for laying   down   a   public   policy   framework   on   IG.
(72 a of Tunis Agenda: Discuss public policy issues related to key elements of Internet Governance in order to foster the sustainability, robustness, security, stability and   development   of   the   Internet;)
Such discussions will lay the guiding principles for, and help clarify, possible policy responses to important emerging issues of network neutrality, public internet infrastructure,   spectrum   de-licensing   etc.
(72 g: Identify emerging issues, bring them to the attention of the relevant bodies and the   general   public,   and,   where   appropriate,   make   recommendations;)
And most importantly, it puts IG discussions in the context of the broad guiding principles   adopted   at   Geneva,   and   later   in   Tunis.

(72 i: Promote and assess, on an ongoing basis, the embodiment of WSIS principles in
Internet   Governance   processes;)

**e.   Who the main actors in the field are, who could be encouraged to
participate   in   the   thematic   session**
All stakeholders – from governments, civil society, business and multi-lateral
organizations to those organizations currently involved with IG, like the ICANN,
have an important role in discussing these issues. However, more stress needs to be
placed on the inclusion of representation from developing countries and (2) the
development   community   without   core   ICT   backgrounds.

**f.   Last but not least, why this issue should be addressed in the first annual
meeting   of   the   Forum   rather   than   in   subsequent   ones.**
The first phase of Internet development was driven purely by enterprise and
innovation, and in many ways by private sector leadership, which served us well.
Internet   grew   mostly   autonomous   of   public   policy   in   this   phase.

But now with the power of Internet firmly established, and its economic and political
threat to many entrenched interests increasingly obvious, we are into an important
phase of development of the Internet where its egalitarian and public nature is
increasingly under threat. To stem this trend and possibility, global public policy
response in the form of clearly establishing the public and egalitarian nature of the
Internet, and laying out its policy consequences, needs to come in urgently.

In the absence of this, it may soon be too late to reclaim the promise of the Internet
for developing a "people-centred and development oriented information society" as
envisioned by the WSIS. As a commentator recently said in the context of the issue of
'network neutrality', if urgent policy action is not taken, the situation may soon
become intractable, and it will then be like trying to push the 'genie back into the
bottle'.