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## Sustainable Development: Theme Proposal for IGF New Delhi\*

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### Summary

1. In response to the request for comments and views on the November 2007 Rio de Janeiro meeting, and suggestions regarding the format and content of the December 2008 New Delhi meeting, this paper proposes that Sustainable Development be considered as a theme for the New Delhi meeting, and that one of its plenary sessions be devoted to “exploring the linkages between Internet governance and sustainable development.” This proposal is based on the following rationale:
  - i) The IGF Chairman observed during the Rio meeting that “one issue that seems to be really an emerging issue ... is the interlinkages with sustainable development.”<sup>2</sup> The Chairman’s Summary of the Rio meeting also concluded that “in terms of public policy exploring the linkages between Internet governance and sustainable development was seen as an important area of debate and new dialogue.”<sup>3</sup>
  - ii) The Chairman’s conclusion is well supported by the marked increase in interest, dialogue and debate in international organizations, national governments, industry associations, non-governmental organizations, and scientific and technical research bodies over the last few months regarding the linkages between the Internet, information and communication technologies, and issues of sustainable development.
  - iii) By linking Internet governance with the broader agenda of sustainable development, the IGF would advance on a critical element of its mandate while serving some important aspirations, namely to:
    - “strengthen ... Internet governance mechanisms,”<sup>4</sup> “adding to their legitimacy to the international community”<sup>5</sup> (by engaging the broader sustainable development community, and illustrating their stake in these linkages)
    - “build upon the experience achieved so far”<sup>6</sup> by increasing the breadth of stakeholder engagement and thus contribute to the IGF setting a precedent for “a renewed, upgraded style of multilateral conferences, in an open, inclusive and representative environment, with the participation of all stakeholders”<sup>7</sup>
  - iv) By furthering the debate and dialogue regarding linkages between Internet governance and sustainable development (SD), the IGF would also advance “in the path towards the full implementation of its mandate”<sup>8</sup> by broadening its response to these other key elements of its mandate:<sup>9</sup>

\* This document is based on IISD’s submission to the February 26 stock-taking session of the Internet Governance Forum.

- facilitate discourse on a cross-cutting issue that does not fall within the scope of any existing body (namely, the impact that Internet development has on poverty and the environment)
- help bring an emerging issue to the attention of the relevant bodies and the general public (beyond the Internet governance community to include sustainable development practitioners and institutions)
- contribute to capacity building in developing countries (to strengthen their voice in global dialogue and debate of important cross-cutting issues)

## Introduction

2. The choice of themes for the first two IGF meetings has proven instrumental in bringing coherence to a diversity of issues relevant to the future of the Internet. The focus on openness, security, diversity and access at IGF Athens facilitated organized, highly successful and timely discussions regarding the role that Internet governance plays in many key Internet related issues. The “Athens-plus” approach of adding the theme of critical net resources to evolve this agenda at IGF Rio helped to galvanize important discussions regarding the relevant processes of coordination and management of the Internet. The development orientation of both meetings, highlighting development and capacity-building as cross-cutting priorities, has also been instrumental in reminding participants of the need to embody relevant WSIS principles in Internet governance processes. Interest expressed at a well attended IGF Rio workshop on the possibility of a new dynamic coalition to form a development agenda for Internet Governance suggests that there is some consensus on the need to further strengthen the focus on these priorities.
3. However, when considering a possible “Rio-plus” approach for New Delhi, in the words of the Chairman,<sup>10</sup>

*“It is important to build upon the experience achieved so far, with a view of exploring possible avenues for strengthening the existing Internet governance mechanisms, adding to their legitimacy to the international community.”*
4. The forum could achieve this in New Delhi by exploring the linkages between Internet governance and the most significant global challenges we currently face such as: exponentially widening income divides; rapid changes in social structures and settlement patterns; alarming environmental degradation; and global climate change. The principles of sustainable development provide the most promising framework for confronting these global challenges. Including sustainable development as a theme for the IGF New Delhi would broaden the debate on Internet governance by providing a space for multi-stakeholder debate on a new cross-cutting theme. It would also facilitate a dialogue between organizations that extends beyond those in charge of complementary aspects of Internet governance to new stakeholders more removed from, but possibly profoundly impacted by, Internet governance.
5. IISD believes that these are the sort of outcomes the Chairman had in mind for building upon the experience achieved so far, and for reinforcing the legitimacy of Internet governance mechanisms within the international community. IISD also agrees with the Chairman’s conclusion regarding the importance of exploring the linkages between Internet governance and sustainable development as an important area of debate and new dialogue for the IGF. Over the past five years, in conjunction with the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and the IGF, IISD has been exploring these linkages through the publications “Information Society and Sustainable Development: Exploring the Linkages,”<sup>11</sup> “A Developing Connection: Bridging the Policy Gap between the Information Society and Sustainable Development,”<sup>12</sup> “Did WSIS Miss the Point? An information society vision disconnected from sustainable development,”<sup>13</sup> and “Internet Governance and Sustainable Development: Towards a Common Agenda”<sup>14</sup> which was launched at IGF Rio.

## Sustainable Development

6. The term sustainable development was first popularized<sup>15</sup> by the publication of the 1987 report of the Brundtland Commission, also known formally as the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The

Commission's report, "Our Common Future," offered the following definition<sup>16</sup>:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

- the concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs."

7. The first attempt to operationalize the definition of sustainable development at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro yielded a predominantly environmental interpretation of these concepts, reinforced by the largely environmental focus of the parallel agreements negotiated at the time, on climate change, biodiversity, desertification and forest principles.

8. However ten years later at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg the global understanding of sustainable development had broadened and, in some ways, was redefined since Rio, particularly in terms of the links between poverty, environmental protection, and the use of natural resources.<sup>17</sup> Specifically the Plan of Implementation of the WSSD promotes "the integration of the three components of sustainable development—economic development, social development and environmental protection—as interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars."<sup>18</sup> The plan goes on to state that "poverty eradication, changing unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development are overarching objectives of, and essential requirements for, sustainable development."<sup>19</sup>

9. Many have also come to view good governance as a fourth pillar of sustainable development both "within each country and at the international level."<sup>20</sup> The WSSD Plan specifically states that "sound environmental, social and economic

policies, democratic institutions responsive to the needs of the people, the rule of law, anti-corruption measures, gender equality and an enabling environment for investment are the basis for sustainable development."<sup>21</sup> The Plan makes some recommendations for strengthening the institutional framework for sustainable development at the international level in support of the good governance objective worth noting here: "strengthened interagency collaboration should be pursued in all relevant contexts," and "promote corporate responsibility and accountability and the exchange of best practices in the context of sustainable development, including, as appropriate, through multi-stakeholder dialogue."

## Linkages with Internet Governance

10. *On economic development*: There is considerable scope within the IGF mandate<sup>22</sup> to make significant contributions to the sustainable development objective of "meeting the essential needs of the world's poor." The following elements are directly relevant:

- Facilitate the exchange of information and best practices, and in this regard make full use of the expertise of the academic, scientific and technical communities
- Advise all stakeholders in proposing ways and means to accelerate the availability and affordability of the Internet in the developing world
- Help to find solutions to the issues arising from the use and misuse of the Internet, of particular concern to everyday users

11. The Brundtland report states that "meeting essential needs depends in part on achieving full growth potential, and sustainable development clearly requires economic growth in places where such needs are not being met."<sup>23</sup> There is mounting anecdotal, econometric and theoretical support for the role of information technology in growth and development, particularly in the case of developed economies. However seventy-five per cent of the world's poor live in rural areas where access to information technology is limited. Furthermore, the utility of access even when available is often

limited by issues such as the lack of local content, literacy, freedom of expression, challenges to access to information and knowledge, and spam to name a few. This disparity in access and the utility of access to information technology between individuals in developed and developing has resulted in exponentially widening income divides. Clearly the need to address these issues and how to go about addressing them has been vigorously discussed and debated within the themes of openness, security, diversity and access in the first two IGF meetings. Linking these efforts to the broader agenda of sustainable development at the next IGF meeting in New Delhi could help galvanize these efforts under a unifying framework and reinforce their legitimacy within the international community.

12. When attempting to address “the essential needs of the world’s poor” the importance of having the poor participate in the entire process has been repeatedly demonstrated. Ensuring that the world’s poor have an effective voice in the Internet governance debate should be considered a guiding principle for the following elements of the IGF mandate.<sup>24</sup>

- Strengthen and enhance the engagement of stakeholders in existing and/or future Internet governance mechanisms, particularly those from developing countries
- Contribute to capacity building for Internet governance in developing countries, drawing fully on local sources of knowledge and expertise

13. Without effective participation by representatives of the world’s poor in the Internet governance dialogue on the issues mentioned above across the thematic areas of openness, security, diversity and access, potential solutions brought forward might prove to be ineffective. Again, linking the fulfillment of these elements of the IGF mandate to the broader agenda of sustainable development could help improve the success of efforts to address many of the issues mentioned above by providing a framework which justifies appropriate representation of the world’s poor in the process.

14. *On environmental protection:* Also central to the Brundtland Commission definition of sustainable

development is the concept of the “limitations imposed by the state of technology” on the ability of the ecosystem to support the world’s needs.<sup>25</sup> Given the many significant environmental challenges facing the world, such as climate change, the following elements of the IGF mandate<sup>26</sup> could play a critical role in contributing to solutions as well as reducing or eliminating adverse impacts:

- Facilitate the exchange of information and best practices, and in this regard make full use of the expertise of the academic, scientific and technical communities
- Discuss public policy issues related to ... development of the Internet
- Identify emerging issues ... and, where appropriate, make recommendations

15. The global information and communications technology (ICT) industry accounts for approximately 2 per cent of global carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions, a figure equivalent to aviation, according to a new estimate by Gartner, Inc.<sup>27</sup> It has also been suggested by the Global e-Sustainability Initiative (GeSi) that this number could more than double by 2020.<sup>28</sup> The impact that e-waste is having in many developing countries has also been well documented. If issues such as the carbon foot print of the Internet architecture, and cradle-to-grave management of all technologies associated with the Internet are not acknowledged, then public policy initiatives to curtail these consequences could limit the growth potential of the Internet. As advocates of the development of these technologies the Internet community has a collective responsibility to help address these problems. The fulfillment of the above elements of the IGF mandate should be informed by this collective responsibility and linking the broader agenda of sustainable development to the Internet governance dialogue will help provide the framework needed to accomplish this.

16. *On social development:* The transition from the agricultural society towards the industrial society illustrated that the full diffusion of new technologies can have profound implications for family structures, work relations, settlement

patterns, economic and political power configurations, as well as behavior patterns and value systems. The Internet is playing a central role in the equally dramatic transition from the industrial society to the information society. In this context the same elements of the IGF mandate mentioned above could play a critical role in taking into account the impact of “social organization on the environment,”<sup>29</sup> also recognized by Brundtland as key to sustainable development. The widespread adoption of societal applications such as telecommuting, e-commerce, teleconferencing, and downloading of content has the potential of having a significant net positive impact on the environment.<sup>30</sup> Many Internet governance issues have implications for the development and adoption of such societal applications and linking the broader agenda of sustainable development to this dialogue will help provide the framework needed to focus on achieving net positive outcomes.

17. *On governance:* The IGF aspires to set a precedent for “a renewed, upgraded style of multilateral conferences, in an open, inclusive and representative environment, with the participation of all stakeholders.”<sup>31</sup> Such a precedent for a renewed style of multistakeholderism has the potential to strengthen the international institutional framework for sustainable development. The current approaches to the Global Environmental Governance (GEG) debate have been slow in achieving necessary institutional cooperation and transformations, and lessons from the IGF may be helpful. At the very least, by linking the Internet governance dialogue to the broader agenda of sustainable development the Forum may open the door for increased interagency collaboration. But more broadly, Forum experience could enhance the international exchange of best practices for sustainable development through multi-stakeholder dialogue. In doing so the IGF would contribute to creating the conditions for good international governance by setting an example of the power in multistakeholderism for addressing challenges that require global coordination. And finally, by championing a process in which the Internet can be managed through shared responsibilities of all actors, the IGF will contribute to ensuring that the Internet serves the global agenda of enabling societies to live sustainably.

## Timing of Sustainable Development as an IGF Theme

18. The Chairman’s conclusion regarding the importance of exploring the linkages between Internet governance and sustainable development are well supported by a marked increase in interest, dialogue and debate in international organizations, national governments, industry associations, non-governmental organizations, and scientific and technical research bodies over the last few months regarding the linkages between the Internet, Information and Communication Technologies, and issues of sustainable development. For example:
- The ITU is organizing two Symposia on ICTs and Climate Change. The first will be held in Kyoto, Japan 15-16 April 2008, hosted by MIC Japan, and the second in London, UK, on 17-18 June, hosted by BT.<sup>32</sup>
  - The Global Alliance for Information and Communication Technologies and Development (GAID), under the United Nations Department the Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), and AIT Global, a global association of management and information technology professionals recently hosted a conference on the positive impact of ICTs on the Environment and Climate Change.<sup>33</sup>
  - Green IT 08, in partnership with SustainIT, has announced for this May 2008 the UK’s first event dedicated to Green IT issues, strategies and solutions across the Enterprise and Public Sector.<sup>34</sup> SustainIT has also teamed up with Intellect, the trade body for the UK technology industry, to hold a conference on 12 February 2008 to explore opportunities for the technology sector in a low carbon economy.<sup>35</sup>
  - Last fall the Association communication et information pour le développement durable (ACIDD) hosted a conference examining the Internet, sustainable development and new technologies.<sup>36</sup>
  - The Global e-Sustainability Initiative (GeSi), an organization that supports companies and institutions across the ICT industry recently

announced a major study to assess current carbon impacts of the ICT sector and analyze ICTs' role in catalyzing transformation to a low-carbon economy.<sup>37</sup>

- Intergovernmental organizations such as the ITU, along with the academic community have been adding to the growing volume of publications looking at the linkages between ICTs, climate change, and sustainable development.<sup>38, 39</sup>
19. All of this has been building on the commendable and persistent efforts over the last several years the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), with recent support from European Telecommunications Network Operators' Association (ETNO), to draw attention to the role ICTs could play in sustainable development.<sup>40</sup>
  20. Much of this increase in interest, dialogue and debate regarding the linkages between the Internet, information and communication technologies, and issues of sustainable development has been fueled by the global attention to the issue of climate change. Climate change, and the ever more serious projections of its impacts, has crystallized debate on many fronts related to economic and social consequences. The recent consensus coming out of the Bali Conference to negotiate a new international agreement by 2009 to drive international mitigation and adaptation efforts means that global awareness and attention on issues of sustainable development will likely continue to increase. The groundwork that has already been laid by the marked increase in debate noted above, along with the prominence of recent events such as the awarding of the Nobel Prize to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change would suggest that the timing is right for selecting sustainable development as a theme for the IGF New Delhi.
  21. The holding of the IGF in New Delhi also presents the Forum with a unique opportunity to consider the linkages between Internet governance and the broader agenda of sustainable development. The global challenges mentioned earlier such as exponentially widening income divides, rapid changes in social structures and settlement patterns, alarming environmental degradation,

and global climate change are being intensified by the rapid growth of many emerging economies. Having staged remarkable growth over the last decade, in part through the impressive development of its technology sector, India is one of many emerging economies at the epicenter of these global challenges making it an ideal host for linking Internet governance with this broader agenda. Many world renowned experts who have made important contributions to global sustainable development locally reside in India and its neighboring countries. These experts could make valuable contributions to the debate at an IGF informed by this broader agenda.

## Conclusions

22. The linkages between Internet governance and sustainable development have been acknowledged to be an important area of debate and new dialogue. This acknowledgement is well supported by a marked increase in interest, dialogue and debate in international organizations, national governments, industry associations, non-governmental organizations, and scientific and technical research bodies over the last few months. Global attention is being increasingly driven to the key issues of sustainable development, climate change in particular, by recent events such as the Bali conference. As such, the timing is right to choose sustainable development as a theme for the next IGF meeting in New Delhi. This is particularly appropriate given India's leadership role in both the ICT sector as well as the field of sustainable development.
23. By furthering the debate and dialogue regarding linkages between Internet governance and sustainable development (SD), the IGF would advance in the path towards the full implementation of its mandate by broadening its response to several key elements of its mandate. As well, linking Internet governance with the broader agenda of sustainable development would also serve the important aspirations of the IGF to build upon the experience achieved so far and strengthen Internet governance mechanisms, adding to their legitimacy to the international community.

## Appendix: About the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)

The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) is a non-profit, non-governmental research institute demonstrating how human ingenuity can *sustainably* improve the development of our global environment, economy and society. The key focus areas are Trade and Investment, Natural Resources Management, Climate Change and Energy, Measurement and Assessment, and Knowledge Communications. In addition, IISD Reporting Services publishes The Earth Negotiations Bulletin, considered to be the “Hansard” of international environment and development negotiations. Based in Winnipeg, IISD works in Canada and internationally through our offices in Geneva, Ottawa and New York. IISD fields a diverse team of more than 150 people located in more than 30 countries, conducting research and providing expert knowledge and analysis. The Institute’s international Board of Directors includes recognized experts in the areas of business,

environmental science, government, and international relations. IISD receives financial support from Canadian federal and provincial governments as well as other national governments, UN agencies, foundations, and the private sector. The Institute is a registered charity in Canada and has 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status in the United States.

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## 24. Endnotes

- 1 Please see Annex for more information regarding IISD's involvement in promoting the principles of sustainable development since 1990.
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