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Session 430

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>> HOST: Welcome back, everybody. We welcome to our next Leaders TalkX building inclusive and knowledge driven digital societies. Welcome to the stage Cerys Stansfield.

>> MODERATOR: Welcome to the first high-level session for this afternoon. My name is Cerys Stansfield, and I'm an Analyst at Access Partnership. This session will focus on building digital societies that are inclusive and knowledge driven in nature. I'm honoured to be joined by esteemed panelists to explore ongoing strategies and initiatives and future priorities in this aim. Please join me in welcoming the Director General of the National communication authority of Somalia.

Next we have the Executive Director of the Uganda communications Commission.

Next is the Director General of regulatory authority in Zimbabwe. And next is Christopher Reckord at National AI Task Force. And Mr. Philip Lee for WACC. And Mr. Bazlur Rahman Ahm, with responsible AI. And also Vint Cerf. The Chairman of the Leadership Panel for the Internet Governance Forum.

Thank you all for being here today.

Please allow me to give the first question. How can you create

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inclusive digital access ecosystems that are resilient, driven and meta ready.

>> SOMALIA: Our information cooperation framework erase deep-rooted barriers. Challenges in this context is a number of issues we cannot ignore to make sure we are leaving no one behind. I would like to demonstrate how Somalia does this for this context. In Somalia we promote ICT for the last two decades, we incentivized the public-private partnership and develop stronger relations and leading to a more stable and more affordable prices for the Internet, which resulted in the increase in the Internet in the Sector. ICT has grown and the international financial inclusion. And now they're rolling out 5G.

It is not only boosting the infrastructure and the ecosystem. It is the laying of a Roadmap for digital inclusion fiber optic expansion. This will focus on the lessons learn from our experience which is the mean theme of our discussion. We need to address the reality of the infrastructure for reliable Internet connectivity and establish the community for a digital society.

There is need for long-term coordinated investment strategies with incentives on the public-private partnership and closing the critical gap. Second we have the limited institutions that limit the continuities of the projects .

It threatens Cybersecurity and builds confidence and develop cross-border trade.

Three, building a digital society tackling the Digital Divide for marginalized Groups especially for the women and youth are excluded from digital service, local Government to design and implement the context for the specific policies that ensure access and usability for all overcoming social barriers and ensuring no one is left behind.

Fourth is the most important one, the digital literacy must be central. Low level digital skills are a constant barrier to the underdeveloped countries, which can incentivize the digitalization of the country.

Fifth, well emerging things like AI for the potential, they're not a magical solution but successful adoption requires solid Governance framework, investment in local capacity to use and manage them responsibly as well.

Building a knowledge driven society is a technical challenge and involvement challenge and above all a human challenge. Thank you.

>> MODERATOR: Thank you. Thank you for sharing the Somali context and lessons learn. We will now go to Uganda. You have been expanding digital infrastructure in a positive form. How is the country combining its inclusive policies, digital skills and efforts for affordability, to ensure ICT and media expand equitable access to information and in particular to those who are unserved and underserved communities?

>> UGANDA: Thank you, Madam Moderator. Colleagues and ladies and gentlemen, Uganda recognizes the true transformative power of ICT. And the media, the ability to have equal access to information,

especially for those that are left behind. Over the past 20 years, we have steadily advanced this Agenda through various Agendas, and most recently through the Roadmap 2023-2028. These fostered a robust ecosystem that has 76% of the National backbone infrastructure, dictates public service and public communication via the access centres and digital literacy Programmes.

That said we are not blind that we have challenges, 7.5 million Ugandans are offline. To bridge the divide we are focusing on three key strategies.

One, the expansion through the universal access fund targeting the North and northeastern Uganda with the broadband initiatives. Through solar powered labs and satellites to reach other areas.

Uganda is advancing legislation on access of public data. These efforts complement our push to establish digital and scientific repositories that are inclusive and accessible to all.

Three, digital literacy and affordability. We're scaling Programmes that have already trained over 500,000 citizens in the past year. Five, six years, including women, SMEs and youth. And we're working to reduce the cost of devices and expand mobile digital literacy.

We believe expanding access to information is not just about equity, it is about inclusion and opportunity. That is why we are fostering an ecosystem that supports independent media, local content creation and diverse voices, particularly at the community level.

We call upon our partners to support our transformations. Uganda is committed to ensuring no one is left behind as we have an empowered and digitally inclusive society. Thank you.

>> MODERATOR: Thank you very much for sharing the comprehensive approach that Uganda is taking to bridge the Digital Divide.

I will turn to my right. May I invite you to share your perspective from Zimbabwe. What is the role of telecommunication and ICT regulatory Authorities in building an inclusive and knowledge driven digital societies?

>> ZIMBABWE: Thank you very much. And good afternoon, Excellencies, that are present. To answer this question, allow me to zero in on the specific interventions by the regulatory authority in Zimbabwe to promote inclusivity and the knowledge based society, through the range of strategic initiatives the Regulator is ensuring that all segments of the will population, regardless of geography or ability or Agenda, age or economic status can participate meaningfully in the digital policy. One of the barriers is the lack of telecommunication infrastructure in remote and economic disadvantaged areas. To address this the Regulator implemented a tower relocation Programme which involves financing relocation to underserved Regions, including border areas.

These towers, once relocated are shared by multiple network operators, making them viable for service delivery, despite low commercial retains. This initiative has brought essential connectivity to marginalized communities enabling access to digital

services and education and access to information.

Recognizing also the unique challenges for persons with disabilities, the Regulator offers basic and intermediate and advanced ICT Programmes tailored to their needs. The Programmes not only enhance digital literacy and also empower people living with disabilities to become trainers themselves through the train the trainer Workshop. This approach fosters self-sufficiency and creates a ripple effect of knowledge transfer within the community of persons with disabilities.

To further support them, the Regulator has facilitated the detection of assist software and gadgets to various centres housing people with disabilities.

These technologies are essential in enabling access to computers and the Internet thus breaking down barriers to education, to communication and employment opportunities.

The Regulator has also taken sufficient strides in promoting gender inclusivity in the tech space through initiatives such as girls in ICT Programme and we also have one which we call she tech Programme. And these Programmes aim to inspire and equip girls and young women with their skills and confidence to pursue careers in ICT. By challenging stereotypes and offering hands-on learning experiences.

To ensure economic hardship does not limit the education, we offer scholarships to those, in this case both boys and girls. We have also noted that when we leave boys alone, the boys, especially in our areas, they end up doing a lot of drugs and we need to assist with them as well. Both boys and girls we're assisting them. Those coming from underprivileged backgrounds and scholarships, so they can also be assisted.

Inclusive efforts extend also to the elderly. We have set up over 202 community information centers, in the rural areas where the elderly are staying, the rural folk are, and they can go and access ICT services, Government services.

Recently we introduced telemedicine as well in those areas so they don't have to be traveling all the way to the towns. Also promoting inclusivity and bridging the Digital Divide.

So the Regulator's multifaceted approach to digital inclusion reflects a strong commitment to building a knowledge based society where no one is left behind.

Through infrastructure development targeted training, technology support, gender empowerment, financial aid and policy advocacy, there is a Foundation that is more equitable and digitally empowered Zimbabwe. I thank you.

>> MODERATOR: Thank you very much. There is a huge number of things going on. So thank you for your efforts in Zimbabwe.

I pivot back. The attendance to the AI event next-door, it shows AI is a hot topic. It is not going anywhere. It is an emerging technology that cuts across several WSIS Action Lines. My challenge is can you give us one quick affordable action a Government can take this year to jump-start the use of AI in public services?

>> CHRISTOPHER RECKORD: Thank you for the question. A big one. One, it is difficult to choose one right now. I will give you a context a bit, to say that a year and a half ago, the then Minister with responsibility for Digital Transformation and innovation created an AI Task Force, that she was invited to Chair. That task force was complemented with Public Sector and Private Sector and Academia there. About 17 persons. It took about a year to do research, meet with stakeholders and put together a report.

With the report, we came up with a document we presented to the Prime Minister and Cabinet that outlined a number of areas.

I will give high-level as to what some of the areas were.

With respect to education, strong recommendations for education. Of course, we had to have a section on economic growth and public awareness, sensitization. One thing we will see firstly coming out is education.

Because the then Minister was reappointed as Minister of Education. So I guess she had head start in getting the report, reading through it and started to implement things in the ministry.

One thing she's done is for testing, a tool to help teachers mark papers. As a former teacher myself, it is a struggle, a lot of papers to mark. With the advent of this technology, it is augmented helping us do these type of things.

That is one of the tools that is there. Another tool in education that is being tested, you know, you mentioned cost. The Minister along with some other dignitaries visited in there and saw interesting experiments happening there.

They were lucky that an investor made an offer to complement the technologies. Some that are doing and sign the contract from the AI lab. And also partner with University, Minister of Education, getting that up off the ground.

Number one thing for me is education, education, and of course, you know, if we were to make a suggestion for a project, bell something like an AI chat box to answer questions for all Government services, regardless of the service you would like is a fantastic initiative, if you were to suggest something brand-new, you know, different, but a chat bot that speaks to the nation for any questions for the Government is forever helpful. Thank you. Thank you, .

>> MODERATOR: Thank you, Mr. Christopher Reckord. It is important to remember when we think about our digital societies, yes, we spend a lot of time in telecoms and ICT Sectors, specifically, but this is transforming all Sectors. We heard about health, education, thank you very much.

Dr. Philip Lee, we heard a range of insights from Government and regulatory perspective when it comes to inclusive digital societies.

Please, can I ask you to reflect on the prominence we should give to communication issues in this dialogue. Specifically, what position does an international NGO such as the WACC take in this field?

>> PHILIP LEE: Thank you, Moderators. WACC and its partners

around the world work to advance communication rights and media freedoms as fundamental to just, democratic, inclusive and peaceful societies.

Looking back on two decades of actions aimed at creating an incredible Information Society, we must confront the reality that millions of people are still excluded. Not just from digital access, but also from meaningful participation in the systems that shape knowledge, Governance and power.

It is a simple truth that without communication justice, there can be no equitable Sustainable Development.

Civil Society especially in the Global South is being increasingly silenced by the collapse of international aid and shrinking funding streams. Digital technologies are dominated by the Global North and some voices are amplified and others are marginalized.

At this juncture, WSIS+20 is formulating bold proposals to rethink understandings of development to elevate National actors and increase accessibility, affordability and accountability.

WACC and its partners welcome these calls, but none of this transformation is possible without confronting the Colonial, racist, and sexist legacies embedded in the control of information and knowledge and in the development of digital technologies themselves. Including artificial intelligence.

We believe that communication must be recognized not merely as a tool for development, but as a right. Central to human dignity, Agency, and justice.

With that in mind, we're calling for media regulation that genuinely serves the common good. Not just market or state interests. Media ecosystems where community-led voices are not just supported by prioritized.

Democratic data Governance that respects people's sovereignty over their own information. New public and nonprofit ownership of digital infrastructure that upholds the public good.

A fair Global knowledge regime where truth is not dictated by power.

Finally, a realignment of the Global digital economy and its final architecture based on principles of fairness, inclusivity and accountability.

WACC urges, WSIS+20 UN agencies, Member States and digital actors to listen to the voices of ordinary people and to respond radically to their concerns.

If the next 20 years are to deliver on the promise of just and inclusive digital societies, then communication rights must no longer be a footnote to Governance discussions, they must be foundational.

Can we imagine a world in which communication ecosystems serve people, not profit or power?

If we can, then we must act decisively to build it.

>> MODERATOR: Thank you, Dr. Lee. And for the reminder that there are several level in our ecosystem where inclusivity must be

accounted for. From the users of the technologies and also the designers, policymaker, Regulators. Very much.

-- thank you very much.

Dr. Bazlur Rahman Ahm, there is a focus on the role of media in Information Society. What are the key challenges we face in implementing this Action Line in Bangladesh and Southeast Asia and more broadly, particularly with regard to the role of independent and pluralistic media in fostering informed societies? And if I may, what are the key trends and opportunities that you see later in 2025 and beyond as we strive to foster inclusive and knowledge driven societies, again, with a focus on Bangladesh and Southeast Asia.

>> BAZLUR RAHMAN AHM: Yeah, Madam Moderator, Excellencies, distinguished participants, WSIS Action Line implementation fighters all over the world, good afternoon. It is a privilege to be here at the 20-year event. I want like to thank the Secretariat for the invitation. WSIS has given me the opportunity to share my thoughts on the behalf of Bangladesh and the Bangladesh Internet Governance Forum. I would like to endorse the statement from my mentor, Mr. Philip Lee, from all of the communication. I would like to fully endorse the instrument and views. At the outset, implementing the WSIS Action Line, we have a tremendous opportunity presented by widespread connectivity and mobility, user friendly interface and emerging transition centres. The advancement encourage us to expand our Government services beyond traditional online and mobile platform.

Moderator, it is concerning to see the significant aspect of Digital Divide. WSIS is alongside our access to information and knowledge.

Unfortunately thy divide appears to be widening each day rather than improving. It is essential to acknowledge this and find solutions to enable everyone to benefit from the digital world.

Madam Moderator, the knowledge Sector is fully commercialized and dominated by the work Sector. As observed after 20 years, therefore, where are the voices of underserved communities in access to information and knowledge? Those who have the money, they have the knowledge, they have the access to knowledge domain, communication domain. Those without money or are underserved people, they're not part of this. This is very sad. After 20 years, we see this. Madam Moderator, it is essential for us to solve this problem.

Voices need to be heard, the system should be agreeable for us given the need for collaboration with the corporate Sector. Madam Moderators, the WSIS mandate have yet to be fully realized as outlined in the Plan of Action and Tunis Plan of Action. There is a pressing opportunity to enhance the WSIS to address longstanding and emerging challenges, and give an improvement in the exploration of efforts and fostering active engagement with the UN coordinator office at the country level.

Madam Moderators, I notable gap appears to exist between the UN resident coordinator office and the issues concerning World Summit on the Action Line and idea at the country level. This should foster

more collaboration and enhance the initiative.

Madam Moderator, in conclusion, what is needed is a permanent reinforced and even stronger WSIS and IGF Secretariat.

With sustainable funding at both the Secretariat and as well as country level with the three areas, number one, develop a localized Action Plan that align WSIS's commitment with National priority. We need a central system from the UN side. Currently, we're putting to the UNESCO and to the WSIS and putting to the ITU. No, we need to central reporting system from the UN side so every country submit their report accordingly. Number two, capacity building and awareness, promote education and digital skills and encourage the use February inclusive Government. Around the campaign on the benefit of the information and knowledge society in line with the creation and dissemination of knowledge and the life and livelihood.

Create a multistakeholder platform that has regular consultation, share progress, update and foster innovation and collaboration. I thank you, Madam.

>> MODERATOR: Thank you for reminding us in our Mission to achieve the WSIS vision, we're on the path, we're doing well, we're not there just yet. Ladies and gentlemen, I realize we're running a little over time, I urge you to grant me a few more minutes as we have one speaker left. Dr. Vint Cerf, thank you for joining us. I hope you can hear me well. You can? We have extensively discussed the importance of extending digital access to remote communities and to all individuals regardless of their gender or age or if they have a disability.

In the final minutes, I will return the focus to AI and ask you, how can AI technologies be leveraged to improve access to digital resources for persons with disabilities?

>> VINT CERF: Thank you, Madam Moderator. I was unable to get connected until moments ago. Thank you for the staff helping me get connected. I want to admire everything that was said in the beginning of the Programme. It is vital to provide access to everyone to get the world's knowledge at their fingertips we have many more things to do to achieve that objective, whether it is affordability or the like.

I want to highlight what artificial intelligence holds for us as this amazing new technology unfolds.

First of all, it is introduction of AI agents may allow voiced hands-free interaction. So the use of a screen reader to understand a two-dimensional web page with one dimensional interaction is improved by discussing with the agent what it is you are trying to accomplish. I see a tremendous benefit there, especially those that happens to be blind, especially those that are deaf, to understand and present speech as text can also be enormously beneficial to enable people to use the online technologies in the ways the former previous speakers have outlined. I would like to also observe the automatic captions are freely available in many different applications, and that too is a consequence of artificial intelligence development. Automatic language translation is also very well along the way.

These are all ways of remedying language disabilities. I have a language disability, I don't speak many of the languages others speak, and I need assistance with that.

Agentic AI can help others, possibly out of consequence of disability or even lack of knowledge.

These kinds of transactions can be enabled

I noticed and I want to emphasize the importance of digital literacy. You must learn how to use them in the safe way, to preserve safety and privacy. I also anticipate for the educational side of things that the agents will become tutors. Instead of asking them questions they will ask us questions to verify we learned what we should learn. Finally the online technology allows people to work from home if the physical facilities will accommodate that. And the job is appropriate. All of the things are benefits that AI will bring to us, but they will not be useful unless you have access to the basic Internet technology to begin with as many of the speakers have emphasized. Thank you very much for allowing me to extend the time beyond our normal termination.

(Applause)

>> MODERATOR: Thank you Dr. Vint Cerf, I believe we all agree that hearing from him is the silver lining to running over. Thank you for your patience. This brings our session to a close. We heard from National Regulators, international and National NGOs and strategic advisory bodies, building an inclusive community is no easy task. We should celebrate what we have done been the Digital Divide remains. The WSIS+20 Review allows an opportunity to refocus and redouble our efforts towards building and empowering our digital societies.

Whether it is in our infrastructure development, digital skills and literacy, tech innovation, financial enablement, empowerment, regardless of age, gender or if you have a disability.

(Music)

Multistakeholder collaboration is key. The Public Sector, the Private Sector, Academia, NGOs, Civil Society, your families, and my family will all co-exist together in the digital societies of the future

It is vital that we build them together. Thank you.

(Music)