High Level Policy Session – Enabling Environment

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Ladies and gentlemen, it's a pleasure to be here.

In early 2016 the World Bank released its World Development Report 2016: Digital Dividends which states that "For digital technologies to benefit everyone everywhere requires closing the remaining digital divide, especially in internet access. But greater digital adoption will not be enough. To get the most out of the digital revolution, countries also need to work on the "analog complements"—by strengthening regulations that ensure competition among businesses, by adapting workers' skills to the demands of the new economy, and by ensuring that institutions are accountable." The report notes that these analog complements should sound familiar "because they are the foundation of economic development."

Not only does the World Bank state that the digital dividends will not be realized without these analog complements but it also suggests that without them there are significant risks including "excessive concentration of market power and rise of monopolies, inhibiting future innovation" the spectre of skills shortages leading to "greater inequality, rather than greater efficiency" and unaccountable governments which will lead to "greater control, rather than greater empowerment and inclusion."

In other words "a favorable business climate, strong human capital, and good governance" are essential to both fully realizing the digital dividend and well as mitigating forces that could undermine it.

These are critical findings when we consider the role of enabling environments in the context of ICTS and the SDGs. The World Bank report has, effectively, highlighted how important an enabling environment is; after-all regulation, skills and good governance are central to any discussion of enabling environments. The report reinforces the importance of underpinning the digital economy with sound and non-digital building blocks.

To broadly extrapolate from the World Banks findings we can reasonably assume that if we wish to more fully realize the digital dividend then we need to focus on enabling environments as much as we do the provision of ICTs, and, if we wish to ensure that we continue to realize the digital dividend we need to put in place enabling environments to prevent concentrations of power and excessive governmental controls.   Putting in place an enabling environment is essential not only to realizing digital dividends but also to economic development more broadly and therefore to realizing the SDGs. Without them we may be prolonging and possibly exacerbating divides and inequality.

Yet what we casually call the "enabling environment" is far more complex than just regulation, skills and governance. What characterizes an enabling environment? It is an environment that is, among others, stable, predictable, safe, accountable, inclusive and empowering, an environment that encourages and enables growth and development. These characteristics are true whether we are talking about human development or economic development.

And therein lies one of the challenges in implementing enabling environments. The human dimension of an enabling environment often appears as if it is an afterthought. Or it's captured by terms such as "digital literacy" or "capacity building" or some similar expression suggesting that human development will occur with IT training. The entirety of para 29 on the enabling environment in the 2015 WSIS Resolution refers largely to technological and regulatory dimensions of an enabling environment; references to the human dimension of enabling environments are found but briefly in the sections on gender issues and human rights.

Fortunately the WSIS Resolution includes the oft quoted text from the WSIS Geneva Principles which calls on stakeholders "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, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

This paragraph speaks volumes. To build an information society that will empower individuals and communities so that they can realize their full potential will require an enabling environment. Putting in place regulation that facilitates market entry, investment certainty and competition, among others, is critical so that businesses can thrive, but also, and most importantly, so that the individual and therefore society and economy can thrive.

The paragraph also recognizes that the realization of human rights is central to an enabling environment and to empowerment. Special Rapporteur Frank La Rue noted in his report on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression that "by vastly expanding the capacity of individuals to enjoy their right to freedom of opinion

and expression, which is an "enabler" of other human rights, the Internet boosts economic, social and political development, and contributes to the progress of humankind as a whole."

Individuals are also empowered through education, healthcare and a safe and inclusive society. The 2014 report entitled "The Business Case for Women's Economic Empowerment: An Integrated Approach" by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) characterizes "sustainable and impactful economic empowerment" for women as comprising the following: "access to equitable and safe employment; education and training; access to and control over economic resources and opportunities; a voice in society and policy influence; freedom from the risk of violence; freedom of movement; access to and control over health and family formation; and, social protection and childcare." These are the building blocks of society and economy.

This is the human dimension of an enabling environment that we often forget. The phrases "digital literacy" and "capacity building" don't capture the challenge and the opportunity that the human dimension of an enabling environment encompasses. Yet this dimension is foundational to creating the economic and social development needed to be able to meet the SDG targets.

Effectively, we need to put in place enabling environments that are people-centred and inclusive and designed to enable individuals and communities to achieve their full potential to ensure that we don't, in the words of the UN Secretary General, leave anyone behind.

Thank you.