**Global Community of Practice Meeting**

**E-governance and Access to Information**

**14-16 January 2009**

**Hyderabad**

**Opening Remarks by Patrick Keuleers**

Excellencies, distinguished guests, dear colleagues…,

On behalf of UNDP, it is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all here in Hyderabad for this global community of practice meeting on e-Governance and Access to Information.

Dear colleagues, in a world where the free availability of information has become one of the decisive factors in judging the economic competitiveness and democratic maturity of societies, the link between E-governance and Access to information is obvious.

As citizens we have many choices to make in life. Having the freedom to access information is a fundamental right that allows us, as engaged citizens, to make those choices in an informed manner. Access to information is thus not only a prerequisite for social and economic empowerment; it is also a citizen’s passport to active participation in public and political affairs.

In particular in today’s world, where people’s livelihoods are threatened by rising food, and energy prices, climate change and the instability of the financial markets, access to information becomes a lifeline to both governments and citizens, rich and poor, of all beliefs and of all ages and gender.

In this period of growing uncertainties, good government is no longer just about delivering services, and achieving the Millennium Development Goals, it is also about redesigning the social contract between the state and its citizens, to engage them more directly in finding adequate responses to the many challenges that societies are facing. E-governance is thus no longer seen as a simple technical solution to improve bureaucratic processes, but increasingly also as a powerful tool to intensify and speed up the democratization of governing institutions. E-governance allows the state to better communicate and interact with its stakeholders, and to engage them in the policy making and decision-making process. From the citizens perspective it allows governments to better respond to the call for greater transparency and accountability and hence to revitalize the notion of public trust that underpins the social contract between the state and the people.

As the title of this COP meeting indicates a lot of work has gone into researching the present status of e-governance and access to information in the different regions. E-governance is clearly emerging as a tool for greater accountability and transparency, better service delivery and for linking both the supply and demand side of A2I. Our role, as the United Nations Development Programme, is to make sure that these developments are not only targeting the better-off in society, but that they also contribute to addressing the social exclusion and lack of participation that continues to affect mainly the poor and vulnerable groups in society.

Despite the tremendous progress made in E-government applications, these investments still rarely benefit the ones that are mostly in need of services, knowledge and information that can better their lives.

Whether action should be taken through stand alone E-Governance projects or by mainstreaming e-governance applications in other UNDP projects remains a topic for discussion. In the Asia Pacific region we were able to identify some 160 UNDP projects in democratic governance, poverty, trade and energy and environment that are dealing with or that include outputs related to e-governance/ ICT and A2I. We are also witnessing a gradual convergence of the service delivery and the citizen participation dimensions of E-governance.

But this meeting is not only about the Asia Pacific. In the coming days we have the opportunity to share experiences from the different regions, discuss various approaches and challenges and explore also the current and future niche opportunities for UNDP in this sector. We will also debate on how best to operationalise e-governance and access to information initiatives in other UNDP practices and sub-practice areas and brainstorm on ways to access resources and advisory services. Knowledge Management is an important element in this process and we are therefore very pleased to have colleagues from our Knowledge Service teams in New York and Bangkok with us, to facilitate the discussion on how to improve the way we share knowledge and strengthen our community of practice in this field of work.

To close, allow me to say a few words to our friends and colleagues from our host country. It is not a coincidence that we decided to hold this COP meeting in Hyderabad. For many years now, India has been at the forefront of E-governance and access to information developments in Asia, particularly those that are benefiting the grassroots communities and disadvantaged groups.

The city of Hyderabad also hosts the two implementation agencies for UNDP’s ICT for development projects in India, namely the National Institute of Smart Government and the Centre for Good Governance.

On behalf of my colleagues, I would like to thank the Director and staff of the National Institute of Smart Government for the very fruitful collaboration in organizing this event, together with the UNDP colleagues from NY, Bangkok, and Delhi.

We have an exciting agenda ahead of us and we all look forward to the discussions. But I also hope that you will find some time after the sessions to socialize and get to know each other. While communication technology can bring together colleagues form distant locations, ICTs are still not able to fully substitute for the benefits and the pleasure of face to face interaction between colleagues and friends.

Thank you all for joining us in Hyderabad and I wish you all a very pleasant and successful community of practice meeting. Thank you.