

## **ICEGOV Closing Keynote Lecture: - by Dr Judy Dlamini, Chancellor at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg**

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Distinguished guests, esteemed colleagues, representatives from governments industry, multilateral and non-governmental bodies, and academia; students and friends;

I greet you all with warmth and gratitude as we come to the final moments of this week of conferencing. Sanibonani, Habari za Mchana, e kasaan, good afternoon!

It is a great honour to be taking the stage to close out the 17th International Conference on the Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance (ICEGOV). And not just because the university that I steward, "the University of Witwatersrand, [comma] Johannesburg" (to quote Prof. Marwala) is one of the hosting bodies, but because the particular theme that we chose for this year's conference, "Trust and Ethical Digital Governance for the World We Want," and the approach that we have taken of paying close attention to voices and issues from the Global South, are so close to my own heart.

And so, I have been delighted to be able to participate in parts of this serial event since we opened on Tuesday. I have taken note of key messages such as:

Minister Buthelezi's message that was a call to action for technology to be both harnessed and governed.

Prof. Marwala invited us to consider what it means to govern Artificial Intelligence at institutional and social levels, he reminded us of the importance of incorporating indigenous languages to address the digital divide experienced by non-English speakers, something that Prof. Vukosi Marivate's team is addressing amongst other academic entrepreneurs. Universal digital access is not possible without investment in the relevant infrastructure, making data affordable, providing digital skills to society including policy makers, which calls for multistakeholder collaboration. In keeping with the call for inclusion, Nisha called out our blind spot when it comes to equal gender representation and people with disabilities, especially the blind. While we applauded the release of the Global Digital Compact, Miller cautioned about complex dynamics regarding imbalances in power, in knowledge, in coordinated agendas and action, and the responsibility of creating hope and follow through on promises and commitments. Matsise called for the country's digital transformation Plan understood by all and driven from the president's office. Prof. Marwala pragmatically suggested that we have the difficult task of maximising the good while mitigating the bad of emerging technologies, the responsibility to consolidate and harmonise the African Digital Compact with the Global Digital Compact.

There have been messages about expanding digital public infrastructure and effective e-government and harnessing AI; but also considered critiques and questionings emerging about risks, values, and paradigmatic lock-ins (which were also referred to as colonized imaginaries).

Many early-stage and advanced research papers have been presented and discussed making points ranging from sophisticated models and frameworks, to softer ethnographic and vernacular studies. Overall, the calibre of thinking coming from scholars around the world has been impressive and promising as we navigate new and murky waters in this world of digital transformations. Congratulations to all of you for these commendable contributions, and the robust engagement in these discussions.

Now, a closing speech is typically not really the time to bring up new issues - and I won't - but I do want to use this opportunity to bring into focus and really emphasize one particular issue that has come up several times this week. An issue that I am passionate about. And I don't want to just bring it up as yet another wicked and bothersome intractable problem for policy and practice. I want to bring up this issue as being deeply real and personal for me, and for you.

### **And what is this issue?**

Well, I want you to look around the room. And I want you to notice something that is both obvious, and easy to miss or ignore. I want you to notice: who is not here.

I want you to notice the missing residents of Mamelodi township which is but a few km away from here.

Notice the missing rural dweller for whom there is no easy road – neither literally nor figuratively – to being in this space with us.

Notice the loud absence of the one who could not afford the conference registration fees and transport to be here.

Notice the unemployed, disgruntled graduate who didn't even know that we were meeting here, and may not have cared because of her loss of hope.

Notice the un-connected, un-aware, un-skilled millions in the global south who are living alternate realities to many of the digital dreams that we are discussing here. There wouldn't be enough space in the auditorium and virtual connection is a luxury that they can't access.

Notice the missing ones that don't trust in digitalisation, and notice the distance of the those that explicitly act unethically and exploitatively, validating that mistrust which builds resentment and despair.

Notice the silent non-human world. The animals, the plants, the microorganisms; the earth and the rivers and the air; the icecaps and the seasons; they don't get to

comment on what digitalisation means for them, but every now and then they shout to remind us that they are here, or that they are angry, or that they are simply gone.

And while you are at it, notice the invisibility of our future generations. The unborn children, the future adults, and all those who will inherit the planet, and its resources, and its failures, created by us.

And as you notice all of these ghosts in the room, I want you to realise one thing, that while we develop our digital compacts and infrastructures, our policy strategies and marketing plans, research and models – as worthwhile as all of that might be – we are living in a world that has become increasingly harsh and precarious. The digital divide between Global North and Global South; and between race, class and gender Prof.iles is already massive. And the legacies and interests that create and sustain these inequalities are still very much at play.

And so that little girl or Gogo (grandmother) who cannot speak here for herself truly bothers me, whose language and indigenous knowledge is ignored and/or excluded make me feel like an accomplice in her exclusion. The thing is it doesn't have to be that way.

And so all of those ghosts who cannot speak here for themselves truly concern me. And they ought to concern all those that believe in a peaceful prosperous world that embraces difference and cares for the wellbeing of all especially the vulnerable.

Just to personalize this

My own background discipline is medicine. As a doctor practicing family medicine in a South African township of Umlazi in the late 80s to late 90s, I spent years witnessing and understanding social determinants of health. When you see first-hand, day in and day out, what a loss of access, of validation and support, and therefore of hope can do to a person of any age, you develop a very practical empathy for what it is like to be left out or left behind. You recognize the difficulties, but you also begin to acknowledge the ghosts, to see your own role and agency, and to see the opportunities to co-create actions starting somewhere. Reconnecting at this conference with one of my young patients who is now SA Government's Chief Information Officer reminded me of the many Mandla Ngcobo's who had potential but no opportunity and therefore fell by the way side. It reminded me the task we all have to close the divide amongst our people and bring back hope to protect gains that have been made.

When I see my dear sister, former Deputy President of South Africa, Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, who comes from the small township where we both grew up, coming into this Conference and advocating in the strongest terms for redressing the gender-based politics of "meaningful connectivity" and emphasizing that we cannot afford to be oblivious to how millions of women get excluded from social and economic opportunity due to systematic digital exclusion? This is seeing the ghosts,

and insisting that we confront them. We cannot ignore the exclusions and the divides and hope for a peaceful and prosperous world!

South African scholar Ayanda Magida speaks of the multiple levels of digital divides, ranging from access to internet and ICT devices; to internet usage and skills; and ultimately to deriving the benefits of internet access and usage. She finds that there are various complex demographic and economic variables that contribute to the divides, but that a more inclusive society cannot be achieved without understanding and addressing these at both individual and systems levels.

As complicated this already seems, we are also confronted with additional layers of the global digital divide. It is a complex of polarizing divides between:

- The haves and have-nots (characterized by poverty, urban versus rural, formal versus informal, white versus black, and many forms of ethnocentrism and othering);
- We also have pronounced divides between the Global North and the Global South (characterized by divides of power and control);
- Divides between the Know and the Know-nots (meaning there are knowledge divides and asymmetries);
- And even Human versus Machine divides (even as the 5th industrial revolution supposedly looms to further blur the lines between our physical, digital, and biological realms).

All this complexity may seem overwhelming, but it is the reality of the times that we are in. And these divides – all of them – have resulted in exclusion, which affects the world we are living in.

A third of the world remains unconnected to the internet, and according to the Global Inclusion Partnership, “Women living in rural areas are three times more likely to lack internet access” and “Men are 21% more likely to be online than women globally, rising to 52% in the Least Developed Countries.” And “Since 2011, the [digital access] gender gap has only dropped half a percentage point, from 30.9% to 30.4%.”

And that’s just taking gender, as one dimension of exclusion.

While our various conversations this week have emphasized, as per our theme, “Trust and Ethical Digital Governance for the world we want”, we cannot ignore or tire of the questions:

Can there really be TRUST in a global digital order that simply reproduces the exclusions and colonisations of the industrial age? Or that makes promises that cannot be met?

Is there any ETHICAL proposition to be made in systems that may serve to entrench predatory and exploitative practices, with no sense of the common good or value?

And what is this “World we want” if it is not for a world that is better than where we are coming from, and perhaps even where we seem to be going right now?

### **Inclusion and the public good must be at the heart of digital governance**

So as we are told that the recent UN Summit of the Future adopted the ambitious Global Digital Compact, it in fact includes a Declaration on Future Generations which makes a case for inter-generational fairness, and makes “A commitment to more meaningful opportunities for young people to participate in the decisions that shape their lives, especially at the global level.” I pray those commitments are fulfilled for the sake of peace and prosperity for all.

The ghosts must be acknowledged, and they must be addressed , as we are charting seemingly clear waters that in fact have murky depths.

This is not the time for blind techno-optimism, or for naïve or desperate efforts to grab at simplistic solutions and case studies parachuted from elsewhere. No.

But neither is it the time to ignore the digital turn, and both the pressure and energy that it is producing in our systems.

It is the time for improving contextual learning, and the kind of anticipatory governance that demands insight, systems thinking, and reflexive action.

I have therefore been encouraged hearing conference sessions mentioning concepts such as Empathy; Fairness and equity; Social justice; Public accountability; Co-creation; Expanding freedoms and sovereignty; Citizen-centricity and common well-being.

### **This is better than “Ghostbusters”!**

This is making peace with our Ghosts, making them feel they belong and they matter. It is inviting them in and befriending them. Seeing those ghosts as part of the challenge as well as the solution for survival and for innovation.

This is a call for our collective Human and Artificial intelligence to find ways to:

Do much more local, contextualized work and research, with less generalization, more connected specificity. Let us truly understand our purpose and conditions.

We need learning networks for knowledge sharing and theory building. ICEGOV is a fantastic basis for this; may the success of this week which builds on the past conferences, breed further success both in your respective countries, and globally.

We need much, much more capability building. In basic education, digital skills development, futures literacy, public sector innovation. All that we have mentioned here.

And we need multi-stakeholder trust and action. The address from Minister Bosun Tijani of Nigeria emphasized the ecosystem approach that is required, bridging between government, industry, civil society, and academia so that we are leveraging our full capacities given the complexity and scale of what we are facing. And here I must mention that we also need improved mechanisms for academia and the public / private sector to interact and learn and act with each other.

One of the lessons from the former UN Women executive director, Dr Phumzile Mlambo Ngcuka on the best and efficient way to address inequality is solving for the ones that are left furthest behind first. Breaking the divides and the inequalities demands of us to follow that lesson otherwise the sustainable development goals will remain just goals that are unattainable. We owe it to ourselves and future generations to achieve them in this century.

And so I repeat: Inclusion and the public good must be at the heart of digital governance if we want to build trust and claim to act ethically towards any future worth having.

This is what I take away from this conference, and this is the mandate I hope we can all carry forward with us.

I want to end with thanking UNU for giving Africa this opportunity to host the ICEGOV. Prof.. Marwala, Dr Delfina Soares: Hopefully you now regret having waited this long to come back to Africa!

I also thank you, the ICEGOV community, for coming to commune with us here, sharing and debating with great talent and generosity.

And more locally, I also thank those who believed in the value of doing this hosting together with Wits, and who partnered so beautifully to pull off this week: DPSA, CPSI, partners from other departments, and our sponsors (BCX, BoxFusion, SITA, Brand SA, and Microsoft).

I also want to specially recognise our sibling country Nigeria's remarkable support and participation under the auspices of the Nigerian Minister of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy and the IT Development Agency (NITDA). Nigeria sponsored all of their accepted paper authors, hosted an excellent Workshop, and have exemplified what it could look like for a state to leverage its role in support of research-policy linkages in key fields of interest and potential. Thank you, DG Kashifu Inuwa Abdullahi on behalf of Minister Tijani and the great country of Nigeria.

I would like to close with a quotation from Kofi Annan, I quote, Today's [real borders](#) are not between nations, but between powerful and powerless, free and fettered, privileged and humiliated. Today, no walls can separate humanitarian or human rights crises in one part of the world from national security crises in another. We are not only all responsible for each other's security. We are also, in some measure, [responsible for each other's welfare](#). Global solidarity is both necessary

and possible. It is necessary because without a measure of solidarity no society can be truly stable, and no one's prosperity truly secure." Close quote.

Siyabonga. Obrigado. I thank you