

## Background paper for the eNACSO workshop at the 6<sup>th</sup> IGF in Nairobi, September 2011

1. A great deal of the discussion about companies' and individuals' rights and responsibilities on the internet is framed by an unspoken assumption that all users are literate and numerate adults of average intelligence, a reasonable level of education, with standard hearing and eyesight. This is far from being the case.
2. Increasingly internet usage has come to mirror the wider demographics of society. As a consequence there is a very broad range of abilities, capacities and levels of comprehension represented among the billion plus internet users worldwide. This has, or at any rate ought to have, profound implications for how we think about what the internet is or might be.
3. As the internet becomes ever more tightly integrated into the fabric of modern social, economic and political life it is imperative that we develop a framework of law and practice which properly honours and respects the civil and human rights of all internet users.
4. Children and young people are a case in point.
5. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the cornerstone of policy in this field among all the nations of the world. The Convention establishes that children and young people are rights holders. Adults, starting from family members through to those making up the international community and the internet industry, are legally required to take action to protect and promote these rights. It is a shared responsibility. Children and young people need to be involved, heard and protected at the same time.
6. The internet and the devices which can connect to it are major channels through which children and young people conduct important parts of their lives, communicating with others, learning, maintaining or building important relationships, having fun. The *virtual world* is part of children's and young people's *real world*. In many contexts trying to make distinctions between the two is meaningless, unhelpful, potentially even dangerous.
7. Thus policy makers in modern societies need to develop a new understanding of citizenship that embraces and encompasses virtual social spaces every bit as much as it does traditional real world spaces. Many parents, teachers and others still need to be helped to understand this crucial dimension of 21<sup>st</sup> Century living.
8. The same principles of behaviour that historically have been promoted in the real world have just the same validity in the virtual world, even if sometimes it is necessary to express them using slightly newer or different words. Kindness, respect, honesty, consideration for the feelings of others, being careful about how and to whom you reveal different kinds of information about yourself or your family or friends, these things matter in both places.
9. Children's and young people's voices have to be central to the evolution of policy in this space. This is not only important in its own right it is also essential to ensure policymakers focus on contemporary issues and find solutions which gain ready acceptance.