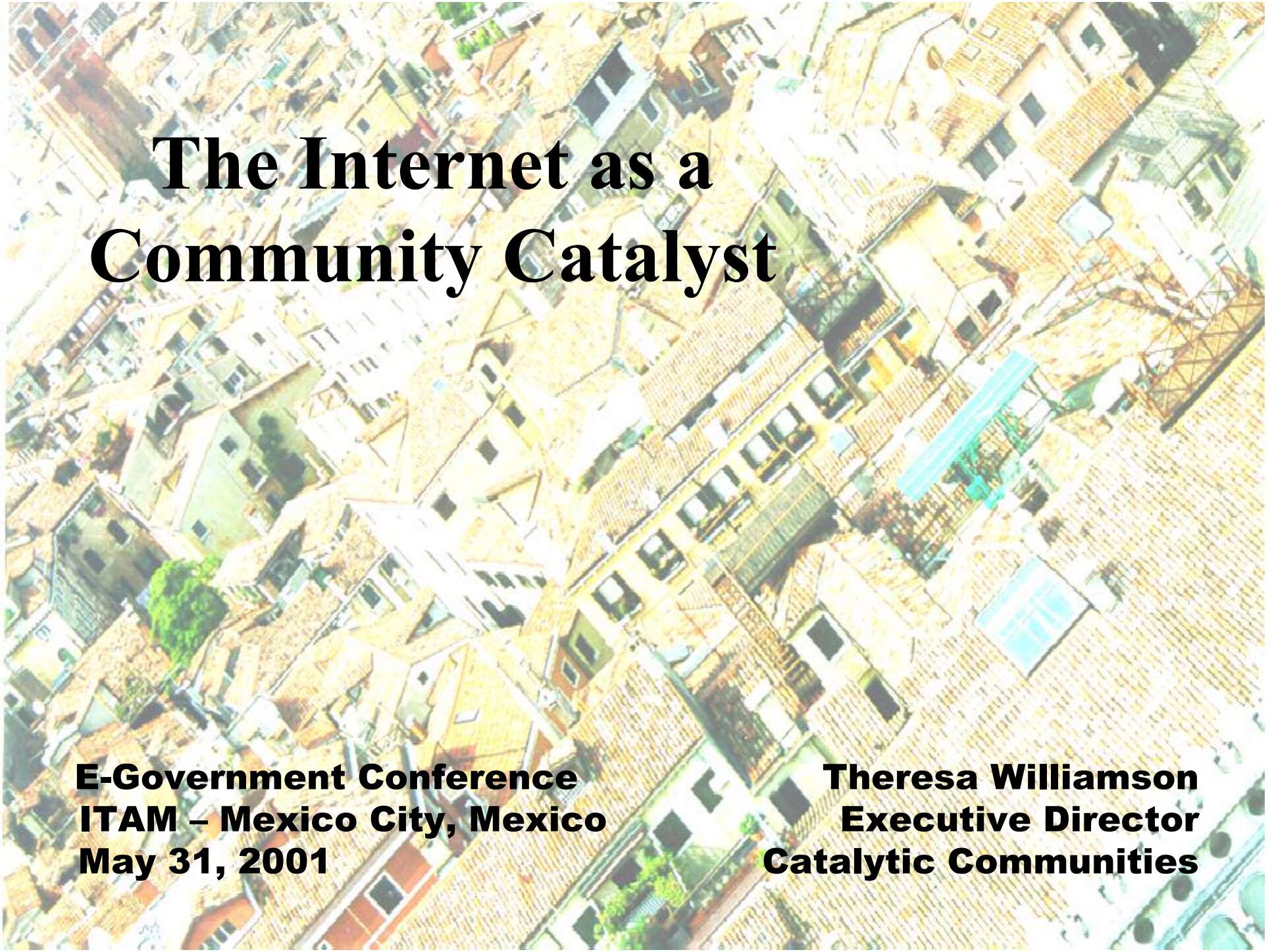

The Internet as a Community Catalyst

E-Government Conference
ITAM – Mexico City, Mexico
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Catalytic Communities

Introduction

Three sets of institutions and the Internet

- Electronic government
- Private sector institutions
- Non-governmental organizations (“non-profits”)

Introduction, cont.

Electronic government

- Access to information about existing government resources
- Citizen feedback channels
- Online social services (e.g. Education)
- Reduced waiting times re: bureaucracies
- Reduced discrimination
- Voting/polling

Introduction, cont.

Private sector institutions

- Online sales
- Comparison shopping
- Bulk purchasing

Introduction, cont.

Non-governmental organizations ("non-profits")

- Access to information about existing non-profit resources
- Citizen feedback on services needed
- Citizen feedback on existing non-profit services
- Mass communication / mobilization for social movements at low cost

Introduction, cont.

Two unaddressed themes

- The unique aspects of the Internet have not been fully taken advantage of.

2. What to do about the most marginalized citizens???

Theoretical Overview

Criticisms of Investment in the Internet for Development

- "Big Brother" state
- Psychological impacts
- More immediate concerns (e.g. hunger)
- Precarious news service quality
- Greater inequality in the short-term
- Inherent racial/gender bias

Theoretical Overview, cont.

Hurdles to Achieving "Digital Inclusion"

- Illiteracy
- Computer illiteracy
- Telecommunications – price, availability
- Technology – price, access
- Content – development, user-friendliness, interactivity, empowerment
- Justifying investments - proving importance of investing in information as compared to investments for more immediate needs

Theoretical Overview, cont.

The Potential of the Internet for Development (unique aspects of the Internet)

- Many-to-many communication
- Minimal travel or time costs
- Social capital / network-building
- Low likelihood of discrimination
- Cheap and rapid propagation of information
- Psychological value of giving validity to experiences
- Anonymity
- Democratization of data
- Accumulation of collective intelligence

Catalytic Communities

September 2000

- Innovative Solutions Database (ISD)
- Networking for low-income communities

Catalytic Communities, cont.

Pollution

Unemployment

Violence

HIV

Illiteracy

Catalytic Communities, cont.

The following is facilitated by such a database:

- Building of social capital
- Accumulation and documentation of communal knowledge

Catalytic Communities, cont.

As an apolitical tool, this database allows community residents a tool for self-empowerment either:

- In places where government is trying to make a difference, it gives communities a sense of possible projects they might encourage local leaders to carry out in their communities.
- In places where government is ineffective it gives communities the practical knowledge to work on their problems over time.

Catalytic Communities, cont.

Accomplishments:

- Volunteer team recruited
- 501(c)(3) tax exempt status in the USA
- Preliminary website available in English and Portuguese

Shortly:

- Full Spanish translation of site
- Full site redesign and database sophistication
- Outreach and active pursuit of cases

Concluding Remarks

Important lessons from Brazil:

For all three sectors' efforts towards digital inclusion to work, it will be important to emphasize:

- **Internet access**
- **Internet content**
- **Marketing**
- **Coordination**

Concluding Remarks, cont.

"Providing physical access to ICTs is one thing; giving citizens good reason to want to make use of them is quite another"

- Hague and Loader (1999) *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age*

English:

www.catcomm.org

Español / Português:

www.comcat.org