

**Closing Speech for Thailand Innovation Day,
The Honourable Anand Panyarachun,
Former Prime Minister of Thailand
Bangkok, June 11, 2001**

Mr. Chairman, Vice President Mr. Kassum, Distinguished guests and innovators, I am honored to provide a few comments in recognition of this event, and in particular the Finalists who have come to share their ideas with us. Now, I know this group of guests and finalists are anxious to find out who has won, so my remarks will be brief.

Our grandchildren are the true IT generation. It is my hope is that the end of the last century will be remembered not as a period of economic crisis, but as a period in which we determined, once and for all, to unite as a nation to address human rights, the equitable distribution of income, and a reform of governance that puts true power in the hands of ordinary people and enshrines the reform in our Constitution.

Our Constitution is a revolutionary document because it empowers people with real tools of governance - rights, accountability and representation - in ways unimagined in the 15 Thai constitutions that failed before it. The difference between this constitution and the previous trail, is the participation of people, rather than vested interests, as its true architects. Armed with that experience and document, we enter the Century of Knowledge. The Era of Innovation.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have seen the great benefits of the technological change in reducing poverty throughout the world. Children in Brazil are learning about democracy through computers, African artisans are selling their crafts over the Internet, and health care is delivered more efficiently in India through handheld devices carried by rural health providers. Citizens throughout the world are conducting government services online, and corporations are conducting shareholder voting through Internet. We have seen businesses become more competitive, reacting more quickly to create new and innovative products in response to the market. Ideas are the currency of the day.

Now Thais are known for many fine qualities, but speedy technological innovation has not been high on the list. We still have some ways to go in terms of education, awareness, and access of all of our citizens to basic telephone service. But we have started on the path, led by the example of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, who has empowered many underprivileged communities and schools with access to information technology. Seeing how many proposals have appeared in such a short time, it is clear that Her Highness' efforts have raised awareness, and that perhaps our reputation in the field of innovation will be changing soon.

The potential benefits of information technology in networking in people, in providing economic opportunity, in sharing knowledge more rapidly, in documenting local wisdom, and in providing basic services, are amply demonstrated by our Finalists. Our rural people, who outnumber our urban people by far, lack these tools more than our city - dwellers. Yet for every 10 Internet users in Thailand, only one is

rural. Such is the way of the market, and this is way we must take action on the digital divide

Information technology has its risks as well. Many in our society fear the possibility of unintended consequences of the wrong type of information reaching our rural communities, which are the cornerstone of our society. This view is based on the assumption that the rural community is closer to an ideal, and it must be protected from change. But we all know that the change is inevitable. In Buddhist philosophy there is a saying, "All things are in flux and nothing is permanent." Like other problems we have faced in the past, we will confront the challenge not by turning our backs, but by engaging confidently, openly, and as a community, to ensure that change in a way that is consistent with our ideals. To me, Innovation Day represents an important step forward, because it demonstrates that people from all walks of life are able to harness the power of information and networking for positive change. To improve the quality of life in the rural community, to provide the right type of information "content" that does not exploit but empowers. I am pleased that the Government also recognizes this imperative, and that the World Bank is supporting the Government's efforts.

Through our Constitution we have determined that our democracy and society will survive, and thrive, based on the pillars of knowledge, good governance, and the empowerment of people. I am pleased to say that we are entering the Century of Knowledge determined to build our information infrastructure on the same foundation.

We will shortly name a selection of winners from this group of community innovators, and one such prize will be given to the Finalist whose proposal best embodies the virtues of good governance and empowerment of citizens using information technology. I would like to thank the American Corporations in Thailand (ACT) for donating this gift in my name. Let me repeat the message of Vice President Kassum this morning. All of the Finalists are winners, and in fact, Thailand is the real winner. Congratulations to all of the finalists who have shared their ideas openly, which are increasingly our most valuable asset.

Without further ado, I would like announce the winner of the Anand Panyarachun Prize for Rural IT Innovation.