

An Inclusive Information Society Rhetoric or Realisation?

Julie E. Ferguson, April 2004

In December 2003, over 13.000 people gathered in Geneva, Switzerland for the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society. The Summit was convened by the United Nations in order to reach international agreement on pressing issues raised by the Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the 21st Century: issues such as who owns the Internet and how it should be governed, how to finance affordable access by the world's poor, combating cyber-crime and spam, promoting cultural and linguistic diversity, and the search for an acceptable balance between international security, privacy, and freedom of speech.

The Information Society – what's at stake?

The Information Society is a concrete indicator of our society's globalisation. With the advent of the Internet, boundaries disappear; information is at our fingertips, 24/7. In this context, the right to information has become a basic condition for human and social development. But commodification of information is a growing trend, further deepening the gap between the haves and the have-nots.



*Maitreyi Doshi from the India Youth Caucus
(ITU/Jean-Marc Ferré)*

ICT and development

One of the innovative features of the WSIS was the ICT4D Platform, a parallel gathering of organisations using ICTs as an instrument for social and economic development. The Platform was an opportunity for delegates and other stakeholders involved in the Summit to showcase their work, and to network and exchange ideas on what the Information Society means for development. And network they did: over 10 000 people from all corners of the world took time out from the Summit debates to visit the ICT4D Platform.

“Principle” outcomes

So what was said, and what results were actually achieved, in this first phase of WSIS? Despite low expectations and significant international scepticism prior to the Summit, delegations representing 176 countries were able to agree on a Declaration of Principles and a Plan of Action.

The Declaration of Principles outlines a common vision of the values of an Information Society. The Plan of Action outlines the steps needed to make the vision a reality and specifically to bring the benefits of ICTs to underserved communities. Important results from both the Declaration and the Plan of Action include:

- Establishing targets for the international community, including measures to promote access;
- That the Secretary General of the United Nations set up a working group on Internet governance;

- Support for local content development, in order to strengthen cultural diversity and create an Information Society based on dialogue among cultures;
- A review of financing mechanisms for achieving universal access in underserved rural and urban areas, including an exploration of the feasibility of a Digital Solidarity Fund proposed by President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal;
- Consensus that the right to "seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers," as stated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹, is an essential foundation of the Information Society;
- A call for governments and other stakeholders to take appropriate action on spam at national and international levels, to raise awareness of threats to privacy, and to cooperate on combating cyber-crime and threats to network security.



Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade called for a Digital Solidarity Fund. (ITU/André Longchamp)

Dutch perspectives

In the months leading to the Summit, citizens in many countries sought to ensure that their values and priorities would be taken into account during the high-level discussions in Geneva.

In the Netherlands, a yearlong consultation process facilitated by three Dutch NGOs, IICD, Hivos and OneWorld Netherlands, enabled stakeholders from the public and private sectors,

researchers, students, and others to develop a set of recommendations to the national delegation. The recommendations were presented in the report *Building Inclusive Information Societies – Dutch perspectives for the WSIS* (available from IICD), and discussed in a public forum held in Amsterdam prior to the Summit.

The Netherlands delegation was advised to take a pragmatic and positive approach to the WSIS, with some specific recommendations on policy and principle:

- *Support for inclusiveness*

The Netherlands should express in her final declaration the political will to work towards an *inclusive information society*. Rather than accepting a weak action plan, the Delegation should invest in a concise, concrete global vision. Martijn van Dam, parliamentarian and delegate, endorsed this recommendation.

- *Commit to concrete follow-up*

In the follow-up to the Summit, Dutch stakeholders should work in thematic taskforces dealing with specific questions, such as how to address spam, and Internet security. The taskforces should have feasible goals, clear responsibilities, and real financing.

- *Sharing EU best practices*

The European Union should actively share her knowledge and best practice reflected in the eEurope Action Plan² with countries less far ahead in their ICT policies and plans.

- *Human rights – real and virtual*

Human rights as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are intrinsically tied to the Information Society. In other words, the rights that people hold in the "real world" are also extended to the "virtual world" of online communication. This pertains in particular to articles of the declaration touching on freedom of expression and the right to privacy.

- *Information is a global public good*

Information should be seen as a *global public good*. In today's society, access to information means access to development. But information is increasingly treated as a commodity, providing

¹ <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

² eEurope is a European plan targeting widespread availability of broadband access at competitive prices and a secure information infrastructure.

unfair advantage to those with *means* to access it, and excluding those who don't. The digital divide is more than a matter of infrastructure, and will not necessarily be overcome simply through technology. The public sector has a responsibility to ensure that fair access is promoted.

- *The individual is paramount*

The *user* - not technology - is the principal actor in the Information Society. As a consequence, a bottom-up approach should be adopted, respecting the *rights* and addressing the *needs* of individuals. In this context, *openness* is a key factor. Freedom and safety of the citizen should be safeguarded in the public domain, addressing harmful spam and viruses, and preventing commercial abuse of information. Although civil society and the private sector have a significant role in addressing these issues, appropriate public policy and regulation are the first condition for an open and inclusive information society. As the Internet is by definition a trans-national entity, international cooperation between governments is critical.

- *Civil society must be engaged*

Civil society organisations should join forces to ensure that the WSIS agreements are truly realised. By working together civil society groups can pool their *social* and *network capital*, enhancing their impact on post-WSIS strategy and implementation.



The Dutch public speaks out. (IICD)

Minister's response

So, after all these valuable inputs, what was actually achieved by the national delegation once the Summit got underway?

The delegation, headed by the Dutch Economic Affairs Minister Laurens-Jan Brinkhorst expressed

its intention to actively pursue taskforces on Internet governance and the difficult issue of financing infrastructure in developing countries, in collaboration with the Republic of Ireland, which holds the Presidency of the European Union in 2004.

Furthermore, the Minister acknowledged the importance of ensuring that the Information Society is firmly rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – in the virtual world as in the real world.

The Dutch statement emphasised the value of an open attitude, of sharing the knowledge accumulated in the development of ICT policies with countries in which these are still in formulation.

Lastly, the Netherlands advocated for the involvement of youth and civil society in the construction of the Information Society. This is critical to achieving the *inclusive* Information Society for which we strive.

WSIS – success or failure?

Involving years of preparation, The World Summit on the Information Society was an enormously resource-intensive event, and many wonder if all this money and effort would not have been better spent on concrete actions to address – rather than talk about – the digital divide.

The Summit, the ICT4D Platform and the many side events in the wake of both have undeniably brought to the attention of the global public the importance of information and communication issues for development in the 21st century. They increased awareness of the digital divide and the true meaning of the Information Society, identifying its limitations, dilemmas and *opportunities*.

Was it worth it? We have yet to see if by 2015 every village has at least one point of access to the Internet, if developing countries will succeed in making the leap forward in their access to the tools and to the people who can help ensure that our society, in reality and in “virtuality”, is inclusive, fair and open.

The second phase of the summit, in Tunis in 2005, will be an occasion to test the international community's ongoing commitment to these ideals.

Further reading

Hivos/IICD/OneWorld 2003. *Building Inclusive Information Societies – Dutch perspectives for the WSIS*. www.iicd.org/publications

ITU 2003. *Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action* WSIS-03/GENEVA/DOC/4-E & 5-E www.itu.int/wsisis/documents

National statement by H.E. the Minister of Economic Affairs of the Netherlands Laurens-Jan Brinkhorst, 11-12-2003 www.itu.int/wsisis/geneva/coverage/statements/netherlands/nl.html



(ITU/André Longchamp)

About the author

Formerly a programme officer with IICD, Julie Ferguson now works with the knowledge-sharing programme of Hivos. Thanks to Paul Maassen, Louk de la Rive Box, Katherine Morrow and Judith Veldhuizen for their contribution to the content of this research brief.

Hivos is a Dutch non-governmental organisation which operates on the basis of humanist values. Hivos aims to contribute towards a free, just and sustainable world. The organisation is committed to the poor and marginalised - and to the organisations which promote their interests - in countries in the South and in South-East Europe. Sustainable improvement of their situation is the ultimate benchmark for Hivos's work. An important cornerstone here is strengthening of the position of women in society. Hivos's most important activity consists in providing financial and political support for local NGO's. Besides offering finance and advice, Hivos is also active in networking, lobbying and in exchanging knowledge and expertise, not only at international level, but also in the Netherlands. Civil society building, economic activity and sustainable production are Hivos's central policy areas.

The **International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD)** assists developing countries to realise locally owned sustainable development by harnessing the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs). IICD realises its mission through two strategic approaches. First, Country Programmes bring local organisations together and help them to formulate and execute ICT-supported development policies and projects. The approach aims to strengthen local institutional capacities to develop and manage Country Programmes, which are currently being implemented in Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Ecuador, Ghana, Jamaica, Mali, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. Second, Thematic Networking links local and international partners working in similar areas, connecting local knowledge with global knowledge and promoting South-South and South-North exchanges. Thematic Networking focuses on sectors and themes like education, health, governance, the environment, livelihood opportunities – especially agriculture – and training. These efforts are supported by various information and communication activities provided by IICD or its partners. IICD is an independent non-profit foundation, established by the Netherlands Ministry for Development Cooperation in 1997. Its core funders include the Directorate-General for Development Cooperation (DGIS), the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

OneWorld (Nederland) has a vision of equitable and sustainable distribution of wealth amongst the world's population, underpinned by global attainment and protection of human rights and by governance structures which permit local communities control over their own affairs. OneWorld is dedicated to harnessing the democratic potential of the Internet to promote human rights and sustainable development. OneWorld aims to be the online media gateway that most effectively informs a global audience about human rights and sustainable development. And OneWorld aims to bring together a global community working for sustainable development through interactive online partnerships of organisations and individuals sharing our vision. OneWorld offer a range of (technical) services to our partners and other organisations working to build a better world.