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The World Summit on the Information Society and its Legacy for Global Governance

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Regardless how one looks at it, the World Summit on the Information Society undeniably opens a new phase in global communication governance and global governance generally. The WSIS process (by which I mean the sum of official and parallel activities) has identified the problematic issues in global communication, indicated the range of views on how to deal with them, provided various blueprints of what should and could be possible in the way of solutions, and gingerly explored ways of dealing with these questions in the future. To that extent, WSIS has crystallized a new paradigm in communication governance that has been emerging for some time now.

The global governance environment in communication (as in much everything else) is based on the interaction and interdependence of a wide array of actors and policy venues. Needless to say, power is not equally distributed among actors, and some sites of decision-making are more important than others. National governments still wield tremendous leverage both on the territories they govern and as the only legally authorized participants in international deliberations. Here again, the disparities are enormous but in all cases, national sovereignty is no longer absolute. Multilateral bodies, transnational corporations, and international treaties powerfully constrain the role of every nation state. Global governance is increasingly referred to as a multi-stakeholder process. The WSIS experience has transformed this framework most notably by sanctifying the place of global civil society as an organized force in this process.

The WSIS is the third attempt by the United Nations system to deal globally with information and communication issues. In 1948, in the optimistic climate of the post-war era, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights spelled out, for all, what the great revolutions of the 18th century had struggled to obtain for Europeans and Americans: that the capacity to seek, receive and impart information is a basic human right. In the 1970s, in the post-colonial climate of the cold war, the non-aligned nations sparked a debate on a “new world information and communication order”, drawing attention to such questions as the inequalities in north-south information flow, the cultural bias of technology and the lack of communication infrastructure in the so-called third world. 1948 was a moment of consensus, but the debates of the 1970s were fraught with conflict, as is well known. Both had something in common, however: an exclusive reliance on states and governments as legitimate actors or *porte-parole* for people.

The WSIS arrived in a totally new and unprecedented general context, marked by buzzwords such as technological convergence and globalization. Significantly, it appeared on the public radar screens with no historical reference whatsoever to its antecedents, as though someone at ITU headquarters had awakened one fine morning and

seen the information society peeking over the horizon of the mountains surrounding Geneva. The early days leading up to WSIS were marked by an almost surrealist fetishization of technology which one observer likened to calling a world conference to talk about wine and asking the bottlers to set the agenda.

The politics of WSIS was marked not only by consensus and conflict among the world's governments, but by a larger politics of definition, pitting governments against nongovernmental actors, namely NGOs and other civil society associations¹. In the immediate wake of the Geneva phase of the WSIS, it is a commonplace among most observers that it was civil society that kept the debate on track, that re-introduced the crucial elements left unresolved or unrealized in 1948 and the 1970s, and that organized itself responsibly to put forward a vision truly reflective of the interests of the world community. It was civil society that pressed the wine, put it in the bottles and labelled them. If civil society had not reared its difficult head at WSIS, it would have had to be invented.

Regarding both issues and process, there is a pre-history to WSIS that deserves to be recalled and taken into account.

The mainstream literature on WSIS to date ignores the vast amount of discussion, soul-searching and rending of garments that has preoccupied multilateral agencies charged with dealing with development, poverty, equality and human rights over the past few decades. The ITU – rightly criticized for failing to see the social side of the issues it deals with – has indeed provided glimpses over the years of the nature of the problems that civil society participants in the WSIS eventually forced on to the agenda. The ITU recognized the significance of the worldwide gap in telecommunications infrastructure between rich and poor – what has since come to be known as “the digital divide” – as early as 1984, in its landmark document *The Missing Link* (ITU, 1984). Eleven years later, a joint ITU/UNESCO (1995) study – ironically entitled *The Right to Communicate: At What Price?* – wondered to what extent societal goals could be reconciled with commercial objectives in this context². The study noted the detrimental effects of economic barriers to access to telecommunication services; the lack of infrastructures in some countries; and the lack of an international universal telecommunication infrastructure. These barriers were often the result of historical circumstances, political requirements and monopolistic industry structures, the study recognized.

Organizations such as the World Bank, meanwhile, began paying attention to communication infrastructure issues in the 1980s, relating them to what it would eventually label “knowledge for development in the information age.” Information and communication technologies began to be foregrounded on the international development agenda, where they

¹ The relatively low profile of the private business sector throughout the WSIS process was an interesting phenomenon. Were the issues too small to attract its attention? Did the business sector feel sufficiently well-represented by governments? Did it press its weight behind the scenes through informal lobbying mechanisms? These questions deserve a separate detailed analysis.

² This interagency report represented a rare effort to bridge the gap between technical and sociocultural sectors of the UN system.

had once been seen as peripheral, as investors and the governments that back them came to realize the great profits to be made by wiring the globe. It doesn't take a weatherman to see which way the wind is blowing when the president of Nokia bemoans the lack of cell phones in Nigeria. But the benefits reaped by "first-world" corporations involved in bridging the digital divide have yet to translate into tangible benefits for the people targeted by these programs.

In the mid-1990s, the "information society" project was driven first separately by the United States and the European Union, and then as a project of the G7 (now G8). The "Global Information Infrastructure" and its subsequent incarnations articulated both a vision and a plan in which, now, private enterprise would join with governments in spreading the good life via information technology. This activity had as its central policy to shift the emphasis from the state to the private sector for initiative, innovation and capital investment to develop the new information infrastructures for global commerce, finance, communication and social services. In all of these grand designs, people were still nowhere to be seen.

Thus, on the eve of the announcement of WSIS, the metaphor of the "information society" signified a certain type of social design – even if no one really knew what it meant. Civil society mobilization, however, has permitted the emergence of an alternative metaphor, that of the "communication society"³, based on values such as human rights, social justice, participation, shared resources, solidarity and sustainable development. It is thanks to the insistence of non-government activists that the WSIS official documents pay at least minimal lip service to such basic notions as freedom of expression, cultural diversity, media pluralism and the centrality of communication as "a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization" (WSIS Declaration article 4).

Can one actually talk about an "information society" without anchoring it in at least some fundamental notion of communication? Amazingly, that is precisely what the WSIS attempted to do, until civil society became involved in shaping the agenda.

That said, the nature of civil society involvement in WSIS – and by implication, in the future of global governance – should not be idealized. It needs to be deconstructed and understood. The story of civil society involvement in WSIS needs to be written and analyzed and that work is now underway. But there can be no question that the creation of an autonomous, open and inclusive structure, the WSIS Civil Society Plenary, and its production of the Civil Society Declaration – despite their shortcomings – provide a model for the blending of issues and process which should inspire all those who are thinking about possibilities for a new global politics, not only in communication but in global affairs in general.

There is no clearly agreed definition of what is meant by "civil society". In United Nations parlance, civil society includes all those who are not part of government, private

³ The WSIS Civil Society Declaration actually favours the term "information and communication societies".

enterprise or intergovernmental organizations. You and I, dear readers, are members of civil society. But how often and by what means do we ever have an opportunity to participate directly in international affairs?

One of the innovative challenges of the WSIS was the institutional commitment of the UN (and personal commitment of its secretary-general, Kofi Annan) that the Summit be organized as a multi-stakeholder partnership. Easier said than done. Much easier said than done. Civil society has for some time been included in various guises in UN summitry, but never as a full “partner”. There is a difference between including some members of civil society in national government delegations, or allowing observer status, or providing space in the Summit agenda and venue for civil society side events, and “partnership”. For one thing, partnership means having an equal say in the outcome.

Easier said than done. The question of civil society partnership inevitably raises important questions about legitimacy and representation. Who speaks for civil society? On what basis? In a democratic political system, one might expect governments to be the legitimate representatives of all their constituents. But the move to include civil society in international affairs recognizes the imperfection of intergovernmental relations as the basis for maintaining world order as well as the need to broaden the scope of global politics to include nongovernment actors. This is one of the salient features of globalization in the 21st century.

Resolution 73 of the ITU⁴, which launched the WSIS process, made no mention of civil society. It did refer to “the various partners concerned (Member States, Sector Members, etc.)”⁵. Initially then, the process began to move forward in a conventional manner, driven by the ITU, the UN agency in charge of regulating the world’s information and communication infrastructure. But this would soon change.

In December 2000, Mohammed Harbi, a senior ITU staff member, told a workshop of the Global Community Networking conference in Barcelona that the participation of NGOs and civil society organizations would be crucial to the success of the WSIS. It is unclear with what authority Harbi made that statement, but it sparked the imagination of a number of activists present at the workshop.⁶

During the subsequent months, members of *Voices 21*, a loose association of media activists, practitioners and individuals formed in 1999 with a view towards building public awareness of media and communication issues⁷, began considering how they might be able to influence the WSIS process. It was decided to revive the Platform for Democratisation of Communication, a grouping of NGOs formed in London in November 1996, whose membership included groups such as the World Association of

⁴ ITU web site, <http://www.itu.int/wsis/basic/about.html>.

⁵ In ITU parlance, « Sector Members » refers to the 400-odd private companies which enjoy associate membership by virtue of their key role in international telecommunication.

⁶ For this and other details of the back story of civil society involvement leading up to the official preparatory process of the WSIS, see “Communication Rights in the Information Society”, theme issue of the journal of the World Association for Christian Communication, *Media Development* (no. 4, 2002).

⁷ See <http://www.comunica.org/v21/>.

Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) and the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC).

On June 16, 2001, the Rev. Carlos A. Valle, general secretary of WACC, wrote on behalf of the Platform to the WSIS acting coordinator, Arthur Levin, requesting a meeting in Geneva, in order to “clarify the opportunities for civil society involvement” as well as generate ideas and possibilities about the process⁸. The letter stated:

Our WSIS NGO Working Group is beginning to formulate ideas on the participation of civil society, and also on the Themes under consideration at this important summit. The response to the WSIS from all members of the group is positive and enthusiastic, and indeed others with whom we are in communication also recognise immediately the importance of this event.

As a response was not forthcoming, the Platform decided to convene a meeting of its members in London in early November to push the process along. The meeting decided to rebaptize the group as the Platform on Communication Rights, and launch a campaign for *Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS)*. The purpose of the CRIS campaign would be “to ensure that communication rights are central to the information society and to the upcoming World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).”⁹

The campaign’s mission statement said:

Our vision of the Information Society is grounded in the Right to Communicate, as a means to enhance human rights and to strengthen the social, economic and cultural lives of people and communities.

Crucial to this is that civil society organisations come together to help build an information society based on principles of transparency, diversity, participation and social and economic justice, and inspired by equitable gender, cultural and regional perspectives.

The World Summit on the Information Society offers an important forum to promote this objective. We aim to broaden the WSIS agenda and goals especially in relation to media and communication issues, and to encourage the participation of a wide spectrum of civil society groups in the process.

The link made by CRIS between communication rights and civil society participation in world summitry was not a casual one. It lies at the heart of the more fundamental link between issues and process that would come to mark the entire WSIS experience.

A key event in that early period came within days of the launch of the CRIS campaign. The Platform joined forces with a German foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, which was intending to bring together a group of public service broadcasters to discuss media involvement in the WSIS. The Platform and the FES jointly organised a meeting of about forty people in Geneva November 19-20, 2001, about half of them from

⁸ Personal archive.

⁹ See *Media Development*, op. cit. The author was a founding member and serves on the international organizing committee of the CRIS campaign,

NGOs and half from a range of media organisations. The theme of the meeting was “Communication as a Human Right in the Information Society: Issues for the WSIS.”¹⁰

The meeting focused on both issues and process relevant to the WSIS. On the second day representatives from ITU and UNESCO as well as the newly-created “Civil Society Division” of the WSIS executive secretariat participated and a broad exchange took place regarding the range of possibilities for civil society involvement. The meeting provided participants for the first time with a clear idea of what the WSIS would be about and how it would be structured. Importantly, both ITU and WSIS officials insisted that there would be significant civil society involvement and that this was seen as essential – despite the fact that a number of governments were hostile to the idea. Furthermore, it became clear that the agenda for WSIS was at this point far from set.

This was the WSIS’s first civil society consultation. One month later, the UN General Assembly formally gave its approval to the WSIS and the general framework for participation. The General Assembly’s Resolution 56/183 “encouraged contributions” from a range of “relevant bodies”, including civil society. But there was still no indication what shape or form these contributions might take. UNESCO, for example, organized a series of consultations on thematic issues in early 2002, in which civil society expertise was central. As one of the “relevant bodies” contributing to WSIS, UNESCO could channel proposals based on its own consultations with civil society representatives. But this would not be the same as direct participation, or anything approaching “partnership”.

The 225 accredited civil society delegates who arrived in Geneva in July 2002 to take part in the first of three scheduled “PrepComs” that would lead up to the Summit therefore had no idea what to expect. Most of them had never met before and there was no clear sense of what the possible role of civil society could be. Some thought they might perhaps be allowed to observe the governmental negotiations while others sincerely believed they would have seats at the table and votes at the end of the day. All were in for a series of shocks.

PrepCom 1 set the tone for a Summit which would be overfocused on process at the expense of content. Government delegates debated for three days whether and to what extent nongovernment actors would be allowed to observe and under what circumstances they would be allowed to speak. Civil society, meanwhile, rather spontaneously organized itself into an open and inclusive “plenary”, with a series of appended structures for coordination and development of content and themes which would endure through the end of the Geneva phase of the Summit.

The rest of the story is relatively well known, as more players eventually came on board (350 registered civil society delegates to PrepCom 3, thousands at the Summit

¹⁰ A full report of this meeting is available on <http://www.crisinfo.org/live/index.php?section=2&subsection=2&id=22>.

itself) and thousands more followed developments on various list-serves and Internet sites. Major side events were organized to deal with clusters of issues ranging from community media to communication rights. An official Civil Society Bureau was created at PrepCom 2, to coordinate the administrative aspects of civil society participation. Civil society caucuses and working groups continued to provide input into the official government negotiations until mid-November 2003, when the decision was taken to concentrate instead on producing an autonomous civil society declaration. On December 8, 2003, the Civil Society Plenary unanimously adopted the Civil Society Declaration, *Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs*¹¹.

Reading the official government declaration and the civil society declaration side by side is instructive. Both mobilize a generous rhetoric, but the official declaration masks the important cleavages that marked the intergovernmental process while the civil society document provides a vision, makes choices and suggests some difficult steps that need to be taken. The official declaration sloughs over the chasm on human rights, for example, where civil society places human rights at the centre of its program. The government declaration, like so many before it¹², deplores the widening “digital divide” where civil society actually names a solution: the rich must pay¹³. Both are consensus-driven documents, but the first reflects the agreement to simply remain silent, and therefore immobile, on contradictory issues where the second is the result of negotiation and compromise in the quest to move forward.

The handling of governance issues in the two documents provides an essential clue to the different approaches. The government declaration tried to address the issue of the enabling environment for ICTs but in the end had to pass the buck on the crucial area of Internet governance to a working group which will report back to the Tunis phase of the Summit. Civil society meanwhile, named an assortment of agencies already involved in international ICT governance and called for public monitoring and analysis of their activities in the interest of greater transparency and ongoing participation in policy development.

So what is the legacy of WSIS? It is not, as some observers are suggesting, that the issues are too complex and divisive to be dealt with in an intergovernmental forum. Nor is it that civil society has all the answers. The legacy lies at the point where issues meet process and in the link between the two. The WSIS experience has put information and communication firmly on the global agenda and has also opened a space in which to explore new ways of dealing with global issues. This bodes well for the democratization of communication and its use as a vehicle for human development.

¹¹ http://www.worldsummit2003.de/download_en/WSIS-CS-DecI-08Dec2003-en.pdf.

¹² See for example, G8, *Okinawa Charter on the Global Information Society*, 2000.

¹³ Or, as the editor of *Le Monde diplomatique* put it in his editorial on WSIS, the world immediately needs “a formidable technological Marshall plan” (Ignacio Ramonet, “Le nouvel ordre Internet”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, January 2004, p. 1).

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