

WHOSE INFORMATION SOCIETY?

DEVELOPING COUNTRY AND CIVIL SOCIETY VOICES IN THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

David Souter

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was the largest single activity in international discussion of information and communication technologies during the past ten years – at least in scale. It absorbed a great deal of time and other resources of international organisations, governments, civil society organisations and businesses over a four year period (2001-2005). It produced four documents setting out aspirations for the information society. It provided a framework for international debate on infrastructure finance and internet governance. But it received only limited public attention and failed to bridge the paradigm gap between the worlds of information technology and international development.

This paper summarises a study of developing country and civil society participation and influence in WSIS that was commissioned by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and is scheduled for publication, to mark the first anniversary of the end of WSIS, in November/December 2006. As well as analysing participation, the study looked at the impact of WSIS on international ICT decision-making in general and makes recommendations to all main actors about how future decision-making might become more inclusive of developing countries, non-governmental actors and their concerns. In particular, it revisits the conclusions of the *Louder Voices* report¹ on developing country involvement in deci-

sion-making, published at the G8 summit in 2002, which identified a series of weaknesses in both international organisations and national policymaking processes which contributed to poor participation – and it asks how these have and have not changed as a result of WSIS.

APC's WSIS study drew on five main sources of evidence:

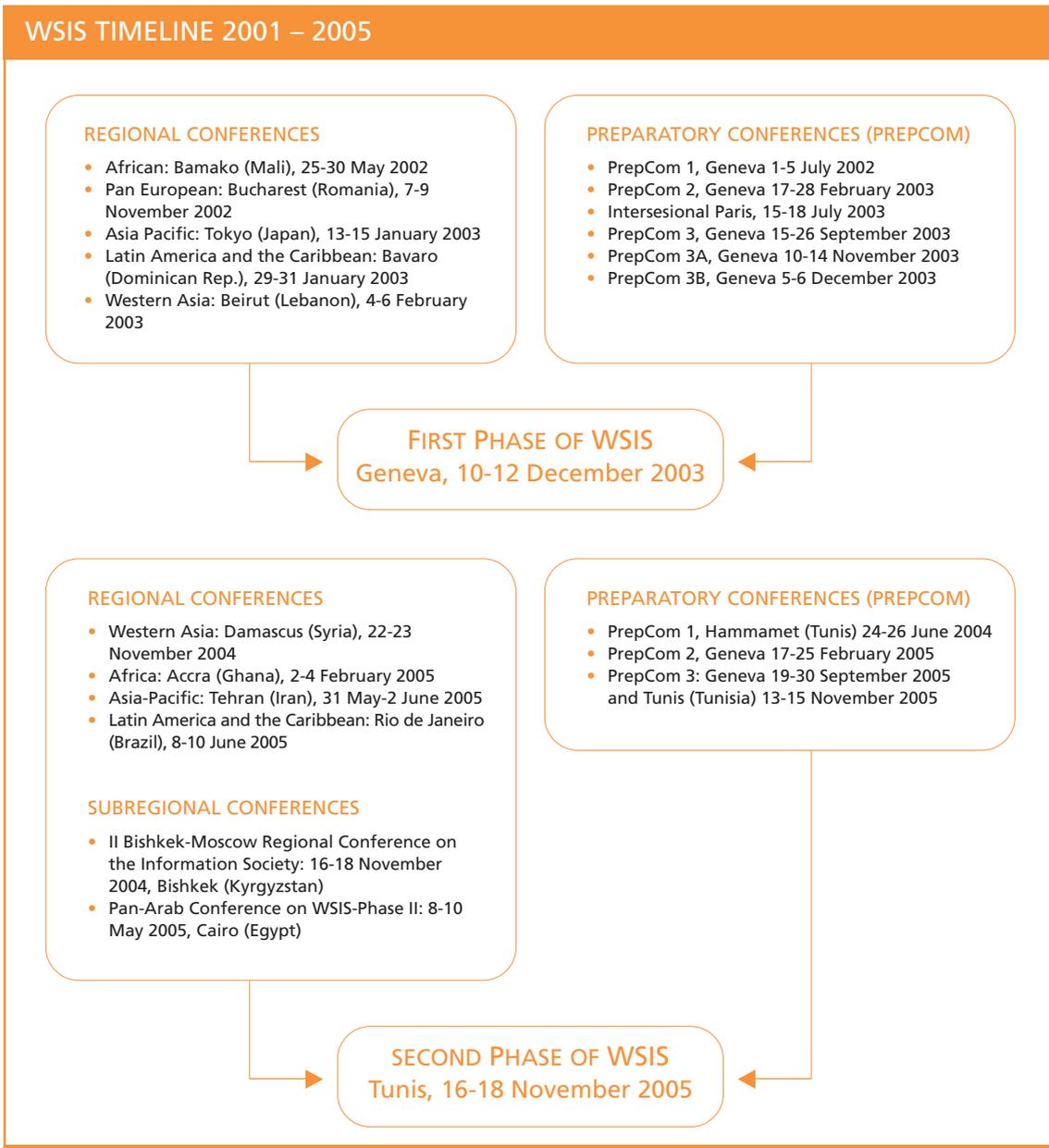
- participant observation of the WSIS process throughout its four year period, by the principal author, David Souter, and research associate, Abiodun Jagun;
- desk research, particularly the documentation produced within the WSIS process by all stakeholders, including developing countries and civil society;
- questionnaires and interviews with many individual participants in WSIS preparatory committees (PrepComs) and in the two summit sessions (Geneva, 2003; Tunis, 2005);
- detailed interviews with forty key actors in the WSIS process;
- and case studies of experience in five developing countries - Bangladesh, Ecuador, Ethiopia, India and Kenya.

This paper briefly summarises the main issues, conclusions and recommendations of the report. The full (book-length) study can be obtained from APC from late November 2006.

<http://www.panos.org.uk/images/books/Louder%20Voices.pdf>

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THE WSIS STORY



The origins of WSIS lay in a decision taken, without debate, at the International Telecommunication Union's 1998 plenipotentiary conference, calling on the ITU to organise a world summit on the information society. It is doubtful if ITU delegates expected this to be a global summit of the kind which the United Nations holds regularly on different issues, but that is what WSIS became when it won the backing of other UN agencies.

There is a standard process for the organisation of world summits. The summit meeting itself is the last stage of a prolonged process of negotiation, and is primarily an opportunity for heads of state and government to make public statements and commit their countries to a formal declaration. The real work takes place in complex discussions over the previous year or two, in a series of regional meetings and preparatory committees (or PrepComs). These are where the

text that is eventually signed is hammered out, and in which disputes are either resolved or shelved.

WSIS mostly followed this standard structure, but its organisation differed from the standard model in two main ways.

Firstly, it was organised in two phases - one two-year phase leading to the first summit meeting in Geneva in December 2003, another to the second summit meeting in Tunis in November 2005. This was justified as an opportunity to devote separate discussions to (firstly) principles and (secondly) implementation - though the underlying reason was failure to choose between two willing hosts. There were therefore five regional meetings during the first phase and four during the second; as well as three full PrepComs and a number of additional meetings in each phase.

Secondly, WSIS was organised by a technical agency of the United Nations, the ITU, rather than by the UN's headquarters. This was not uncontroversial. The "Information Society" includes wide-ranging cultural and developmental issues which many considered the responsibility of agencies like UNESCO and UNDP rather than the technocratic ITU. An underlying tension between broader development goals and goals of the ICT sector lasted throughout WSIS. Some within the ITU also saw the summit as an opportunity for it to redesign itself and broaden its mandate from telecommunications to wider information technology and information society issues. This was opposed by some ITU members, other international agencies and NGOs.

The first phase of WSIS, up to the Geneva summit in 2003, developed two general texts - a *Declaration of Principles* and a *Plan of Action*. These texts were agreed in negotiations between governments, though other stakeholders sought to influence them with varying degrees of success. The *Declaration* sets out the summit's (considerable) aspirations for the role of ICTs in transforming social and economic life. The *Plan of Action* brings together many different issues and identifies possible areas for international action, together with suggested actions on which agreement could be reached. These included targets related to the Millennium Development Goals.

A number of issues proved contentious during the first phase, including the right of non-governmental stakeholders to take part in WSIS negotiations and issues concerning information and communication rights (particularly their relationship to fundamental agreements such as the Universal Declara-

tion of Human Rights). Two issues, however, proved intractable and were referred to separate fora established by the UN Secretary-General, which met between the first and second WSIS phases.

- The Task Force on Financing Mechanisms (TFFM) was initially concerned with a proposal to establish a "Digital Solidarity Fund", supported by many African governments, but opposed by donors. Its remit extended, however, to ICT infrastructure finance in general, and its conclusions were mostly concerned with this. The TFFM worked along conventional UN task force lines, in which limited representatives of interested parties reviewed issues on the basis of consultants' reports.
- The Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) was concerned with anxieties expressed, primarily by developing countries, about the way the internet operated - in particular, the perception that critical aspects of the internet (particularly ICANN, which governs domain identities, and the root server system) were ultimately controlled by the United States, rather than a conventional international or intergovernmental forum. It adopted innovative working methods, in which a wide range of participants from the whole range of stakeholder groups worked together to resolve differences and establish a common frame of reference for further negotiations.

The second phase of WSIS agreed not to reopen discussion of the first phase texts and so was almost entirely concerned with these two deferred issues and with the question of follow-up activity. In practice, issues of infrastructure finance were resolved relatively quickly, and the final year of the WSIS process was overwhelmingly concerned with internet governance. Both issues are described further below.

The final outputs of the WSIS process were two further documents, the *Tunis Commitment*, reiterating the first summit's conclusions, and the *Tunis Agenda*, drawing out the second summit's conclusions on infrastructure finance and internet governance and setting out follow-up procedures for implementation.

The following sections of this paper in turn review the findings of the APC WSIS study concerning the organisation of WSIS, the issues discussed, and the participation of developing country and civil society actors in them.

THE ORGANISATION OF WSIS

Global summits are expensive ways of doing international business. They require large investments in time and money, especially for the governments of smaller countries and for non-governmental actors, and they raise high expectations. Because they rely on global consensus, however, they often get bogged down in controversial detail and are less likely to innovate than more informal fora. They are usually thought to be best at forcing governments to confront intractable problems of fundamental importance at the most senior level, but less good at developing strategies to meet new opportunities.

Kofi Annan's view, expressed at the opening of the Geneva summit, that "This summit is unique: where most global conferences focus on global threats, this one will consider how best to use a new global asset" was, therefore, not seen by everyone as positive. Although little voiced in public at the time the UN General Assembly agreed to hold WSIS, there was a good deal of scepticism amongst international officials and (particularly) industrial country governments about the merits of a World Summit on the Information Society. Many others were concerned about the cost - both in general and to their own organisations.

A lot of different interests therefore came together in the WSIS process, and it was always going to be difficult for the secretariat, managed by the ITU, and the summit process as a whole to meet the different aspirations and expectations of different stakeholder groups. What implications did these factors have on the way in which different stakeholders behaved and the summit itself evolved? The study draws conclusions around this in four main areas.

Firstly, the interaction between WSIS and other decision-making fora was poor. Although it did involve the ITU and did address issues of internet governance, it had very little interaction with the actual decision-making work which the ITU and internet governance bodies engaged in during the four years it took place, and it had even less interaction with other significant international fora of importance to communications (such as the WTO). Prior international discourse on information, communications and development, such as the work of the G8 DOT Force and a variety of UN agencies, did not greatly inform WSIS debates either. WSIS was not, overall, seen as a significant decision-making body by industrial countries, which were, by and large, represented at a much lower level than developing countries in WSIS processes and at the two summit meetings.

Secondly, the central role of the ITU had an important impact on the nature of participation and discussion in WSIS. The ITU is essentially a technical agency and had little expertise in the wider rights, development and political questions that profoundly affected discussions at WSIS. Although it sought to address these weaknesses, and although other UN agencies were also involved in overall WSIS management, the fact that the ITU led the process meant that governments tended to give lead responsibility for their own participation to ministries of communications rather than to central or developmental ministries. WSIS therefore did very little to reduce the "paradigm gap" between ICT specialists and mainstream development communities which has become a significant concern for the development community.

Thirdly, the two-phase approach failed to deliver. Rather than enabling the discussion to move from principles in phase one to implementation in phase two, agreement on the main development and societal issues in phase one stifled further discussion about them in phase two. Many important developments in ICTs and their application in development occurred in the four-year WSIS period, but these are barely reflected in its final outcome documents. Many in development agencies felt that these were already outdated as they were agreed. Four years is, in any case, a long time to spend discussing a sector as fast-moving as ICTs. Those who argue that the second phase was, in effect, a World Summit on Internet Governance are not far from the mark; and the limited nature of that outcome leaves a big question mark over the merits of a two-phase summit. While some participants feel quite strongly that the two-phase approach facilitated networking and understanding among participants, this was at high cost, and it is unlikely that the WSIS experience will encourage the UN to repeat it in future.

Finally, a number of important organisational issues arose concerning the participation of non-governmental stakeholders (the private sector and civil society), in the summit itself and in the two "interim fora", the TFFM and the WGIG. Multi-stakeholder principles were adopted in the WSIS texts but contested in WSIS negotiations. The TFFM and WGIG adopted very different ways of working with different stakeholders. The WGIG's very open approach to non-governmental actors has been seen as a potential model for future dialogue in other international issues - a point discussed further below.

WSIS ISSUES

WSIS meant different things to different people. *Prima facie*, a World Summit on the Information Society might have been expected to address issues of importance in many aspects of all societies. The concept, after all, implies a comprehensive transformation of society and economy, comparable to that following the Industrial Revolution. In practice, WSIS did not address the information society on this grand scale but focused on a much narrower range of issues - the relationship between ICTs and fundamental rights, that between ICTs and development, infrastructure finance and internet governance. It paid much more attention to developing countries than to industrial countries. At most, therefore, it might be called a summit on *aspects* of the information society rather than on the information society *per se*.

The relationship between information and fundamental human rights was contested from the start of the WSIS process when some governments sought to exclude explicit references to binding rights agreements from draft WSIS texts. Although references to fundamental rights were eventually included, the underlying tensions between freedom of expression and government authority remained throughout the summit, and were put in sharper focus by arguments over freedom of expression in the second host country, Tunisia. The WSIS texts do not discuss rights issues in any substance, and do not address the potential which ICTs have for adjusting the balance of rights and responsibilities between citizens and governments.

The WSIS texts on the role of ICTs in development are also disappointing. WSIS overall had a strongly pro-ICD (information and communications in development) ethos, but its texts do not reflect the fact that this ethos is not universally shared within the development community. While the WSIS texts therefore emphasised the potential, as they saw it, for ICTs to engender a step change in countries' ability to overcome development challenges, the Millennium Review Summit, held just a couple of months before the Tunis summit, had almost nothing to say about ICTs in its review of progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Many who work at the interface of ICTs and development policy see this as an opportunity missed, and regret the fact that WSIS failed to create a genuine dialogue between ICT and development communities, or between ICD enthusiasts and sceptics. There are many reasons why this might have happened. For reasons already discussed, WSIS was attended by ICT professionals rather than development special-

ists. Its overall ethos encouraged enthusiasts to participate, and sceptics to stay away. The process used to gather input for inclusion in the outcome documents made it easier to construct lists of aspirations and desiderata than to analyse the evidence and draw priorities. Summit statements often emphasise rhetoric over realism, and avoid addressing issues of contention. The result, in WSIS' case, was text that reflected the views of ICD believers without addressing the concerns of sceptics.

This is not to say that WSIS did not build awareness and understanding of the potential importance of ICTs in development. Many in developing country governments, in particular, stress how much more familiar they became with the issues as a result of exposure through WSIS and how much more importance is now attached to them by their governments. At the same time, however, WSIS did nothing to convince multilateral agencies and bilateral donors of the case for ICD. It has not led to widespread new commitments in the ICD field, and some agencies have made reductions on past engagement. It seems possible that WSIS may come to be seen as the highpoint of ICD enthusiasm rather than a stimulus to new development initiatives.

One exception to this conclusion is the area of infrastructure finance. The proposal for a Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF) during the first phase of the summit posed a significant problem for donors since it sought a reallocation of development finance outside the terms of the global development consensus represented by the Monterrey Convention and the Millennium Development Goals. ICT infrastructure, in this consensus, was considered adequately addressed by the private sector, and to many in donor agencies support for the DSF looked like an attempt to secure funding for the ICT sector at the expense of other development priorities (such as power, water, health and education). The dispute here was almost enough to prevent agreement on a draft text being reached before the first phase summit opened its plenary session.

In this case, the Task Force on Financing Mechanisms developed an approach which recognised that access in some geographical areas and some types of ICT infrastructure could not be financed by the private sector alone and that international and/or public finance would also be required. This was accompanied by a move to support African ICT infrastructure by the World Bank and the European Union, and together these proved sufficient to enable global agreement on the issue to be reached at an early

stage in the second phase of WSIS. The Digital Solidarity Fund proposal transformed itself into a small voluntary organisation. A consensus, therefore, was quickly reached – with the result that the significance of the shift in thinking about infrastructure finance has been missed by many.

No-one expected WSIS to be preoccupied by internet governance when the summit was first mooted. Some argue that it was an issue waiting in the wings for the right occasion to come along; others that its prominence was largely the result of political factors concerning different countries' relations with the United States. A central aspect of the question is the fact that, almost uniquely in human history, the internet has become very important, very quickly, with very little government or intergovernmental involvement. For most governments, this was an anomaly in need of resolution (though for some governments and much of civil society and the private sector it was a positive factor that should be preserved). Here, then, were two principal contests of authority: between governments and non-governmental agencies, and between those governments perceived to have authority over the internet

worldwide (principally the United States) and those feeling they had none at home.

This issue remained highly politicised and contentious to the very end of WSIS. Although substantial and consensual, the WGIG's report did not secure the same consensus within WSIS as that of the TFFM. The final outcome – compromises on "enhanced co-operation" within existing internet governance and the creation of an "Internet Governance Forum" with substantial scope but insignificant powers – left the issues largely in the air. One way of looking at this suggests that it represents another step within the internet's long-term evolution – a step that continues the erosion of its original North American identity, rather than the revolutionary step that some desired; perhaps also a step that tends to bring the internet further within the ambit of government or intergovernmental oversight. But the arguments over internet governance were in no sense resolved by WSIS and will continue in the future.

DEVELOPING COUNTRY PARTICIPATION

Summits differ from conventional, permanent international decision-making fora, such as the ITU and WTO, in many ways – not least because they are more politicised and because their outcomes usually have less immediate practical effect. Less expertise is needed to participate effectively in summits, while the need for consensus (rather than majority vote) also gives more weight to smaller and less powerful countries.

Nevertheless, developing country participation in WSIS varied markedly in scale. The internet governance debate in particular provided a platform for a small number of larger developing countries to assert their influence and authority, in a way comparable with similar new alignments in (for example) WTO negotiations. Smaller countries and LDCs (Least Developed Countries), by contrast, tended to be more concerned with specific development questions, such as infrastructure finance, and played a less politicised role in Summit negotiations. It is important, in this context, not to confuse the increased influence of a few major developing countries with any change in influence for the developing world as a whole, particularly LDCs.

Across WSIS overall, national delegations were largely made up of diplomats and telecommunications sector professionals. Geneva diplomatic missions and home-based diplomats tended to play the main role in formal negotiations, as in other international agreements regardless of sector. National policy discourse was usually led by communications ministries and, diplomats aside, a lot of delegations were made up mostly of people from the traditional telecommunications establishment (the communications ministry and regulator and the incumbent fixed network operator). Mobile networks, the internet community and private sector operators were poorly represented, if at all, in most delegations, and there were also few participants from mainstream development ministries. Women were also under-represented.

A few, but only a few, developing countries included civil society representatives in their delegations, while some strongly opposed the presence of civil society representatives, even as observers, in formal negotiations – which, in all summits, are *intergovernmental* in character. National case studies carried out for the report showed considerable variation, too, in the extent of consultation and participation in WSIS discourse at a national level. In many countries, policymaking remained largely within the narrow confines of government ICT officials; though in

some, such as Kenya, civil society and private sector actors played a significant part. Media attention to WSIS was minimal in most cases.

The regional conferences did not play as great a part in the WSIS process as the Preparatory Committees. The fact that they were continental in scale may have inhibited attention to detail, where sub-regional conferences might have made a bigger contribution. The African regional conferences were both vibrant events, with substantial civil society input and impact. Others were less dynamic, and Europe did not even bother with a regional conference in the second phase.

WSIS was, ultimately, a one-off event, in which developing country participation was more substantial and assertive than it is in permanent ICT decision-making fora such as ITU and WTO. Partly, this was because summit dynamics make it easier for developing countries to manage their participation; partly because industrial countries did not see WSIS as a priority. Few interviewees for the study, however, felt that WSIS had significantly changed the balance of power in ongoing policy debates in permanent decision-making fora, likely outcomes arising from them, or their arrangements for participation, except where internet governance is concerned. The ITU will discuss some WSIS-related changes at its November 2006 Plenipotentiary Conference, but it is not clear how these – and the ITU's own identity – will develop.

In practice, the report concludes that the institutional dynamics of participation require much more substantial changes in both international institutions and national policy-making processes if they are to enhance developing country participation – a conclusion very much in line with that of the *Louder Voices* report. While WSIS raised awareness of ICT and ICD issues in many countries, at least amongst government officials and some NGOs, it did not facilitate capacity-building or change policy making relationships at a national level. Unless those weaknesses are addressed, many developing countries will find it as difficult to represent their priorities effectively in future in specialist ICT decision-making fora as they did before WSIS, which might be considered another opportunity missed.

CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION

One of the most important *Louder Voices* conclusions concerned the extent of private sector and civil society participation in ICT policy. Because of the way ICTs and particularly the internet have evolved, much relevant expertise resides in the private sector and civil society rather than in government.

Although some governments opposed this, the WSIS outcome texts make much of the importance of multi-stakeholder involvement – the principle, as the *Geneva Plan of Action* puts it, that “the effective participation of governments and all stakeholders is vital in developing the Information Society, requiring cooperation and partnerships among all of them.”

Civil society involvement in summits has increased over the years, sometimes including the holding of “alternative” summits alongside the main event. No such alternative happened in the case of WSIS, but the summit did represent a significant advance in civil society participation. The ITU’s lack of experience with civil society may have fostered this, by giving more autonomy and responsibility to a civil society bureau within the secretariat, just as its extensive experience with the private sector may have opened spaces for that stakeholder group. Nevertheless, the opening stages of the first summit phase were dominated by arguments about the rights of civil society and the private sector to participate – arguments which helped the two non-governmental stakeholder groups to build more of a common understanding between them than they had contrived elsewhere. (This was also helped by very effective coordination of private sector participation.)

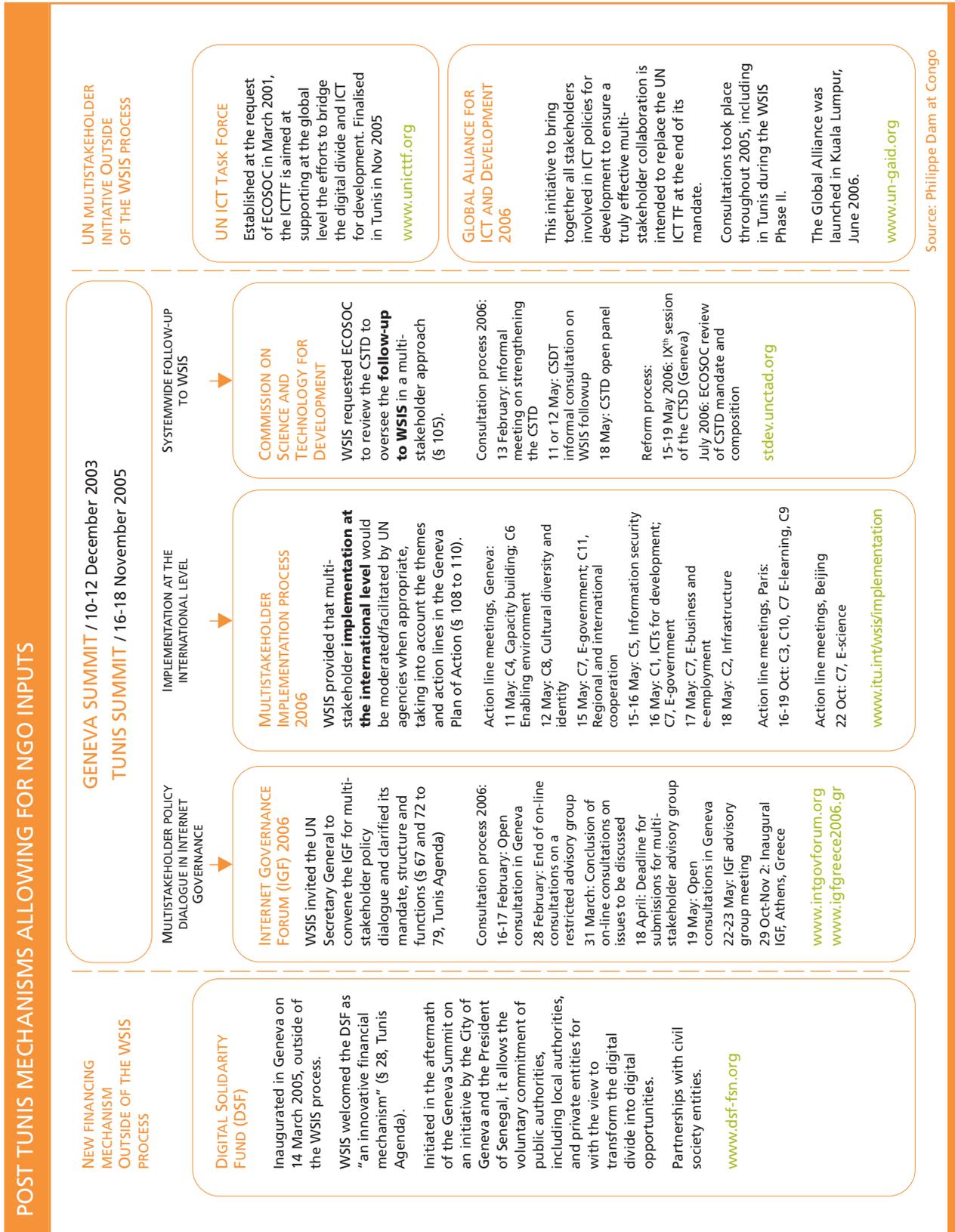
In the Geneva phase of WSIS, civil society had a wider range of issues to discuss. The whole character of the “Information Society” seemed up for grabs, and there were points of principle to argue on a wide range of issues around which civil society could coalesce. The hostility of some government delegations to civil society’s presence also fostered a sense of community and solidarity. Civil society engagement focused on rights issues, and had relatively little impact on the text on development. These factors were less apparent in the Tunis phase, which focused much more narrowly on internet governance. However, this was an issue in which civil society found other ways of influencing outcomes – in the WGIG, for example, and through dialogue with those government delegates who shared many of the internet community’s objectives. The quality of civil society organisation was weaker in the second phase, but the Internet Governance Caucus provided a power-

ful instrument to advance positions which it shared with the internet community. On the whole, therefore, the space for civil society participation in WSIS was sufficient to ensure that most civil society organisations felt there was more value in constructive engagement than in opposition. Caucusing played an important role in developing civil society overviews and in strategy and tactics, as it has at other recent summits.

Civil society participation in WSIS PrepComs and, to a lesser extent, the Geneva and Tunis summit sessions, was, like that of governments, concentrated amongst those with particular ICT/ICD interests. Few mainstream development or human rights NGOs attended any part of the process, and this greatly weakened civil society’s capacity to contribute to the development agenda. Developing countries were also disproportionately under-represented in civil society participation – partly because of lack of resources, partly because few civil society organisations in developing countries had tracked information society issues in the past, and partly because those which had were less likely to be included in their own national discourse on WSIS issues.

The costs and benefits of civil society participation in WSIS are still debated. The financial cost and opportunity cost in personnel time were very considerable for those organisations that took WSIS seriously. Policy gains, in terms of WSIS outcomes, were limited. Where gains were made was in extending organisations’ understanding of issues and in their building networks outside their own regions and specialisms that would not otherwise have been available to them. The value of this should not be underestimated, though it is questionable how well these networks can survive without the focus that WSIS PrepComs provided for them.

AFTER WSIS



The final question to be asked of WSIS concerns its follow-up processes. These can be divided into three groups.

- Some overview implementation processes were set in place, reporting to the UN General Assembly, as with other summits.
- In the case of internet governance, ambiguous compromises were reached to foster “enhanced cooperation” in order “to enable governments, on an equal footing, to carry out their roles and responsibilities, in international public policy issues pertaining to the Internet,” and to establish a multi-stakeholder Internet Governance Forum with no substantive powers but extensive scope.
- A list of eleven “action lines” was established (with a further eight subsidiary lines) to undertake otherwise unspecified “multi-stakeholder implementation at the international level.”

Internet governance developments have continued to attract the interest and attention of all stakeholder groups, principally because the issues remain unresolved. They will continue to do so, and internet governance institutions will continue to change, as they have done throughout the internet’s history. How they change is yet unclear, but the profile of internet governance has become and will remain much more substantial as a result of its politicisation in the WSIS process.

The WSIS texts on wider information society issues are far from the cutting edge of development thinking, and are proving of little interest to those who are seriously engaged in ICD. The first round of “action line” meetings held in May 2006 was very poorly attended and produced little in the way of new initiatives. It seems unlikely that these will offer any significant legacy for WSIS, which is likely to remain largely a stand-alone event in the history of ICT/ICD.

One significant question which is often asked is whether the WGIG experience of multi-stakeholder participation offers a model for use in other international fora. The report concludes that this is possible, but in limited contexts. The WGIG was concerned with an area of international governance in which governments and intergovernmental institutions were not predominant. Multi-stakeholder participation and processes were easier to instigate, therefore, because they did not challenge existing (inter)governmental authority. The WGIG’s process – as a genuinely “working” group of diverse individuals – was also particularly suited to an issue which was both complex and highly politicised and where many disputants were largely ignorant of the technical complexities involved. There are some other international issues which are similarly complex and politicised, and where issues are poorly understood, but relatively few. These would be much more susceptible to this approach than issues which do not share all these characteristics.

CONCLUSION

What lasting impact has WSIS had on the ‘Information Society’ and on developing country and civil society participation?

Almost a year on from the Tunis summit, it is difficult to see that WSIS has had a lasting impact on the issues it discussed, with the exception of internet governance. The quality of its development texts was poor. Much more significant documents and initiatives in this context have been written and undertaken outside the WSIS framework during the past five years than within it. WSIS does seem to have drawn more attention to the lack of evidence and critical evaluation available concerning ICT’s impact on development, and to the paradigm gap between ICT and development professionals. Some international agencies are now seeking to address these.

Many developing country governments were made more aware of ICT issues by WSIS, and ICT and ICD are being included in more Poverty Reduction Strategies. There has also been a shift, following the TFFM, in thinking about infrastructure finance. However, these developments do not represent a revolution in thinking about the information society of the kind that WSIS’ advocates had hoped to see.

At an institutional level, WSIS has not had a significant impact on the deliberations or processes of most existing permanent international ICT decision-making fora. WSIS did allow the ITU to push the boundaries of its mandate beyond telecommunications towards the information society to some extent, but within limits. If anything, the WSIS process probably increased hostility to the idea of it playing a major role in internet

governance, rather than advancing the case for this. The scope for the ITU extending its developmental role is constrained by both its own members' wishes and those of other agencies within the UN system. The ambiguous compromise on internet governance reached in Tunis will be played out over some time to come. The meaning of "enhanced cooperation" and the role of the Internet Governance Forum are yet unclear; but WSIS is likely to mark a stage in the evolution of internet management which is likely to see increased government involvement alongside that of its historic stakeholders. The action lines on development issues set up as part of WSIS follow-up do not seem likely to make a significant or lasting contribution.

Developing country participation in WSIS was significantly higher than in other ICT decision-making fora, but WSIS did not in fact make significant decisions. The more assertive role played by some larger developing countries may follow through to other fora, notably in internet governance, but WSIS has not equipped smaller and less well-resourced developing countries to participate more effectively in permanent fora like the ITU and WTO, which will have more lasting influence than WSIS. Institutional changes in the way those organisations manage their processes and national changes to improve the quality, scope and inclusiveness of national policy debates are still fundamental to enabling developing countries to articulate their issues and concerns more effectively in permanent decision-making fora. The dominance of WSIS delegations by ICT professionals, and the very limited participation of development specialists, meant that WSIS did little to address the paradigm gap between these communities in as well as outside developing countries.

Civil society participation in WSIS was significant, and some feel that it was both more cooperative and more assertive than in many previous summits. WSIS did illustrate, however, that civil society, like government, faces a paradigm gap between organisa-

tions interested in ICT/ICD (which participated in the summit) and mainstream development and rights agencies (which did not). Northern civil society was also more strongly represented than its southern counterparts. Civil society's main gains lay in increased understanding and networking, but these were bought at a high price and their sustainability is uncertain. In some countries, civil society organisations also improved relationships with national governments, on which they may be able to build in future.

Finally, the WSIS texts strongly emphasised the value of multi-stakeholder participation and, though many governments remain uncomfortable about it, this will make future attempts to exclude civil society and the private sector more contentious. Experience with the Internet Governance Forum will be telling here: a successful Forum will advance the case for multi-stakeholder participation, but failure will be used against the principle.

In the coming period, APC will work with its partners and other organisations to build on the WSIS experience, as described in the report outlined in this paper, in order to improve developing country and civil society participation in future international ICT decision-making. New fora like the Internet Governance Forum, and long-standing institutions like the ITU will both play an important part in this work. There is still a great need for capacity-building which creates better understanding and develops new resources; for better networking and experience-sharing, particularly among and between developing countries; and for improved dialogue between different stakeholder communities. The WSIS experience has helped APC and other organisations to think through their own objectives and priorities in this area and to develop new initiatives. If this leads to more effective and more inclusive participation in the future, then that will be a positive and lasting outcome from this particular World Summit. ■



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Internet and ICTs for Social Justice and Sustainable Development

APC is an international network of civil society organisations founded in 1990 dedicated to empowering and supporting people working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communication technology (ICTs).

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