GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2007

Focus on **Participation**

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The World Summit on the Information Society:
The end of an era or the start of something new?

David Souter

Introduction

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was the largest single event in international debate on information and communications technologies (ICTs) during the past ten years. It absorbed a great deal of the time and resources of international organisations, governments, civil society organisations and businesses over a four-year period (2001 to 2005). It produced four documents setting out aspirations for the information society. It provided a framework for international discussion of 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. Sixteen months after it ended, its impact – on all parties – seems to be receding as technology and policy debate move on to meet new challenges.

What happened during the WSIS is the subject of a substantial report published by APC in early 2007.[1] This study is particularly concerned with the participation of developing countries and civil society, and with the question of whether the WSIS might have a lasting impact on their involvement in other ICT decision-making forums. It drew on four main sources of evidence:

- Participant observation of the WSIS process
- Desk research, in particular of documentation produced by developing countries and civil society
- Questionnaires and interviews with individual participants, including 40 detailed interviews with key actors in the WSIS process
- Case studies of experience in five developing countries: Bangladesh, Ecuador, Ethiopia, India and Kenya.

This introductory chapter of the Global Information Society Watch report briefly recounts the WSIS process, discusses the findings of this APC research, and sets the scene for the discussion of what has happened since the WSIS in the remainder of the report.

The WSIS story

The origins of the WSIS lie in a decision taken at the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU's) 1998 Plenipotentiary Conference to propose a world summit on the information society. It is doubtful if ITU delegates expected this to become a global summit of the kind which the United Nations holds regularly on different issues, but their resolution fed into earlier discussions within the UN system, where it met with interest from other agencies, notably UNESCO, and eventually led to such an outcome.

Summits are highly complex processes. The summit meeting itself is the last stage of a prolonged period 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 (PrepComs). These are where what will become the final texts are hammered out and disputes addressed. Meaningful participation in summits means participation in this process as a whole, not at the final summit sessions.

The WSIS differed from the standard summit model in two ways.

Firstly, it was organised in two phases: one two-year phase leading to the first Summit in Geneva in December 2003, another to the second 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 to hold the Summit in two phases was failure within the UN system to choose between two willing hosts. The two-phase structure increased the cost and complexity of participation but did not in practice achieve the separation of discussions into principles and implementation that was proposed. The second phase of the WSIS was very largely preoccupied with narrow issues of internet governance.

Secondly, the WSIS was organised by a technical agency of the United Nations, the ITU, rather than by the UN's central organisation. This was controversial. The "information society" includes wide-ranging cultural and developmental issues which fall more naturally into the remit of agencies like UNESCO and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) rather than the technocratic ITU. An underlying tension between broader development goals and goals of the ICT sector lasted throughout the WSIS. This was accompanied by suspicions that some within the ITU were seeking to use the WSIS in order to extend its authority over much wider "information society" issues, in particular over the internet. The ITU's lead role also affected the nature of participation in national delegations (see below).

The first phase of the 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, including targets related to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).[2]

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 the relationship between information, communication and wider human rights. Two issues proved intractable and were referred to separate forums which met between the first and second WSIS phases.

1 Souter, D. (2007). *Whose Information Society?* [online]. Available from APC: <www.apc.org>.

2 See: <www.un.org/millenniumgoals>.

- The Task Force on Financing Mechanisms (TFFM) considered ICT infrastructure finance following failure to agree at the first Summit on a proposal to set up a "Digital Solidarity Fund". It worked along conventional UN task force lines, drawing on consultant reports and discussion (mostly) among key governments and intergovernmental players.

- The Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) was concerned with the way the internet is managed – in particular, the perception among many developing countries that critical resources are ultimately controlled by the United States, or the feeling that they should be managed by an intergovernmental forum. The WGIG was more innovative than the TFFM, drawing participants from a wider range of stakeholder groups.

The second phase of the WSIS was predominantly concerned with these two deferred issues. In practice, agreement on infrastructure finance was reached quickly, and the final year of the WSIS process was overwhelmingly concerned with internet governance.

The final outputs of the WSIS process were two further documents, the Tunis Commitment, reiterating the first Summit's conclusions, and the Tunis Agenda, which drew out the second Summit's conclusions on the two deferred issues and set out follow-up procedures for implementation. A summary of the Agenda "commitments" can be found in the following chapter on WSIS follow-up.

WSIS issues

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 non-governmental actors, and they raise high expectations. Although little voiced in public at the time that plans for the WSIS were agreed, there was a good deal of scepticism among international officials about the merits of a World Summit on the Information Society and whether its outcomes would justify the costs incurred.

The WSIS also 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. In practice, it 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 was more a summit on aspects of the information society rather than on the information society per se. It paid little attention, in particular, to issues concerning the impact of ICTs on relations between the citizen and the state – which is likely to be significant if/as the organisation of society is increasingly based around the acquisition and use of data which is digitally stored.

The WSIS did significantly raise awareness of ICT and ICD (information and communications for development) issues, particularly within developing country governments. Most of those who took part would agree that it also provided valuable opportunities for networking and for sharing of experience, especially in informal contacts outside the main negotiating framework.

The WSIS did little, however, to move forward debates on ICT or ICD, or to engage the ICT sector with mainstream development or rights communities. It was, overwhelmingly, a meeting place for those already involved in ICT or ICD. Nor did it engage significantly with the main development policy initiatives with which it coincided, notably the September 2005 Millennium Review Summit (which paid virtually no attention to the role of ICTs in development and poverty reduction). Many development agencies are increasingly concerned about the evident "paradigm gap" concerning ICTs between ICD professionals and the mainstream development community. With hindsight, the WSIS missed a major opportunity to bring together ICD enthusiasts and sceptics to address this gap.

Since the WSIS ended, its outcome texts on development have proved too vague and ill-defined in practice to act as guidelines for either ICT or development agencies' programme planning. 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. This is unhelpful when it comes to deciding how to allocate resources. The low level of interest shown in WSIS follow-up processes – with the exception of the Internet Governance Forum – suggests that they will not have much impact in the future.

There has been much debate about whether developing countries gained significantly in the two major issues debated within the WSIS. Where infrastructure finance is concerned, the idea of establishing a separate Digital Solidarity Fund – promoted by President Wade of Senegal and other African delegations – foundered in the TFFM, and was not pursued by its proponents in the second phase. However, debate on the issue did lead to some rethinking of infrastructure needs by major donors including the World Bank and the European Commission. Discussions on internet governance ended in the kind of compromise that all sides could consider acceptable from their point of view: the United States made no significant concessions on its current status; new procedures and one new institution were agreed which might gradually move internet governance forward over time; and the multi-stakeholder principle was included in texts that might otherwise have sought to extend governmental power over the internet.

Developing country participation

Summits differ from conventional or permanent decision-making bodies in many ways. They are concerned with broad principles rather than with detail. Their conclusions are reached by consensus rather than with contested votes. Their decisions are not binding while those of bodies like the ITU and ICANN set rules with which governments and businesses have to comply.

Developing country participation in permanent ICT decision-making bodies was assessed in the *Louder Voices* report, prepared in 2002 for the Digital Opportunity Task Force (DOT Force). This report identified two main types of problem identified by developing country participants in interviews (CTO/Panos, 2002). These were summarised as follows:

A. Weaknesses in national policy processes:

    I. Lack of policy awareness, at all levels of government and citizenship, of the potential role of ICTs in development.

    II. Lack of technical and policy capacity on ICT issues, particularly in respect of emerging technologies and new policy area.

    III. Weaknesses in national and regional policy-making processes, which variously included weaknesses in political leadership; absence of national ICT strategies; ineffective coordination between different government departments and agencies with ICT responsibilities; lack of private sector and civil society participation in national decision-making; inadequate preparation for international meetings; and ineffective use of financial and human resources.

B. Weaknesses in international policy processes:

    I. Lack of easy, affordable and timely access to information about ICT-related issues, decision-making forums and processes.

    II. Logistical problems, including the frequency and location of international meetings and restrictions on participation (for example, by private sector and civil society experts).

    III. Ineffective use of financial resources available to support participation.

Some differences to this distribution of problems were evident in the WSIS. Because the WSIS dealt in generalities rather than detail, less technical and policy expertise was necessary for participation. Because its conclusions had less direct impact on future conduct – because it did not change the way ICTs are actually governed – it was taken less seriously, and attended at a less senior level, by industrial than by developing countries. Indeed, for some of the former, participation was not so much about making sure that things got better as making sure that things did not get worse from their perspective.

Developing country participation in the WSIS varied markedly in scale. Some countries had large delegations – for example, Senegal and South Africa – while some, particularly smaller countries, sent only a few representatives, and some took no part in the process whatsoever.

It is important to distinguish here between the impact of a few developing countries and the impact of developing countries as a whole. The internet governance debate provided a platform for some larger developing countries to assert their influence and authority, in a way comparable with new alignments in other international negotiations. Smaller countries and least-developed countries (LDCs) were more concerned with specific development questions, such as infrastructure finance. There were some tensions between developing country delegations resulting from these different perspectives.

Across the WSIS overall, national delegations were largely made up of diplomats and the "telecommunications establishment", i.e. telecoms ministries and regulators and fixed telecommunications operators. This was, perhaps, inevitable given that the ITU had lead responsibility for the WSIS: invitations to participate naturally went to the government departments responsible for working with the ITU. 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 (finance, planning, health, education, etc.).

This had a significant effect on the scope and quality of debate. Like the ITU, national telecommunications officials and fixed network operators have little expertise in mainstream development issues such as health and education, or in issues like human rights. The weakness of the WSIS texts in these areas betrays the lack of substantial input from such mainstream expertise. Instead, the WSIS focused most strongly on issues of particular importance within the telecoms debate that were natural to the ITU – infrastructure and the management of technical resources. One can only speculate whether different outcomes might have resulted had the WSIS been led by an information or development organisation like UNESCO or the UNDP rather than a communications technology agency like the ITU.

A few countries included civil society representatives in their delegations, while others strongly opposed the presence of civil society representatives, even as observers, in formal negotiations. Where civil society representatives were included, however, they were usually constrained by delegation policy and played little part in presenting national policy positions.

Women were also under-represented in WSIS delegations. Just 19% of delegations at each of the main Summit events, in Geneva and in Tunis, were women.

Five national case studies carried out for the APC research showed considerable variation in the extent of consultation and participation in WSIS discourse at a national level. In many countries, policy-making remained largely within the narrow confines of government ICT officialdom, though in some, such as Kenya, civil society and private sector actors played a significant part. Media attention to the WSIS was minimal in most cases. Where civil society organisations did seek to get involved, in case study countries, their participation was often reactive rather than central to the formulation of national policy. Much the same could be said of local internet communities – again with the exception of Kenya, where the formation of a lobbying alliance between private sector and civil society organisations did much to extend input in ways that may have a more lasting impact.

Civil society participation

Civil society involvement in UN summits has increased over the years, sometimes including the holding of "alternative" summits alongside the main event. No such alternative event was organised in the case of the WSIS, and many participants feel that 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, and creating more opportunities for civil society organisations to innovate within the summit framework.

Civil society representatives were able to make presentations during plenary sessions of the Summit. More importantly, they were able to work informally with government delegates and other interest groups to ensure the inclusion of a number of issues in the WSIS texts – notably on child protection and on internet governance, where much of the mandate for the Internet Governance Forum derived from wording that originated with civil society organisations. Importantly, too, many civil society participants felt that they gained substantially from the networking opportunities that the WSIS offered – both during the preparatory process (in which organisations had to work together) and in the Summits themselves (when many organisations were able to present their work in the associated exhibition and workshop spaces).

Civil society participation in PrepComs and, to a lesser extent, the Geneva and Tunis Summits themselves, was, like that of governments, concentrated among those with particular ICT/ICD interests. Few mainstream development or human rights NGOs attended any part of the process, and this substantially weakened civil society's capacity to contribute to the development agenda in particular. Developing countries were also disproportionately under-represented in civil society participation – partly because of a 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.

There were important differences in civil society experience of the two Summits. In the Geneva phase, 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 – notably about human rights – on which civil society could coalesce. The hostility of some government delegations also fostered a sense of community and solidarity. The quality of civil society organisation and sense of unity or purpose were weaker in the second phase, though the Internet Governance Caucus provided a powerful instrument to advance positions which civil society shared with the internet community. Sharing the experience of government hostility to their participation during the early stages of the first Summit phase also built a stronger sense of partnership between civil society and private sector representation than has been seen in many other summits, and this helped both civil society and the private sector to pursue their agendas through the Summit as a whole.

As in other summits, caucusing lay at the heart of civil society participation. Caucuses have been used in a number of summits by civil society organisations to formulate and promote common positions. Plenary caucuses in the WSIS were supplemented by those concerned with particular issues under discussion. The caucus process during the WSIS was more effective during the first phase – when the rights of civil society to participate were threatened, and where significant input was achieved into the Declaration of Principles (ITU, 2003a), though not the Action Plan (ITU, 2003b) – than during the second (when the focus was much more on a single issue, and the unity of civil society was disrupted by the participation of pro-government Tunisian NGOs). Civil society caucusing also led to the publica-

tion of specific civil society viewpoints, published during the Geneva meeting[3] and a month after the conclusion of the Tunis Summit.[4]

The costs and benefits of participation in the WSIS are still debated within civil society. The financial cost and opportunity cost in personnel time were very considerable for those organisations that took the 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.

The other potential area of "gain" lies in the acceptance, within the WSIS, of multi-stakeholder principles for ICT decision-making. "We recognise that building an inclusive Information Society requires new forms of solidarity, partnership and cooperation among governments and other stakeholders, i.e. the private sector, civil society and international organisations," as the Geneva Plan of Action put it, presaging multi-stakeholder engagement in the future (ITU, 2003b). This principle, in a sense, seeks to extend the multipolar character of policy development within most nation-states (where government authority is divided between different levels of government, and where a variety of government agencies share power with non-governmental actors) into the international sphere (where governments see themselves as representing national interests in their entirety).

A multi-stakeholder approach also characterised the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG), whose diverse members acted as individuals working towards a common goal rather than as representatives of specific institutions. There has been a lot of discussion about whether the WGIG offers a model for other decision-making processes. The APC research notes that the issues facing the WGIG differed from those in other ICT forums – in particular, that governments lacked authority over the internet and were therefore not conceding ground to other stakeholders in accepting the WGIG format. But the success which many felt the WGIG process represented may encourage repetition of the experience in other issues which are technically complex and highly polarised. In any event, the multi-stakeholder principle was extended by the Tunis agreements into WSIS' follow-up, notably into the Internet Governance Forum.

After WSIS

Sixteen months on from the Tunis Summit, it is difficult to see that the WSIS is having much 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 on

3 *Shaping information societies for human needs.* Civil society declaration to the World Summit on the Information Society. Available from: <www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/civil-society-declaration.pdf>.

4 *Much more could have been achieved.* WSIS civil society statement on WSIS. Available from: <www.worldsummit2003.de/download_en/WSIS-CS-summit-statement-rev1-23-12-2005-en.pdf>.

ICT and ICD have been written and undertaken outside the WSIS framework during the past five years than within it. The 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 the WSIS, and ICT and ICD are being included in more national poverty reduction strategies. There has also been a shift in thinking about infrastructure finance, following the TFFM. However, these developments do not represent a revolution in thinking about the information society of the kind that the WSIS' advocates had hoped to see.

The structure of WSIS follow-up processes is described in the next chapter. Insofar as wider civil society participation is concerned, this can be divided into two main sections: the action line processes intended to track the WSIS outcome text conclusions; and the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). A few comments are worth making here on each of these.

The first round of "action line" meetings held in May 2006 was very poorly attended and produced little in the way of new initiatives. Very little subsequent activity has taken place since then within the action line structure, though there have been significant new developments outside. It is difficult to see the action line structure, which has no independent resources, offering much of a framework for future cooperation or any significant legacy for the WSIS. The second round of action line meetings in May 2007 will probably establish whether there is any further mileage in them.

The IGF is a different matter. Its first meeting – in Athens in November 2006 – was almost universally considered a success. Although formally a UN meeting, it adopted procedures very much at odds with UN traditions. Rather than giving exclusive rights to governments, or even equivalence to stakeholder communities, it treated all participants – regardless of their origins – as equals. Plenary and workshop sessions had a strongly multi-stakeholder character. Debates were open and few people spoke in the kind of code that characterises many international meetings. However, all of this was facilitated by the fact that the IGF has no decision-making powers. Its value lies in that it is a "talking shop", not a negotiating forum. It is very doubtful if it could have been successful as the latter. What it may illustrate is that, far from being a waste of time, "talking shops" may be a very necessary way of increasing understanding between stakeholder communities of the different views that people hold and the reasons why they hold them.

More interesting than the action lines, and as interesting as the IGF, is the question of whether the experience of the WSIS is likely to bring about any change in the way that permanent ICT decision-making forums go about their business.

The 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 forums such as the ITU and WTO. This was partly because summit dynamics make it easier for developing countries to manage their participation, and partly because indus-trial countries did not see the WSIS as a priority. Few interviewees for the APC research, however, felt that the WSIS had significantly changed the balance of power in ongoing policy debates in permanent decision-making forums, in likely outcomes arising from them, or in their arrangements for participation, except where internet governance is concerned.

The ITU discussed some WSIS-related changes at its November 2006 Plenipotentiary Conference, but it is not yet clear how these – and the ITU's own identity - will develop. These discussions are considered in the ITU chapter of this report, but the ITU's response has been in fact quite cautious and it does not seem likely to significantly extend its remit within the wider information society. WSIS debates have also had some influence on thinking within ICANN about its future. But it is hard to see any significant changes resulting in the way that other ICT decision-makers – from the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) to the regional telecommunications agencies – expect to operate in future.

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 the WSIS raised awareness of ICT and ICD issues in many countries, at least among 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 forums as they did before the WSIS, which might be considered another opportunity missed. The *Louder Voices* conclusions, in short, would seem to stand. ■

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GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH is the first in a series of yearly reports covering the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society and stakeholders in the global South.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH has three interrelated goals:

- **survey** the state of the field of ICT policy at the local and global levels
- **encourage** critical debate, and
- **strengthen** networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society.

The report discusses the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process and a range of international institutions, regulatory agencies and monitoring instruments.

It also includes a collection of country reports which examine issues of access and participation within a variety of national contexts.

Each year, the report will focus on a particular theme. In 2007 **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH** *focuses on participation.*

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Third World Institute (ITeM), and follows up on our long-term interest in the impact of civil society on governance processes and our efforts to enhance public participation in national and international forums.