

World Summit on the Information Society and the Struggle to Bridge the Digital Divide: A Lack of Commitments

India, West Godavari district (Andhra Pradesh state): over the space of a few years, every village in this rural district has been connected to the Internet thanks to 47 access and service centres established as a joint initiative between the local and national governments. The cost of this connectivity? A mere \$2.30 USD a month per hook-up, in accordance with a fixed rate set by the government after a call for tenders. At these so-called e-Seva¹ centers, citizens are offered a wide range of services, from consulting land records and accessing information on public works in progress, to ordering birth certificates or filing grievances against administrative authorities, among dozens of others. Thus, in addition to saving hours that would normally be spent waiting in line at various offices, this initiative also contributes to the democratisation of public life and the fight against corruption.

The e-Seva project serves to highlight two aspects that are important to consider when reflecting on digital divide issues. *Firstly*, it was born from the conviction that information and communication are essential instruments for increasing transparency and democracy, empowering citizens and fighting poverty. *Secondly*, it required public financing to be implemented. These two facts are important to keep in mind when evaluating the negotiations on bridging the digital divide held in the framework of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

Putting information and communication at the service of the poor and reducing the gap that currently separates the “info-rich” from the “info-poor” was initially announced as one of the priority goals, if not the very *raison d’être*, of the WSIS. “This global gathering will be a unique opportunity for all key players to develop a shared vision of ways to bridge the digital divide and create a truly global information society,” declared UN Secretary General Kofi Annan back in 2002.²

Three years later, however, in the light of the documents adopted and commitments assumed by the heads of state in Geneva and Tunis, one has to ask if this process has genuinely given rise to an agenda and a paradigm for development. Or to put it more simply, did the WSIS accomplish anything with regard to development? To answer this question, it is necessary to distinguish between two levels: that of paradigms, and that of concrete actions.

WSIS paradigms: From the all-powerfulness of the market to the need for a development agenda

At the level of paradigms, the WSIS has brought about a minimal opening. During the first phase of the summit, discourse and negotiations with respect to the development of the information society were dominated by a neoliberal paradigm. As a result, the Plan of Action and Declaration of Principles adopted in Geneva viewed the opening and liberalisation of markets, the establishment of transparent

¹For more information see: “Pro-Poor Access to ICTs – Exploring Appropriate Ownership Models for ICTD Initiatives: Case Study of Rural e-Seva”, Anita Gurusurthy, Parminder Jeet Singh and Gurusurthy Kanisathan, IT for Change, 2005. www.itforchange.net

²WSIS informational brochure, published by the WSIS Executive Secretariat, Geneva, June 2002.

and non-discriminatory regulatory frameworks, foreign direct investment and private/public partnerships as the magic formula to bridge the digital divide. The official discourse made little room for nuances. Any references to the limitations of the neoliberal model were removed from the final texts. Such was the fate of a point which stated: "If left strictly under the influence of market forces, ICTs may actually deepen social inequalities within countries, and widen the gap between developed and developing nations."³

In the texts adopted during the second phase, however, two points were introduced that added subtle nuances to this discourse. *Firstly*, in the documents on financial mechanisms approved at the end of PrepCom2 in Geneva (February 2005), the governments acknowledged the insufficiency of the financing provided and measures taken until now to build an inclusive information society that responds to the needs of development. They recognised, in effect, that in developing countries, the infrastructure for basic telephone service or Internet connectivity is still lacking in remote areas, that training for the population in the use of information tools is insufficient or non-existent, and that information content is not always appropriate.

But what political and economic measures need to be taken to respond to the needs of development? This is the main political issue at stake. Through long and heated negotiations, and thanks to the diplomatic activism of developing countries (mainly Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador, Ghana, South Africa, Botswana, Bangladesh, India and Senegal), the final documents of the WSIS introduced a nuance in the dominant paradigm, stressing the need to combine private and public financing to bridge the digital divide: "We recognise that public finance plays a crucial role in providing ICT access and services to rural areas and disadvantaged populations..."⁴ This statement is a recognition of the limitations of the market. It stipulates the need for public investment and policies, while up until now the market had been viewed as the sole vector for development of the information society, and thus capable of responding to all needs.

A *second* point introduced in the documents adopted in Tunis refers to the importance of public policies, pointing to the need to integrate the development dimension in all national strategies addressing the information society. For the first time in history, the link between ICTs and poverty reduction is made at a political level: "We agree that the financing of ICT for development needs to be placed in the context of the growing importance of the role of ICTs, not only as a medium of communication, but also as a development enabler..."⁵

What does this approach signify in concrete terms? Since the 1980s, governments have begun to design national strategies aimed at stimulating the growth of the information society (e-strategies). For the most part, these government policies have focused on matters of infrastructure and telecommunications, the development of an ICT-based goods and services industry (hardware, software, telework, etc.), exports and job creation. By adopting strategies like training

³ Point 4A of the draft Declaration of Principles (18 July 2003 version).

⁴ "Revised chapter two of the operational part (financial mechanisms)", paragraph 31, 1 March 2005. www.itu.int/wsis/docs2/pc2/off11ann1rev1.doc

⁵ See: "Revised chapter two of the operational part (financial mechanisms)", op.cit, paragraph 23.

engineers and technicians, offering tax exemptions and creating a stable and predictable climate for private investment, numerous developing countries have sought out a role as leaders in the ICT market, endlessly touted as the key to all economic growth in the years to come.

In Costa Rica, for example, the national economy was severely hit in the 1990s by the fall in world market prices for the commodities that made up the bulk of its exports. The government decided to turn to the ICT industry, declaring that “in the century to come, software and ICTs will be to the economy of Latin America what coffee and bananas were in the previous century.” Thanks to its stable political climate, highly educated population (the result of public policies) and the offer of tax exemptions, the Costa Rican government was able to attract the U.S.-based computer industry giant Intel in the late 1990s. Intel opened its second largest microprocessor chip assembly plant worldwide in this Central American nation, and was soon followed by other companies in the sector. As a result, by the year 2000, coffee accounted for 5% and bananas another 10% of the country’s exports, while ICT-related goods and services represented a whopping 37%. Other examples are Singapore, where the ICT sector has become the driving force of economic growth and exports, and China, where the electronics industry’s share of exports rose from 12% in 1997 to 30% in 2003.

Until now, these national e-strategies to develop the information society have primarily focussed on industrial development and economic growth. These policies make little mention of information content and social inequality, much less poverty reduction. In fact, an OECD study conducted in February 2003 demonstrated that of the 23 developing countries considered, only three – Benin, Sri Lanka and Kyrgyzstan – had actually integrated poverty reduction into their e-strategies.

In affirming the role that can be played by ICTs in fostering development and fighting poverty, the WSIS documents on financial mechanisms theoretically promote a reorientation of national policies and strategies, aimed at the use of ICTs for seeking greater equality, social cohesion and participation.

These two points – the recognition of the role played by public finance and policies and the need to incorporate the social dimension in national e-strategies – are among the principal gains achieved through the WSIS by civil society, in terms of financing and the development agenda. They represent two openings that non-governmental actors can use – at both the national and international level – to demand the creation of new public policies based on the needs of the poorest sectors of society.

Nevertheless, we should not allow ourselves to become overly optimistic: these two paragraphs are relatively meagre in the context of a document of over 10 pages and 100 paragraphs and sub-paragraphs. And the lack of concrete commitments from the wealthy countries with regard to other areas of negotiations seems to indicate that the implementation of a development policy in the information and communication sector is still far from a priority on the international political agenda – especially if it runs counter to powerful economic interests.

From words to actions: the lack of concrete commitments to a development agenda at the WSIS

The outcome of the Tunis summit was disappointing with regard to international cooperation: no promises, no concrete and binding commitments from the industrialised countries to help finance the development of the information society. To the developing countries that stressed the need for public investments, the wealthy countries (the EU, United States, Japan, Switzerland) essentially responded, "Make your public policies, but we don't have the money." Thus, there was no in-depth discussion at the WSIS regarding the issue of official development assistance (ODA), and even the goal of 0.7% of GDP that the wealthy countries have pledged to devote to ODA for more than 30 years has failed to materialise.

Then there is the matter of the Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF), a Senegalese initiative aimed at raising financing for ICT projects. While it was in fact acknowledged in the Summit documents, the wording chosen specifies that the governments "welcome" the creation of this fund. They no longer "support" it, as was called for in a previous version of the text. On the part of the OECD countries, this acknowledgement does not reflect a pledge of financial commitment, but rather the acceptance of an unavoidable reality, since the DSF was already created at the Geneva Summit, thanks to the contributions of cities and local governments.⁶

If there were still any doubt in this regard, it is enough to consider the press release issued at the February 17, 2005 meeting of the EU Council's Economic and Social Affairs committee, which states that "the EU considers that a new United Nations Fund would not be an effective instrument for closing the digital divide." It later adds: "As regards the voluntary Digital Solidarity Fund established in Geneva by European and African municipalities, the EU takes note of the initiative, which is not of an intergovernmental nature and involves, in an innovative manner, local authorities in combating the digital divide."⁷

The DSF is therefore not a United Nations project, supported by the member states, but rather an initiative fundamentally sustained by municipal or regional authorities. At present its most active members are the cities of Dakar, Geneva, Lyon, Turin and Paris, along with the regions of Piedmont (Italy), Aquitaine (France), and the Basque Country (Spain). This commitment on the part of local governments is a positive sign, but it does not change the fact that the project was originally conceived as something different. When Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade first presented the digital solidarity concept, his goal was to stress the notion of shared responsibility among the rich and poor countries in bridging the digital divide. And it is precisely this notion of shared responsibility that the industrialised nations refused to commit to at the WSIS.⁸

⁶ See: www.dsf-fsn.org

⁷ Council of the European Union, Economic and Social Affairs, press release, 17 February 2005.
<http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=PRES/05/21&format=HTML&aged=1&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

⁸ See first speech by President Wade on the subject, February 2003 (PrepCom2, phase I) at www.itu.int/wsis/docs/pc2/visionaries/wade.doc. Or the presentation of the initiative by the Senegalese delegation at www.uneca.org/aisi/Bamako2002/SolidariteNumerique.doc

Another stumbling block is the question of follow-up. This essentially refers to the measures to be adopted by governments to ensure the implementation of the plans of action adopted in Geneva and Tunis, and would involve defining the concrete initiatives to be undertaken to bridge the digital divide, as well as to coordinate the work of the United Nations and evaluate the progress made over years to come.

At the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, for example, the final documents referred to the possibility of organising follow-up meetings five and ten years later, and proposed the creation of a permanent commission on sustainable development. At the WSIS, however, this matter proved to be a highly controversial one. During PrepCom3 (September 2005) the developing nations called for strong international coordination, such as through the creation of a commission on the information society⁹, but the OECD countries refused to take on any precise commitments. The United States went even further by demanding that any references to “mechanisms” and “follow-up” be removed from the final documents. Essentially, the position adopted by the industrialised countries, and particularly the United States, was aimed at placing the responsibility for bridging the digital divide on the governments of the poor countries. And by preventing the creation of any kind of forum or international coordination after Tunis, they could avoid a political debate that would take the voice of the countries of the South into account.

At the conclusion of the Tunis meeting, however, the governments reached a slightly different consensus... they agreed not to make a decision! Instead, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan was given the mandate to present proposals for WSIS follow-up to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) by July 2006. Among the alternatives he can consider is the Commission on Science and Technology for Development, a subsidiary body of ECOSOC established in 1992 and based in Geneva. And within this mandate to study the various options available, the need to incorporate all the different stakeholders – namely governments, civil society and the private sector – is explicitly stated.

For civil society, this non-decision leaves the door open to as many possibilities as questions. Does this waiting period mean that the governments will eventually reach an agreement on providing a clear mandate to the United Nations for follow-up of the resolutions adopted in Geneva and Tunis? Or is it simply a sign of apathy? And what will be the final mandate of this body, or commission, of coordination? For the time being, the answers to these questions remain completely open-ended.

⁹ At PrepCom3, Chile proposed redefining the mandate of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development and making it the body responsible for WSIS follow-up. For their part, civil society groups released a statement calling for the creation of a specific Commission for the Information Society that would function in accordance with new modalities and guarantee real participation by non-governmental actors. See www.comunica-ch.net

By way of a conclusion: the WSIS, a Summit held for nothing?

In the end, what was the actual outcome of the WSIS? Did this Summit and process actually serve to achieve anything with regard to development? The answer is ambiguous. At the level of paradigms, the WSIS brought about a slight advance: it acknowledged the need for public investment and policies to put information and communication at the service of all citizens. Nevertheless, this acknowledgement has not been followed by actions. In fact, due to the systematic opposition of the industrialised countries, the WSIS did not give rise to any concrete or significant commitments in terms of international cooperation. In the end, it essentially placed the responsibility for bridging the digital divide on the governments of the poor countries and promoted nothing more than “voluntary” initiatives to build a more equitable global village.

This approach represents a dangerous depoliticisation of the issue of the digital divide. A depoliticisation that reaffirms the primacy of the market or of economic interests, and is largely the result of pressure exerted by major economic lobbies, like the International Chamber of Commerce. And this fact essentially marks the defeat of the hopes raised by the WSIS. Tunis was supposed to be the Summit of concrete actions and solutions, yet in the end it merely resulted in voluntary, non-binding initiatives. Any development-related advances made at the WSIS – the introduction of the 100-dollar computer, the Digital Solidarity Fund, open-source software, community networks, etc. – took place on the sidelines, and not as part of the official negotiations and agenda.

For civil society, it will therefore be crucial to continue pursuing discussions, studies and campaigns aimed at demanding the establishment of a real development agenda in the area of information and communication. But in these future efforts, civil society can now depend on the dynamic of consensus, exchange and coordination created thanks to the WSIS: a dynamic built over the course of three years of shared work, which has led to the emergence of a global civil society movement devoted to information and communication.

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