
The Challenge of WSIS **by Nitin Desai**

Some one hundred and fifty years ago, the railways and telegraph charted new territories and crossed seemingly impenetrable frontiers. They re-shaped the world economy and revolutionized the way people communicated. The world began seeing radical transformations in the conduct of business, trade, governance and even warfare. News gathering and dissemination began to acquire global dimensions. Information became more accessible. Cross-cultural exchanges between communities became more commonplace, leading to greater egalitarianism and freedom. While concentrations of development occurred mainly in the United States and Europe, the technologies did spread to the colonies (today's Third world) if only to connect them better with metropolitan markets and to strengthen the forces of imperialism. In sum, the new technology changed the prospects for development mainly in the richer part of the world and may even have exaggerated economic and political inequalities.

Replace the phrase 'railways and telegraph' with the phrase 'information and communication technologies (ICT)' and the description above may still apply. That is the core of the challenge before the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), which convenes in December in Geneva and later in Tunis in November 2005 in a unique two-phase international process.

The InfoTech industry that dazzled with the sheer pace and scope of the digital revolution is in need of a new dynamic for continued growth. The future of the industry now depends not only on technological advance but also on the spread of InfoTech in the developing world and in evolving new user sectors. It needs a new business model.

The choking points of development for the ICT companies today lie in the lack of vision and a policy framework for this broader goal rather than in technology. It involves organizational, institutional and public policy questions, not technological fixes.

This is at the core of the agenda for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) whose objectives include:

- to establish a common vision for the information society
- to utilize ICTs to overcome poverty and achieve other development goals enshrined in the Millennium Declaration espoused by world leaders.
- to work towards bridging the digital divide
- to create partnerships and funding mechanisms for universal and affordable access to ICTs
- to consider the need for new legal and policy frameworks for cyberspace
- to create improved coordination mechanisms for improved security in cyberspace
- to promote cultural and linguistic diversity in the Information Society
- to uphold freedom of expression and the right to communicate

Governments set the national and global policy frames that enable or hinder development. There are differences between those who bemoan the anarchy of multiple standards and the lack of inter-operability and those who see too many constraints on competition imposed by older, more monopolistic visions of public service. The challenge before the summit is to secure a shared understanding of what constitutes good policy practices for managing cyberspace and to set up appropriate coordination arrangements at the international level to achieve them.

The summit is also about the digital divide - the vast gap in the use of ICTs in the richer and poorer parts of the world. This has to be a global concern because in a networked world everyone gains when the network spreads. My telephone becomes more useful when you also acquire a phone.

In the developing world, public policy has to give priority to eliminating poverty and deprivation. This is why the focus has to be on the use of ICT in governance, education, health, or more generally, on ICT for development. The aim is to reach as many people as possible, not just the privileged few who can afford rich country prices. The competencies to provide and deliver the services exist in the private sector. Hence the need for partnerships and innovative initiatives. Many are being developed like, for instance, the Global e-schools initiative, which is bringing together some important corporations, donor governments and developing countries with homebound goals for connecting universities and schools to the Internet. This and several similar initiatives have been spawned by the UN ICT Task Force, which brings together international policy makers from governments, CEOs of info tech companies and civil society leaders, and international organizations. But much more needs to be done, and the unique two-phase structure of the Summit must be used to lay down goals and strategies and then flesh them out in concrete partnerships so that by the time we meet in Tunis the Geneva Action Plan truly lives up to its name.

Activities in the public domain require public resources in national budgets and in donor aid programmes. This is one issue that the delegates will agonize over, the developing

world looking for specific commitments and the donor countries arguing for less binding language or, in some cases, flatly rejecting any case for new concessional resources.

There will also be some debate on issues of technology access, not just in a North-South context but also more generally, for instance about appropriate policies for open-source software. In both of these areas - conversational finance and technology transfer - the delegates will find their way to appropriate compromises. But the real challenge is to make sure that no promising partnership or ICT initiative in the public domain is held back by lack of resources or technology access.

ICTs can transform politics as information on government or corporate operation becomes more widely available, or as easier communication makes it possible for citizens to organize themselves. In fact, the greater transformative potential of the new technologies lies in how they can alter government-citizen and citizen-citizen relationships. We have seen this already in the way SMS was used by citizens to thwart an attempted coup in the Philippines, the use of the internet to exchange news in Serbia under Milosevic and the way citizen-pressure organized for the Land Mines Treaty. But to ensure this we need public recognition of the freedom of expression and the right to communicate. One of the most important results of the Summit could be in precisely this area.

ICT technologies are seen as universalizing influences. To the extent to which they universalize prosperity and democracy that is surely welcome. But they are also seen as universalizing particular languages (specially English) and modalities of communication and, through all this, homogenizing life-styles. This fear has to be met so that the diversity of languages, cultures and lifestyles is respected and nurtured in the internet and in the media. In fact, ICT technologies make possible a type of decentralization that actually can enhance the viability of languages, cultures and traditional knowledge outside the mainstream.

In many ways, the World Summit on the Information Society is tackling issues that will define how our century evolves. This is not a matter just for technocrats in ministries of information or communication. It concerns every part of government. That is why it has to be a Summit, and that is why any political leader who cares for the future should be there. It is also not just a base for political leaders. The leaders of the InfoTech industry must also be there because their industry needs a second wind which the Summit can provide and because they command the capacities that have to be deployed to realize the full promise of these technologies – a more equal, more prosperous, more peaceful and a more free world.

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