

World Summit on the Information Society

15 July 2003

Civil Society Priorities Document: Summary Presentation to Plenary (15 July 2003) WSIS Intersessional Meeting, Paris 15-18 July 2003

WSIS - Civil Society Working Group on Content and Themes

Madam Chair, Distinguished Delegates.

I am honoured to present, on behalf of the Civil Society Working Group on Content and Themes, the following summary of the Civil Society Priorities Document.

This document is the result of an extensive process of collaboration and is endorsed by a broad range of civil society organisations. We consider that the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) offers a unique framework at the international level, where not only different visions can be shared among a variety of stakeholders and cultures, but also basic agreements on the shape of future policies could emerge. We therefore welcome the broadened range of issues covered by the present draft documents for the Summit.

We are concerned, nonetheless, that certain key areas are still missing, need strengthening or are inadequately addressed. In the Civil Society Priorities Document we have set out five core principles and four further priorities for attention and improvement:

First is the principle of universal human rights (refs DD 1, 7, 8, 10, 21, 26)

An information and communication society that has people and human needs at its centre requires human rights standards as the core set of principles guiding its development. We therefore particularly support the primacy given to human rights in the Draft Declaration. Communication is a fundamental participative and interactive process and is the foundation of all societal organization. In order to ensure freedom of expression and the right to information, the WSIS Declaration should therefore not only reaffirm Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), but also commit to its active enforcement. In addition, the principles of a better-balanced flow of information, free circulation of ideas, press freedom, participation in the communication process, and knowledge require consistent articulation of human rights. We therefore also endorse the specific references in the Draft Declaration to communication rights and the free flow of information.

Second is the principle of sustainable democratic development (refs DD 3, 9, 11, 13)

An equitable Information Society must be based on sustainable economic and social development and on democratic principles. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have great potential for developing more democratic, transparent and participative processes of governance. But technologies can also lead to the perpetuation and expansion of existing, undemocratic power relations and inequalities between peoples and nations. We therefore welcome the references to sustainable development, including the Millennium Development Goals but we caution against overstating the case for the positive impact of information and communication technologies as, for example in paragraph 9 of the Draft Declaration which directly links information ubiquity with the alleviation of hunger. Information and communication technologies should be used as an instrument for the creation of genuine and sustainable sources of work, above all for those who have been excluded from the formal employment system, as well as those affected by labor discrimination. Sustainable democratic development of the information society can not be left solely to market forces; in order to balance commercial objectives with the public interest, recognition should be given to the need for appropriate regulation and development of public services. The Action Plan should also address proposals to support community-based communications using both traditional and new communication technologies. Information and communication technologies can contribute to sustainability, but their use is also creating new environmental hazards. The Action Plan should include concrete proposals to: develop renewable energy resources, particularly for remote communities; improve resource efficiency and ensure safe disposal or recycling of used information and communication technologies hardware.

Third is the principle of the global knowledge commons (refs DD 22-25, 30-32)

The Declaration should include, the maintenance and growth of the commonwealth of human knowledge as a means of reducing global inequality and of providing the conditions for intellectual creativity, sustainable development and respect for human rights. We therefore welcome the section on "access to information and knowledge" in the Draft Declaration (paras 22-25).

The privatisation of knowledge and information through copyright, patents and trademarks is ceasing to be an effective means of rewarding creative endeavour or encouraging innovation and can contribute to the growth of inequality and the exploitation of the poor.

The Action Plan must defend and extend the global knowledge commons, through public policy and investment in open source and open content, as well as through access to public communication platforms for knowledge sharing.

The Action Plan should commit to review the impact on poverty and human rights of current arrangements for recognition and governance of privately held knowledge and information including the work of World Intellectual Property Organisation and the functioning of the TRIPS agreement.

Urgent attention should be paid to the potential positive and negative impacts of information and communication technologies on the issue of literacy. This should build on and extend the section on capacity building in the Draft Declaration (paras 30-32).

The Action Plan should devote attention to the resources that are needed to enable basic skills, including information and communication technology skills and to promote lifelong learning.

Governments should invest in nation-wide "backbones" providing access to scientific, cultural and educational information to support learning and information literacy.

Literacy, education, and research efforts must include a focus on the needs of people with disability.

Gender sensitive educational programmes and appropriate learning environments including e-learning must be developed to increase women's access to education and employment.

Fourth is the principle of cultural and linguistic diversity (refs DD 10, 48-51)

The Declaration should adopt as a statement of principle the need to respect cultural and linguistic diversity and to support a plurality of means of information and communication.

The Action Plan should promote legislative, regulatory, technological and financial measures to support communications media and information pluralism; and should allow for specific safeguards against concentration of media ownership in either corporate or government hands.

The Action Plan should reinforce rights of access to the media and the means of information and expression for all peoples, including indigenous peoples and other discriminated groups as well as other linguistic and cultural minorities.

The Action Plan should support diversity through public service broadcast media including community media.

Fifth is the principle of gender equality

Evidence of governments' commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment remain largely absent from the World Summit Agenda. The Declaration must adopt as a statement of principle a fundamental commitment to gender equality, non-discrimination and women's empowerment, and recognize these as non-negotiable and essential prerequisites to an equitable and people-centred development within the Information Society.

The Action Plan must commit to redress the effects of the intersection of unequal power relations in the social, economic and political spheres between women and men, as well those of class, ethnicity, religion, race, geographical location and development status.

The Action Plan should endorse the development of governance and policy frameworks, the setting of quantitative and qualitative targets and a system of monitoring and evaluation which would redress shortcomings of current gender mainstreaming approaches.

We also have continuing concerns in four other areas:

First we are deeply concerned with the question of information security (refs DD 34-37)

The Draft Declaration is not well balanced on this issue notably the section on "building confidence and security" (paras 34-37). Existing policies on information security often impinge unnecessarily upon the rights of individuals, and may be technologically and economically problematic. The Declaration should contain, as a statement of principle, that the involvement of all stakeholders is essential to the development of any such policy at the local, national, and international levels.

The Action Plan must support education and open discourse in information security including inventories of recommended best practices and impact assessments of potential policies.

The Action Plan should include a call for developing means through which local and international stakeholders can ensure equitable and just protection of rights as international legal solutions are devised.

The World Summit should recognize that one of the greatest threats to "information security" lies in the militarization of information space, including the development and deployment of "infowar" technologies and techniques; the deployment of military software or hardware against civilian communications systems; the domination of satellite orbits for military purposes; and the purposeful destruction of civilian communication systems during conflicts, in violation of international law. The World Summit should encourage the foundations for a future Convention against Information Warfare to address these concerns.

Second we are concerned with issues of access and infrastructure (refs para 17-20)

Global universal access to communication and information should be a target of the WSIS Action Plan. The expansion of the information infrastructure should be based on recognition of a universal right to communicate and principles of equality and partnership and guided by regulation at both national and international levels. The existing references in the Draft Declaration and Action Plan are largely to be welcomed but are not sufficient.

The evolution of policy should be coordinated internationally but enable a diversity of appropriate solutions based on national and regional input and international sharing of information and resources. This should be people-centered and process-orientated, rather than technologically determined and expert dominated.

International bandwidth costs and allocation of radio spectrum and geo-stationary positions should be democratic and equitable and the current burdens of cost unfairly weighted to under-developed contexts must be eliminated. National access and infrastructure plans must address the divide between socio-economic groups and between urban and rural areas.

Specific reference should be made in the Declaration and Action Plan to the needs of people with disability including in the design and development of information and communication technologies and access to appropriate equipment and services.

Governments should be encouraged to adopt free/open source software, since their use of proprietary software is both economically unsustainable and compromising in terms of transparency and security.

Third we are concerned with global information and communication technology governance (refs DD para 38, 39, 44)

We welcome the references to good governance in the Draft Declaration. In an information and communication society, good governance must be based on the values of participation, inclusiveness, transparency and accountability. This implies the democratic management of international bodies dealing with information and communication technologies.

In particular, the management of the core resources of the Internet, that are the Internet protocols, standards and identifiers such as domain names and IP addresses, must serve the public interest at the global, national and local levels. Furthermore, any decision made on protocols and standards should be compatible with international human rights standards and specially the rights to freedom of expression, to privacy, and to non-discrimination.

And finally, we wish to draw the attention to a major risk with respect to other related regional and international processes (refs para DD 53)

Essential decisions are already being taken, in other regional and international political arenas that may not be consistent with the vision and values elaborated at this Summit.

Work in progress of supra-national organisations all have huge potential consequences for knowledge, education, culture and communication.

There is especially a need to redress the current trend of exporting to the global level, international legal frameworks which have been developed by and for Western countries, and to empower effective participation of developing countries in decision making processes.

We therefore recommend that the WSIS participants establish a multi-stakeholders observatory committee that would be responsible for: mapping decision-making in other political arenas that impacts or intersects with the WSIS agenda; establishing a monitoring system to ensure decisions taken in other political arenas are consistent with the general framework established by the WSIS process; and reporting to all stakeholders of the WSIS on a regular basis until December 2005.