Contribution from the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IMACR)

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Comments on documents presented by the "Group of Friends of the Chair" to Prepcom2

Established in 1957, the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) draws its membership from around the world. We are the largest international professional organisation in the field of media and communication research. IAMCR members promote global inclusiveness and excellence within the best traditions of critical research in the field of media and communication (See appendix for a list of formal aims of the association).

IAMCR has been an accredited civil society participant in the World Summit on the Information Society since the early days of Phase I. In July 2002, the association created a task force on WSIS to monitor the various stages of the event and help IAMCR intervene effectively. Our members have been active in WSIS activities in the areas of education and research, media, and internet governance, among others. Two of our members represent different families on the Civil Society Bureau.

IAMCR notes the efforts of the Group of Friends of the Chair to produce a basic framing document to focus discussion in Phase II of WSIS, and welcomes the GFC's invitation for contributions from interested parties. It is in the spirit of cooperation and multistakeholder collaboration, and in the interest of the world community as a whole, that we offer the following comments.

An essential principle: multistakeholder collaboration

Both the "Political Chapeau" and "Plan of Implementation" proposed by the Group of Friends of the Chair reiterate the fundamental principle of multistakeholder collaboration in determining and realizing the goals of WSIS. We applaud the recognition, reiterated several times in the two documents, that these goals can only be accomplished "through the involvement, cooperation and partnership of governments and all stakeholders and that international cooperation and solidarity at all levels are indispensable if the fruits of the Information Society are to be shared equitably by all". However, the nature and extent of this collaboration remains vague and undefined. During the first phase of WSIS, despite the formal openness of the process to input from nongovernment actors, real input *with impact* came about only as a result of constant and sometimes draining struggle. Negotiations over process often superseded debates over content. At the end of the day, most observers and participants agree that the most significant results of nongovernment – particularly civil society – involvement in WSIS were achieved in the corridors and on the margins of the Summit rather than inside the event itself. Despite the myriad obstacles to their meaningful participation, nongovernment actors clearly demonstrated that their expertise constitutes a critical contribution to defining the shape and the substance of knowledge societies. **We would appreciate a clear articulation of how the GFC sees the participation of nongovernment actors in the Tunis phase of WSIS and beyond, and hope that this vision will be as inclusive as possible.**

<u>A role for research</u>

IAMCR has much to say on many of the subject areas covered by WSIS. Our particular expertise, however, is in the area of research. The WSIS Declaration of Principles adopted in Geneva refers to ICT research and development but pays no attention to the importance of social-scientific or humanistic research in building a people-centred knowledge society. The Plan of Action goes a bit further – calling on academics, for example, to explore the ethical dimensions of ICTs. The GFC documents make no mention of research at all. **We therefore call on the GFC to correct this lacuna, by including a significant reference to the need for research in the currently open paragraphs of its report on "further commitments" and "resource mobilisation".**

The WSIS Declaration and Plan of Action are ambitious documents, which the GFC is trying to take forward in Phase II of the Summit. Many of the action areas that have been announced will require a vastly extended knowledge base before they can be properly addressed. **WSIS documents should refer explicitly to the central role of research activities and institutions in facing the many challenges that they identify. Research should be considered a target area for the plan of action in itself, as well as a crucial resource for the accomplishment of other targets. Nearly every target line of the WSIS plan of action has a significant research requirement, and this means that the human and financial resources required to *produce* research need to be taken into account. In addition to new and original research, WSIS should also recognize the need for independent analysis and expert synthesis of existing research findings.**

IAMCR is currently preparing an «International Researchers' Charter for Knowledge Societies», which aims at establishing the rights and obligations of the international research community - all disciplines included - in the information age. The Charter proposes a number of basic principles, including the right to seek, retrieve and distribute research results freely, the respect of the status of researchers for independent, open and fair working conditions, and the free access to archives, libraries, universities and other entities funded through public resources. It also suggests the means necessary to implement these rights and obligations, and calls on the research community as well as governments, the private sector and other segments of civil society to recognize those tenets and implement them, in the name of knowledge enhancement and capacity building. Finally, it urges all actors to establish or invent instruments for the improvement of the status of research, for making it independent of technological or political considerations as well as the biases deriving from commercial interests, and thus improving the relevance of research to education, academia and society at large.

This Charter will be offered by IAMCR as a contribution to WSIS as soon as it has been adopted by the association's governing bodies later this year.

Media and communication – an unfortunate blindspot within WSIS

IAMCR, as our name clearly indicates, is concerned about media and communication. The media and on and offline means of communication play central roles in today's world. In the face of globalisation there is a growing need for dialogue aimed at fostering greater social and economic equality and at facilitating the actions and practices that are needed to foster respect for human rights and to alleviate poverty or distress wherever it occurs. This is the role of the media.

Sadly and paradoxically – as many critics have noted –, the World Summit on the Information Society has so far failed to recognize the central importance of media and communication in building an equitable, people-centred information society. WSIS to date has paid only cursory lip-service to media and has not acknowledged critical issues such as the lack of media freedom in many parts of the world, the rising global concentration of private media ownership, the challenges facing public service media where these exist, or the importance of recognizing and promoting the legitimacy of independent community-based media. **The GFC documents "recognize the role of the media" and include an action line on this topic. We strongly urge that this be translated into a thorough analysis of the role of the media in meeting the stated goals of WSIS, the obstacles presently standing in the way of their fulfilling this role, and a series of recommended action steps towards creating an international enabling environment for media and communication.**

The ongoing importance of education

Bridging the digital divide, research on the social and cultural implications of ICTs and a free and vibrant media will only result in a more humane and equitable society to the extent that people are able to make use of the powerful emancipatory capacity that these unleash. *Education* is therefore another resource to be deployed at every stage of the development of knowledge societies. An associate member of IAMCR, the European Consortium for Communications Research (ECCR), wrote recently that education efforts need to be developed dramatically, if the promise of the information society is to be realized: "Current initiatives are meagre and concentrate on the acquisition of computer skills with an overwhelming focus on tasks oriented tools and procedures, falling short of providing even the minimal foundation needed to orient oneself in the Information Society in the making. The severe deficit of adequate education leads to a new form of illiteracy which entails societal risks comparable to that of illiteracy of the past centuries." **Information and communication literacy skills are therefore among the key building blocks of a genuine knowledge society and should be recognized as such in the documents presented for discussion by the GFC.**

Financial mechanisms and Internet governance

As we mentioned above, we have limited ourselves in this document to commenting on those issues within WSIS which speak to our particular areas of expertise, namely research, media and education. As citizens of the knowledge society, we have also underscored our interest and concerns regarding the multistakeholder collaborative process. In this respect, we are encouraged by the spaces that have opened up for civil society participation within the official WSIS structures of the Task Force on Financial Mechanisms and the Working Group on Internet Governance. We recognize, however, that these are not enough and therefore, in the coming months, IAMCR will continue to be active in discussions regarding these two major points on the current agenda for Phase II of WSIS.

Appendix: Aims of IAMCR

IAMCR has consultative status 'A' with UNESCO and is regarded as the international umbrella organisation in the field of media and communication research. The **formal aims** of the association are:

- To provide a forum where researchers and others involved in media and communication can meet and exchange information about their work;

- To encourage the development of research and systematic study, especially in areas of media production, transmission and reception, in the contexts in which these activities take place and in those subjects and areas where such work is not well developed;

- To stimulate interest in media and communication research;

- To disseminate information about research and research needs – not only to researchers but also to those working in the various media and others responsible for communication policies;

- To seek to improve media and communication research, policy and practice and to encourage research, especially from international and interdisciplinary perspectives, and to exchange information on practices and conditions that would improve the quality of media and communication practice, and media and communication research;

- To contribute by means of appropriate research, to the development and improvement of the education and training of journalists and other media professionals.

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