

Statement to WSIS Plenary PrepCom 2, Geneva 18th February 2004.

CRIS Campaign (Communication Rights in the Information Society)

The following is the text delivered on behalf of the CRIS Campaign by Claudia Padovani.

"Communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization. It is central to the information society." If these words sound familiar it is because they are taken from the WSIS Geneva Declaration. The CRIS Campaign takes these to heart. We believe that communication, and communication rights, are at the heart of the Information Society.

This point is very relevant to the issue of financing, and I want to focus on a few dimensions of this.

First, people's right to communicate, and to engage with the Communication structures of society, should not be dependent on the ability to pay. Since the market works on ability to pay, where it fails (and the Task Force report acknowledges that it sometimes does) governance structures must find the resources to make up the short fall and ensure people have at least a minimum of communication rights. Thus governments, individually and collectively, must create the environment in which the communication needs of development are realised in all its dimensions. An environment to attract private investment might be one aspect of it - but this is a means not an end, and cannot fulfil all the needs. The centrality of public expenditure, directed at the public good, must be recognised. This may in turn require the redistribution of some of the considerable profits generated in the communication sector towards the needs of poor communities. Such redistribution may, in part, be most equitably and efficiently done at the global level.

In short, inability to pay for a basic need implies redistribution of resources: governments of the north, as well as the south, cannot shirk their responsibilities here. It is also clear that the scale of the problem, especially among poor rural communities, demands some new thinking.

Second, it stands to reason that the mechanisms that are put into place for financing, the follow-up mechanisms for the WSIS, or indeed national policies through which they are implemented, must have the active participation of all parties, and this must include any Digital Solidarity Fund. Of course, civil society is accepted on paper as a partner in the process- but we need to translate this into reality, and I include here the onus on civil society to understand the issues and come up with workable realistic solutions.

Third, the structures into which finances are directed, especially where the goal is explicitly to support development and enhance communication of the poor, must be tailored specifically to those needs. The most effective financing, ownership and management structures must be facilitated – and this may mean community ownership of networks infrastructure, local SME ownership, local authority ownership - and not just

large corporate ownership. Examples of community-driven networks can be found everywhere -from the USA (where about 1,000 rural cooperative exist) to Poland, to Argentina, Peru and India. These have often emerged against the odds. We need an environment that will encourage them, enable community and local entrepreneurship, and reap the development and empowering benefits.

Fourth, in relation to spending finances most wisely, w must observe technology neutrality - the most appropriate technology must be used. I refer of course to realising the potential of new and emerging technologies, from VOIP to WiFi to WiMAX, and to regulating to maximise their contribution to solving the problem of exclusion. But appropriate technology also applies to old technologies. As we have heard community and local radio can often hugely contribute to the capacity to communicate, and is still Hugely neglected - and for that matter television, increasingly controlled by corporate and commercial interests, must also be re-imagined as a tool for communication, not profit generation.

These comments are somewhat general in nature, still at the level of principles. Over the coming days, weeks and months, the CRIS campaign and its partners will be developing innovative, practical and workable ideas to put these principles into action, and we look forward to collaborating with everyone here in the time ahead. The Civil Society Working Group on Financing, too, will be developing its own ideas to be conveyed to the assembly.

Thank you