



## From the Editors

### ***What Can We Expect from the World Summit?***

Between December 10 and 12, 2003, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) will take place in Geneva, and many of us from within the *ITID* community are heaving a sigh of exasperation and doubt.

Can any good possibly come from yet another meeting on the global communications revolution, especially on this scale and at this expense? Over the past decade there have been dozens of opportunities to communicate about the communications revolution, including its role in international development. Meetings have run the gamut from specialized events like the G8 Ministerial in Brussels in 1995 and the Information Society and Development meeting in South Africa 2 years later, to regular annual sessions of international bodies such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and infoDEV, to academic meetings sponsored by institutions, including our own.

Some of these events have actually led to improvements in the capacities of developing countries, and the world community more broadly, to manage better the transition toward more knowledge-intensive societies. Others have not. What are the odds that WSIS—certainly the most ambitious of any of these meetings so far—will help or hurt the cause of global communications and development?

The WSIS is really a pair of meetings, the initial meeting in Geneva with a second, follow-up meeting in Tunis in 2005, convened by the UN secretary general and organized by the ITU. In the lead-up to the two summits, there has been a flurry of preparatory conferences in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe. The intended outcome of the WSIS, according to its Web site, is to “develop and foster a clear statement of political will and a concrete plan of action for achieving the goals of the Information Society, while fully reflecting all the different interests at stake.”

Hard to argue with those sentiments. But can WSIS contribute to real solutions, and not just expansive rhetoric?

### **The Good and the Bad**

While preparing this editorial we canvassed our *ITID* advisory and editorial boards for their opinions on the WSIS. The responses were mostly pessimistic ranging from calls for an outright ban on such meetings to pleas for more substance and action and less process and talk. One board member described the WSIS as a series of pointless boondoggles funded by the international community.

Overall, this pessimism stems from a fairly pervasive sense of meeting fatigue. For systemic and enculturated reasons it is often easier to raise funds to *talk about* information and communications technology (ICT) and development than to actually *do the work*. This is a situation that must change and (the irony noted) should be seriously discussed at the WSIS meeting.

Pessimism notwithstanding, our board does generally hope for the best, and it noted some ways the WSIS might contribute to the cause of ICT for development. A meeting on this scale presents extraordinary opportunities for networking and relationship building and we do hope the WSIS will provide time and facilities to ensure that these connections are made. Furthermore, the WSIS is certain to help awareness raising and may mobilize A FEW new resources. At the same time the WSIS must focus on ways to get the message out, as well as mechanisms to lock in commitment on the spot.

## **The Real Opportunity**

If this were 1993, networking and awareness raising would have been sufficient motivation for a vast WSIS. But in 2003 it is well past time to only hope for such modest outcomes.

Today, the biggest opportunity for the WSIS is to ensure that the communities of practice in our field are able to be more reflective and reflexive about their *own* work; to critique their practice, their successes, and failures; and to make a professional commitment to *communicate* these reflections to the community at large. We all need to speak honestly about what works, what seems not to work, and why. If the WSIS can help us learn how to learn from the vast number of ICT experiments already under way, to ascertain the reasons for their failures and their successes, and to design better ways to communicate them to other potential users, then it will indeed have been worth the heavy costs. This dialogue must capture issues relevant to social and cultural contexts and empowerment; economic development, sustainability, and environmental concerns; and new engineering practice and technological design.

Millions of dollars are being wasted on doomed projects in one village that simply repeat the known failures of their predecessors in other villages. By agreeing to wrestle with the difficult challenge of gathering and creating useful knowledge for sustainable projects in ICT and development, the WSIS could lay down a marker in Geneva against which it can measure progress in Tunis 2 years hence.

## **A Role for ITID**

The founding purpose for *ITID* is to create stronger communities of thoughtful practitioners and engaged scholars in respectful and critical dialogue, and if the previous argument is somewhat self-serving, so be it. We at *ITID* are eager to work with WSIS initiatives that share the goal of better knowledge for better development. We aim to elevate the reflective and reflexive opportunities within our community and to serve as an instrument of communication for new knowledge. We believe that in the transitions toward more knowledge-intensive societies, providing these communities a means of better communication is a fundamental calling.

One way that *ITID* is working to do just that is represented by the Forum piece here in our second issue. Jonathan Peizer's essay expresses his personal views, based on years of experience in the world of foundations, about when and how cross-sectoral collaborations fail to work. This issue's Forum section has been expanded beyond what we had originally envisioned for *ITID*. Reacting to the range of submissions and to calls from our board and other colleagues, we are testing mechanisms in which the Forum can support more and longer pieces of reflection and opinion that do not fit well the old-school model of the research paper.

We have also selected for this second issue a number of excellent research pieces. Beth Kolko, Carolyn Wei, and Jan Spyridakis provide a very carefully developed analysis, backed with empirical data, of Internet use and infrastructure in a poor country from a region rarely the subject of attention—Uzbekistan in Central Asia. In another research article, Rafiq Dossani and Martin Kenney provide

real insights into a much-debated topic: Of what use is offshoring back-office services to developing countries, and how extensive is this trend? Who precisely is providing these services, and on what criteria are start-up and investment decisions made? Their overview of business process outsourcing is based on a large collection of first-person interviews conducted in India. This contribution is particularly timely given the skeptical and often ill-informed responses by some parties, including in the United States, to the growth in offshore information technology (IT) work.

In his article James Dempsey of the Center for Democracy and Technology debunks a silver-bullet argument for IT use in developing areas, that is, the erroneous belief that if developing countries could just get the best digital signature law passed, then e-commerce, e-government, and so on would be much easier. He points out that creating the conditions for sustainable use of distributed, digital resources are so enmeshed with political, institutional, social, and other factors that no single solution is available for any important ICT endeavor. He points to the importance of creating conditions conducive to trust in this new, quickly evolving Internet environment.

In a Research Report, Raul Roman provides an analytic framework for evaluating one of the most popular ICT experiments in this period, the telecenter. He makes a strong, unambiguous call for more attention to such theoretical frameworks when studying the role of ICTs in development, and he offers diffusion theory as a useful candidate framework. Finally, Catherine Mann focuses on the importance of careful attention to the terms we use in our ICT and development discussions, and reminds us that the “developing world” is not monolithic but a rich and broad collection of peoples and contexts, requiring equally nuanced policy responses.

*ITID* continues to evolve and we again ask for your submissions, support, and input. Please do contact us at [itid-ed@mit.edu](mailto:itid-ed@mit.edu).

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