

more informal and unscripted style of meetings. While there still are, of course, many critiques and problems with the CSD Multistakeholder Dialogues, several important proposals have sprung from these meetings, such as initiatives on eco-tourism and sustainable business practices.

This is just one idea. What is clear is that whatever modalities are employed to move toward the next phase in the WSIS process, we must move beyond the traditional statecentric UN summit format. Otherwise we risk losing the signal amid the noise. ■

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Information Technologies and International Development
Volume 1, Number 3–4, Spring–Summer 2004, 48–49

A Tale of Paragraph 4: Stating the Obvious at the WSIS

Seán Ó Siochrú

Behind every paragraph, line, and even word of the WSIS Declaration of Principles is a story. This is the tale of two lines of Paragraph 4, which read: “Communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization. It is central to the Information Society.”

At the Paris WSIS Inter-Sessional meeting in July 2003, several ad hoc intergovernmental working Groups were set up. Each took a section of the draft declaration, aiming to gain agreement at PrepCom III a few months later. Paragraphs 1 and 1A were taken together. The former was a reaffirmation of fundamental human rights. There were three options for the latter, the third of which began with the sentence: “We recognise the right to communicate and the right to access information and knowledge as a fundamental human right.”

The right to communicate is a contentious issue in the WSIS. Some use it as a vigorous expression of support for universal access. The CRIS Campaign uses it as a collective term for all rights associated with media and communication. And there are others still under the influence of the divisive battles in UNESCO in the 1980s, when the right to communicate began as a struggle for more equitable global communication structures and ended up as a battlefield of the Cold War. The Working Group set up in Paris to deal with Paragraphs 1/1A, chaired by Canada, a strong supporter of universal access, called itself the *Right to Communicate Working Group*. Although probably initially unaware of the controversial choice of title, the chair soon realized she had a difficult task ahead of her.

At PrepCom III, a friend alerted me late the night before to the ad hoc Working Group’s first meeting. At 8:00 a.m. on Wednesday, September 17, I showed up. The chair, presumably to circumvent controversy, opened the meeting by excluding from subsequent deliberations Paragraph 1A, Option 3 on the right to communicate, noting—and she had a point—that it was impossible to recognize a right that had no legal existence.

Civil society at that time was allowed 10 minutes for interventions, and could sit through the rest of the meeting as observers. Ill prepared, I mumbled a

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few words about “communication rights being at the heart of any Information Society.” After the business sector spoke, my second attempt to be more coherent was abruptly and mercifully cut short by the chair. I was content to sit and learn for the remaining 50 minutes, during which governments failed to agree on anything.

The meeting reconvened the next morning, but circumstances had changed. Due to complaints from a few governments, civil society could now speak for only three minutes and was then obliged to leave, returning at the end to be briefed on the outcome. There was nothing we could do, and indeed, even rallying civil society to protest proved difficult.

Politics apart, I cursed the need to drag myself in so early for just three minutes. But at least I was better prepared having conferred with others in CRIS to produce a couple of proposals. As the sole civil society representative there, I had the full three minutes to present my proposals for Paragraph 1. As part of a longer tract, I included the words quoted above. When I returned later to be briefed, the chair—who was supportive of civil society participation—noted that several delegates liked the wording but the process would continue.

Later, after further redrafting, the chair informed me that the first two sentences of our submission had been retained in Paragraph 4, at least until the next round. Ultimately, they persevered to become part of the Declaration.

To some, it got the whole Working Group off the hook: placing communication at the center of the Information Society retained the spirit of what they intended and preserved the word “communication,” while the formula could never be accused of raking over old Cold War coals. In fact, I had taken the first sentence from a passage written by Cees Hamelink that I happened to read the week before; and linking it directly to the second is intended to compensate for a deficit in the limp and static term *Information Society*. In the final declaration, these lines are prefaced with a vitally important reference to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Compared with the international battles fought and intrigue generated over this, “my” sentences were shooed in with no contest.

On a human side, the chair revealed that her own preference for the words was based on a keen interest in paleoanthropology—the study of early human fossils—an interest I share. There is much controversy over what first stimulated the emer-

gence of human society. Both she and I favor the idea that the decisive factor was language—our ability and need to communicate—and the CRIS proposal neatly restated this founding thesis in today’s context.

I admit I indulge in some juvenile pleasure in seeing these words in print, on the first page of the Declaration of Principles. But there is little reason to rejoice. That communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need, and the foundation of all social organizations merely states the obvious. Few could reasonably deny that communication is central to the Information Society, though too often it is forgotten.

Indeed, if this passage can claim even minor significance it is because so many far more important statements of the obvious are shamefully omitted from the Declaration.

That more and more of society’s information is owned by multinational corporations and released to the public only on terms that maximize their profits is found nowhere in the Declaration. Copyright, patents, and trademarks are strongly skewed in favor of the corporate owners of “intellectual property,” and nothing in the declaration and Action Plan will change that (though we can claim some credit, along with more enlightened governments, that the final Declaration Article 42 was an improvement over earlier drafts). That concentration of ownership globally has led to control of mainstream media by a handful of avaricious corporations does not warrant a mention. And the crucial potential role of community and genuinely independent media (independent of state and commercial control) is ignored, with mention of support only for “media based in local communities.” Free and open-source software—tried and tested means to introduce more effective, equitable, and development-friendly software—are given short shrift.

In general, the Declaration of Principles is a timid document that says more about the current pecking order of power—indeed, going to some lengths to confirm current imbalances—than it does about the major questions confronting the creation of an Information Society. Yes, it could have been worse. But it would have to be a lot better to make a difference. ■

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Information Technologies and International Development
Volume 1, Number 3–4, Spring–Summer 2004, 49–50