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or to revolutionize information, communication, and knowledge in a new social order by putting developing nations on a more equal footing with former colonial powers and their hegemonic cultures and languages? Was the purpose to secure greater freedoms in totalitarian states and authoritarian regimes or to make empty declarations that would allow many states to continue their policies of information control, filtered communication, and censored sources of knowledge? The final declaration in the eyes of many did not go far enough to allow international organizations such as the United Nations to support new approaches to development which respect today's real diversity and provide a roadmap leading to the equitable development of knowledge, communication, and Information Societies that truly respect human rights and freedoms.

As we look forward to Tunis in 2005, all stakeholders must reflect on the recognition of diversity as a dynamic. Tunis will provide a unique opportunity for countries, international organizations, the private sector and civil society to undertake actions which will go beyond vacuous declarations. The official recognition of this dynamic will also constrain authoritarian regimes, such as Tunisia, to prove their resolve to engage in an open process that respects cultural diversity, plural bases of knowledge, open cybercommunications, and free access to information. If Tunisia, which tended to avoid issues of rights and freedoms leading up to and throughout the Geneva Summit, cannot set itself as an example of the new order, the chances of bridging the digital divide will be slim indeed. ■

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ICTs and the World of Work: Weaving a Bright New Fabric or a Tangled Web?

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Labor is too often excluded from discussions about the Information Society. It is, however, one of the critical components. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are changing not only people's actual work environments, but also the way labor markets operate. These technologies are modifying the competitive environment of firms in most industries and countries in the world by altering information asymmetries in the markets for goods, services, and labor. ICTs are also contributing to a reduction in transportation and transactions costs which, in tandem with globalization, are increasing the commerce of goods and the trade of previously localized services. Such transformations are in turn promoting outsourcing and subcontracting, which encourage the creation of complex supply chains. Outsourcing can lead to industrial restructuring with losses in employment in some sectors and growth in others; these results in changes to the configuration of the labor force as demand for specific competencies shifts, altering wage and employment structures and often increasing inequality.

The Geneva WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action seem to be guided by two implicit assumptions. The first is that improved access—both in terms of availability of services and reduced usage costs—will reduce inequality. The second is that only positive outcomes can result from the adoption of ICTs. Unfortunately, neither of these two assumptions is true. This paper explores these assumptions that shape the Geneva Plan of Action and suggests important aspects that should be addressed in the upcoming Tunis phase of WSIS.

Access to ICTs leverages or amplifies firms' and individuals' existing endowments. Enterprises and individuals that lack the know-how to implement ICTs are at a disadvantage and must invest heavily to catch up. However, while the laggards are catching up, the endowed individuals and enterprises continue to progress. It is indeed extremely difficult to leapfrog the knowledge acquisition processes. It should therefore be self-evident that ICTs are, inherently, sources of inequality. Policies that exclusively

rely on improved—and subsidized—access thus risk amplifying existing inequalities.

An economically viable strategy to use ICTs as vehicles for social progress must therefore emphasize the critical role of enterprises, and suggest structured and coherent policies to promote ICT-enabled small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Many actions to promote enterprises are included in the WSIS Plan of Action. Unfortunately, the proposals are spread throughout the text and in many cases seem to concentrate on the ICT sector rather than on the whole economy. The most glaring omission, however, is the absence of enterprise development services to promote ICT-enabled enterprises or any consideration of access strategies for SMEs.

ICTs can have negative effects. The characteristics of staff within those firms investing in ICT systems are changing. Labor markets are becoming more fragmented as ICTs require more qualified staff. The conditions of work of qualified personnel are increasingly diverging from those of the less skilled workers: the wages and employment security of the former are improving while those of the latter are worsening. Thus, many societies, seeing important delocalization and increased specialization of their workforce, must raise expenditures in both retraining and social safety nets to improve labor mobility and enhance human resources. Many OECD countries are beginning to recognize this, but developing countries often do not have the resources to implement such policies.

Internet-based job exchanges and free-agent referral services are increasingly popular, but in many parts of the world these resources are only available to qualified persons with higher incomes. Only explicit actions by governments to promote the use of ICTs in labor exchanges will redress the situation.

Delocalization and outsourcing that result from the greater opportunities afforded by ICTs can generate employment in the developing world. These opportunities can, however, lead to a “race to the bottom” where different countries compete for less remunerative jobs in progressively more precarious employment, under worsening conditions and with increasingly lower local value added. There are also temptations to offer fiscal incentives to reduce those resources that allow governments to increase public services or offer better social safety nets or retraining facilities. It should therefore be in everybody’s interest to limit competition based on the creation of

progressively lower quality jobs. ICTs can provide global unions with the means to inform members of working conditions in specific industries and the wages relative to national averages. Such information would allow local labor organizations to negotiate their own working conditions. However, for such strategies to be effective, international labor standards play a fundamental role.

A summit that wishes to examine social effects of ICTs must pay greater attention to the quantity and quality of employment and to unionization and respect for international labor standards as fundamental framework conditions. The Tunis phase of the WSIS should be more explicit in a future Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action about the opportunities and the challenges that ICTs pose to workers. Participants at the preparatory process of the Tunis phase should therefore consider:

- Examining in greater detail the benefits and costs of ICTs for enterprises and reviewing at greater length measures to help enterprises—particularly SMEs—to adopt competitive, ICT-enabled, and efficient production strategies. These need to be seen in a wider context of public policies for SMEs, such as the availability of proficient logistic systems, secure financial transaction backbones, quality control certification strategies, and other support facilities.
- Reviewing the impact that the adoption of ICTs can have on the labor force. In this sense, greater attention should be given to social safety nets. Social dialogue and workers’ participation are essential, as well as skills training and life-long learning.
- Explicitly appraising how to improve the distribution of the benefits accrued by the adoption of ICTs. Emphasis will need to be given to policies that are designed to endow the underprivileged with the capacity to fully exploit ICTs. Experience has shown that the full integration of ICTs has been obtained through competition and supply chain development. Paradoxically, effective interventions of this kind might need to start with large enterprises that emphasize local outsourcing to SMEs. At least at an initial stage, public intervention might be needed to provide entrepreneurship training, financial support, low-cost but economically sustainable data processing and communication services,

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and other, similar enterprise development strategies. Training and retraining facilities for workers in these sectors will also need to be developed. ■

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A Human Rights Assessment of the World Summit on the Information Society

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The first phase of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) resulted in a Declaration of Principles and a Plan of Action, adopted by government representatives, and a Civil Society Declaration entitled “Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs.” In assessing the outcome of the Summit from a human rights angle, several critical observations can be made on governmental, as well as civil society, outcomes.

Squandering an Opportunity to Bring Forward the Human Rights Agenda

Starting out with the positive aspects, we are pleased that the Declaration of Principles begins with human rights. As such, the first four paragraphs of the Declaration include important human rights principles and references. The essential principles of universality and indivisibility are reiterated and there are references to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as well as to the Vienna Declaration and the UN Charter. It is also positive that Article 19 of the UDHR is quoted in full rather than in an abridged version as some delegations were proposing.

Looking then at the more critical aspects, it is remarkable that a major setback in the international consensus on human rights in the final Declaration of Principles was avoided only at the last minute. Up until a few days before the Summit, government delegates were still in disagreement over a reference to the UDHR as the basis for the development of the Information Society.

This potential human rights problem was fortunately resolved. However, one cannot and should not be too impressed by documents that merely confirm principles agreed upon 55 years ago, while not meeting the challenge of bringing forward the actual implementation of these standards. As numerous cases show, the main human rights problems today do not relate to lack of formal commitment, but rather, to lack of effective implementation of human rights.

Crucial Human Rights Concerns

Furthermore, the Declaration of Principles lacks crucial human rights principles that have been raised by