

FORUM

The Millions Without a Voice in the Worldwide Information Society

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The World Summit on the Information Society is the latest in the long line of events at which we, the international community, entered into commitments that later we were not able to honor. In 1996 at the World Food Summit we committed ourselves to halve the number of the undernourished people by 2015. Six years later it was pointed out that we were 45 years behind, and many countries are experiencing food shortages (Sources Observatoire). Considering how these summits are organized and what they target, it is hard to see what distinguishes the Geneva World Summit on the Information Society from the 1996 World Food Summit or other similar events in the past. In other words, what is the likelihood that the international community will succeed with the Geneva Agreements if we have failed where food, health, and environmental issues are concerned?

Instead of differences, what we see are similarities, such as the disinterest exhibited by the big Western countries' leaders: they did not show up. And they did not make a financial commitment. To President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, who suggested the creation of a Digital Solidarity Fund, they replied that the Digital Division had already been included in their Aid for Development Plans. We came out of the Summit with a laudable agreement in principle, with a wonderful action plan approved by the participants, yet with no means to implement it.

Another similarity we must point out is the underrepresentation of the "real people," the people from rural areas or the working-class people, the masses that should be at the center of the Information Society. It is commonly said their integration is a prerequisite to reducing the digital division. Yet we still face the issue of letting them participate in the preparatory committees of the World Summit on the Information Society, as well as in other decision-making processes.

We have to question the ideological foundation of the World Summit on the Information Society. As a matter of fact, the Summit organizers assumed that the Southern countries' governments, or the civil society organizations present at the Summit, were capable of speaking for these "real people,"

expressing their views, their way of thinking, their culture. Such an assumption may be safe in the Western countries, yet hazardous in the Southern countries. In fact, several studies, especially studies on the rural world in Africa as well as South America, have exposed the gap between the people living there and their representatives at the state level, who are supposed to speak for them (Ela, 1990). There is also a communication gap between the rural world and the civil society organizations and their leaders (Kiyindou, 1997).

As far as the State is concerned, it is important to point out that most Southern countries' leaders simply want to remain in power at all costs, which has led to irresponsible and dictatorial political elites. In remote areas, the authority of the state is often undermined by pre-existing traditional organizational structures and sometimes tribal affiliations are a stumbling block in the information process.

This means that the nature of the state in Southern countries does not allow its representatives to speak for the majority of the people. No wonder this majority later finds it hard to identify themselves with many state-run projects. By ignoring the divide between the people of the South and their political elites, the Information Society, as described by the International Telecommunication Union, the United Nations, and the Geneva Summit, is a society built on a wrong view of the world.

I had hoped the World Summit on the Information Society would be a Mecca for trade (Usumier, 1992), for exchange, for communication and consultation of peoples and cultures! Yet it was the opposite, an event of noncommunication (Huissman, 1985). The development model suggested by the Geneva Summit means top-down assistance, not participation. (Participation demands that all parties play an active part in the process). Here, once again, we have defined somebody else's needs without giving them the chance to comment on the part they are expected to play in the digital society. It is high time we swapped the paradigm of top-down assistance, which has been underlying the agenda of many big world summits, for a paradigm of partnership. Because, as Serge Latouche puts it: "The hand that receives assistance always stands below that which supplies it." This means that assistance perpetuates the West's historical domination over the South.

One of the aims the international community

committed itself to for Tunis 2005 was to make up for prior mistakes by encouraging more suitable models of participation. In addition, the noble intention of integrating the global South into the Information Society needs to be backed up by a serious effort to monitor the follow-up and assess the impact of ICT on development in the South. This is what the NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development) meant when they talked about developing a real follow-up and assessment power, in order for the South to make the most out of its integration into the Information Society. In the wider context, it is necessary to evaluate the normative underpinnings of the Information Society, making an effort to give the socially excluded, and indeed the people themselves, a voice, rather than just listening to their so-called representatives. This means using IT as a tool for development, peace-building, better public health, and more democracy. ■

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The WSIS in Geneva on Pluralism, Media Quality, and Work in the Information Society: The Journalists' Perspective

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Journalists have a front-row seat in the changing world of the Information Society. Most journalists are already wired into the networks, working practices, and the employment landscape of this new society and most recognize that, with the right approach, new communications networks will widen the scope of journalism, stimulate growth and job creation in the national and global media economy, and strengthen democracy through citizens' rapid access to policymaking at local, national, and regional level. But will it happen?

After the WSIS, most journalists will still have doubts. Nothing in the outcomes of the Summit seriously addresses the crisis facing information workers such as journalists. Nothing has been agreed that will diminish the increasingly insecure and pressurized conditions in which Information Society work is carried out. The Information Society vision remains one that is driven only by the commercial imperatives of the global marketplace.

Journalists and trade union groups that took part in the Summit are convinced that the market-and-technology-based approach—which has characterised the WSIS work—is bad news all round. It will drive down employment rights, stifle creativity, lower quality, and reinforce existing divisions within society at large.

The WSIS declaration and action plan make no serious mention of the need to protect workers' rights. Nor is there a serious attempt to combat the threat posed by unprecedented levels of media concentration and numerous examples of undue influence by global media conglomerates on the world's media market—and much of the public information available on the Internet.

In fact, despite all the hype, that there is less diversity and lower standards in media and a rush to the bottom in terms of quality and pluralism. Promises to open up Internet access to millions in communities starved of reliable information may prove far too optimistic. In fact, governments are taking more control of the Internet. In recent months there