The Origins of Civil Society Involvement in the WSIS

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There is an intriguing back story to civil society participation in the WSIS. Doing it justice would require more than can be accomplished in this short article, but I will try to provide some insight here into the circumstances that led to some 350 organizations, most of them with little prior experience working together, crystallizing into the Civil Society Plenary, which many observers see as perhaps the most interesting outcome of the WSIS.

Civil society participation has been part of the rhetoric of United Nations summitry since the Earth Summit of Rio de Janeiro. But the particular conjuncture of the WSIS lent itself to more than rhetoric.

The 1998 ITU Resolution instructing the agency to move forward with organizing the WSIS made no mention of civil society. Instead, it referred to "the various partners concerned (Member States, Sector Members, etc.)" who would be called to take part. But in the wake of the Seattle demonstrations against the World Trade Organization and the new model of confrontation it augured for intergovernmental meetings on a global scale, it was clear that the UN had to decide whether it wanted barricades around its gatherings or not. Secretary General Kofi Annan, a strong proponent of the latter, called for full partnership of civil society in the WSIS and people began to take him at his word.

In December 2000, Mohammed Harbi, a senior International Telecommunication Union (ITU) staff member, told a workshop of the first Global Community Networking conference in Barcelona that the participation of NGOs and civil society organizations would be crucial to the success of the WSIS. It is unclear with what authority Harbi made this statement, but it sparked the imagination of a number of activists present at the workshop.²

During the subsequent months, members of

Voices 21, a loose association of media activists, practitioners, and individuals formed in 1999 with a view toward building public awareness of media and communication issues,³ began to consider how they might be able to influence the WSIS process. It was decided to revive the Platform for Democratisation of Communication, a group of NGOs formed in London in November 1996, whose adherents included groups such as the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), the Association for Progressive Communication (APC), and the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC).

On June 16, 2001, the Rev. Carlos A. Valle, general secretary of WACC, wrote on behalf of the Platform to WSIS acting coordinator Arthur Levin, requesting a meeting in Geneva to "clarify the opportunities for civil society involvement," as well as generate ideas and possibilities about the process.⁴ The letter stated:

Our WSIS NGO Working Group is beginning to formulate ideas on the participation of civil society, and also on the Themes under consideration at this important summit. The response to the WSIS from all members of the group is positive and enthusiastic, and indeed others with whom we are in communication also recognise immediately the importance of this event.

As a response was not forthcoming, the Platform decided to convene a meeting of its own in London in early November 2001 to push the process along. The meeting decided to rename the group as the Platform on Communication Rights, and launch a campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS). The purpose of the CRIS Campaign would be "to ensure that communication rights are central to the Information Society and to the upcoming World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)." The campaign's mission statement stated:

Our vision of the Information Society is grounded in the Right to Communicate, as a means to enhance human rights and to strengthen the social,

^{1.} In ITU parlance, sector members refers to the 400-odd private companies that enjoy associate membership by virtue of their key role in the business of international telecommunication.

^{2.} For more on this and other details of civil society involvement leading up to the official preparatory process of the WSIS, see "Communication Rights in the Information Society," theme issue of the journal of the World Association for Christian Communication, Media Development, 4, 2002.

^{3.} See http://www.comunica.org/v21/

^{4.} Personal archive.

^{5.} See Media Development, op. cit.

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economic and cultural lives of people and communities.

Crucial to this is that civil society organisations come together to help build an Information Society based on principles of transparency, diversity, participation and social and economic justice, and inspired by equitable gender, cultural and regional perspectives.

The World Summit on the Information Society offers an important forum to promote this objective. We aim to broaden the WSIS agenda and goals especially in relation to media and communication issues, and to encourage the participation of a wide spectrum of civil society groups in the process.

The link made by CRIS between communication rights and civil society participation in world summitry was not a casual one. It lies at the heart of the more fundamental link between issues and process that would come to mark the entire WSIS experience.

A key event in that early period came within days of the launch of the CRIS Campaign. The Platform joined forces with a German foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), which had been planning to bring together a group of public service broadcasters to discuss media involvement in the WSIS. The Platform and the FES jointly organized a meeting of about 40 people in Geneva on November 19 and 20, 2001, about half of them from NGOs and half from a range of media organizations. The theme of the meeting was "Communication as a Human Right in the Information Society: Issues for the WSIS." 6

The meeting focused on both issues and process relevant to the WSIS. On the second day, representatives from the ITU and UNESCO, as well as the newly created "Civil Society Division" of the WSIS executive secretariat, participated and a broad exchange took place regarding the range of possibilities for civil society involvement. The meeting provided participants for the first time with a clear idea of what the WSIS would be about and how it would be structured. Importantly, both ITU and WSIS officials insisted that there would be significant civil society involvement and that this was seen as essential—despite the fact that a number of governments were hostile to the idea. Furthermore,

it became clear that the agenda for WSIS was at this point far from set.

The Geneva meeting was the WSIS's first civil society consultation. This early education in the certainties and uncertainties of WSIS had a number of interesting effects. The broadcasting organizations decided to concentrate the lion's share of their efforts on organizing the World Electronic Media Forum, which turned out to be one of the largest and most successful of the WSIS side events. The CRIS Campaign, meanwhile, decided to focus on facilitating civil society involvement within the official process. One month later, the UN General Assembly formally gave its approval to the WSIS and the general framework for participation. In July 2002, representatives of civil society organizations converged on Geneva expecting to play a significant role in the first of the projected series of WSIS "PrepComs," and the rest—detailed in other contributions to this collection—as they say, is history. ■

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^{6.} A full report of this meeting is available on http://www.crisinfo.org/live/index.php?section?2&subsection=2&id=22