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face of the new labor relations which emerge in the Information Society.

We must be aware of the opportunity WSIS provided to discuss the different challenges the emergence of the Information Society raises, between people and institutions of different origins. If nothing else, we must be glad to have had this opportunity. ■

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New Model, Old Barriers: Remaining Challenges to African Civil Society Participation

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Summary

African civil society representation in the process leading up to WSIS, and at the Geneva meeting itself, did not elicit the impact expected by some and hoped for by most. Looking closely at the reasons why could inspire solutions for next time, in particular as attention turns to the Tunis meeting in 2005. Problems and hurdles were many, and there was no single point of failure. However, one underlying factor exacerbated many others: the various actors did not understand what was really needed for ground-level representatives to participate effectively in an international policy meeting. On one side, the international organizers communicated the importance of civil society groups and called on them to participate, but they failed to recognize that those most suited to contribute—especially in Africa—did not have the financial and other resources needed to participate effectively. On the other side, African civil society did not deliver enough of the kind of input that WSIS insiders could use to leverage change. Overall, they lacked coordination and failed to build consensus on many topics. And once representatives got to the meeting, many were not well informed enough to effectively influence discussions—not only in the “big rooms,” but more importantly, in the many smaller venues and corridors where unscheduled opportunities arose for direct interaction with decision makers.

Bridges.org: Our Specific Perspective

This report is written from the specific perspective of our organization. Bridges.org is an international organization based in Africa. Via our directors and board members, we are well connected on an international level. We are based in South Africa and do most of our work across the continent, with the majority of our staff being African. International actors encouraged us to participate in the PrepCom meetings and relevant WSIS sessions as representatives for African civil society because we “understood the ground level.” But we did not think that was an appropriate role for us, partly because our understand-

ing of “civil society” is fundamentally different from that of the development aid community, as I outline below.

Our Views on African Civil Society Participation

We identified two main shortcomings that prevented African civil society from leaving a significant imprint on the discussion and results of the WSIS process.

1. The exclusion of a large number of civil society organizations from the process, due mainly to an imperfect selection process and financial limitations.
2. African civil society's lack of experience in organizing itself, building consensus, and communicating in a way that is effective at the international level.

What Is the “African Civil Society” and How Was It Included in the WSIS Process?

Before determining the level of involvement and impact of “civil society,” we argue for a new definition of the term—different from what we consider a construct of the development aid community. For us, *civil society* means organizations working with and representing people on the ground. This includes community centers, public radio stations, parent-teacher associations, churches, and in some cases, labor unions.

But this group is different from the majority of organizations that were invited and funded to become actively involved in the WSIS process. Some of the professional NGOs at the conference were more likely to be part of the *development aid community* rather than the *local community* they were meant to represent. In other countries NGOs might be more directly linked with civil society, but at least partly due to the institutionalization of development aid in Africa, an industry has grown that acts as an additional layer between the international level and the ground level. We see a tension between the calls for more projects that come from ground level—driven by local organizations—and the grand strategies for Africa that are developed in the North. At the same time, development aid structures require sophisticated African organizations to navigate them, and the donor community's efforts to work with and support civil society on the ground have not been successful.

The Selection Process

The lack of preparedness within African civil society—first observed at the PrepCom meetings—manifested itself during the selection process for African caucus delegates. Selection happened in two ways: (1) a process driven by African NGOs and conducted largely on mailing lists aimed at selecting who should represent African civil society in Geneva, and (2) a process in which the international donor community selected individuals and organizations for funding. Unfortunately there was little coordination between the two processes, making the first one ultimately irrelevant, because without outside funding, participation was impossible. To this day it is not clear what selection criteria were used to choose delegates—both in the process that was intended to be bottom-up and the process driven by the donor community.

No effective solution was found to the problem of selecting representatives in the bottom-up approach. One reason could be that the lack of funding created competition between organizations interested in participating. The more significant obstacle seemed to be the lack of experience with a process like this. Coordination on this scale with organizations at ground level across Africa had never been tried before. The challenges turned out to be daunting—including language barriers, limited access to telecommunications (most of the discussions were led on Internet mailing lists), and lack of capacity.

In addition, the donor community failed to cooperate internally. Each organization wanted to be responsible for bringing the few internationally recognized African organizations to WSIS. As a result, those few African civil society representatives who managed to get on the international radar screen found themselves choosing between different sources of donor funding, while many others ended up staying home.

For the initial PrepCom meetings, the approach to involve mostly larger and professional NGOs—and hope that these organizations would lead the development of an active and involved African caucus—could be considered a reasonable first step. However, the failure of this African caucus to materialize quickly became apparent, as did the absence of a strategy to address it. This failure to help African civil society organize is one of the main reasons

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that the WSIS process has remained largely disconnected from many organizations. These same organizations are expected to lay the groundwork of the global Information Society.

Finances

Participation in an international meeting in Geneva is expensive even by developed world standards. If a ham-and-cheese sandwich for 11 Swiss Francs is a luxury for participants from Germany, it is an impossibility for delegates from Burundi, where this amount approximates the monthly GDP per capita. From the outset it should have been obvious that practically all of African civil society needed financial assistance, and the impact this assistance would have on the selection process, and who would be able to represent Africa. Africa turned to the international donor community and the international donor community shuffled its feet. It seems that the amount of international support needed to bring African civil society to the discussion table was greatly underestimated. Had financial assistance been discussed at an early stage, it could have presented an opportunity to engage with civil society across the continent, collect information on how much funding would be needed, and suggest mechanisms for distribution. It is not clear that this would have solved the lack of funding, but it would have demonstrated a constructive effort to work around the shortcomings of the international community. However, by the time a large part of African civil society realized it would be left out—for financial reasons—it was too late.

Lack of Experience with Participation in International Policy Process

The lack of experience participating in international meetings among the majority of African civil society organizations prevented them from taking part most effectively. These organizations were faced with huge challenges and did not receive the support they needed to organize themselves, build consensus locally, and work with their governments to affect change.

African Civil Society's Failure to Organize and Build Consensus

Africa is a vast continent with differences in culture, language, infrastructure, and education that are often underestimated when seeking an "African perspective." There are many such perspectives, and

African civil society itself failed to strike a consensus between these diverse voices and focus on a few core issues. Until the last weeks leading up to the Geneva meeting, mailing list discussions were not able to move beyond the disgust expressed by some members with what they perceived as an "unfair" selection process and, so, failed to build consensus on the most important issues. The cases of smaller countries sending more delegates than larger ones remained a more controversial topic of discussion than the still-prohibitively high costs of telecommunication between Africa and the rest of the world.

One important role of civil society in international policy meetings must be to highlight the realities "on the ground," and contrast them with the "policy-level" strategies being developed. Doing so can present an important alternative, or addition. But here, no alternative to the watered-down official statement was presented. There was no African civil society manifesto—no list of hot issues that should be focused on going forward was communicated through the media—no "next steps" or ways to join and contribute were outlined. Since there was no consensus on these issues, none of the things listed above came into existence.

Affecting Change by Working with Governments (and the Private Sector), Not Against Them

The mention of working with their governments, possibly even through joining the national delegation, was frequently answered by civil society organizations with strong objections. Too often civil society considered their governments part of the problem, and felt that by joining the government the delegation they would be betraying their cause. They failed to understand that it is not necessary to agree with everything governments say or do in order to sit at the same table. Nor did they understand that it is far more effective to sit at that table and raise constructive objections to influence your country's positions than to be outside the room. And it is far easier to take issues to the international level and have an impact if the organization is taken seriously by its government.

Participation and progress at this level require a different set of skills, and a willingness to work within structures that one may not agree with. International bodies and their programs can only be changed from within and by participation. The WSIS

process presents a tremendous opportunity to overcome reservations and start collaborating, not only with governments, but with the private sector.

A Bold Idea for the Road Ahead

The concerns we at bridges.org had when first hearing about WSIS and its objective to include “all voices” were proved correct. If African civil society wants its voice heard at the international level, it needs to organize itself, collaborate, build consensus, and use the media effectively to communicate its positions. At the same time, if the international community really is interested in African civil society’s perspective, it must more wholeheartedly support society’s efforts to participate.

Looking ahead to Tunis, there is enough time to address some of these problems. To ensure African civil society’s effective participation, why not create an alternative WSIS—either as an independent element of the WSIS process (there were many such events and parallel tracks in Geneva) or as a separate process. This could be used to collect the views of civil society and present them in a way that it will be difficult to ignore—by using the media effectively, by presenting a collective position on the issues, and by demonstrating a willingness and ability to participate in the international debate in a constructive manner. The people of Africa need a voice of their own, and African civil society must be there to represent them. ■

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On Research and the Role of NGOs, in the WSIS Process

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Having participated in the drafting committee (Content & Themes) as focal point for the education and research family, and more specifically, having submitted the final points of the literacy, education, and research sections, as well as contributing to public domain issues, my analysis of the WSIS process bears on two sets of results. One is the renewed place of research; the other is the increased legitimacy of the role of NGOs within the ranks of other civil society actors.

On Education, Research, and the Public Domain

A general consensus has formed around education. The official document and the civil society document both extol it as a principle and as a need. Because it seems the most democratically acceptable for all, there has been no heated debate over it, contrary to other issues, such as human rights or Internet governance. However, the two documents are in fact divided over a common value. While nation-states tend to instrumentalize education for the creation of an efficient labor force, civil society sees education and literacy as a means to build life-long autonomy and collaborative exchanges. Civil society considers education on a continuum of knowledge, consistently connecting it to related issues of access, capacity-building, community-based solutions, public domain commons, linguistic diversity, and pluralistic approaches to cultures.

The Perils of Ignoring Social Sciences Research

Contrary to education, research—the pillar upon which any new construction of knowledge rests—has been neglected in the debate, or rather, in the official view of nation-states, when it is mentioned, it relates to R&D in the industrial perspective of applied and hard sciences, basically connected to utilitarian technological advances and product development. The soft sciences have been consistently neglected in the process. This can be explained partly because they have no apparent link with information technologies, partly because they

1. *In spite of my institutional involvement in the WSIS process (as Deputy Secretary General of the International Association for Media and Communication Research and as focal point for the education and research family), this paper reflects only my personal views.*