Improving WSIS Successfulness by Increasing Business Participation

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The International Telecommunication Union, organizer of WSIS, has not done enough to facilitate needed relationships at WSIS with the business community. This judgment is based on business participation at WSIS and the attitude of nonbusiness attendees toward the business sector. Business is a critical party in the advancement of the Information Society. Nations and civil society embarking on ICT projects will be more successful overall if they make the business community a resource rather than an enemy.

WSIS set out to bring together those with the vision and influence to improve the Information Society. But with less than 5% of WSIS participants coming from the business sector (as of December 12, 2003), alarm bells should be ringing in the Secretary General's 14th-floor office at the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). As organizer of WSIS, the ITU should see it has not done enough to facilitate the relationships that nations and civil society should cultivate with business to advance the goals of the Information Society.

Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876 and the following year formed Bell Telephone Company. It was business that brought the telephone to the Information Society, enabling so many other innovations. Though history does not quite repeat, we see over the years that it does rhyme. As telecommunications technologies continue to develop, thanks usually to businesses and governments, then everyone from civil society to intergovernmental organizations to citizens discovers new ways to use those technologies. Technology development is frequently driven by the demands markets place on business. CERN, for example, generates massive amounts of data through the experiments at its particle accelerators. It cannot find computers on the market that are fast enough for its needs, so CERN organizes consortiums of businesses to develop the technology it requires. One of the reasons, then, that businesses can be such an important partner for WSIS-related projects is that they thrive by finding and meeting the needs of people and organizations.

It is ill advised for WSIS to pursue the goals of its

Plan of Action without substantial collaboration with relevant businesses. Unfortunately, WSIS is on a negative rather than even on a neutral footing right now. I watched WSIS participants express negative attitudes toward businesses (e.g., "Involvement with nonprofits is motivated only by tax breaks"). I was surprised to hear one person involved with the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) say they felt marginalized and even maligned at the conference (e.g., "Invitations that should have arrived for events never materialized—I wouldn't be surprised if that was deliberate").

True, the ITU has made some initial strides to-ward dialog between businesses and other WSIS participants. It invited the ICC to create the Coordinating Committee of Business Interlocutors to mobilize and coordinate businesses. This is a useful organization, but WSIS cannot outsource the entirety of its business relations. The ITU should promote a positive attitude toward business and should more vocally encourage governments, civil society, and others to seek the synergy possible with businesses.

Businesses have goods, services, skills, and experience required to accomplish WSIS's goals. Additionally, businesses are made up of people who in many cases have the same interest in helping people through communications as do people in government or civil society. Productive collaboration between businesses and other members of WSIS should include:

- identifying ways technology can address problems;
- planning projects using technology to address problems;
- obtaining goods or services at potentially reduced prices;
- having businesses participate on boards and committees of nonbusiness organizations;
- establishing expertise groups to which project implementers can turn for advice.

The more contact WSIS and similar efforts have with businesses, the more the human-focused employees in those businesses will become involved in efforts that need their contributions.

My own experience illustrates the interest that individuals in companies can have for efforts geared toward helping others through technology. I am a

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former Web developer now working as a consultant for a software company. A few years ago, a loose federation of friends and I organized to help non-profit, humanitarian groups better use the Web. We have had graphic designers, business professionals, a networking engineer, and others participate. We have written software, designed sites, consulted about domain name issues, and hosted sites. Each of us does this work outside of our professional roles in businesses, and we see that our skills are important to those we assist. Additionally, the software company I work for has facilitated my participation in WSIS. Businesses are not the enemy of WSIS objectives!

As WSIS moves toward implementing its action plan and toward Tunisia, WSIS and the ITU should decide at their highest levels to encourage greater business participation. They should seek participation among individuals from businesses who have proven themselves interested and influential in furthering the Information Society. They should also seek participation from companies whose offerings are particularly significant to accomplishing WSIS goals. As WSIS does so, this global effort will become more mature and effective.

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US-Based Latino Youth: The Engine of Empowerment and Development for Latin American Youth?

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I attended the WSIS Conference in Geneva this past December. As a Latino student in the United States, I was delighted to see firsthand the diversity of participants from the furthest reaches of the world. Yet, I was dismayed to find that Latin American participants at the conference, save Bolivia, were few and far between. In fact, with the exception of Canada, the Americas (15% of the world population and nearly 40% of the global GDP) were underrepresented at the Geneva conference. Even the United States was absent from any significant portion of the dialogue. As a youth from Northern California and part of the Latino Dispersion, I was struck by the possible intersections of information and communication technologies (ICTs), Latin America, and Latino youth in the United States.

There are tremendous changes in the demographics of the United States that will have immeasurable impacts on the socioeconomic climate of the nation and the Americas more broadly, and affect the diffusion of the Internet and ICTs. The U.S.-based Latino population in the United States, in 2002, became the largest minority in the country, at 13.5%.1 That same population is also the fastest growing ethnic group, reaching over 50 million, or 16.4%, of the U.S. population by 2007. Within the next 20 years, Latinos will become absolute majorities in bellwether states, such as California and Texas. Spanish will become an increasingly significant language during the same period. These changes in population and language will impact ICT diffusion directly and indirectly in the region.

Just as immigrants from southern Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s became the engine for the Industrial Revolution in the United States, the U.S.-based Latino population has the potential for a major role in this coming Information Revolution. The Latino population is already actively bolstering the U.S. economy, effectively powering the "bread and butter industries," from assembly line positions to domestic housework and seasonal agricultural work. Latinos are filling jobs at the lowest levels of the socio-economic pyramid. However Latinos have

^{1.} http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Products/Profiles/Single/2002/ACS/Tabular/010/01000US1.htm