

Three Questions About WSIS: A Civil Society Perspective from Within

Claudia Padovani

It is not easy to describe WSIS, nor to understand it, though it is necessary, considering the most frequent question I have been asked lately: "Geneva has been a failure, after all. Is that right?!" "Yes and no" would be the answer to that and other questions about WSIS, if we consider the expectations and priorities of those involved. I suggest here that not only the output of the Summit—the final documents—should be evaluated, but also the outcome (meaning the overall political process) should be considered and investigated. Apparently simple, the three questions I pose as a means to analyze the process raise issues directly concerned with the transformations of society that were the very object of debate in Geneva. I suggest that it may be that some of the concepts we use to understand the world are likewise being transformed.

The setting is Geneva, December 2003: the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society. Some 10,000 delegates from all over the world and different sectors of society gather in the spaces of Geneva Palexpo for 3 days of debates, conferences, formal and informal meetings, rituals of diplomacy, and electronic storytelling on projects and initiatives using ICTs for development. But it is fundamental to remember that international organizations, led by the ITU and government representatives, as well as business entities and members of civil society, have been working for almost two years in building the road to Geneva. Even more important, Geneva is not the final event, but the opening to a second phase of WSIS, which will close with the Tunis meeting in November 2005.

Has the Geneva Summit Been a Media Event?

Political high-level gatherings usually are media events. They involve central actors and a number of well-known personalities; they deal with global issues; they tackle problems of collective interest. Nevertheless, in spite of the almost 1,000 people registered as media professionals, mainstream media attention to the Summit, not only in my own country, Italy, has been almost nil. Not even the inside media, the World Electronic Media Forum, received

any meaningful attention. It was unlike Rio, the Cairo Summit, or Beijing, and definitely different from Seattle, to say nothing of the Genoa G8.

Of course, there were no mass protests in the streets, no sensational declarations, and no immediately relevant output. As Galtung and Vincent (1992) observed some years ago, processes are difficult to report. "Permanents," as opposed to "events," do not fit the media logic and therefore are not perceived as newsworthy. Thus a process aimed at "building a common vision of the Information Society" in which technologies promise, on the one hand, to change everything but risk, on the other hand, to greatly enhance global gaps and exclusion has hardly been followed by the general public.

Media events in the era of integrated technologies should be conceptualized differently, as new media and information technologies are also being used to promote forms of alternative communication that go beyond mainstream media reporting. The huge amount of information that has been gathered and shared; the level of communication and exchange through networking, Web sites, and mailing lists of the civil society; all have been transmitted and reproduced in different places and languages through community radio, independent press, and televisions. Thousands of people, in their local contexts, have been able to follow discussions on contentious topics of direct interest to them. In many cases, they have also been able to contribute in defining the conceptual boundaries of issues, cooperating from a distance with those who were operating inside the WSIS process. These actors have been recognized officially as major stakeholders in the Information Society, and more importantly, have shown a capability to use technologies in an inclusive and horizontal manner.

Geneva, therefore, should not be considered a media event in a traditional sense, but as the occasion that has opened a window on the potential of transnational communicative mediation. This mediation has found its way into local contexts, translated in local languages and meanings, making information accessible and communication possible. If media are crucial to the development of public spheres, could we consider alternative communication inside and around WSIS as the sign of emerging public spheres in Information Societies?

FORUM

Was WSIS Actually a High-Level Political Gathering?

ITU announced before the Summit that over 50 heads of state were to participate. Why was it that mainly “technical ministers” came to Geneva from the most industrialized countries? In the case of the Italian government, the head of the delegation was Lucio Stanca, Minister for Technological Innovation—a ministry with no autonomous budget—even though the reduction of the so-called digital divide, a fundamental issue in WSIS, will require concrete commitments and relevant investments. Financing the adopted Plan of Action has been one of the most debated issues and highlights the different expectations of the global South versus industrialized countries.

We must ask whether the political significance of such an event can be determined exclusively by the participation of official delegations, themselves hardly interested in a ritual where speeches were made in front of an almost empty huge auditorium. One of the most prominent personalities who crossed the corridors of WSIS, also at the Summit of Cities and Local Authorities (held the week before in Lyon), was the President of the Republic of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, who suggested a Digital Solidarity Fund which was transformed in the final documents into a more generic Digital Solidarity Agenda. The other highly visible personality, mainly because of the number of bodyguards and military accompanying him, was President Ben Ali of Tunisia, the host country of the second phase of the Summit, already contested by civil society groups because of its poor record for protecting human rights and freedom of expression.

WSIS has been characterized by a higher level of involvement from different actors, especially civil society, than has ever been the case at former events. Involved not only formally but substantively, the civil society Governance Caucus suggested procedural mechanisms through which more meaningful involvement of “observers” could be developed within the official negotiation process. We should recall all the channels of communication that have been developed between civil society and official delegates, as in the case of the European Caucus and EU members. We must also note the high visibility of hundreds of civil society events at Palexpo, which contributed to legitimizing crucial issues for the Information Society vision: from communication

rights to freedom of expression, from privacy matters in a technologically-controlled world to the human consequences of proprietary appropriation of knowledge on culture and diversity, to the complex issues of Internet governance.

I am not suggesting a causal link: quantity of participation does not equal quality. Nor does input necessarily lead to impact. But it is clear that the Summit has changed its face (or better yet its faces). There are now the faces of those members of civil society, women and men who shared the floor at the official closing session; those of the young people who, from the floor, were able to make all delegates stand up and sit down, in an unexpected simulation game; the faces of Zulu women welcoming visitors, in the structured scenography of the ICT4D exhibit, to an African village made of signs, symbols, and technologies; and those faces of people from India, Latin America, and the Pacific who, in terms of social use of technologies, have proven they have a lot to teach societies in the Northern hemisphere.

High political level? Substantive change? Civil society has been invited to take part in the event in the recognition that no policy implementation will be possible unless a change in mentality occurs, unless competencies and visions develop in those local spaces where nongovernmental actors are already developing their own visions and applications. Geneva has confirmed the idea that Information Societies will not only be something described in political documents: it already has its actors and protagonists.

What Has WSIS Accomplished?

We could say that no counterdemonstration took place because it was clear the aim was to develop a vision, not to adopt a treaty; to indicate paths to reduce gaps, not to commit to specific programs. Civil society expectations were always limited and, in fact, the final documents are general, vague, and full of rhetoric, supporting the status quo and indicating no definitive solutions on problematic issues. They are at best common denominators among states reaffirming their sovereign authority (Declaration of Principles, no. 6) and defer to the need to “respect national legislations.” Interestingly, at the November 2003 closing of Prepcom3, civil society decided to stop contributing to the official process affirming: “The struggle we see is the old world of

governments and traditional diplomacy facing the challenges and realities of the 21st century." Perhaps we can say—and this has been an unexpected outcome—that Geneva has shown the difficulties for state actors when they confront the transformations inherent in network societies.

A Summit offers an occasion to define the boundaries of collective interests, as was the case in the past with environmental issues and sustainable development. This happened in WSIS, as well: starting from a technologically determined and infrastructure-oriented agenda, two years of debates at different levels in different settings contributed to opening up the agenda and refine the theoretical boundaries of Information Societies. Issues of human rights, access to knowledge, the crucial role of education, possible market failures, the principle of universal service, and the need for regulatory mechanisms within a deregulated context all found their way into the discourse. The dialogue is now turning to even more controversial issues of security versus surveillance, communication rights versus concentration of ownership and power. Opening the agenda was one of the aims of advocacy groups such as the CRIS Campaign (Communication Rights in the Information Society) from the early stages of WSIS.

We can, thus, affirm that some positive results came out of Geneva, both in rendering the official negotiation more multi-layered and in enlarging the scope of a public debate outside the restricted WSIS arena. Civil society advocates saw WSIS mostly as an occasion to enhance public awareness on issues relevant to the concept of citizenship in the Information Society. Thus the words of the Preamble to the Civil Society Declaration—"We, women and men coming from different continents, cultural contexts, perspectives, experiences and competencies, members of the different constituencies of the emerging global civil society . . ."—should be considered part of a vision, along with the emergence of a number of national platforms that have contributed to "localizing" the debate. New alliances are being built at this level and they promise to become more active toward the WSIS second phase.

Starting from the "yes and no" answers to the questions posed here and referring to the growing literature on transnational movements and the global civil society with their potential political impact and growing interconnectedness, I suggest we look at WSIS as a meaningful passage: not a con-

quest or the naive affirmation of a definitive change, but certainly a passage that deserves our critical attention, now and in the future. ■

Resources

Galtung, J., & Vincent, R. (1992). *Global Glasnost: Toward a New World Information and Communication Order*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

© 2005 The Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Information Technologies and International Development
Volume 1, Number 3–4, Spring–Summer 2004, 123–125