

What Does the “Information Society” Mean for Social Justice and Civil Society?

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Many of us question the use of the term Information Society. It has the tendency to de-emphasize more fundamental inequalities. Nevertheless, the term is here to stay, and the recent United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), held in Geneva in December 2003, popularized its use by governments and the media. Participating governments adopted a Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action which outline policy for global coordination of information and communications technologies (ICTs), and propose actions to “bridge the digital divide.” Civil society organizations adopted their own Declaration, which expresses an alternative vision and plan.

WSIS: Was It Worth the Effort and Expense?

Since the completion of the first phase of WSIS, academics and activists have been debating the event, the process, the outcomes, and the prospects for the second phase to be held, controversially, in Tunis in 2005.

The common verdict is that official outcomes are limited. In their quest for consensus, governments opted for generalities: broad principles regarding the potential of ICTs for development characterize the Declaration, while the Plan of Action focuses on connectivity and infrastructure.

One of the key areas on which governments could not agree was the financing of digital inclusion. An initiative such as the proposed Digital Solidarity Fund, which could involve individual buyers of ICTs in rich countries paying a “digital divide” levy, will be discussed by a working group that will make recommendations to the Tunis Summit. Whether this innovative initiative will survive in a form that promotes citizen engagement in development and disburses its funds transparently remains to be seen.

From the perspective of several civil society organizations (CSOs) that participated actively, WSIS has been valuable, creating a new platform of solidarity across ideological, sectoral, and geographical divides.

The convenor of WSIS, the International Tele-

communication Union (ITU), adopted a “multi-stakeholder” approach, which included civil society and private-sector groups as observers to the official process. Formal opportunities for making an impact were created through short speaking slots for civil society and private-sector representatives in the Government Plenary, and more significantly, through submitting written proposals.

That looked good on the surface. In practice there were many barriers to the effective participation of civil society. The limited financial resources allocated to travel scholarships and a hostile attitude on the part of several governments are worth highlighting. For example, civil society observers were asked to leave some of the government working groups set up to deal with controversial issues such as Internet governance. A further obstacle was the well-intentioned but cumbersome bureaucracy established by the WSIS civil society secretariat, which resulted in organizations wasting valuable time trying to sort themselves into “families” according to their thematic activities or regions.

Nevertheless, due to commitment, solidarity, and hard work, and possibly because of the degree of deadlock among governments, a fair portion of the proposals put forward by civil society made it into the final text. Notable examples are the references to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, gender equality, and free and open-source software.

At the informal level the outcomes are more significant. I believe that WSIS has been a watershed in the process of public participation in ICT policies. It has facilitated a shift from the world of obscure ICT policy jargon, used by a select group of NGOs, consultants, donor agencies, and governments, to a new context in which ICT policy has become fixed in broader debates on development and society. Many more CSOs have entered the debate, lobbying for specific interests. Through WSIS new voices sounded in the ICT policy arena, such as those of people with disabilities, the free software movement, children’s rights advocates, campaigners for the global information commons, and so on.

CSOs that engaged ICT policies before the WSIS process started tended to fall into four broad groups: community radio, privacy and anti-censorship groups, organizations working specifically in ICTs for development, and those tracking the ICANN process, the process of assigning Internet names and numbers.

These groups have tended to focus narrowly on specific areas of regulation. They have rarely engaged ICT policies in a holistic way, or dealt with issues of global ICT governance. They have been geographically divided between the “development” groups based mostly in the South, and the “privacy and civil liberty” groups based mostly in the North.

The exception to this was found in groups such as the Platform of Action, which launched the Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS)¹ Campaign in 2001. While this campaign raised critical issues, it was primarily a platform for progressive organizations already working in the field. Through WSIS, its membership expanded and it filled a gap in the formal process, as indicated by the well-attended CRIS World Forum on Communication Rights held during the Summit on December 11, 2003.

What has changed during WSIS? A broader range of CSOs are tackling ICT policy issues. Experience, confidence, and knowledge built during the relatively “safe” spaces of the civil society Plenary and caucuses in WSIS are feeding directly into national advocacy campaigns. To tell just one story. . . . In November 2002, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), the freedom of expression organization Article 19, and the United Nations’ Economic Commission for Africa held an ICT policy workshop and WSIS orientation for African civil society in Addis Ababa. Kenyan participants, once back home, asked their national telecoms regulator: What is Kenya doing about the WSIS? At the time the answer was “not very much,” but at one of the WSIS preparatory meetings (prepcom) in Geneva, Kenyan CSOs and government delegates talked again, and the government delegates offered to table civil society proposals in the official forum. At the next prepcom, civil society was invited to join the Kenyan delegation.

The real gain is that these links continue beyond Geneva. Currently there is a national ICT policy process underway in Kenya and it is relatively inclusive, involving civil society and the private sector. In the Philippines, CSOs measure their government’s national policy process against the principles agreed on by civil society in its declaration to the WSIS (APC News, 2003). In South Africa, SANGONeT, a pro-

gressive ICT service provider, convened public consultations on ICT policy in small and medium-sized towns, far away from Johannesburg, where community organizers confront government officials with questions, such as “Where are those phone lines we were promised in 1996?” In Senegal, ENDASynfev, a women’s networking initiative, convened a WSIS report-back session attended by more than 75 women. Participants ranged from organizations for the disabled to IT entrepreneurs. In Brazil a civil society organization, Rits (Third Sector Information Network), has launched an interactive online “observatory” to facilitate public participation in “info-inclusion” policy.²

These examples show the potential for influencing policy outcomes and for creating a space for networking and collaborative implementation. It creates awareness of policy promises and demand for transparent delivery—an important form of public participation. It locates ICT policy as social policy, not technical policy, and it keeps it in the public domain where it belongs.

Current ICT policy and regulation trends could limit the freedoms needed for using ICTs for social justice and sustainable development. From treaties on cybercrime that result in invasion of privacy, to the over-commercialization of radio spectrum, to restrictions on innovation by intellectual property regimes and telecommunications regulations (e.g., by limiting low-cost options such as Internet telephony), civil society interests are threatened. We must be out there protecting them.

ICT Infrastructure and Civil Society

While policy debates rage on (more openly than before), how are CSOs engaging the technology itself?

The opportunities are there: working in a networked way has the potential to strengthen collaboration, information exchange, and learning, and to link the local to the global. But there appears to be a general consensus that the potential of using ICTs to increase the impact of civil society is not fully realized. Often this has been attributed to the poor quality and high cost of connectivity in much of the world. However, connectivity is increasingly accessible, and often the most innovative uses of ICTs are found where access is difficult.

1. <http://www.crisinfo.org>

2. <http://www.infoinclusao.org.br/>

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A recent study by Mark Surman and Katherine Reilly commissioned by the Social Science Research Council says, "This issue of appropriation—using networked technologies strategically, politically, creatively—is amongst the most pressing that civil society faces in the Information Society. The big question is: what should we do with these networked technologies now that we have access to them? By all accounts, the broad majority of civil society organizations are struggling with the issue of how to mold these tools to meet their needs—to increase the impact of campaigns, projects and programs using networked technologies. Or, in many cases, they are simply using them without any thought about where and how these technologies fit into the political work for which they feel so much passion. It is not that these organizations use networked technologies completely without question or critique, but rather that they don't take the time to consider how they can be using these technologies most strategically." (Surman and Reilly, 2003).

I would argue that there are four dimensions to tackle: policy and regulation at national and global levels, as discussed above; understanding the information technology marketplace, and how it tends to turn people into consumers rather than creative users of technology, capacity building so that people have the know-how to use the tools available to them, and planning and thinking strategically about ICTs and networking.

The thread that links the challenge of creatively using ICT to the involvement of civil society in the policy process is capacity. It is a very fragile thread. There is not enough investment in learning and capacity building within individual institutions, broadly in the sector and by donors.

APC used WSIS as a springboard for building the capacity of civil society to engage in ICT policy advocacy. We developed a curriculum and manual of ICT for beginners, and a guide to conducting national policy consultations.³ Demand for the training has been overwhelming; donor support less so. If it were not for the networking opportunities presented by WSIS, the scale of formal capacity building and informal learning would have looked very different.

How do we build capacity for strategic appropri-

ation of ICTs? We want to do this not for the sake of technology on its own, "but rather to enable civil society organizations to collaborate better, communicate more effectively and to have more social impact" (Surman & Reilly, 2003, 74). Surman and Reilly outline several innovative recommendations in their paper, ranging from the need to build a "social tech movement" made up of organizations and individuals that provide support and training to CSOs, to "embracing the open source movement" and creating "better maps of civic cyberspace" (Surman & Reilly, 2003, 71–74).

I support their suggestions and, in summary, make the point that we need to enhance learning and capacity building, as well as engage actively in the political and policy processes that surround the technologies we use.

Learning to use ICTs creatively can be both formal and informal, and is one of the most enduring outcomes of online networking. We need to actively learn and share experiences of our use of ICTs in collaborative work. The unintended outcome of the WSIS process that will stay with many CSOs, even once hopes for policy transformation have faded, is the experience of using ICTs creatively. The many WSIS online forums and Web sites, committees, and consultations are testimony to this.

In the ICT world, as in the rest of the world, it matters who owns what, who controls innovation, and who shapes policy and regulation. We need to take our passion and our policies to our PCs. Shifting from MS Office to a free software application such as Openoffice.org may seem a low priority for CSOs, but it can save money and make a statement about the power of choice.

The slogan, "Another world is possible," adopted by the global justice and solidarity movement applies to the ICT world, as well. It is up to us to make it concrete by thinking creatively and appropriating technology. It is up to donors to continue to invest in capacity building, networking, and learning. ■

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Information Technologies and International Development
Volume 1, Number 3–4, Spring–Summer 2004, 126–129

Bring WSIS Back to Earth

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Civil society groups made a valiant and in many ways successful effort to broaden the agenda of the World Summit on the Information Society to address the human as well as the technical concerns of the Information Society. Ironically, it may have been this broad and inclusive agenda that made it nearly impossible for the governments to come to any meaningful conclusions during the first phase of the Summit. The ITU Plenipotentiary Conference in 2002 recommended that the Summit deal with the three issues of (1) providing access to ICTs for all, (2) using ICTs as tools for social and economic development to meet the Millennium Development Goals, and (3) addressing security in the use of ICTs. The ITU was perhaps wise to recommend a limited agenda for a conference that could have touched on such a broad array of issues, reflecting just how comprehensively information and communication permeate every aspect of our lives. Through the preparatory process, civil society was successful in promoting its vision of a “people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society” (Declaration of Principles) over a technology-focused vision promoted by the ITU. This inclusive vision, though important, expanded WSIS to unmanageable scope.

With its purview widened, the Summit began to tackle so many issues that it spread itself too thin. With complex negotiations taking place on a Declaration of Principles that once measured 30 pages in length, the focus on WSIS failed to move from language to action. Bogged down in textual arguments, no concrete steps were taken by the governments to reach the 2015 ICT and development targets described in the Plan of Action. WSIS could have formally taken on the role of formulating partnerships among governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector. Instead, it was caught up preparing documents that are not even binding. Any real results from the first phase of WSIS will occur because of partnerships formed outside of WSIS at the ICT4D platform rather than in the plenary room.

Finally, despite its noble intentions, civil society seemed at times more interested in inclusive rhetoric than actual progress. It is perhaps telling that the