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Bring WSIS Back to Earth

Sarah Tierney

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

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civil society plenary composed its own, alternative declaration, but no alternative plan of action. The vilification of global business by some civil society groups, in particular, ignores the simple fact that the private sector is needed to create sustainable ICT development in the developing world. It also exposed civil society's ambivalence as to how the development of an information infrastructure to enable human communication and development will be financed. What is needed is a civil society that not only promotes an inclusive vision, but also demands action from governments and the private sector to meet the challenges of development, and commits itself to solidifying partnerships to make that progress possible. Civil society succeeded in changing the focus of WSIS to being one of human values, and rightly so. Now it is time for civil society to lead WSIS from what has become an unmanageably long "to discuss" and "to-do" list to a series of targeted projects that will bring the "pie in the sky" language back to earth. ■

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Promotion of Real Understanding About the Internet Is not a Minor Achievement

Tim Fewkes

Despite much talk about the lack of strong outcomes at WSIS, one outcome has emerged that should not be discounted: dignitaries were educated.

Many times during the Summit it was made clear that some common, faulty conceptions of the Internet could cripple progress. These issues were addressed, and if good policy will result, WSIS will have achieved what it set out to do.

Some say that this—the process of educating dignitaries and policy makers—was the only success the Summit achieved. Others may be quick to declare that this is no success at all. I would caution this second group not to be so harsh. My experience at the Summit and the Summit event for Internet scientists held at CERN, the Role of Science in the Information Society, clearly illustrated that a strong understanding of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) must precede steps toward better national and supranational policy on these issues.

The Summit was not a place where only the tech-savvy from each country came together. Rather, it was attended by delegates who have the power to change policy within their own countries (including over 40 heads of state), civil society workers who are on the ground administering programs in hundreds of countries, representatives of the business community, and Internet scientists. Each person was working from his or her own frame of reference, including economic understanding, technical ability, and beliefs as to how the Internet could best serve people's needs. Through communication among and across all of these groups, gaps in the understanding of the Internet became obvious and were addressed. Hopefully, this will help achieve better policy decisions, strengthen the political will to back them up, and provide a realistic understanding of the costs to implement them. Let me give some examples when I witnessed how listening to other perspectives improved people's understanding of the Internet:

- *Due to cost of access, the Internet is often not fully deployed.* A representative from Mereke