

FORUM

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

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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

University in Uganda reported that for his university he purchases 2Mbps of bandwidth via satellite for US\$28,000 per month. He went on to explain the difficulty in sharing the equivalent of one DSL connection among 30,000 students.

- *The problem is not only general budget constraints.* During a discussion about funding needs at WSIS, it was made clear that bigger government budgets wouldn't necessarily translate into more ICT spending. Governments maintain roads because there is an incentive for them to get local crops to the market. When the need for digital roads is made clear, governments will be more likely to respond through changes in policy and direct investment. An understanding of the benefit will make room in current budgets for ICTs.
- *The Internet is made up of many networks under different administrations.* One simple message reiterated by representatives of business entities led by the International Chamber of Commerce was that the Internet is not a centrally administered resource, but a group of hundreds of individually administered networks. The need to explain such a basic concept may be depressing, but if such a thing does need to be said, then I'm glad for a worldwide venue to communicate it.
- *ICANN is not the government of the Internet.* I heard a talk by Esther Dyson, founding Chair of ICANN, where she spoke like someone who is used to being verbally attacked. Her entire presentation showed the desire to mitigate a future attack. And in the first question following her presentation, she was attacked. ICANN, the body that makes decisions regarding Internet address allocation and domain name services, remains controversial. Part of the controversy could be cleared up by people listening to her message:
 - ICANN doesn't govern the Internet. No one governs the Internet.
 - ICANN does make important decisions that affect the Internet.
 - ICANN is sorry for past mistakes.
 - ICANN is interested in evolving toward a truly representative and consensus-based body.

These are statements that needed to be heard, and they lead to a further truth:

- Regardless of the type of body will make these important decisions in the future, be it more or less like a government, ICANN is what we have now. We need to know where we are and where we have come from in order to proceed.

So, let's assume that a certain amount of learning took place on all sides. One could still ask the question: Would you rather have people attend who have the power to change policy, or people with clear views of what that correct policy should be? The hope of the conference was that there would be both kinds of people, and there were. Unfortunately, this meant that an educational phase had to precede the actual action phase. WSIS 2003 was that educational phase. Goals for ICT deployment were agreed on in the Plan of Action, and the benefits that achieving these goals will bring were the subject of hundreds of hours of panel discussions and presentations.

One thing holds true for any country deciding to improve its communication infrastructure. Before discussing the funding options, the public/private partnerships, or the legal infrastructure, government must know the benefits that will come out of its decisions. WSIS 2003 made those benefits clear. It enumerated appropriate goals to gain those benefits. This was the real educational work of the past Summit. Now on to 2005. ■

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