FORUM

WSIS: Reflections from the Inside

Stephen Browne

From the beginning, the prospects for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) were inauspicious.

The idea for a global conference germinated in the late 1990s, which was a busy decade for summitry. Following the mother of all summits—the Millennium Summit of September 2000, which assembled the largest number of heads of state and government in history—the UN was under growing pressure to hold fewer of them, particularly because the world now had a comprehensive development blueprint in the Millennium Declaration.

So WSIS was the "extra" summit, particularly because it was to be held in two phases. The timing of WSIS I last December 2003 was awkward. It collided with several other major events: with Japan's invitation to the 10 ASEAN leaders to a mini-summit in Tokyo and with the European Union's leaders' attempts to agree to a Constitution in Brussels. There was a Commonwealth Summit in Abuja, Nigeria the week before and Telecom World—a major event for the IT private sector—for 2003 was held a scant 8 weeks earlier.

There was also the matter of the agenda. What was going to be discussed? What was really at stake? And the participants: If this was to be a summit on the Information Society, then it shouldn't be confined to government representatives? "Societies" are broader and in any case not many in government have thought much about the societal and developmental implications of information communication and technology (ICT).

A lack of enthusiasm, the awkward timing, and vagueness about the agenda all conspired to put WSIS in the shade, with several governments from the North declaiming early and loudly that they would send lowly delegations. At one point, the Information Telecommunications Union (ITU) had hoped as many as 60 leaders would attend, but only 40 finally came.

And yet, even if it scored poorly by traditional criteria, such as attendance and concrete outcomes, WSIS Part I was in fact an event of some significance for a number of reasons. I can think of four.

First, this was a meeting on a subject that had never been broached at a UN summit level, but which deserved much wider global debate and which could generate important demonstration effects. In development, ICT constitutes the fastest-changing frontier of all. In a growing number of countries, ICT applications have touched millions of lives that had always been bypassed by development. The half of the world that hasn't made a phone call is a rapidly diminishing fraction: in China alone there are 5 million new mobile subscribers every month. There will soon be 1 billion Internet users. Directly and indirectly, the Information Society begins to encompass most of the world. The delegates at WSIS—and particularly those from government—were not all the converted and the Summit provided a platform on which the power and significance of ICT applications were talked about and demonstrated. And better than hearing was seeing. The unexciting plenary discussions were paralleled by a spectacular showcase of ICT for development in practice, where little imagination was needed to see how technology was transforming a growing numbers of lives.

Second, this meeting gave a prominent platform to the real change agents in ICT within the traditional intergovernmental structure that characterizes all UN summits. This wasn't the fully tripartite meeting that many wanted to see, but private sector and nongovernmental interests were strongly represented both in the plenary discussions and in the three high-level round tables. The respective roles of governments as enablers and of private and nongovernmental interests as the doers were never more obviously on display. There were important lessons for the state-as-monopolist views of the development process. A clear message of the Summit was that governments often need to move aside and facilitate, not smother, the opportunities that ICTs open up.

Third, the Summit ensured that some critical issues of principle got aired and agreed to. No one enjoyed the tedium of the drafting sessions on the Final Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action. But they helped to focus on some basic principles of the global Information Society. Chief among these are the rights to freedom of opinion and expression and to "seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers" (WSIS Declaration of Principles). These principles are

already enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), but some countries were resistant to the inclusion of this language. Now these rights are fully recognized as inherent to the Information Society in every country, and more likely to be respected if global public opinion can be mobilized to monitor and support them. The need for the Declaration to be agreed to by the conclusion of the Summit gave special urgency to obtaining agreement.

Fourth, the Summit established a timetable for action. Unfortunately, many of the explicit development milestones and deadlines of the earlier versions of the Plan of Action did not survive the compromises of the final drafting sessions. However, some key targets remain: national e-strategies in every country by 2005; proposals for a global Internet governance system by the same year; and a list of goals to be accomplished by 2015, including universal access to TV and radio and the connection of all local and central government departments to the Internet.

Ultimately, words will not be enough. The real criterion of WSIS success will hinge on the extent to which these commitments of country leaders translate into beneficial change. This is where the global Information Society itself can help—by giving full vent to the objectives of WSIS and monitoring progress.

WSIS truly needs to stay on-line. The Pentium-vs.-penicillin debate is not resolved in the minds of most leaders, and practice needs to prevail over the hype generated by the diminished technology boom.

Otherwise, it will remain the Summit which was not-as-bad-as-we-thought, but not-as-good-as-we-hoped. ∎

WSIS–A Global Development Challenge

by Hamadoun I. Touré

The two overarching objectives established at the very beginning of the World Summit on the Information Society preparatory process were firstly, to have all major stakeholders reach a shared vision of the Information Society, and secondly, to identify actions that would enable implementation of this shared vision. With the unanimous endorsement of the WSIS Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action by the world's political leaders, both objectives were met.

Moreover, this vision is in particular congruence with the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU) general objectives and, in particular, the goals of the Development Bureau. Thus, in my capacity as Director of the Bureau for Telecommunications Development (BDT) of the ITU, I am extremely pleased with the results of the first phase of the Summit, held in Geneva, December 10–12, 2003.

For the ITU to have organized such a major event with more than 11,000 participants from government, industry, international organizations, and civil society—including more than 50 heads of state and vice presidents, some 1,000 media representatives, and more than 300 Summit-related events—is in itself an achievement of which we, the ITU membership, could be proud of. However, the smooth and efficient running of this huge event in itself would have been meaningless had the Summit been unable to reach the results and objectives it had set out to achieve.

I am particularly pleased—from an ITU standpoint—that the outcomes of the Geneva phase of the Summit reflect congruence of vision, similarity of purposes, and significant synergies between the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action, and ITU basic texts, particularly the ITU-D Istanbul Action Plan.

Indeed, in its articulation of a shared vision of the Information Society, the WSIS Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action list 11 principles key to building an inclusive Information Society. No less than 8 of these key principles are directly related to the ITU mandate. That is why the ITU, in partnership with other WSIS stakeholders, will actively carry out the decisions and recommendations of the World