Research Report

Maturation Stage of eCommerce in Developing Countries: A Survey of South African Companies

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Abstract

There is a paucity of empirical data on the level of diffusion of eCommerce technologies and business activities enabled by these technologies in businesses in developing countries. This study investigates the implementation and plans of a range of e-enabling hard and soft technologies: electronically performed business functions and the overall maturity of eCommerce usage. The authors surveyed 150 South African businesses. The findings reveal the dominance of communication aspects, but not the transaction aspects, of eCommerce. The implementation of integrated eCommerce solutions and security-enabling applications is very limited. Implementation plans of eCommerce revolve around extending communication technologies and enabling upward movement along the value chain, particularly marketing and procurement activities. By establishing benchmarks, the study contributes to our understanding of developments of eCommerce in developing countries.

Introduction

eCommerce studies have reviewed different aspects of the new enabled processes. Some have argued in favor of eCommerce's development potential (UNCTAD, 2002; Sheats, 2001; Mann, 2001; Goldstein & O'Connor, 2000; Davis, 1999). Other country-specific studies identified the potential barriers to eCommerce (Mukti, 2000; Enns & Huff, 1999), or the drivers and preconditions for its diffusion (Jennex & Amoroso, 2002; Travica, 2002). Some produced eCommerce readiness indexes of different countries (Dutta, Lanvin, and Paua, 2003; Dutta, Lanvin, and Paua, 2004). Still other studies explained the factors that affect eCommerce's adoption (Cloete, Courtney, & Fintz, 2002; Ang, Tahar, & Murat, 2003).

Less empirical research has so far reported on the extent developing country organizations have actually implemented eCommerce technologies and business practices. There is a dearth of field data that indicate the actual and planned implementation of eCommerce in firms in developing countries. The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it assesses the status and implementation of eCommerce in organizations in a developing country. Second, it reports on the eCommerce plans of the businesses; and third, it gauges the eCommerce maturation stages of the businesses surveyed. To meet these objectives, data were collected using a survey administered in South Africa.

Analytical Framework

There are many definitions of eCommerce (Treese & Stewart, 1998; Wigand, 1997; Kalakota & Whinston 1996; Zwass, 1996). For our

purpose, eCommerce is defined as conducting one or more core business functions internally within organizations or externally with suppliers, intermediaries, consumers, government, and other members of the enterprise environment through the application solutions that run on Internet-based and other computer networks. This definition captures several hierarchies of eCommerce (Molla & Licker, 2001; Zwass, 1996, 1998), from the technological level through different application solutions and business functions, including business relationships.

For assessing the actual and planned implementation of eCommerce, we used a three-level framework: network archetypes (hard infrastructure), application solutions (soft infrastructure), and business functions. The hard infrastructure represents the electronic infrastructure of firms that provides the backbone for the soft infrastructure supporting eCommerce. This incorporates computing and telecommunication networks including traditional proprietary networks, intranets, extranets and Internets (Riggins & Rhee, 1998, Zwass, 1996). Soft infrastructure refers to application solutions that run over the hard infrastructure and make it technologically feasible to build business models and perform business functions electronically. These include electronic messaging, electronic data interchange, electronic payments, electronic publishing, enterprise-wide applications, and security applications (Treese & Stewart, 1998; Kalakota & Whinston, 1996). Finally, the business functions cover advertising, business communication, marketing, procurement, human resource management, and telecommuting. Using these definitions, 19 eCommerce-enabling hard and soft components and 16 business functions were identified in this study. Although this list is not exhaustive, it nonetheless can be considered indicative.

To gauge the overall past, existing, and expected status of eCommerce in our sample, we used an eCommerce "stages of growth" model. Despite differences in the number and naming of the stages, eCommerce researchers appear to accept that organizations follow certain paths in pursuing eCommerce (McKay, Pranato & Marshall, 2000; Deise et al., 2000). These models help to identify conceptually the stages that organizations move through in adopting and implementing eCommerce, and the sophistication of eCommerce use. In this essay, we employ a six-phase eCommerce framework:

1. Not connected to the Internet, no e-mail
2. Connected to the Internet with e-mail but no Web site
3. Static Web, that is publishing basic company information on the Web
4. Interactive Web presence, that is, accepting queries, e-mail, and form entry from users
5. Transactive Web, that is, online selling and purchasing of products and services such as customer service
6. Integrated Web, that is, a Web site integrated with suppliers, customers, and other back-office systems allowing most business transactions to be conducted electronically

Research Methods: Sample and Data Collection

To select our sample, we developed a set of criteria that included the characteristics of the population to be studied, the comprehensiveness of the list to represent the population of interest, the completeness of the list in terms of contact addresses, and the required sample size. A primary consideration in defining the population was whether the survey should be limited by sector or size. One primary challenge in developing countries is the relative lack of real experience with eCommerce. Given that, we could hardly expect a normal distribution of responses to any particular question across any given sample. Rather, we expected a uniform distribution of responses. Hence, a wide variety of respondents would be appropriate in order to encompass the entire range of responses. As a result, it was not essential to limit the target population to a specific sector or size.

We relied on a South African business directory that has been published for more than 60 years and that satisfied the above selection criteria as our sampling source. We also established that businesses could be listed in the directory purely on voluntary basis. Hence, we took the directory to be an adequate sampling frame for the purposes of the study.

Using a systematic sampling criterion, 1,000 business organizations were selected. The data were collected during late 2001 and early 2002 using a self-administered questionnaire addressed to the managing directors of the organizations. Follow-up efforts were undertaken through e-mail and phone calls. Of

the 1,000 questionnaires mailed out, 169 were returned. Another 125 questionnaires were returned because either the businesses had changed their address or were no longer in operation. Of the 169 completed questionnaires, responses from 19 businesses were incomplete and were excluded from the analysis, resulting in 150 usable questionnaires (18% response rate).

Profile of Surveyed Businesses

A cross-section of businesses responded to the survey. Survey respondents were distributed across all sizes of businesses. However, according to the South African classification,[1] more than 60% of the respondents could be classified as "large businesses." Further, 84% of the respondents have been in business for more than 10 years. According to the Standard Industry Classification (SIC), the majority of responses came from the non-electronics and noncomputers manufacturing sector (26%), closely followed by financial services (21%), then electronics, computers, and communications (11%). Another 2% are from the tourism sector, and agriculture, construction, mining, and retail represent 5% each. In general, some 67% of the respondents were from four sectors: electronics/computers and communications, financial services, manufacturing and media, marketing and consulting. However, as the sampling criterion was systematic and not stratified, any inference about sector and size should be made within the context of the sampling approach. More than 64% of the responses were from managing directors, or their equivalent, and the rest were from directors of eCommerce, finance, and information technology departments of businesses.

Status of eCommerce Implementations

The study surveyed the implementation of eCommerce hard and soft technologies, business functions performed online, and reported plans covering a 3-year period.

Implemented eCommerce Technologies

Based on the analytical framework, the implementations of the 19 eCommerce components in the hard and soft infrastructure category were investigated. The findings are described in Figure 1.

Of the 19 components, the eCommerce components that demonstrate the weakest uptake were integrated applications and security technologies. Only 11% of the respondents have implemented supplier relationship management, and another 11% have implemented partners relationship management. Similarly, at the time of the survey (end of 2001 and early 2002) only low proportions of respondents had implemented security technology, that is, digital signatures (19%) and secure electronic transaction (27%), although 78% of the respondents have implemented firewalls. The limited use of extranet, supply chain management, and EDI networks indicates eCommerce use was not permeating established value chains. Pare's (2002) and Humphrey et al., (2003) analysis of developing countries' B2B (business-to-business) eCommerce activities in the garment, agriculture, and horticulture sectors also found that most users of eCommerce in developing countries remain outside international value chains.

Most respondents have their own domain name (92%), Web site (86%), and access to the Internet through a dedicated connection (81%). Using the Global Diffusion of the Internet (GDI) criteria (Peter et al., 2001) these figures could be characterized as *medium,* because the number of businesses with Internet servers or leased connection fall within the range of 10–90% [3.1 million Internet users as of 2002 (UNCTAD, 2003)]. This figure is comparable to the use level figures from other developing countries such as Mexico (James, Foster, & Press, 2002).

Of all the sectors surveyed, the manufacturing sector appears to show the most aggressive stance. However, this should not be taken at face value because of the unequal distribution of the respondents across the sectors. A close examination of the within-sector percentage distribution of the implemented technologies reveals no single leading sector in terms of implementing the components, and all sectors tend to be at a relatively similar stage. Again, this finding should be interpreted by making allowances for the number of respondents in each sector.

1. According to Statistics South Africa and the National Small Business Act 102 of 1996, businesses with 50 or fewer full-time employees' size (FTES) are considered small. Those with 50 to 100 FTES (maximum 200 in mining, manufacturing, and construction) are medium and the rest are considered large.

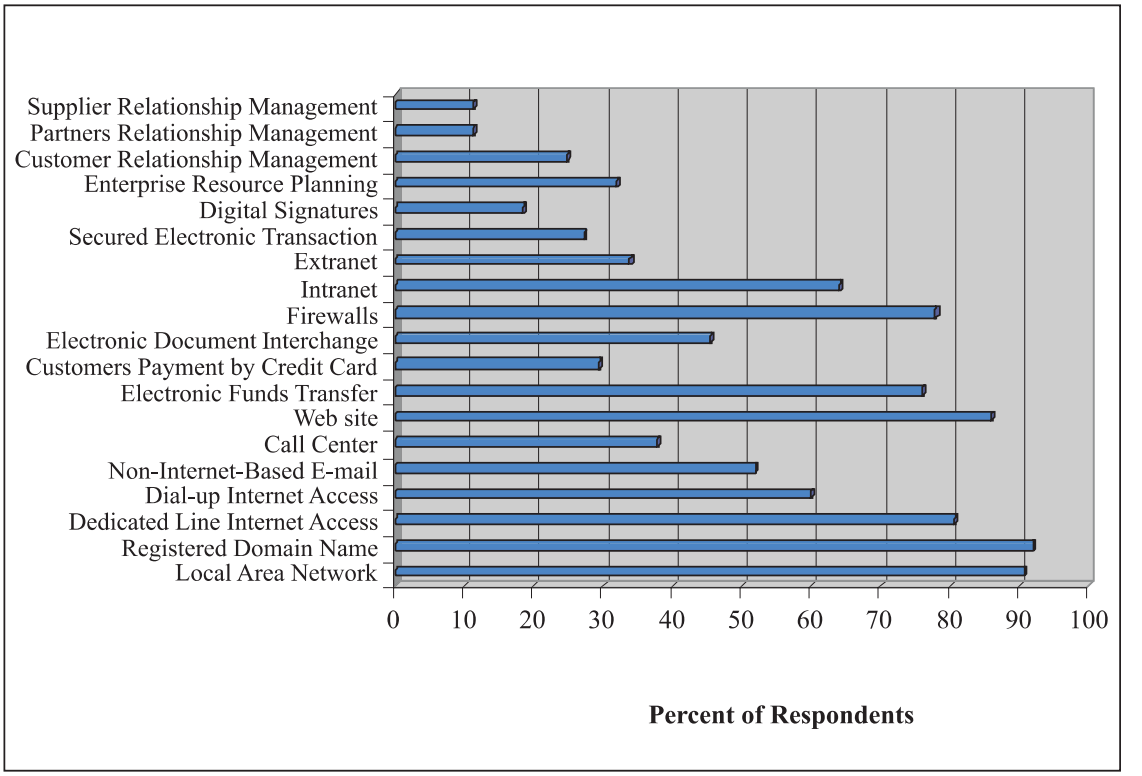

Figure 1. eCommerce Technologies Currently Implemented

However, we do observe significant variation in implementing the components between small and medium enterprises (SME) and their larger counterparts, with larger businesses leading especially in the integrated application categories. However, the implementation trend *within* each size category shows no major difference and the same trend is observed across business sizes. That is, access and computing technologies show the strongest uptake, whereas security technologies and integrated enterprise-wide applications show the weakest. In addition, the level of implementation of the components within each category remains roughly the same. For example, Websites are implemented by 83% of SMEs and 87% of large businesses; 19% of SMEs and large businesses implemented digital signature technology (Cloete et al., 2002). In interpreting this finding, readers should be reminded that we have used the full-time equivalent of employees (using Statistics South Africa's classification) to measure business size. It is likely that other countries and regions have a different classification. In addition, use of other metrics such as revenue turnover, and/or registered or declared capital might not lead to the same classification.

Business Functions Performed Electronically

In the history of eCommerce, it is possible to identify non-Internet–based eCommerce and Internet-based eCommerce (Wigand, 1997). While business functions such as buying and selling, order-taking, transmission, and receipt of payments have been accomplished electronically using more traditional technologies (fax, electronic data interchange, and electronic funds transfer), Internet-based eCommerce has revolutionized the way these functions have been performed and provided a new channel for such functions as marketing, publishing, advertising, market research, and public relations. The use of Internet-based electronic tools for performing the 16 business functions (Figure 2) is assessed.

Three of the top five business functions performed electronically using Internet-based networks relate to internal communication (79%), customer

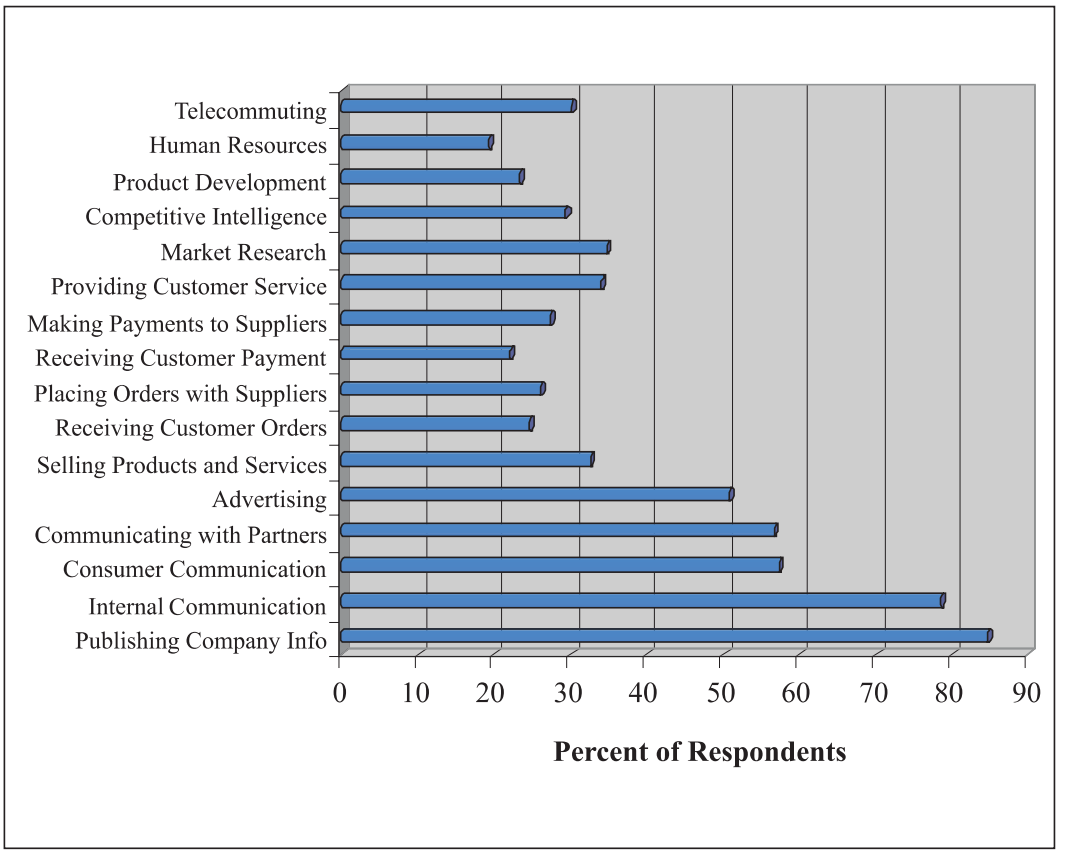

Figure 2. Business Functions Performed Electronically

communication (57%), and communication with partners (57%). While many organizations use the Internet for publishing their information (85%), some advertising (51%), and customer service (34%) activities, very few use the channel for transactional services such as order-taking (25%), procurement (26%), payment (22%), and housekeeping activities such as human resources management (19%). Other researchers have reported more or less similar trends of eCommerce activities in developing countries (Paré, 2002; Tigre, 2003).

The business functions performed electronically can be used as indicators of the sophistication of eCommerce use. Using the GDI criteria, this sophistication level could be interpreted as *level 3, transforming,* implying innovative use of the Internet by some, but not most, businesses (Peter et al., 2001), a position similar to Mexico (James et al., 2002). This observation also reflects South Africa's relatively good standing in the category of business usage of eCommerce in the Global Information Technology report (Dutta et al., 2004). The report measures business-to-business and business-to-consumer eCommerce and use of ICT for activities like marketing and online transactions.

eCommerce Maturity

One goal of the study was to investigate how much progress firms have made in the past and how much progress they are likely to make in the future in incorporating eCommerce into their operation. In this study, a six-stage maturity model assessed the changes in the eCommerce status of the respondents as they seek to enter the electronic world. The model was used to assess where the businesses were 2 years ago, where they are currently positioned (end of 2001 and beginning of 2002), and where they expect to be in 2 years' time. Figure 3 describes the eCommerce status of the respondents at these three points.

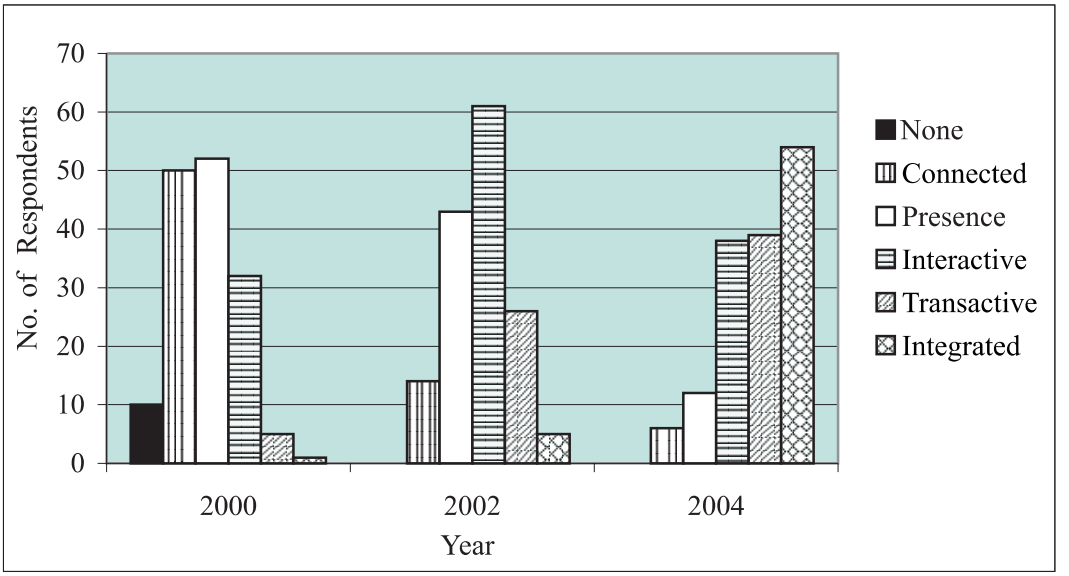

Figure 3. eCommerce Maturity of Businesses

Figure 3 reveals a clear distinction of the eCommerce status of the businesses in the three time periods. In 2000, only 1% of the respondents had achieved an integrated eCommerce status. This figure is expected to change to 36% by the end of 2004. In 2002, the majority of the respondents (61%), up from 31% in 2000, have an interactive eCommerce system and use their Web system to accept queries, e-mail, and forms from users. Similarly, 20% are actually selling and purchasing products and services, including customer service through their Web sites, that is, transactive status. By the end of 2004, an estimated 62% of the businesses expect to achieve a transactive and integrated eCommerce status. Overall, while the majority of the businesses in 2000 had achieved a presence status, this has improved to an interactive status in 2002, and will change to an integrated status in 2004. The migration pattern observed here is similar to Tigre's (2003) finding of the Brazilian eCommerce usage pattern.

In terms of sector-wise (intra-sector) eCommerce status, the agriculture and retail sectors appear to lag, with the majority of the businesses in the agriculture (63%) and retail (57%) sectors achieving a connection and static Web presence maturity levels. Of all the industries surveyed, the financial sector leads the rest with 44% of the businesses demonstrating a transactive and integrated eCommerce status.

No significant difference has been observed in terms of the eCommerce status of the respondents based on business size. An equal 62% of the respondents in each size category have achieved an interactive or higher eCommerce status in 2002. Tigre (2003) observed more or less the same pattern in the interactive eCommerce status of businesses in Brazil. This provides additional evidence of the earlier assertion that business size (conventionally measured by the number of employees) does not appear to considerably influence eCommerce uptake in South Africa (Tigre, 2003:41). This could be because instead of size *per se,* other organization variables, such as total resources, slack resources, or technical expertise (quality rather than quantity of employees), might affect the eCommerce maturation of organizations.

Charting the Future

The firms have made significant plans to implement additional eCommerce technologies. As Figure 4 indicates, the respondents plan major growth in the implementation of security technologies and back-to-back integrated applications. An estimated 40% of the respondents plan to implement secured electronic transactions and digital signatures, 39% cus-

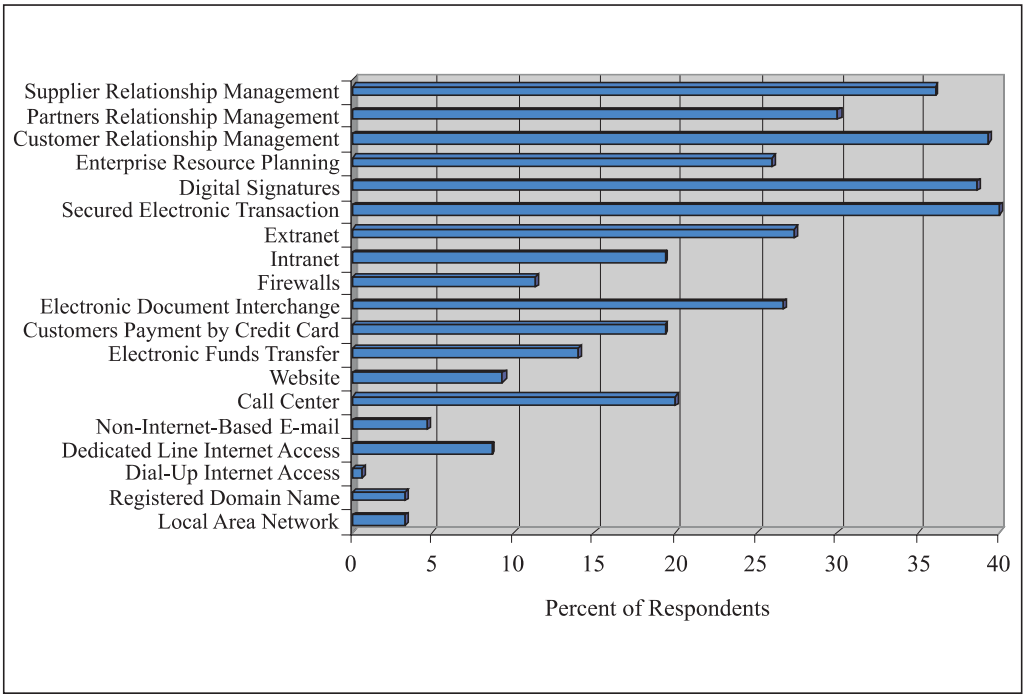

Figure 4. Planned Implementation of eCommerce Technologies

tomer relationship management, 36% supplier relationship management, 30% partners relationship management, and 27% extranet. This result is in line with the expected eCommerce maturity status of the businesses by year-end 2004. Some of the planned implementations are small because of existing high penetrations (cf., Figure 1).

The planned implementations are noteworthy across all business sizes. Fairly equal proportions of organizations in each size category (more than 30%) plan to implement back-to-back integrated applications and security technologies in the next three years. Again, business size does not appear to influence future eCommerce technology plans, and the small and medium enterprises show as much interest in eCommerce as their larger counterparts.

In terms of planned business functions to be performed using Internet-based networks (Figure 5), the emphasis appears to be on marketing- and procurement-related functions. Of the respondents, 52% expect to place orders over the Internet with their suppliers and 46% plan to make the payment through the same channel. 47% of the respondents intend to receive orders and payment from customers; 38% expect to perform human resources functions.

The business functions expected to be performed electronically do not appear to show significant differences related to organizational size. Most of the respondents in the small, medium, and large business categories indicate significant plans to place orders with suppliers (48%, 42%, and 56%, respectively). Respondents also indicate their tendency to receive customer orders, receive payment, and provide customer service within the next two years: SMEs 46%, 41%, and 37%, respectively and large businesses 51%, 47%, and 46%, respectively. However, large businesses appear to show possibly higher interest (43%) in plans to conduct human resource activities through Internet-based networks compared to SMEs (28%). This definitely reflects the importance of such a function for large businesses in contrast to their smaller counterparts.

Limitations of the Study

Like all studies, this one has limitations. The survey returned a relatively higher percentage of responses from large businesses. With hindsight, it can be

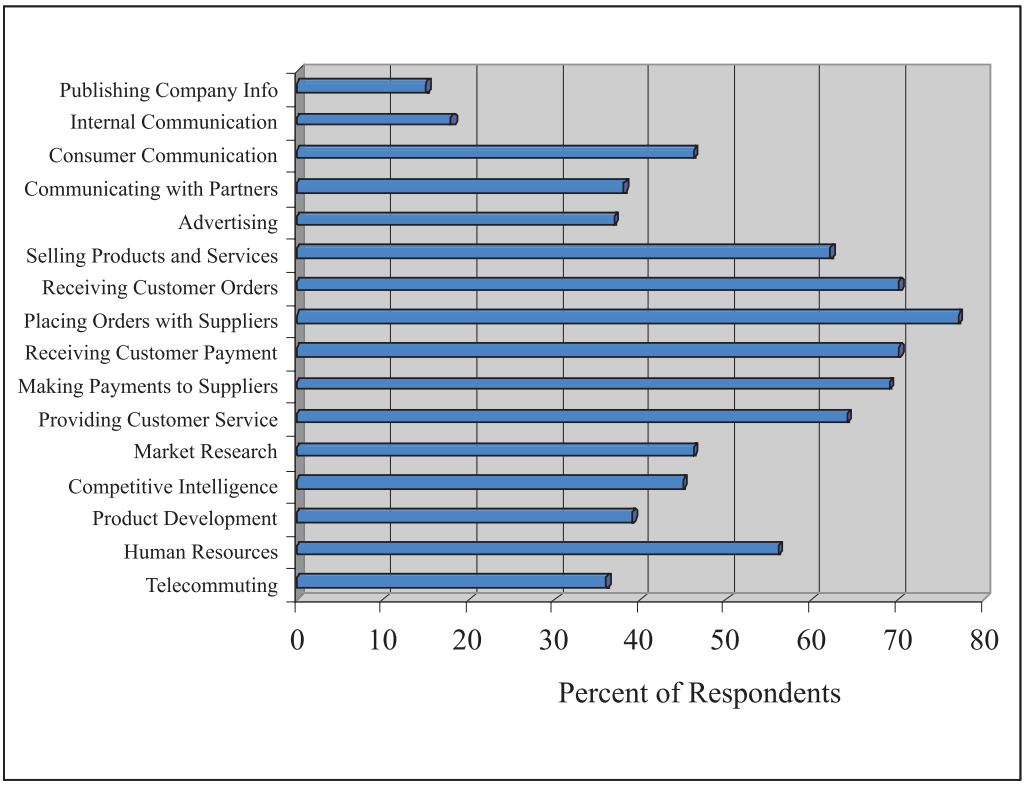

Figure 5. Planned Electronically Performed Business Functions

speculated that larger businesses might see greater value than smaller ones in listing themselves in the directory used as a sample source. Hence, the directory might overrepresent large and established businesses. Another limitation could be that, because of its production schedule, the sample frame might have underrepresented new entrants to the market. Further, South Africa's economic landscape is highly uneven, so there are effectively two economies and societies, although we haven't investigated to what extent the sample reflects such realities.

Another limitation of this paper is that because of its descriptive nature, it does not investigate the factors that might be responsible for the observed variations in eCommerce implementations and plans. However, we believe the study is valuable because there is so little data and analysis of any type in developing countries, including South Africa, and more work on casual mechanisms should be pursued. In addition, we need systematic comparative studies of the South African experience with other countries.

Summary

By most developing countries' standards, South Africa has an advanced ICT infrastructure. Indeed, successive yearly ranking of countries in terms of their network readiness index (NRI) by *The Global Information Technology Report* (GITR) ranks South Africa above the median, among the top of the developing world's league (Dutta et al., 2003, Dutta et al., 2004). Obviously, such infrastructure gives businesses a strong incentive to adopt and use eCommerce. We conclude, with the limitations outlined above that the overall picture of eCommerce in South Africa looks promising. This finding can reflect South Africa's business eCommerce usage ranking, which stands at 24 out of 102 countries, even ahead of developed countries such as Italy (28) and Austria (25) (Dutta et al., 2004).

Our findings reveal a consistent picture of the level and complexity of eCommerce penetration in South Africa in terms of implemented technologies, business functions performed online, and the eCommerce status. At the time of the survey, com-

munication and publishing technologies are the most widely implemented technologies. In a similar fashion, most of the respondents reported using these Internet-based channels to enhance and support their internal and external communication.

Future implementation plans for eCommerce technologies revolve around extending communication technologies and those enabling segments of the supply chain, particularly marketing and procurement activities.

Survey respondents represent a wide range of sectors, although most of them are from the non-electronics manufacturing and financial services sectors. Attempts were made to highlight the sector-wise distribution of implemented technologies, electronically performed business functions, and the eCommerce status of the organizations. The results reveal that, while the manufacturing sector appears to lead in terms of the current implementation of eCommerce technologies, when implementation is evaluated within each sector, all of the sectors show more or less the same trend. This finding can be used as a benchmark for future studies, but its interpretation must make due allowances to limitations of the sampling technique and to the number of respondents in each sector. Any generalization from this study to the sector-wise eCommerce uptake must be done cautiously.

The survey covered a fair distribution of small, medium, and large businesses, as measured by employee size. An interesting finding in this connection is that business size does not seem to significantly affect the current levels of implementations of eCommerce technologies, business functions, and maturity status and their planned uptake in each group. Small and medium enterprises appear to be keeping up with their larger counterparts in all comparisons. The established notion of a positive relationship between business size and IT adoption should be investigated when it comes to entry-level eCommerce usage.

This study has some value to future researchers of eCommerce. For example, some argue that there is a positive correlation between eCommerce maturity and the nature of eCommerce benefits attained. The findings discussed in this paper in terms of the current status of eCommerce maturity can then be used to inform future studies investigating such issues. In summary, the study indicates that eCommerce has a healthy start in some businesses in South Africa. Questions for future research include whether this observed trend is limited to a few businesses; what factors contribute to the adoption and implementation of eCommerce; whether the businesses receive benefits from their eCommerce investments; and what factors affect those achievements? Future studies should address such questions. ■

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Outcomes and Paths to Tunis

Conveying one unified understanding of what occurred in Geneva is impossible, but the following perspectives combine to offer a nuanced view on what sort of event the WSIS was, what it might signify for society, what we need to do to make it more valuable, as well as the purposes it has already served, and a thematic/institutional look at where we are likely heading next.

Forum

Information Society Paradox: Reflections and Actions

Dr. Neville S. Arachchige Don

WSIS set the tone to create a true global Information Society. However, achieving it will be a complex task. Being involved in the WSIS process, it is my intention, on behalf of International Research Foundation for Development, to present some thoughts and actions about creating a sustainable global information society.

Let me begin with the fundamental issue pertaining to the Information Society dialogue. The information communication revolution has brought with it a digital divide phenomenon as one of the major problems of the contemporary world. This problem is not an independent phenomenon, but an integral part of the structure of inequality at all levels: international, regional, national, and local. The digital divide tends to reproduce the basic elements of the structure of inequality along the lines of traditional patterns of socio-economic and political stratification. The major challenge is a growing paradox of the Information Society, which is mirrored in the process of the digital divide and the unfolding rift of social-spatial spectrum. I highlight here a few of these paradoxical tendencies.

Despite the global consensus on the dramatic developmental potential of the ICT technological hubs, some countries in Europe, Asia, and Latin America have created few technological hubs peripheralizing the vast territories of the world and their population. Most of Africa, Latin America, vast landlocked parts of Asia, significant areas of the former Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe are technologically excluded.

The pattern of technological diffusion is parallel to other forms of capital flow and is marked by uneven global economic integration and development indicators. Therefore, people living in peripheral regions are trapped in a vicious cycle and face severe constraints for development. Underdeveloped markets and the lack of infrastructure, such as energy grids, international bandwidth, and high costs of access to equipment, are the main constraints to providing communication technology to the rural masses and deprived urban communities. In addition to the lack of basic physical infrastructure, the limited human and institutional capacity and outdated or weak regulatory frameworks are common to most parts of the peripheral territories. Furthermore, rural economic sectors and small and medium-scale industries have not been properly connected to the national and regional chains of production and services, and thereby, not integrated into the global economic system. The informal sector, particularly in developing economies has been largely deserted. Backward and forward linkages are virtually nonexistent.

Despite the potential for e-governance, technology penetration in the government sectors, reform of the governmental institutional structure, and human resource development are still low in many parts of the world. Furthermore, the global survey conducted by the UN stated that two thirds of the people think that their government does not represent them, do not trust their government, and feel that their country is not governed by the will of the people.[1] There are two major reasons for these phenomena: 1. Most of the governments engage in destroying public value, and 2. Governments fail or do not want to articulate clearly people's preferences. It is important to note that the technology per se does not promote e-governance nor ensure a degree of transparency and accountability, nor does it promote people's true participation. In the absence of organizational innovation and policy guidance, ICTs may lead to the supremacy of the traditional political and commercial forces, instead of following people's true preferences, which recognize the supremacy of the societal context. According to the World Public Sector Report (2003), e-government is at the crossroads either "leading us towards world making, or towards just measuring the tread marks left by the technology-led governmental bulldozer" (World Public Sector Report 2003, 1–2).

There is a growing awareness that cyberspace has become a venue for cultural and linguistic diversity. However, there are two dialectical tendencies in ICT application with regard to cultural domain and development. On the one hand, there is a tendency of hegemonic domination in cultural accommodation. On the other hand, there is an opposing trend

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1. *http://sts.scu.edu/nexus/Issue1-1/Castells-DimensionsOfTheNetworkedSociety.asp*

at will result in resurgence of cultural and religious fundamentalism, thereby using cyberspace as a new breeding ground for race, caste, creed, religion, and gender discrimination and negative tribal elements, which will renew old animosities. Some of us may question these dialectic tendencies and emerging responses. Are we heading toward constructive global hybridization with diverse cultural enrichment that promotes equality and human dignity, or are we near experiencing "cyber tribalism"? Will the emerging concept and approach of "glocalization" resolve this paradox?

Rapid actions and structural transformation are necessary to break the vicious cycle of infrastructural deprivation and marginalization. Otherwise, the marginalized world will experience a huge time lapse for catching up as reflected in the age of the industrial-agricultural gap while we are having cyberhysteria. The only way the world can break this vicious cycle is to embark on a radical developmental departure, which demands true international cooperation. It also demands the mobilization of enormous resources to develop physical infrastructure, human development organizational innovations, and the education of the world for peace and development.

To this effect, the global community must emphasize the following to address necessary remedies:

- Examine variations on ICT physical and institutional infrastructural development (threshold of ICT investment in terms of human capital and intellectual capital) and economic performances of enterprise at all levels (large, medium, small, informal sector economy), and the need to integrate them into the global market.
- Shed light on socio-economic and politico-cultural implications of the information revolution and digital divide.
- Formulate critical policies, strategies, and advocacy efforts within an interdisciplinary and integrated framework to bridge the digital gap, creating a necessary ICT threshold for economic development and political democratization across the globe.
- Develop an integrated approach to create sustainable development and peace, and a global information society for the 21st century.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate five forms of ICT paradoxical tendencies:

1. global integration and technological peripheralization;
2. global cooperation economic conglomeration and small and medium entrepreneurial marginalization
3. e-governance and non-articulation of public preferences;
4. hegemonic universalism and cultural particularism;
5. global economic integration and social-spatial disintegration.

Having considered paradoxical tendencies discussed above, IRFD2 has embarked on a comprehensive ICT application for global education and development by establishing partnerships with many development organizations. This partnership effort will result in establishing ICT Centers and implementing a comprehensive "e-Community Development Strategy."

E-Community Development Strategy through ICT Centers is an integrated approach. ■

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2. www.irfd.org

and organized series of events, forums for the UN World Forums.

Crossing the Digital Divide: What's next?

Alireza Masrour and Melody Mohebi

With access to limited financial means and technological development, the digital divide, in a technical sense, can be tackled. However, what do we do once we have taken significant steps on this road?

Today, Iran can be categorized as a developing nation, with over 70% of its population under the age of 25 and a high unemployment rate. Therefore, supplying this young population with the innovative technology that has overtaken the global political, social and economic systems is a necessity. We traveled to Geneva to attend the World Summit on the Information Society as two of the youngest associates of the Science and Arts Foundation (SAF), a nongovernmental organization that aims to empower Iranian youth by means of information technology.[1] Thus far, SAF, in collaboration with Sharif University of Technology, has provided the technology, hardware, and software necessary to train over 50,000 students, teachers, and school administrators to connect to the World Wide Web. While the technology is permeating the nation at a rapid rate (particularly through programs supported by nongovernmental organizations such as SAF), we have witnessed a communication divide unrelated to the physical ability to connect to the Internet. The social inability of youth to connect with people in different nations due to language and cultural differences presents a greater challenge to advances in information and communication technology than that of technological accessibility. This deficiency is particularly evident in Iran, a nation with limited access to the outside world and apprehensions about the intentions of outside nations. Therefore, we must also provide the means for young iranians to connect with youth abroad, an event that will promote cultural understanding. It is only by providing this mutual cultural understanding that the citizens of the next generation will have the opportunity to learn from each other, rather than through the present hierarchical system in which industrial and developed nations face. We entered the ICT4D Platform of WSIS to find a remedy for this difficulty.

Thus far, SAF has made substantial efforts to provide a platform for students in Iran to connect with each other and with students across the globe. Currently, few attempts have been made in Iranian schools to connect students within a school to work together in a collaborative setting, let alone providing an arena where students from different schools can share ideas or experiences. SAF, therefore, pioneered the concept of cooperative learning through electronic clubs in academic fields such as biotechnology, robotics, Persian literature, and mathematics. Participation in these e-clubs requires that students work together and share the results of their projects with students throughout Iran via a network called SchoolNet.[2] However, cooperation and team work between students within Iran represents the first step in making possible one of the most important factors in advancing knowledge: the exchange of ideas. To that end, SAF expanded its activity by supporting the participation of Iranian students and educators in international educational networks.

One of our main objectives in the first phase of WSIS was to take an active part in the Global School Networks Alliance meeting provided by the United Nations Cyberschoolbus and the European Schoolnet to further our connections with international educational networks. This conference gathered networks from across the globe in one assembly to meet and discuss commonalities. During this one-day event, we to achieve our key goal. The majority of networks present at this conference use education as a way to gain mutual understanding and cultural exchange. By connecting with these organizations, we have already embarked on a mission to connect Iranian high schools with schools internationally. Another important feature of the networks we encountered was their global vision. Either as an international nongovernmental organization or an international organization, the system of hierarchy between the developed and developing world is absent. Rather, these networks provide the opportunity to work in a universal system where students are equal partners on a mission to advance their knowledge. We had the opportunity to connect these networks with Iran and provide a rare p o r-

1. www.saf.ir
2. www.schoolnet.ir

tal into the nation's education system through the channel of a nongovernmental organization.

WSIS provided us with an opening to bridging the communication divide that will remain after the digital divide has been resolved through technology. ■

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Globalization and Local Identity as Demonstrated at the ICT4D Platform

Yukie Hori

The ICT for Development Platform (ICT 4D) at WSIS demonstrated global civil partnerships by showcasing some of the strong and diverse actions that are currently being taken at local and regional levels. This was an interesting contrast to the Summit plenary meeting, where policy makers sought a convergence around ideas of the global Information society as its outcome. I would like to reflect on the enhancement of local identities within the globalization process, which I observed in a series of events and demonstrations at the Platform.

Globalization processes can intensify the shaping of local identities. The age of globalization is also the age of nationalist resurgence, expressed both in the challenge to established nation-states and in the widespread (re)construction of identity on the basis of nationality, always affirmed against the alien (Castells, 2003). What was notably different about the Platform showcase from the nationalist resurgence perspective, however, was that the local identities were resurgent not due to nationalism but in a partnership of local groups within a transnational civil society.

One of the occasions showing the bepolar the binary opposition of globalization and local identity was an award ceremony for the regional Women's Electronic Network Training (WENT) workshop, run by a coalition of women's groups in Asia for the past 5 years. The winner, Chong Sheau Ching, was selected for her outstanding practice in using ICT for women's empowerment. After attending the WENT workshop held in Korea, she built a portal, "ehomemakers.net," helped 200 disadvantaged women to learn about ICT, and prepared them to earn income from home. She organized a number of conferences and seminars, which attracted several thousand homemakers and other disadvantaged women in Malaysia. Her remarks on how the WENT workshop contributed to her subsequent works show how she found her local interests through

meeting others at this regional-level training workshop:

> It was there that I realized that there is such a network as WENT for women community change agents, and that I wasn't alone. I met women leaders who worked on issues like child sex trade, migrant rights, labor rights, etc. The obstacles I encountered paled beside their horror stories. But they did not give up. They were right there in Seoul, learning how to use ICT to improve their work! And they had visions just like what I had! ... This realization was powerful as it spurred me to move on with a government grant for community Web site application as if I had not encountered any obstacles before except rewriting my proposed concepts over and over again! And it became a learning process for me.

The movement of women's organizations such as WENT is generally aimed at building a regional and global alliance for the advancement of women that is visible at the policy level and the advocacy level. Local groups become part of regional and international networks, design common strategies, and strengthen their institutional capacity. Perhaps in a more subtle way, the network also provides an opportunity for them to reflect upon their own organizations by assuming an outsider's view. Local women's groups use the global stage as a vehicle for strengthening their own local identities and activities, whether or not they do so intentionally. When one sees their transnational network expansion as a mere assimilation to the globalization process, one clearly underestimates their level of self-reflection. Their global transregional network experience, as seen at the Platform, could be a critical element for the formation and strengthening of local groups to advance their local agenda today. Such reciprocal global social interaction and simultaneous localization could trigger a new formation of global civil society. The vital role of ICTs in this process was well proven at the Platform. ■

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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 story telling 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.

My First Question Is: 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 Bejing, 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 and gathered and shared the level of communication and exchange through networking, Web sites and mailing lists of the civil society 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?

My Second Question Is: 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 unexpectedy 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 to 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.

The Final Question Is: 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 aregeneral, 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". REFERENCE? 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 trans-national movements and the global civil society with their potential political im-

pact and growing interconnectedness, I suggest we look at WSIS as a meaningful passage: not a conquest or the naive affirmation of a definitive change, but certainly a passage that deserves our critical attention, now and in the future. ■

Resources

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What does the 'information society' mean for social justice and civil society?

Anriette Esterhuysen, January 2004

Many of us question the use of the term 'information society'. It has the tendency to de-emphasise 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, popularised its use by governments and the media. Participating governments adopted a Declaration 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 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 characterise the Declaration, while the Action Plan focuses on connectivity and infrastructure.

One of the key areas on which governments could not agree on was the financing of digital inclusion. An initiative like 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 who will make recommendations to the Tunis Summit. Whether this potentially 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 organisations (CSOs) that participated actively, the WSIS has been valuable, creating a new platform of solidarity across ideological, sectoral and geographical divides. The convenor of the WSIS, the International Tele-

communications 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, e.g. 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 organisations 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 the 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, engaged by a select group of NGOs, consultants, donor agencies, and governments, to a new context in which ICT policy has become firmly located 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; organisations 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 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 organisations already working in the field. Through the 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 in Geneva on 11 December 2003.

What has changed during WSIS? A much 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 organisation 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 got talking 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 are measuring their government's national policy process against the principles agreed on by civil society in its declaration to the WSIS.[2] In South Africa, SANGONeT, a progressive ICT service provider, is convening public consultations on ICT policy in small and medium-sized towns, far away from Johannesburg, where community organisers are able to confront government officials with ques-

tions 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 organisations for the disabled to IT entrepreneurs. In Brazil a civil society organisation, Rits (Third Sector Information Network)[3] has launched an interactive online 'observatory' to facilitate public participation in 'info-inclusion' policy.[4]

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 can result in invasion of privacy, to the over-commercialisation of radio spectrum, to restrictions placed on innovation by intellectual property regimes and telecommunications regulations (for example by limiting low cost options like internet telephony); civil society interests are threatened. We need to be out there protecting them.

ICT infrastructure and civil society

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

The opportunities are there: working in a networked way has the potential for strengthening collaboration, information exchange and learning, and linking 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 realised. Often this has been attributed to 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.

A recent study by Mark Surman and Katherine Reilly commissioned by the Social Science Research Council says that "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 Reily, Appropriating the Internet for Social Change, SSRC, November 2003)[5]

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 market place, 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 the 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.[6] 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 appropriation 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." [7] Surman and Reilly outline several innovative recommendations in their paper, ranging from the need for building a "social tech movement" made up of organisations and individuals that provide support and training to CSOs, to "embracing the open

source movement" and creating "better maps of civic cyberspace".[8]

I would 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 how 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 websites, 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 like 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 acting to appropriate technology. It is up to donors to continue to invest in capacity building, networking and learning.

-END-

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7
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8
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Bring WSIS Back to Earth

Sarah Tierney, The University of Texas at Austin, WSIS Youth Caucus

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 providing access to ICTs for all, using ICTs as tools for social and economic development to meet the Millennium Development Goals, and 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 the WSIS to unmanageable scope.

With its purview widened, the Summit began tackling so many issues that it spread itself too thin. With complex negotiations taking place on a Declaration of Principles that once had only measured thirty pages in length, the focus on WSIS failed to movefrom 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. Whereas the WSIS could have formally taken on the role of formulating partnerships among governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector, it instead was caught up preparing documents that are not even binding. Instead, any real results from the first phase of WSIS will occur because of partnerships that were 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

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 development of ICTs in the developing world. It also exposed ambivalent ideas as to how the development of an information infrastructure that can 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 toward solidifying partnerships that can make 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 the 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.

Promotion Of Real Understanding About The Internet Is Not A Minor Achievement

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

Many times during the summit it was made clear that some common fawlty 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 policymakers, 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 (RSIS), clearly illustrated that a strong understanding of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) must precede steps towards better national and supranational policy on these issues.

@PARA = For better or worse, the summit was not a place where only the tech savvy from each country came together. Rather, it was attended by delegates who have 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. This will hopefully serve to help make better policy decisions, strengthen the political will to back them up and provide a realistic understanding of the costs to implementing them.Let me give some examples of occasions 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 $28,000 US 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 incentive for digital roads are 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 administration.
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 a woman who is used to being attacked. Her entire presentation showed the desire to mitigate any 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:
@PARA = ICANN doesn't govern the Internet. No one governs the Internet.
@PARA = ICANN does make important decisions that affect the Internet.
@PARA = ICANN is sorry for past mistakes.
@PARA = ICANN is interested in evolving toward a truly representative and consensus-based @PARA = body.
These are statements that needed to be heard, and they lead to a further truth: Whatever type of body will be making 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.

@PARA = 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.

@PARA = One thing holds true for any country deciding to improve their communication infrastructure. Before discussing the funding options, the public/private partnerships, or the legal infrastructure, governments must know the benefits that will come out of their decision. 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.

Towards Tunis: Suggested Next Steps by Sarah McCue
The Geneva Summit was a success in showcasing the immense number of local or national programs that have been developed for e-education, e-government, e-health, etc. It can also be characterized a "success" because the declaratory statement and action plan were finalized, despite the cost of physical meetings and disappointing lack of use of information and communication technologies to prepare these documents.
In order to ensure the next WSIS in Tunis in 2005 is also a success, the following is suggested as five important next steps:
Determine How To Finance The Solidarity Fund. The World Bank, regional banks, and a large number from the global ICT private sector could determine funding options for the Solidarity Fund based on a detailed "wish list" that outlines the funds needed for a select number of national, regional, and global initiatives to be achieved by the next WSIS.
Immediately Coalesce the Private Sector and Build Tangible and Practical Partnerships. The ICT private sector could be much more actively engaged, not only for funding but by identifying exactly how they can participate in a few select initiatives deemed by the Secretary General himself to be of global and urgent need. A core group of individuals with experience in forging partnerships with the private sector, NGOs, and the United Nations could be given the opportunity to create and implement a plan that would immediately engage the global ICT private sector.
Identify Three to Five Urgent Initiatives to be Achieved by 2005. An unprecedented opportunity was missed to launch fully-funded and organized initiatives that are global / regional in nature. At the next Summit, the Secretary General could launch initiatives that are already funded, organized, and proven as operational that address urgent and globally important issues such teaching girls to use the Internet; creating a global online business registration system, developing a free e-mail system for children in Africa and the Middle East; providing comprehensive e-governance training and e-commerce training; launching an online global environmental monitoring system; creating a global donor

funds tracking system; etc. These are but a few urgent issues that need immediate attention.

If the Secretary General soon identified his priority initiatives, he could issue a challenge to all WSIS participants, encouraging groups to coalesce behind his priorities and determine exactly how an initiative will be organized, funded, and launched a few months prior to WSIS.

Coalesce a Group of ICT Experts to Determine How to Put More "E" in the UN. A shared vision needs to be created on how to more efficiently and cost effectively use ICTs to address e-commerce; e-trade e-government; e-health; e-education; e-culture; using ICTs to respond to crises, food distribution, refugee crises, and the AIDS epidemic; how to use the Internet for information dissemination; and how to apply technology for greater efficiency and transparency within the UN system. Working through a representative group of individuals with expertise in ICT could help identify innovative ways to achieve global initiatives in these important areas.

Survey All WSIS Participants. A survey of all WSIS participants could be conducted to receive their feedback and ideas on ways to better structure the summit, how to use ICT much more innovatively to prepare for the next summit, and suggest specific global / regional initiatives that need to achieved prior to the next Summit. In sum, to put ACTION in the plan adopted at the Geneva summit.

It is in the spirit of collaboration, innovation, and great hope that these recommendations are submitted.

Let us all join hands to determine how to use information and communication technologies for greater peace, prosperity, individual growth, and economic development.

Dr. Sarah McCue
former Manager
United Nations Development Programme
Information and Communications Technology for Development Practice

The World vs. The Web:
The UN's Politicization of the Information Society

Report on the World Summit on the Information Society; Geneva, Dec. 2003

By Audrey Selian and Kenneth Neil Cukier *

I. Introduction

On the surface, the issue of the "information society" should be one of the least controversial issues in contemporary international relations. Considering that nearly all nations welcome the advent of the Internet for economic development, social progress and entertainment, it would seem that a UN summit on such an intangible theme should be an occasion for rare harmony in an increasingly polarized world. Moreover, considering that the information society itself is spearheaded by the commercial sector in the form of computers, Internet access and media, it would seem appropriate that governments should view their role in this area modestly.

Yet this was not to be so. Instead, the UN's World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) that took place in Dec. 2003 in Geneva will be remembered as the moment when a seemingly unspoken global consensus largely in favor of the Internet and information technology frayed at the level of formal intergovernmental relations.

A number of issues related to the information society have emerged to divide countries, mainly along the lines of the developing and developed world. These disputes—over human rights, free press, intellectual property, the digital divide and control of Internet infrastructure—will not be resolved easily. One outcome of WSIS was the creation of a UN working group on "Internet governance" and a study on a fund to reduce the digital divide, with recommendations due before the Summit's second phase in Tunis in Nov. 2005. Meanwhile, as with previous summits, the UN sought to use WSIS as a forum to increase the participation of non-governmental organizations into its processes, both from industry and groups representing "civil society." This, too, largely failed. Many civil society representatives complained of having their interests passed over, while industry mainly ignored WSIS altogether. The result is that there was probably more goodwill among groups and greater sense of agreement about the information society in the late 1990s before the WSIS process began than now that it is halfway concluded.

In some ways, WSIS was an artificial moment. The main activity took place in the formal talks that led up to the event, not during it. The Geneva Summit took two years of planning, with preparatory meetings on every continent (and negotiations over the wording of the final declaration and action plan stretching past midnight in the days before the conference doors opened). Around 60 heads of government attended, as did 11,000 visitors. Organized by the UN's International Telecommunication Union, the

Summit was widely viewed as an attempt by that agency to boost its relevance in the Internet era. The road to Tunisia will be a long one. The issues that divide nations and private-sector stakeholders are significant, and may actually widen over the next 18 months. The Tunisian authorities have sought to increase the diplomatic stature of the Summit by privately proposing that it establish a formal "Charter for the Information Society." Though this would boost the importance of the event they host, it might also broaden the rifts among participants. Strikingly, the Internet is becoming more contentious, not less, as it develops. This may make it either a pawn in a wider battle in international relations, or a punching bag. Neither would be good for the information society, which ironically promised to transcend geographic borders and the parochial interests of nation-states for an enlightened spirit of global solidarity.

II. Areas of Conflict

When one thinks of the information society, images of computers and telephone wires usually comes to mind. Less so issues like the environment, gender equality or the needs of disabled people. However, these were exactly the sorts of topics that quickly cropped up as WSIS agenda items—and became points of contention. In one respect, the themes may represent an enlightened understanding of the information society that encompasses more than technology and extends to their broadest possible impact on human life. Yet less generously, they may be considered marginal issues that inappropriately over-extend the concept of the information society, and thus are distractions that prevent a deeper discussion on topics that are more central to the theme.

The final declaration raised 67 points and the action plan 29 points, which, like in many UN documents, couch their true meaning in generic language that can be interpreted in numerous ways. That said, four main issues were the focus of contention, and will likely remain sources of tension.

* Intellectual Property / Open Source—The developing world, led by Brazil, wanted strong language in the declaration in favor of open source software; the US, influenced by industry, notably Microsoft, wanted the inclusion of wording that referred to "different software models" and "proprietary software." Moreover, the US wanted text that specifically called for adherence to existing international IP regulations. The compromise reached was weaker wording on open source and less specific mention of IP treaties—and an agreement that the parties would slug it out in the appropriate forum, which is the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), not WSIS. One critical point: Microsoft is so concerned with referring to IP treaties in the text because it fears the day may come when developing countries treat the WSIS ideal of a right to information as carte blanche to declare access to software a vital national interest—and openly violate Microsoft's software patents just as some have done with patents on HIV/AIDS medications.

* Free Press / Human Rights—China, Cuba, Vietnam and others wanted to weaken the language on human rights and freedom for the media, while the US and Europe wanted stronger wording. The compromise is that the text refers to pre-existing charters (i.e. the Universal Declaration on Human Rights) but doesn't try to put forward ideals that seem to be stronger. There is even wording that can be interpreted to allow censorship under the notion of preserving national cultural norms. Considering that the UDHR itself is regularly violated, the controversy here is somewhat inane. The interesting point is that, according to officials involved with the discussions, the US didn't fight for language calling for complete freedom of information—the reason being that now, unlike in the past, it sees a usefulness in restricting some Internet content beyond political hot-button issues like pornography; i.e. content such as bomb-making instructions or the ability for terrorists to communicate.

* Digital Divide—The developing world, led by Senegal, called for a new fund to overcome the digital divide, to be paid for by first world companies and countries. The US, Europe and Japan balked, noting the fund's potential for ineffectiveness, corruption and that the plan overlaps existing digital divide programs (an OECD report issued to coincide with the Summit identified over 30 multilateral initiatives). The Summit's Action Plan established a voluntary Digital Solidarity Fund, and a study on the idea of a more elaborate fund to be issued prior to the Tunis Summit in 2005. There is a great irony here: Many national leaders from the developing world in their formal remarks highlighted his or her country's extraordinary record in Internet usage – Senegal President Abdoulaye Wade himself mentioned that in some years the country saw 300% growth—which seemed to dilute the urgency for new Western financial aid. Moreover, though the need for trans-

parency and accountability in an aid program was identified, the use of technology itself as a way to reduce corruption was not considered.

* ICANN—The administration of the domain name system, performed by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Named and Numbers (ICANN), was the biggest source of controversy at WSIS. Developing countries expressed opposition to ICANN, arguing that it is a form of US or Western power over the Internet. They argue that it strips them of sovereignty over their country-code domain name, and prevents them from meaningful participation in discussions over how the overall system should work. Notably, these complaints mark the first time many countries have formally expressed a public view on the domain name system. However, many countries did not seem to understand the issue other than shallowly, sometimes incorrectly, and mainly in the context of basic opposition to US power. Essentially, ICANN became the victim of a far wider discontent with US unilateralism in other foreign policy matters. The outcome of the Summit is that the UN will convene a task force to define what is meant by "Internet governance" (an important first step since the very nature of the term misleads governments into thinking that unless they do it, it is not being done), study the issue and make recommendations in time for the Tunis summit in 2005.

The ICANN controversy warrants a fuller treatment than is appropriate in this overview. That said, it bears remarking that this is a serious dispute and it is only going to get more complicated. As a first step, governments are calling for sovereignty over their country-code domains, something that although acceded in the US government's 1998 White Paper that established policy for private-sector Internet management, ICANN has been reluctant to institute fully. The problem is that in achieving this basic goal, governments may try to garner more—greater control over the domain name system itself. Such an assertion of power could unravel the entire ICANN "experiment." It would mean governments themselves would manage the core infrastructure of the Internet, in the same way as the ITU today coordinates the global telephone system. The US and many other Western countries are wary of this approach since UN agencies tend to impose bureaucratic processes and politicize issues that could place a drag on technical innovation for Internet technology, as well as thwart the inherent openness of the medium.

These disputes among governments are fairly typical of UN summits; perhaps it underscores the degree to which technology is a mainstream matter that it should be treated like a political football and kicked about, and offline political issues grafted upon it. More novel is the way that the UN itself has had to account for non-governmental actors, which are the motor of the information society around the world. In that domain, too, the Summit generated substantial tensions, which is the focus of the next section.

III. Civil Society

Once a sideshow, always a sideshow? The WSIS process was intended to highlight the UN's outreach to non-governmental institutions. Yet those groups, which have complained of second-class treatment at other UN events, left the Summit expressing frustration at the way they were treated and their interests addressed. There are two dimensions to the tension: a dispute over the substance of the outcome at WSIS, the other, complaints about the structure and process.

Indeed, in the case of industry, it for the most part refused to participate. The lowest turnout among attendees was from the business sector (and no CEO from a major global technology company attended save for the head of Nokia, a Summit sponsor). Moreover, rather than engage organizations representing civil society, the Summit enraged them. From the preparatory meetings before the event to the treatment of organizations at the Summit—and even the architectural layout of the venue—civil society participants were marginalized both ideologically as well as physically by governments.

Substance Matters

A lack of dialogue, and thus lack of consensus building, led civil society organizations to reject the Summit's formal declaration and issue their own alternative document. The discontent felt by civil society organizations after the third official preparatory committee meeting in September (on issues such as advocating community media, open source software, intellectual property rights, and gender rights) were not resolved before the Summit. That said, civil society concerns were not wholly ignored in the way some martyrs of the process would like to argue. Nevertheless, the final documents were perceived by civil society representatives to reflect a vision of the information society that was uniform, technocratic, and not people-centered.

There were many issues where civil society expectations were not met, particularly in regards to the

choice of strategic wording in the texts, and the lack of solid social justice and rights-based approaches to problems of freedom in the information society. The differences between the Civil Society Declaration, entitled "Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs," issued on December 8, and the official Declaration of Principles by the WSIS Plenary issued on December 12, are not immediately discernible. However, those deeply involved in the process see the distinction in governing principles and values quite starkly.

The divergence lies in the classic issue of contention: the official Declaration calls itself 'people-centered' and pays homage to Article 19 of the UDHR. However, it does not do so to the extent that the civil society text places the human being at the heart of the information society. The civil society version is geared specifically toward the realization and improvement of human rights and development of all people from a social justice standpoint. While the official Declaration became more human-centered, it did not touch upon issues of equitable distribution of resources and the necessity of applying a social justice framework. Furthermore, the official Declaration recognizes communication as a fundamental social process, but the civil society version goes further, by explicitly endorsing the right to freedom of opinion and expression – rights that are extended regardless of national borders.

To be sure, the official WSIS Declaration addressed certain civil society interests that were initially in dispute. For instance, the final version incorporated issues of literacy, education and research throughout the text, as well as made slightly fuller mention of skills (other than ICTs alone) that are necessary for empowering people. The final Declaration was also modified to include references regarding the role of WSIS to help attain objectives and commitments made at previous global summits and meetings, particularly in the domain of development.

In contrast, the civil society document exposes the significant shortfalls in the WSIS Declaration to emphasize the rights and freedoms of people in the context of freedom of movement, association, privacy and expression. The other disappointment to many civil society groups was the failure of the Declaration to include a concrete plan for the Digital Solidarity Fund, and to make significant strides away from prioritizing infrastructure over the social impact of ICTs on society and economies.

Structure Matters

If the substance of the debates left the civil society institutions wanting, the Summit's very structure exposed differences as well, from the symbolism of the physical design of the venue, to the actual proceedings themselves. These intangible aspects of UN Summits are often not recorded since they do not leave a documented trail, and yet they are as important as the official meetings, since the environment provides the context for either friendly or frustrated dialogue among stakeholders.

The environment wasn't conducive for dialogue. For instance, civil society organizations were structurally cordoned off from the area where the governmental plenary meetings were held. Access to these areas was exclusively limited to government delegates and selected private-sector attendees; only a few civil society delegates were able to acquire passes to enter. Rather than being treated as partners, the divisive design as well as the hierarchical access appeared to suggest a lower regard that the governmental organizers seemed to hold for the private-sector and civil society stakeholders.

The actual architecture of the event symbolized the inequality: governments were at the forefront of an elevated tier of the main building, while civil society organizations could be found in small, compartmentalized cubicles where the din of one session would interfere with another (a fitting mirror of the anarchy of activist organizations in the real world, alas...); industry and private groups were one floor below. This layout – governments on top, business below, and civil society left to their own, in a sophisticated shantytown – was not conducive for dialogue among different groups or within the civil society caucus. Nor was the fact that the WiFi Internet access, often free at many technology conferences, was priced exorbitantly high and was extremely difficult to set up. Considering the theme of the event, this underscored a serious lack of sensitivity on the part of the organizers that may reveal a broader lack of judgment about ICT policy, and the interests of users, generally. The inaccessibility of Internet connectivity was especially detrimental to civil society groups in particular, since the Internet is their lifeblood for coordinating their actions. This is the sector that most lives the information society (and can best teach others in government and industry about its potential), yet they were unable to participate in it at a Summit centered on the very topic.

The most revealing tension among the stakeholders

appears in the treatment of the civil society groups. Several civil society members claimed to have been challenged at the security gates as they brought documents in to the forum, while others were actually arrested after demonstrating outside. Of course one might question the utility of such protests, when the opportunity for participation was open to all organizations that applied, and it was reiterated throughout the Summit that civil society participation at WSIS was not equivalent to endorsement of it. Still, it would be appropriate to note the obvious hypocrisy on the part of WSIS organizers in censoring or filtering written materials at a Summit on the *Information* Society.

IV Conclusion

The World Summit on the Information Society is often referred to by proponents in flowery terms, as an unprecedented moment in history when governments around the world came together to acknowledge the power of the Internet and our mutual interconnectedness. Yet like so many other attempts to understand the Internet, this view tells us more about peoples' aspirations for the medium than its reality.

In theory, WSIS is about understanding how to manage new technologies so that everyone, not just those that first invented them, can benefit. It was meant to discuss technical standards, how to use technology to facilitate cooperation and level a deeply inequitable playing field. In reality, discussions over standards and inclusion may well be empowering to all, but not in the way that many first hoped. WSIS does not alter the proportional lack of power by the least technically advanced nations relative to those most advanced. This is not to say that WSIS is a failure; only that just as we have begun to acknowledge that technology is not a silver bullet to the world's problems after a period of initial hype, WSIS participants must make the same realistic assessment about the Summit itself.

NWICO – UNESCO ? ICANN = WSIS?

The most persistent feature of technology is that it seems to erase our memory of what came before it, a historical amnesia that can be problematic for policymakers. Looking back a few decades provides insight on the politics of the information society today.

In the 1960s, the classic East-West divide became complicated by the addition of a North-South dimension, and one of the main areas of dispute was media. Predictably, the debates converged along the lines of the ideological standoff between the capitalist and communist world, with the West in support of the free flow of information and the East in favor of greater governmental control. Also predictably, it played out on the stage of the third world. One key concern was to keep pace with the innovation in communication technology, particularly satellites. Developing countries criticized the nature and direction of information flows as unidirectional, and sought to bridge economic divides as world markets developed. The dispute culminated in the late 1970s and early 1980s into proposals called the "New World Information and Communication Order" (NWICO) and debated at the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Among the demands was for a subsidy by Western media companies to foster media resources in developing countries, and for greater national control over information – an ironic parallel to the calls at WSIS for a Digital Solidarity Fund to reduce the inequality of ICTs and the invocation of national sovereignty to justify censorship.

The current disputes at WSIS suggest that the central issues that NWICO exposed three decades ago have not disappeared in the Internet age, and in fact may have even become larger. The Internet has not remedied the concern over who owns communication infrastructure, as well as the politics of access and connectivity in the developing world.

"To Carthage Then I Came..."

Looking ahead to the second phase of WSIS in Tunis in Nov. 2005, one can expect the conflicts to become more intense as national positions, previously unformed, become more entrenched. This is because the first phase of WSIS raised the bar of awareness on a variety of issues; with understanding, come disputes. Moreover, should WSIS II strive to establish a formal Charter, it will likely take policy differences that today are hairline fractures in international relations, and expand them unnecessarily. Areas of conflict that could otherwise be addressed over time and in bilateral settings may get be commingled with broader foreign policy concerns, where they are less likely to get resolved smoothly. This places special importance on the process leading up to Nov. 2005, which will entail a new series of PrepCom negotiations, as well as the UN reports on Internet governance and the digital divide. These are opportunities for consensus and confidence-building that should not be squandered by any side. One reason why a formal Charter has been floated

for the Tunis phase is because of the low turnout among Western leaders in Geneva – no major Western head of state attended save for France, and the US sent a low-level delegation. If the US in particular ignores WSIS, it will set back potentially positive global discussions and could lead to a backlash by the developing world against the US that could jeopardize its interests in areas such as ICANN. That might mirror history in a way that no one benefits from, if the NWICO dispute is any guide. The conflict at UNESCO in the 1980s became so fractious that it led the US to pull out of the Paris-based body for two decades, only to return in October 2003. Moreover, just as UNESCO was criticized for inefficiency and being a shade too politicized in their role in NWICO, so have the intentions, agenda and role of the ITU at WSIS come under fire. That said, time may be the best balm to calm tensions. Consider that efforts to establish the concept of a "right to communicate," a phrase coined in 1969, was introduced by Sweden at the UNESCO General Conference of 1974. Nearly thirty years later, an entire forum of panels at WSIS entitled the "World Forum on Communication Rights" was sponsored by the group Communication Rights in the Information Society, and led by a coalition of international civil society organizations.

If the world has not changed as much as we think despite the emergence of the Internet, the World Summit on the Information Society underscores one important way in which it has: in terms of the role of non-governmental organizations. In the 1970s, debates over media were mainly the domain of state-to-state relations; today, the WSIS process is dominated by the idea of multiple stakeholders and shared authority. This is an important evolution, since by acknowledging the relevant parties we can address interests pragmatically. The question, as always in international relations, is how we work together. Despite the interconnectedness of the Internet age, such accord cannot be taken for granted.

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