



World Summit On The Information Society: Prepcom I

INTRODUCTION

Over 800 representatives from 133 UN Member States, NGOs and business sector entities took part in the first Preparatory Committee Meeting (PrepCom I) of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)--to be held in two phases, one in Geneva from 10-12 December 2003 hosted by the Swiss Government, and the second in Tunis in 2005 hosted by the Government of Tunisia.

The idea of holding a Summit to address "the whole range of relevant issues related to the information society"--in particular those pertaining to new information and communication technologies (ICTs)--began as an initiative by the 1998 Plenipotentiary Conference of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and subsequently endorsed by UN General Assembly Resolution 56/183. The Resolution identifies ITU to assume the leading managerial role in the Summit's Executive Secretariat, and encourages the active participation of all relevant UN bodies, other international and regional organizations, NGOs, civil society and the private sector in the intergovernmental preparatory process and the Summit itself. A High-Level Summit Organizing Committee (HLSOC) has been established to coordinate the efforts of the UN system in the preparation, organization and holding of the Summit. The HLSOC is composed of representatives of various UN bodies and chaired by ITU Secretary-General, Yoshio Utsumi. The Summit process is expected to arrive at a common vision and understanding of the information society and adopt a political declaration and a plan of action for implementation by governments, international institutions and all sectors of civil society.

PrepCom I was preceded by the first WSIS regional meeting, held for the African region in Bamako (Mali) from 28-30 May 2002. Prior to PrepCom I, there were also a series of NGO consultations organized by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and various seminars and meetings, organized notably by the Swiss Government, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Communications Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) campaign (see Box).

Member States at PrepCom I focused their efforts on determining the rules of procedure for the PrepComs (including arrangements for accreditation of NGOs and other actors) and began identifying the themes and content of the Summit. In parallel, an active civil society platform of more than 150 representatives of some 100 NGOs and civil society organizations from around the world began sharing and consolidating their own pluralistic vision of key issues facing the information society, and lobbying for effective civil society input in the preparatory process and the Summit itself.

It remains to be seen how broadly governments will define the agenda of the Summit. The themes proposed by participants range from expanding the reach of ICT infrastructure and ICT-user capabilities in developing countries, to increasing developing country participation in global ICT governance. Possible themes also include promoting citizens' use of ICTs to improve governance and public service delivery (such as education and medical advice), and preserving cultural and linguistic diversity in the digital age.

Some participants, particularly from the civil society platform, see the issues at stake in the information society from a broader perspective--with human rights prerogatives as the core guiding principles. These include: the right to communicate (which is defined to encompass freedom of expression and the right to information); the right to privacy in relation to security-related Internet surveillance measures; new consumer rights issues emerging in conjunction with the rise of electronic commerce and the strengthening of intellectual property rights legislation; and democratic rights in a context of global concentration of media power.

THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION: EMPOWERMENT AND INEQUALITY

Representing UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan at the opening of the PrepCom I, Shashi Tharoor, UN Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, said, "one thing is already clear: dollar signs

MAJOR GLOBAL ICT-RELATED DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

During PrepCom I, participants had the opportunity to share experience of some of the key global ICT-related initiatives aimed at bridging the digital divide and promoting development.

UNICT Task Force

Created in November 2001 by Kofi Annan, the UN Information and Communication Technologies (UNICT) Taskforce is comprised of 39 high-level members whose mission is to utilize ICTs to close the digital divide. The Taskforce, which acts as a facilitator, coordinator and catalyst of ICT-related development initiatives, is designed around a number of themes, including policy reform, human resource development and entrepreneurship. Commenting on the uniqueness of the initiative, the Taskforce Executive Coordinator, Pekka Tarjanne, said, "it is the first UN-wide process where all the stakeholders participate on an equal footing, including civil society, academics and NGOs." He noted that the Taskforce has a three-year mandate and intends to publish annual reports on its efforts.

World Bank InfoDev programme

Bruno Lanvin, who heads up the grant functions of the World Bank's InfoDev programme, noted that the Bank spends approximately US\$2.5 billion in loans and over US\$30 million in grants per year on ICT-related initiatives. Mr. Lanvin suggested that the WSIS can bring visibility and awareness to an area that has for decades been considered a minor element in development. He said that the Summit will provide a forum to share experiences, design clear objectives, facilitate the creation of innovative ways of addressing the myriad social, cultural, political and economic issues associated with the digital divide. However, he insisted that "we cannot use the best practices from the most developed countries; rather we must identify best practices in the developing world that are replicable."

UNDP

Similar to the World Bank's efforts, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in this area is mostly concerned with strategies that link ICTs to human capacities and infrastructure in an effort to eradicate poverty. UNDP representative Denis Gilhooly noted that UNDP is investigating innovative areas such as "open source" software and the encouragement of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) at the local level.

UNESCO

Given that its mandate includes a focus on diversity and multilingualism, freedom of expression and education, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has substantial experience with many objectives of the WSIS, and has engaged with numerous NGOs and civil society groups in preparation for PrepCom I. A representative of UNESCO urged the assembly to address issues relating to access, multilingualism, localized content development and expanding the information available in the public domain.

G-8 DOT Force

The Digital Opportunities Task Force (DOT Force) was created by the G-8 Okinawa Charter on the Global Information Society in July 2000. It now has more than 20 ICT-related initiatives under development, focusing on issues relating to Internet governance, the creation of localized content and applications, human capacity building and "e-government."

As a contribution to the July 2002 G-8 Summit in Kananaskis (Canada), the UK Department for International Development (DFID) commissioned a report on the influence of developing countries in international ICT decision making. Undertaken by the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organization and the Panos Institute, the study outlines a number of recommendations for strengthening developing country participation in global ICT policy fora, including: creating ICT policy awareness; building technical and policy capacity; strengthening national policy institutions and processes; providing access to information about the international ICT policy agenda; improving the structure, functioning and working methods of international policy fora; and making effective use of financial resources.

and GNP tables are no longer the only elements dividing the haves and have-nots. The industrial revolution is passé; we are living in the era of the information revolution." Mr. Tharoor went on to note that, "this is a revolution with lots of *liberté*, some *fraternité*, and no *égalité*." Of all the figures marking dramatic disparities across the world, he said, the most striking global divide of today is that of information inequality. Citing Mr. Annan, he added that "knowledge is power and information is liberating." There can be little argument, he said, that information and freedom go together. "The information revolution is inconceivable without political democracy and vice-versa." Perhaps the newest challenge for the United Nations, he said, is to bring access to information, and the empowerment it offers, to all the world's people. "Only then will *égalité* be brought into the Information Revolution."

On the same panel, the ITU Secretary-General, stressed that, "the transformation to the information society will be every bit as profound as the movement from agrarian to industrial societies." In the past, such changes have led to winners and losers. "It could happen again," Mr. Utsumi warned, "and if we do not take any action now, existing gaps will be widened. We must not make the same mistakes for the coming information society."

In his opening address as host country representative, Swiss State Secretary Marc Furrer reminded delegates that "those who have no telephone, no Internet--not in their home, not even in their village or neighbourhood--will not be satisfied with some nice general political statements of the WSIS. They will want concrete plans on how they can achieve access to the information society, especially those who need to use ICTs for education or for better medical help. So I ask you to always bear in mind that we have come together to find substantial solutions, real solutions. We have to overcome political obstacles: it is not the proceedings which count, it is the substance."

At the same opening session, a civil society perspective was presented by Daniel Pimienta, President of the Networks and Development Foundation based in the Dominican Republic. Mr. Pimienta insisted that the digital divide is merely a reflection of deep social, economic and political divides between North and South, and within countries. He warned that the prevailing rhetoric is superficial and simplistic in that it distracts from the information society's "true social promises"--social ownership of technologies leading to empowerment of people and communities. Instead, the mainstream debate focuses the debate on "access" in the narrow sense of the word. He said that he recognizes that network access infrastructure and services at affordable prices are essential, but that is not enough. For ICT applications to contribute to changing the reality of social injustice, other factors are essential, he emphasized, including: the existence of content and interface that adequately reflect the languages and cultures of each group; the basic education required by users in order to be able to transform information into knowledge, and knowledge into wisdom; and specific training in the mature use of these technologies for understanding what is at stake socially, and enabling citizens to become socially-involved development players.

THE CRIS CAMPAIGN

The Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) campaign was launched in November 2001 by the Platform for Communication Rights, an international umbrella group of international NGOs active in media and communications. Its vision of the information society is grounded on the "right to communicate," as a means to enhance human rights and to strengthen the social, economic and cultural lives of people and communities. The campaign aims to build an information society based on principles of transparency, diversity, participation and social and economic justice, and inspired by equitable gender, cultural and regional perspectives.

CRIS believes that the WSIS offers an important forum to promote these objectives. The campaign aims to broaden the WSIS agenda and goals especially in relation to media and communication issues. The themes that CRIS focuses on include:

- n strengthening the public domain, ensuring that information and knowledge are readily available for human development, and not locked up in private hands;*
- n ensuring affordable access to, and effective use of, electronic networks in a development context, for instance by innovative and robust regulation and public investment;*
- n securing and extending the global commons, for both broadcast and telecommunication, to ensure this public resource is not sold for private ends;*
- n instituting democratic and transparent governance of the information society from local to global levels;*
- n tackling information surveillance and censorship, by government or the commercial sector; and*
- n supporting community and people-centred media, both traditional and new.*

"Many fear that behind the current drive toward the information society is the relentless expansion of corporate control, stifling dissent and manufacturing consent. Global corporate interests are firmly in the driving seat, with governments relegated to referee between monoliths wrestling for the greater share of spoils.... Yet people worldwide are forging a new vision of the information society, one with human rights at its core. New forms of media and networking tools are being used to build global communities from the local level, to share knowledge, amplify marginalised voices, organise political action, empower participation, and sustain and celebrate cultural and intellectual diversity.

"We must choose, and then build, the information society we want. Will it be one that suits the corporate elites, but excludes the majority? Or one that sustains and expands sustainability, human rights and people's dignity? The right to communicate is a universal right, underpinning and serving all other human rights. The emergence of the information society must see this right extended and reinforced to the benefit of all."

—Extracts from the CRIS Campaign mission statement: "Whose Information Society?"

EMBRYONIC INTERGOVERNMENTAL DEBATE ON THEMES

Much of the intergovernmental sessions during the week were taken up in hearing general statements and negotiating rules of procedure (see below). This meant that delegates had limited time left to negotiate the content of guiding principles and themes for the Summit. This work will continue throughout the preparatory process, including during a possible intersessional meeting in Geneva in autumn 2002.

For PrepCom I, the Executive Secretariat produced a document on proposed themes for the Summit and possible outcomes (WSIS/PC-1/DOC/4-E), which drew on contributions from HLSOC, the outcome of a workshop held in December 2001 under the auspices of the Swiss Government, and ongoing work of the Executive Secretariat. The document (available online at www.geneva2003.org) identifies three clusters of main concerns, based on GA Resolution 56/183:

- n Vision: "To develop a common vision and understanding of the information society."
- n Access: "To promote the urgently needed access of all the world's inhabitants to information, knowledge and communication technologies for development."
- n Applications: "To harness the potential of knowledge and technology for promoting the goals of the United Nations Millennium Declaration."

The Civil Society Division of the WSIS Executive Secretariat will post on the Geneva 2003 website a compilation of major themes that were put forward by governments during PrepCom I.

NGO AND BUSINESS SECTOR ACCREDITATION AND PARTICIPATION

In the general debate in Plenary, an overwhelming majority of Member States emphasized the need to actively involve NGOs, civil society and the private sector in the preparatory process and the Summit itself. On 5 July, PrepCom I adopted the following rules and procedures for the accreditation and participation of NGOs, civil society and business entities in future PrepComs:

- n NGOs currently in consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), as a rule shall be considered accredited after informing the Executive Secretariat and registering to participate.
- n The same applies to ITU "Sector Members" (which include primarily telecommunications-related firms that pay statutory contributions to the ITU to participate in its technical meetings).
- n Those NGOs, civil society and business sector entities not covered in the above categories but wishing to participate may apply directly or through their governments to the Executive Secretariat of the Summit for that purpose. The information required for the submission of applications and modalities for reviewing applications is contained in BOX...
- n NGOs, civil society and business sector entities

APPLICATION OF NON-ECOSOC STATUS NGOS

The application of NGOs, civil society organizations and business entities that do not enjoy consultative status with ECOSOC requires the submission of the following information:

- a) name of the organization/entity and pertinent contact information, including address and main contact;
- b) legal status;
- c) year of establishment;
- d) purpose of the organization/entity;
- e) a list of the members of the governing body of the organization/entity and their countries of nationality;
- f) a description of the membership of the organization, indicating the total number of members, the names of organizations that are members and their geographical distribution;
- g) programmes and activities in areas relevant to the subject of the Summit and indicating in which country, or countries, they are carried out;
- h) copies of the annual reports, with financial statements and a list of financial sources and contributions, including governmental contributions, if applicable;
- i) a copy of the constitution and/or by-laws of the organization;
- j) a completed pre-registration form prepared by the Executive Secretariat;
- k) confirmation of the activities of the organization at the national, regional or international levels.

These may be submitted by mail or by fax to the Executive Secretariat (see coordinates below). The deadline for submitting accreditation applications is six weeks before the start of each Preparatory Committee meeting. The Executive Secretariat will review the relevance of the work of the applicants on the basis of their background and involvement in information society issues. It shall seek the assistance of the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service, in this context. In its evaluation, the Executive Secretariat will ensure that NGOs, civil society and business sector entities whose applications are rejected or whose accreditation has been cancelled do not apply under new names. If the evaluation shows, on the basis of the information provided, that the applicant is competent and its activities relevant to the work of the Summit, the Executive Secretariat will make recommendations to the Preparatory Committee for its decision on the accreditation of those NGOs, civil society and business sector entities. In cases where such recommendation is not made, the Executive Secretariat will make available to the Preparatory Committee meeting the reasons for not doing so. The Executive Secretariat will circulate its recommendations and the reasons for them to Member States two weeks before the start of each committee meeting. This document will be circulated in the languages of the PrepCom and would contain separate recommendations for all the different categories. Member States may be provided by the Executive Secretariat upon request additional information referred to in paragraphs a) to k). In case the above conditions are not met, in a way that impedes a sufficiently informed decision, the PrepCom may defer its decision regarding the applicant(s) concerned until its next meeting.

Accreditation is a continuous process. An organization that has been granted accreditation according to these rules to attend a session of the Preparatory Committee meeting may attend all subsequent preparatory sessions, as well as the Summit unless the PrepCom or the Summit decides otherwise.

CIVIL SOCIETY PERSPECTIVES ON GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND THEMES

In a concerted round of consultations during the daily NGO/civil society plenary meeting, the civil society Sub-Committee on Content and Themes produced the following statement, based on two unofficial documents ("non-papers") presented by the chair of the PrepCom's intergovernmental subcommittee on content and themes. The chair's non-papers aimed to capture some of the main proposals made during informal discussions but did not carry the weight of any intergovernmental consensus in themselves. The following civil society response was formally adopted by some 20 organizations.

"We note positively the substantial improvements made to the guiding principles and themes, in particular the stress placed on preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity and the assumption that ICT is a tool for achieving economic and social goals, and not an end in itself.

Nevertheless, we urge the governments to work towards consensus on the following issues:

A. Principles

- n The summit should be oriented to ensuring that ICTs contribute to the goals of peace, conflict resolution, equality, sustainable development, reduction of poverty and health issues;*
- n Previous work on relevant issues should serve as a basis for future work, carried on by the civil society, governments and private sector;*
- n An inherent element of universal and inclusive access to the information societies is the active participation of all citizens, whether as individuals or communities;*
- n The broad-based partnership among stakeholders should pay specific attention to community-based initiatives;*
- n The universal human right to communicate, [should] be considered as a guiding principle;*
- n An approach be adopted that addresses the diverse realities and specific needs of different social groups, in particular marginalised groups, women, youth, older persons, indigenous peoples, the disabled, and people suffering from discrimination;*
- n Gender equality goals and mainstream gender perspectives in all plans and preparations for WSIS and its follow up programmes;*
- n Contributions of youth in overall development of Information societies have to be recognized.*

B. Themes

- n Although the digital divide between North and South is at the heart of civil society concerns and should be dealt with throughout the Summit, it should not mask the fact that all countries including western are facing social inequities related to ICT; also all marginalised communities must be included in the digital society;*
- n Infrastructure financing and development should give priority to community based information infrastructure; particular attention should be paid to environmental impact. Issues of technology waste dumping should also be raised; infrastructure financing should be secured through creative and alternative mechanisms (e.g. solidarity fund, taxes...);*
- n Barriers to achieving equity in the various information societies include not only technical and financial obstacles but also political and social ones. Democratization of media ownership is also a core concern. Gender equity should be included across the board;*
- n Governance should include the contribution of ICTs to the consolidation and enhancement of democratic process at all levels from local to global and more democratic governance of ICTs themselves;*
- n Education and training should not be only technical but also should cover the skills necessary for critical appreciation of information and for content creation; education is part of a process to build responsible citizens. Capacity building and training to support wide participation by women and gender specialists in policy and decision making;*
- n Access should include the various new and traditional information and communication technologies;*
- n Information security must not be dissociated from fundamental civil liberties such as citizen privacy and freedom of expression and should not jeopardize the potential of ICTs as a tool for enabling democratic participation and for open information sharing;*
- n The policy and regulatory framework must reflect citizens' interests, not only industry concerns. It should also provide adequate protection and incentives for infrastructure, networks and media in the public and non-profit domain;*
- n In the digital era, wealth creation is based on cooperative processes and abundance of knowledge. Therefore a new economic model has to be built, questioning among other things the traditional approach to intellectual property, and inspired by free and open source software innovation;*
- n Particular attention should be paid to the problems of brain drain as well as to those of ICT sweatshops, especially in the South.*

accredited to the PrepCom may designate representatives to sit as observers at public meetings of the PrepCom and its subcommittees (Rule 55.1).

- n The meetings of the PrepCom and its subcommittees are public unless decided otherwise by the body concerned (Rule 50).
- n Upon invitation of the presiding officer of the body concerned and subject to approval of that body, such observers may make oral statements on questions in which they have special competence. If the number of requests to speak is too large, the NGOs, civil society and business sector entities shall be requested to form themselves into constituencies to speak through spokespersons (Rule 55.2).
- n Written statements submitted by the designated representatives shall be distributed by the secretariat to all delegations in the quantities and in the language in which the statements are made available, provided that statement submitted by a non-governmental organization or a business sector entity is related to the work of the PrepCom and is on a subject in which the non-governmental organization or business sector entity has a special competence (Rule 57).

It is important to note that the above rules apply for future PrepComs only, and not the Summit itself, for which modalities still need to be established.

At a press conference on the final day of PrepCom I, Bruce Girard, co-chair of the daily NGO/civil society plenary meetings, explained that in the months leading up to PrepCom I, civil society organizations were given the impression that they would be given a much greater voice in the shaping of the agenda and decision-making processes than in previous UN Summit preparatory meetings. "In their most optimistic interpretation," he said, "the agreements reached here represent a variation on established practices, but nothing in the way of positive innovation." He added that numerous concerns were expressed concerning what he described as the possible precedent of accrediting individual firms to UN summits. "The private sector has always been capably represented by its trade and industry associations, accredited by the UN as NGOs, but this Summit is also proposing the formal accreditation of individual firms, responsible primarily to their shareholders or individual owners."

FOLLOW-UP

The second WSIS PrepCom will be held during the first quarter of 2003, and PrepCom III is tentatively scheduled for the third quarter of 2003. The exact dates will be posted on the ITU website. In the run-up to PrepCom II, the following regional meetings will take place:

- n Europe: from 7-9 November 2002 in Bucharest (Romania). This will be organized under the auspices

of the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), so includes North America, Eastern and Central Europe, and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

- n Asia-Pacific: in 2003 (dates to be decided), in Tokyo (Japan)
- n Latin American and the Caribbean: in 2003 (dates and venue to be decided).

The regional meeting for Africa took place from 25-30 May 2002 in Bamako (Mali).

An informal intersessional consultation is planned in autumn 2002 in Geneva, to make further progress on determining guiding principles and themes for the Summit. At PrepCom I, an interim NGO steering group with representatives of the various NGO caucuses and working groups established during the week, will ensure continuity between PrepCom I and II, and identify opportunities to make civil society contributions during the inter-sessional period (see contacts below).

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Most documents mentioned in this Roundup as well as others concerning WSIS are posted on the above website.

Non-ECOSOC-status NGOs can apply through the above website or fax number.

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