

The World Summit on the Information Society and the Women's Agenda

by Libay Linsangan Cantor

Today's world is characterised as one of globalisation and technological revolution. In both of these areas, media, information and communication plays a central and defining role. Economic and cultural globalisation would be impossible without a commercial media information system to promote this arrangement and encourage consumer values.

The rapid development and use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly in the North and in the urban centres of the South, have changed the understanding of many regarding information gathering and dissemination, and knowledge generation. In addition, the globalisation of media enterprises has reinforced the one-way flow of a largely Northern, male-dominated worldview. Access and participation in various mediums of communication technologies do not change the reality of who actually controls these mediums. Indeed, the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are changing the face of the 21st century, altering the landscape of opportunity as well as challenges for women in ways never before imagined.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was conceived out of the need to understand and develop a common vision of this evolving order, and to create a strategic plan of action so that this vision is for the benefit of all. For women and other civil society

information and communication (info-com) organisations, the WSIS presents an opportunity to interrogate the potentials and implications of bringing about a different view of what is commonly referred to as the "Information Age."

The WSIS Rationale

The Summit is organised by the United Nations, under the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU) leadership and will be held in two phases—the first to take place in Geneva, Switzerland in December 2003, and the second in Tunis, Tunisia in 2005.

The aims of the Summit are to: (i) develop a common vision and understanding of information society; (ii) promote a better appreciation of its scope and dimensions, and (iii) formulate a strategic plan of action for adapting to a "new" knowledge society. (The 2003 Geneva leg of the Summit is expected to adopt a Declaration of Principles and Action Plan.)

The Summit was conceived as a high-level forum for governments,

inter-government agencies, civil society and non-government organisations, private sector, and funding organisations. WSIS is envisaged as a forum for the issues and concerns relating to a rapidly evolving Information Age and to gain a better grasp of its meaning and implications on the global community. It was initiated in recognition of the widening gap between information "haves" and "have-nots," as well as the increasingly important role of telecommunications in the political, economic, social and cultural sphere. Also, the United Nations (UN) saw the need for cooperation among the various national and international initiatives fostering ICTs for development.

For further information about the Summit, the ITU has set up a Website at: <http://www.geneva2003.org/home/index01.htm>.

Pre-Summit Activities

Global Level

Three preparatory committee (PrepCom) meetings will be held prior to the 2003 Geneva Summit. The first, which took place in Geneva on 01-05 July 2002, drew 969 participants from numerous groups and organisations from 142 countries. The meeting discussed the possible agenda, themes and outcomes of the

Summit. This task, which continues into the preparatory processes, will be focused on the expected outcomes of a vision for the "Information Society," and access to ICTs and ICT applications for all.

The High-Level Summit Organizing Committee (HLSOC) has defined the following as possible topics for the Summit:

- ◆ **Building the infrastructure** – This includes the role of telecommunications, investment and technology in creating the Information Society infrastructure and bridging the Digital Divide; Internet connectivity; wireless technologies; rural communications; and bridges between digital media: radio, television, press and Internet.
- ◆ **Opening the gates** – This includes sub-topics such as understanding the information society; achieving universal and equitable access to the Information Society; meeting the needs of the developing world; information as a common public good, with due consideration to intellectual property rights; access to information/knowledge; freedom of expression and of the media; cultural and linguistic diversity; and specific needs of the least developed countries.
- ◆ **Services and applications** – This includes the implications of the Information Society for economic, social and cultural development; the implications of the Information

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Society for science and medicine; traditional knowledge; ICT for government, decentralisation, empowerment and democracy; Cross-border E-commerce; E-government; and E-health.

- ◆ **The needs of users** – This includes the sub-topics consumer protection and privacy; standardisation on network security; critical infrastructure protection; affordability; human resources development; user training; worker protection and workplace privacy; gender perspective; and needs of young people.

- ◆ **Developing a framework** – The sub-topics under this are: the roles of government, the private sector and civil society in shaping the Information Society; Intellectual property rights; facilitating trade in ICT goods and services; establishing appropriate policy, regulatory and market structures; data protection, privacy, and network security; and confidence-building measures for online transactions.

- ◆ **ICTs and Education** – The sub-topics under this are: ICTs as a lever for educational change; creating a learning environment: ICTs, teachers, learners and content; and the needs of currently employed workers.

The role of ICTs in good governance was also proposed as one of the main topics in the Summit.

For more details on the themes and possible outcomes of the Summit, please visit the WSIS website at: <<http://www.itu.int/wsisis/>>.

During this meeting, the matter of the accreditation of non-government organisations (NGOs), civil society, and business entities (representing the private sector) was discussed, and a consensus reached was the need for a collaborative and comprehensive effort to close the digital chasm between industrialised and non-industrialised countries. The participants also expressed commitment to the use of ICTs as a tool for bridging the digital divide and converting this into digital

opportunity. The meeting stressed that a sustainable global information society depends on the international community's ability to broker lasting and mutually beneficial partnerships among national governments, NGOs, civil society, and the private sector.

The second PrepCom meeting will be on 17-28 February 2003, also in Geneva. The main objective of the second Preparatory Committee meeting will be to begin consideration of a draft Declaration of Principles and Action Plan, to be submitted for the approval of Heads of State attending the Summit in December 2003.

NGOs and other civil society organisations are invited to submit specific proposals and actions they may want to put forward and have reflected in the first draft of the Declaration or of the Action Plan. These proposals should be sent to the WSIS Executive Secretariat, at <wsis.ap@itu.int> no later than 07 December 2002.

No venue has been identified yet for the third meeting. This meeting is likely to be held within the third quarter of 2003.

Regional Level

The four regional preparatory meetings leading to the Summit seek to evaluate crucial regional and global challenges, opportunities and constraints relating to the Information Society; to develop a common vision and understanding

for the region; and to prepare a plan to address ICT-related issues and concerns. These include the establishment of a platform for dialogue, the identification of existing initiatives and networks, and an assessment of the best practices in the region.

The first regional preparatory meeting, the African Regional Conference (ARC), was held in Bamako, Mali on 28-30 May 2002. Conference delegates tackled issues pertinent to the overall goal of defining Africa's needs and priorities while stressing the importance of helping the continent find its voice in the global arena. Focusing on cultural diversity, institution building, gender and localised content, the ARC laid out a comprehensive framework for facilitating a participatory process to bridge the digital chasm between Africa and the developed world.

The Pan-European Regional Conference was held on 07-09 November 2002 in Bucharest, Romania. Participants to this meeting came up with The Bucharest Declaration that spells out the principles, strategy, and priorities for action in the European region. The principles that will guide the vision of an Information Society beneficial to all (E-inclusion) includes securing access to information and knowledge; promoting universal access at affordable cost; promoting linguistic diversity and cultural identity; developing human capacity

through education and training; setting up an enabling environment, including legal, regulatory and policy frameworks; building confidence and security in the use of ICTs; and addressing global issues.

The meeting participants also stressed the need to adapt national e-strategies to the specific requirements of varied communities that will reflect the stage of development and the structural characteristics of the national economy.

The following priority themes for e-strategies were likewise identified in the European meeting: E-Government: More Efficient and Accountable; E-Business: More Competitiveness and Better Jobs; E-Society: Broader Local Content and Applications; and E-learning and E-Education: Empowering People.

These principles and priorities will be submitted as a regional contribution to the WSIS process and its follow-up, and are aimed at assisting governments to shape policies and to take necessary action, with a view to developing the Information Society.

For further discussion of the principles and priorities that came out of the Bucharest meeting, visit <http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/bucharest/final_declaration.doc>.

The Asia-Pacific Regional Conference will be on 13-15 January 2003 in Tokyo, while the Latin

America and Caribbean Regional Conference will take place in Santo Domingo, Chile on 27-30 January 2003. Japan's recently released programme for the Asian regional meeting, however, plays havoc on the efforts of civil society groups to have their inputs included in the official process. Two days of the meeting will be devoted to the statements from each of the 52 UN member countries and nine associate countries in the region. While NGOs will also be allowed to make their statements, they are last in the list.

The world's major regions will also hold international, regional, and national thematic meetings to tackle such issues as info-ethics, information literacy, information culture and freedom of expression.

A host of conferences on the significance and implications of information technology, the knowledge society, and related themes has been held since January in such places as United Arab Emirates, Brazil, Australia, Malaysia, Spain, Ethiopia, and Canada. National governments, UN agencies, the private sector and civil society have been eager participants in these activities, which are scheduled up to mid-2003 in the run-up to the Geneva Summit.

What NGOs Are Doing

NGOs have sent experts to the WSIS Executive Secretariat to help in the preparations for the Summit. Together with the rest of civil society, they are engaged in determining the

social and cultural consequences of current developments, and in drawing attention to the importance of accountability for measures taken toward the forging of an information-based international community.

The Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) campaign, launched in November 2001 by the Platform for Communication Rights, is an umbrella group of international NGOs active in media and communication. Generally representative of the developed world, the CRIS campaign is working for an information society centred on human rights. However, it is but one of the projects of the NGO community. In the developing countries, NGO networks are holding their own discussions and workshops on ICT issues in preparation for the Summit. For further details, please visit the CRIS Website: <<http://www.comunica.org/cris/>>.

Pitfalls and Concerns

The WSIS and the preparatory conferences will tackle the various issues relating to the increasing disparities in knowledge and information technology between the "haves" and the "have-nots":

- ◆ cultural diversity
- ◆ the right to communicate

- ◆ ICT infrastructure and cost
- ◆ access in a digital global economy
- ◆ services and applications, and their implications on economic and socio-cultural development
- ◆ knowledge transfer
- ◆ consumer protection
- ◆ privacy, security and ethics

Many NGOs are deeply concerned about the focus of the Summit. Michael Gurstein of the Global Community Networking Partnership articulates such apprehension by stressing the need to include "human development" and "human well-being" in the WSIS's core of concerns, instead of human rights in general. The implications of the term "stakeholder," according to him, are dangerous as this refers primarily to one's status as a "possessor" of a "stake" in society, instead of one being a person with rights. (Source: wsis-prep1@lists.cpsr.org, 11 September 2002)

A number of NGOs are likewise convinced the WSIS should be oriented toward development that is aimed at: (i) satisfying basic human and societal needs; (ii) ensuring that ICTs contribute to peace, conflict resolution, equality, sustainable development, reduction of poverty, and health concerns; (iii) recognising the universal right to communicate. They believe that communication and information-sharing should be a central theme of the Summit, with technology placed at the service of both; that people should be recognised as citizens, not just "consumers" or "users" of technology or services; that emphasis should be on universal and inclusive access to the tools and benefits of the information society; that gender equality should be guaranteed in the

WSIS Point Persons

ITU secretary-general and HLSOC chairman Yoshio Utsumi oversees the preparations for the Summit. He is assisted by Special Ambassador G.O. Segond and an ITU team composed of Executive Director Pierre Gagne, Deputy Executive Director Art Levin, M. Hedblom and J.Y. Besnier

Useful Contacts for WSIS

Intergovernmental contacts:

General Information: info@geneva2003.org
 Registration and partnerships: net@geneva2003.org
 Documents (sharing and receiving):
doc@geneva2003.org
 Media Relations: media@geneva2003.org

WSIS Executive Secretariat

World Summit on the Information Society
 International Telecommunication Union
 Place des Nations
 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland

Executive Secretariat

Civil Society Division
 Tel: (41-22) 730-6304
 Fax: (41-22) 730-6393

Contact for Governments

E-mail: wsis.gov@ties.itu.int
 Tel: (41-22) 730-6375
 Fax: (41-22) 730-6393

Contact for International Organizations

E-mail: wsis.unag@ties.itu.int
 Tel: (41-22) 730-6353
 Fax: (41-22) 730-6393

Contact for Business Sector

E-mail: wsis.priv@ties.itu.int
 Tel: (41-22) 730-6362
 Fax: (41-22) 730-6393

Contact for Media and the Press

E-mail: pressinfo@itu.int
 Tel: (41-22) 730-6039
 Fax: (41-22) 730-5939

For General Inquiries

E-mail: wsis@itu.int
 Tel: (41-22) 730-6111
 Fax: (41-22) 730-6393

Civil Society contacts

For the CRIS CAMPAIGN:

Bruce Girard
 Comunica
 E-mail: bgirard@comunica.org

or

Sean O'Siochru
 NEXUS
 14 Eaton Brae, Shankill, Co. Dublin, Ireland
 E-mail: sean@nexus.ie
 Tel: (35-31) 473-0599
 Fax: (35-31) 473-0597

Civil Society Gender Working Group

Susanna George
 Isis International-Manila
 3 Marunong Street, Barangay Central,
 Quezon City 1100, Philippines
 Tels: (63-2) 435-3405, 435-3408, 436-0312,
 436-7863
 Fax: (63-2) 924-1065
 E-mail: susanna@isiswomen.org

WSIS Gender Caucus

Gillian Marcelle
 E-mail: secretariat-wsisgendercaucus@wougnet.org

More information about other NGOs participating in the Summit is available at <http://www.wsis.info/>.

Information Society, including the promotion of women's rights and their access to ICTs; and that the State should promote an Information Society that puts people first.

The NGO community is also calling attention to the importance of opportunities and enabling processes resulting from effective ICT use, and not just to the expansion of markets for infrastructure and ICT-related products. Moreover, the WSIS agenda of a "global commons" is cause for deep concern, especially among NGOs in the South. Global commons is defined as "resource domains to which all States have legal access" be it the high seas, atmosphere and space. These resources are available for anyone to use. In WSIS, the CRIS campaign is advocating for the securing and the extension of the global commons to include both broadcast and telecommunication and to ensure that this public resource is not privatised. As Mumbai-based activist Radha D'Souza puts it, the idea of a global commons appeals to Northern NGOs because the politics of commons denies the self-determination of oppressed peoples as it assumes that the oppressors and the oppressed form a "community" that can live together without dealing with their histories or geographies. To NGOs in the developing world, the idea of a commons conveniently sweeps aside the need for critical understanding of communities, including their problems and needs, and therefore rules out the possibility

of the oppressed charting their own destiny. (Source: Global Commons: But Where is the Community? Radha D'Souza, <http://www.tao.ca/~colours/d'souza.html>)

Gender on the WSIS Agenda

Women's groups are pushing for a common acknowledgement that gender concerns are a cross-cutting principle at the WSIS. Critical to feminist and women's info-com groups such as Isis International-Manila is to bring into the discussion the different impacts of media and new ICTs on women and men, how it affects women's empowerment, and its contribution to facilitating and/or impeding social change.

Without being caught up in the rich/white and poor/black dichotomy of North and South, the women's info-com advocacy organisations demand that the Summit process and outcome address the following:

- ◆ How is this Information Society being constructed?
- ◆ Under what conditions is this Society being constructed?
- ◆ For which aims is this Information Society being constructed?
- ◆ For whom is this Information Society being created?
- ◆ Who has access to and controls the benefits of this Society?
- ◆ Is another world possible through an Information Society for all?

The women's organisations are also concerned about the need for

training and capacity building at all levels to heighten gender awareness and increase ICT skills among girls and women—especially in science and technology; the ratification and implementation of conventions on women's human rights; the inclusion of women in all policymaking processes and at all levels of policy formulation; the use of ICTs as a tool to empower women, especially in the areas of health, education, trade and employment; and the setting up of appropriate gender-specific data and reporting mechanisms to monitor the impact of policy and actions adopted.

The women's info-com groups are also focused on the need for designing ICT projects that take into account women's needs and specific circumstances; for democratising the ICT sector to allow for fair participation by women—especially in ownership and control structures of the firms within the ICT sector; and for increasing women's reach of ICTs, across sectors through the use of local languages and various media. ↷

Libay Linsangan Cantor is a freelance writer based in Quezon City, Philippines. She is also a documentary filmmaker.

Footnote:

* The WSIS was first put forward in 1998 through Resolution 73 of the ITU, the UN agency responsible for regulating, standardising, and developing telecommunications worldwide, including international management of the radio frequency spectrum and satellite orbits.