

Unfulfilled Expectations At The “Summit of Solutions”

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- *When it comes to assessing the World Summit on the Information Society, the most remarkable point may lie in the field of procedures rather than results. In other words, in the incorporation of multisectoral debate and monitoring mechanisms – with the presence of civil society representatives as well as governmental and corporate interlocutors – when it comes to thinking about future developments of the information society. In fact, multisectorality will be one of the characteristics of the Internet Governance Forum, a new international instrument to discuss Internet governance as promoted at the Summit.*

Key words

Information society, information and communication technologies, Internet governance, development.

For UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society¹ was to be the ‘Summit of Solutions’. However, the balance of the meeting in Tunis² from 16 to 18 November 2005 failed to ensure it. The Summit’s contribution - despite modest media coverage – cannot be denied with regards the public’s awareness about certain key questions on the incorporation of information and communication technologies (ICTs). However, few concrete solutions can be taken from the two official documents adopted at the Summit, i.e., the so-called Tunis Commitment and the Action Plan for the Information Society. At least agreements were reached that signify novelties on Internet governance, one of the issues that raised the most interest in the run-up to the Summit, and on the issue of financial mechanisms to bridge the digital divide.

The Tunis Commitment is basically a declaration of intent and as such does not specify agreements or mechanisms. The document links the information society to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN’s Millennium Development Goals. It also expresses a generic commitment to reduce the digital divide, facilitate equal access for all countries to new technologies and to pay special attention to the particular needs of marginalised and vulnerable groups in society.

In terms of the Action Plan, the most significant aspect was the agreement to create the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), an international and multilateral instrument linked to the UN structure for debating issues relating to Internet governance, bearing technical, political, social and economic dimensions in mind.

An Internet Debate Forum

The IGF will be an authority with no decision-making ability

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where governments from the different regions of the world, intergovernmental organisations, civil society and private enterprises will participate. Its mission will be to facilitate dialogue between the relevant authorities in different aspects of Internet governance and to identify emerging issues that do not fall within the powers of these authorities.

The IGF will initiate its work in autumn 2006 with a meeting in Athens. Among the questions to determine will be who can participate in the organisation and how, the agenda and the relationship with other pre-existing organisations such as the ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) and the ITU (International Telecommunications Union)³.

Beforehand, however, it will be necessary to do previous contact work among the different actors involved in the IGF to establish the basic criteria that should govern its structure, operation and objectives. The first of these meetings took place in Geneva on 16 and 17 February 2006 and brought together around 300 representatives from different sectors to discuss the nature of the IGF and the agenda of priority discussion issues. In terms of this latter question, various topics were raised, such as cyber crime, spam and the Internet's role in promoting development – an issue which, in turn, opens up questions about issues such as connection costs, Internet access and conditions for acquiring software on the part of users from developing countries⁴.

The creation of the IGF does not involve the disappearance of the ICANN, the enterprise responsible for managing IP names and numbers of Internet domains, a task it carries out under the supervision of the US government's Department of Commerce. Despite uncertainty about the IGF's real ability to influence Internet governance, the general opinion is that it is an agreement that can satisfactorily promote a process of more openness and participation in the processes of drawing up policies about information and communication technologies.

Development Funding

With regards the second of the main issues at the Summit, i.e., funding to reduce the so-called 'digital divide', palpable results have been thin on the ground. A series of agreements were reached at the Summit on the principles to guide this funding (it should not be exclusively private,

should not be aimed only at infrastructures but also at areas like training and the creation of local content, etc.). However, no type of mechanism to nourish the Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF)⁵ was included besides the voluntary contributions of possible donors. Along with countries that have already announced their contributions to the fund, some of the most dynamic economies on the planet have been conspicuous by their absence.

The DSF is an initiative that arose from the first phase of the Summit at the proposal of the president of Senegal. The committee that organised the creation was made up of local authorities (the mayors of Geneva and Lyon) and regional authorities (the president of Turin Province). To this initial group were added representatives from states and international organisations, bringing the number up to twenty founding members. The DSF, created in March 2005, is part of the Digital Solidarity Fund Foundation headquartered in Geneva. Foundation board members are elected for a three-year period and come equally from three source groups: state governments, the private sector and civil society (including local government representatives).

Funding can come from the voluntary contributions of citizens, public institutions, the private sector or civil society. Forms of collecting contributions and funding criteria for DSF activities are set out in the Digital Solidarity Charter. Through the Fund, a new development funding mechanism has been proposed, called the Geneva Principle, which suggests that 1% of each ICT contract between a private company and a public administration should go to the Fund⁶.

Generally speaking, funds are not aimed at financing major infrastructure, but rather community projects.

On other matters, such as free software, the position agreed upon at the Summit was, rather than neutral, undetermined. Point 29 of the Tunis Commitment says the idea is to "encourage and foster collaborative development, interoperative platforms and free and open-source software" while recognising "the importance of proprietary software in the markets of the countries".

The organisation responsible for monitoring the implementation and monitoring mechanisms of agreements made at the second phase of the WSIS will not be the International Telecommunications Union, which organised the WSIS, but rather ECOSOC (the UN's Economic and Social Council), in

particular the Commission on Science and Technology for Development.

Multisectoral Participation

One significant aspect is that participation in these monitoring processes will have a multisectoral nature, i.e., governments and the private sector and civil society will take part. These three sectors were represented at the second phase of the Summit by 174 countries, 200 commercial firms and over 600 NGOs and civil society organisations, as well as 92 international organisations and more than 600 media outlets. In total, the Summit brought together over 19,000 participants.

In an assessment of the first phase of the WSIS, Martín Becerra (2005:129-133) considered that the role of the world's civil society was not very influential, and said that the decision-making process was basically intergovernmental (only state delegations had the right to vote)⁷. Following the celebration of the second phase of the Summit, the civil society representatives drew up a declaration that evaluated the process and results and expressed its belief that much more could have been achieved. In this document, civil society said people-focused issues (human rights, freedom of expression, etc.) did not receive enough attention. However, the representatives were positive about other matters, such as the Tunis Commitment and the Action Plan reflecting the importance of public policies in funding ICTs for development instead of trusting solely in market mechanisms.

Therefore, now the Tunis phase has ended and when it comes to assessing the overall work of the WSIS, the most significant contribution may not lie in the field of results but in procedures, i.e., in the incorporation of multisectoral debate and monitoring mechanisms – with the presence of civil society representatives as well as governmental and corporate interlocutors – when it comes to thinking about future developments of the information society.

Notes

- 1 See the official Summit website: <http://www.itu.int/wsis/>.
- 2 At the closing session, the host country received numerous displays of recognition for the organisational effort made. However, the second phase of the WSIS was marked by criticism about the lack of freedom of expression of the country appointed host. The ostentatious presence of police forces and the omnipresence of the image of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali unfailingly accompanied the retinues of international delegates wherever they went. For its part, the Tunisian press compared the profusion of headlines and photos that highlighted the multiple activities of the President, alone or with the First Lady, with the complete lack of references to the strike being held in Geneva by various members of the Tunisian opposition to call international attention to the situation in the country.
- 3 For further information on the IGF establishment process see: <http://www.intgovforum.org>.
- 4 «Le Forum sur la gouvernance d'Internet abordera un large éventail de sujets, déclare un représentant des Nations Unies», 21-02-2006, at: http://portal.unesco.org/ci/fr/ev.php-URL_ID=21382&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
- 5 For further information on the DSF see: <http://www.dsffsn.org/>
- 6 The World Summit on the Information Society and the Role of Local Authorities, which took place in Bilbao in November 2005, shortly before the WSIS, prepared a declaration which set out its support for the DSF and the Geneva Principle.
- 7 It is important to recall that the first phase of the WSIS ended with two declarations of principles: the official one and an alternative one drawn up by the representatives of civil society.

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