UN World Summit on the Information Society

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INTRODUCTION

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is a United Nations (UN) conference led by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). It has unique structural features. First, WSIS is comprised of two summit events: one in Geneva, Switzerland, December 10 to 12, 2003, and the other in Tunis, Tunisia, November 16 to 18, 2005. Second, WSIS is characterized by the so-called multistakeholder approach (Association for Progressive Communications [APC] & Campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society [CRIS], 2003; Hemmati, 2002; Raboy, 2004). In this approach, civil society and the private sector have an institutionalized basis in the summit process from which to engage with governments and inform the political deliberations. The goal set for WSIS is to develop a global consensus on the features that are to characterize the information society and on ways to bring this society about.

BACKGROUND

Historically, WSIS is part of the unprecedented series of UN conferences and summits that have in particular marked the 1990s and early 2000s. These conferences have taken up pressing issues such as sustainable development and the environment, human rights, women's rights, the abolition of racism, and poverty eradication, and have discussed them within a global framework. The impetus to hold a World Summit on the Information Society came from ITU, which adopted a resolution to this effect at its Plenipotentiary Conference in 1998 (Resolution 73; Minneapolis). When the UN General Assembly finally took up this issue and adopted it in 2001 (A/RES/56/183), much of the attention within the UN had already shifted to the Millennium Summit and its follow-up process, particularly the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The ongoing WSIS political process, which culminates in 2005 with the Tunis summit, has been eclipsed by this focus to the effect that the UN Millennium Summit +5 (September 14 to 16, 2005) is now termed the 2005 World Summit.

THEMATIC SCOPE OF WSIS

Thematically, WSIS has focused almost exclusively on the new digital and networked information and communication technologies (ICTs) so that the prime developmental question has been how to bridge the digital divide. Given the importance attached to the Millennium Summit follow-up, this question has in the WSIS process been tied to the assertion that ICTs can and should be employed for reaching the goals laid down in the Millennium Declaration. A major point of political contestation has been which financial mechanisms could be utilized in this respect, from the exploitation of existing development cooperation favored by the North to the establishment of a new digital solidarity fund called for by the South. Further main issues of the political debate, whose discussion has not necessarily stood in relation to the question of how to enable development and a sustainable closing of the digital divide, have been the scope and organization of Internet governance; human rights including freedom of expression and communication rights, as well as the right to privacy vs. national security issues; intellectual property rights (IPRs) vs. knowledge commons and public resources; proprietary vs. free- and open-source software models; and media diversity vs. media monopolies.

GENDER DIMENSIONS IN TERMS OF THE WSIS POLITICAL OUTCOME

The principle of gender mainstreaming has not been applied to WSIS, and the political deliberations have

hence been characterized by a gender-blind and male-centered discussion process. A broad reaffirmation of women's human rights and of the commitment to women's empowerment and gender equality has been hard to achieve and has not automatically extended from the first to the subsequent political statements that have been discussed: the Declaration of Principles (WSIS-03/GENEVA/DOC/4-E) and the Plan of Action (WSIS-03/GENEVA/DOC/5-E) that were agreed upon at the Geneva Summit, and the Political Chapeau and Operational Part that are currently negotiated for the Tunis Summit. The one strong commitment to women codified so far is Paragraph 12 of the Declaration of Principles. It states,

We affirm that development of ICTs provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of, and key actors, in the Information Society. We are committed to ensuring that the Information Society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis on [sic] equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes. To this end, we should mainstream a gender equality perspective and use ICTs as a tool to that end. (United Nations, 2003a)

In addition to this paragraph, two more paragraphs of the Declaration of Principles contain expressly gendered content: Paragraph 2 reiterates the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women as well as the improvement of maternal health as goals of the *Millennium Declaration*, toward which ICTs should be employed. Paragraph 29 refers to the special needs of girls and women regarding literacy and universal primary education.

In the Geneva Plan of Action (PoA, United Nations, 2003b), several paragraphs take up specific concerns of girls and women, while it is indirectly claimed that "special attention will be paid" to girls and women with respect to all objectives, goals, and targets of the PoA (para. B.7). Explicitly, the PoA addresses girls' and women's promotion with respect to ICT education, training, and careers (paras. C4.11.g, C7.19.a, C7.19.c, C7.19.d, C8.23.h, C6.13.l); the integration of a gender perspective in ICT education (para. C4.11.g); a focus on "gender-

sensitive curricula in formal and non-formal education"; and the attainment of "communication and media literacy for women" (para. C8.23.h) as well as the promotion of balanced and diverse media portrayals of men and women (para. C9.24.e). Also, the need to acknowledge "women's role as health providers in their families and communities" is referenced in the context of e-health (para. C7.18.e). Importantly, the PoA acknowledges the requirements to monitor the developments and to devise "gender-sensitive indicators on ICT use and needs" (para. E.28.d).

GENDER DIMENSIONS IN TERMS OF THE WSIS PROCESS AND ENTITIES

The larger WSIS process has constituted a unique focal point and has even been a catalyst both for research on women, media, and ICTs, and for feminist advocacy regarding media and ICT that is based on this research. Various stakeholder entities from inside and outside the UN system have been involved in these endeavors and have promoted them in the WSIS process. Important examples from within the UN system during the Geneva phase are the following. The UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) held a virtual seminar series on gender and ICTs in the summer of 2002 (Huyer & Sikoska, 2002). The same year, the UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), together with other agencies, held two expert group meetings and two online discussions in preparation for them. One meeting was titled Information and Communication Technologies and their Impact on and Use as an Instrument for the Advancement and Empowerment of Women and was held in Seoul, Republic of Korea, November 11 to 14, 2002 (DAW, 2002a). The other was entitled Participation and Access of Women to the Media, and the Impact of Media on and its Use as an Instrument for the Advancement and Empowerment of Women and took place in Beirut, Lebanon, November 12 to 15, 2002 (DAW, 2002b).

The 47th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2003 brought many of the previous findings together under the agenda item Participation and Access of Women to the Media,

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