

Global Information Society Watch 2007

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2007



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Preface

The “desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society” was expressed by heads of state, ministers and other high-level representatives of the governments of the world during the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), convened by the United Nations in November 2005 in Tunis.¹ The Tunis Summit elaborated on the principles agreed upon two years before in Geneva, where the enormous potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to benefit “millions of people in all corners of the world” was recognised.² But as we all know, the reality, also recognised during the Summit, is that the benefits of the information technology revolution are unevenly distributed between countries and within societies.

The ambitious agreed goal of bridging the “digital divide” while also respecting human rights, promoting education, public access to information, women’s empowerment and economic prosperity, can only be accomplished, according to the Tunis Commitment, through the involvement, cooperation and partnership of governments, the private sector, civil society and international organisations.

As civil society organisations identified with those principles, and with long experience in using the tools provided by technology to empower communities, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Third World Institute (ITeM) have always been aware of the “digital divide”. While we welcome the global commitment to bridge the gap and accept the challenge to contribute to these goals, we have also identified another gap: the gap that still exists between good intentions and actual achievements, between promises and realities, between high sounding principles and concrete actions.

The experience of citizen involvement in public policy advocacy around the world has shown that the status quo tends to prevail unless political will to implement change is strengthened by active citizen participation. A “Global Information Society Watch” is needed to make governments and international organisations accountable.

We reaffirm our desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, international law and multilateralism, and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, so that people everywhere can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, to achieve their full potential and to attain the internationally agreed development goals and objectives, including the Millennium Development Goals.

**Paragraph 2, Tunis Commitment
World Summit on the Information Society, 2005**

We reaffirm our resolution in the quest to ensure that everyone can benefit from the opportunities that ICTs can offer, by recalling that governments, as well as private sector, civil society and the United Nations and other international organizations, should work together to: improve access to information and communication infrastructure and technologies as well as to information and knowledge; build capacity; increase confidence and security in the use of ICTs; create an enabling environment at all levels; develop and widen ICT applications; foster and respect cultural diversity; recognize the role of the media; address the ethical dimensions of the Information Society; and encourage international and regional cooperation. We confirm that these are the key principles for building an inclusive Information Society, the elaboration of which is found in the Geneva Declaration of Principles.

**Paragraph 9, Tunis Commitment
World Summit on the Information Society 2005**

This publication, the first in a series of reports covering the state of the information society on an annual basis, focuses on the theme of participation. The report has three interrelated goals: surveying the state of the field of ICT policy at the local and global levels; encouraging critical debate; and strengthening networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society. It discusses the WSIS process and a range of international institutions, regulatory agencies and monitoring instruments from the perspective of civil society and stakeholders in the global South. Alongside this discussion, we present a series of country reports which examine issues of access and participation within a variety of national contexts.

In compiling this publication, the APC and ITeM are following up on their long-term interest in the impact of civil society on governance processes and their efforts to

1 Tunis Commitment. World Summit on the Information Society 2005. Available from: <www.itu.int/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/7.html>.

2 Geneva Declaration of Principles. World Summit on the Information Society 2003. Available from: <www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>.

enhance public participation in national and international forums. The APC network has been involved in global, regional and national ICT policy processes since 2000, with a focus on human rights and social inclusion in the information society and on addressing the “digital divide”. ITeM has been active in researching and promoting the use of ICTs to strengthen citizen involvement in decision-making processes. It hosts international civil society advocacy initiatives such as “Social Watch”, which monitors social development and gender policies, and “IFlwatchnet”, which monitors the activities of the international financial institutions.

Both our organisations are independent from any government, political party or corporate interest. While we acknowledge the enormous importance and legitimacy of multilateral governmental commitments, particularly those negotiated under the umbrella of the United Nations, we do not necessarily agree to all of their terms and formulations. Thus, for example, the very concept of the “information society”, which is so widely used and features in the title of this publication, is not without controversy, and we approach it with caution. It is a term that tends to de-emphasise social inequality, power and

access to resources. Similarly, we find that the concept of the “digital divide” reduces structural differences in access to power and decision-making to the level of “technology haves and have-nots”.

Different degrees of access to technology and connectivity mirror the social and economic divides within countries and between countries. Increase in access to ICTs will not, by itself, reduce poverty or secure freedoms on a sustainable basis. But there is a real danger that lack of access to ICTs, and to the spaces where decisions are made about information and communications infrastructure, content and services, can deepen existing social exclusion and create new forms of exclusion.

It is in this context that we believe it is essential for civil society networks to participate in and watch over ICT policy processes at the global, regional and national levels.

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