

THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

BACKGROUND, ORGANIZATION AND GOALS

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WHAT IS THE INFORMATION SOCIETY ?

The Information Society is a Global Society in which everyone – at least in theory – can produce, record, process and disseminate information in oral, written or visual form without limitations as to time, distance or volume.

The Information Society therefore adds a new dimension to human intelligence. And it fundamentally changes our way of living, learning and working, overturning not only traditional power structures in politics, economics and social affairs but also education, the media and cultural life.

At first, the Information Society and economic globalization were expected to lead to a new distribution of work, jobs and wealth between North and South, which would bring economic progress, assure the further spread of democracy and promote social development.

The Information Society then represented a promise, the promise of advancement for the whole of mankind.

This promise of a better future for everyone has not been fulfilled.

Today, the Information Society does not exist for the vast majority of mankind. Most countries of the South face great problems in connecting to the Internet and "surfing the Web" which remains the province of the North : 91% of the Internet users are living in the part of t

world where are 19% of the population.

How can a common vision of the Information Society be developed ? How can basic rules be laid down for the Information Society ? How can the Information Society be shared with the whole of mankind ? What can be done to narrow the digital divide ? How can the necessary infrastructure be made available ? And last but not least, what financial resources will be available for this work ?

It is to find answers to all these questions that the WSIS has been decided by the UN General Assembly.

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WHAT IS THE WSIS ?

The WSIS is convened under the patronage of UN Secretary General, HE Kofi Annan. It is organized under the direction of HE Yoshio Utsumi, ITU Secretary General. And it will be held in two phases, in Geneva in December 2003 and in Tunis in November 2005.

The WSIS will look at the profound changes being wrought by the Information Society in all aspects of human life. It will examine ways to put this revolution at the service of human development. And it will study the ways and means to narrow the Digital Divide and the Content Gap.

In December 2003, in Geneva, the core intergovernmental Summit – the World Assembly of Heads of States and Heads of Governments – will include a series of high-level roundtables and will be complemented by 150 Summit events on subjects ranging from the World Electronic Media Forum to Information and Communication technologies for Development. These events will serve as a platform for dialogue between Heads of States and Government and leaders from the private sector, civil society and international organizations.

One of the main outcomes of the Summit will be the adoption of a visionary political Declaration of Principles and a comprehensive Action Plan.

The WSIS will provide a unique opportunity to meet at the highest political level to forge global consensus and a strong commitment to the policies and actions required to promote the access of all peoples and all countries to information, knowledge and communication technologies. It will help to advance the goals of the UN Millennium Declaration and to build a truly inclusive global and fair Information Society.

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WHERE ARE WE WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE SUMMIT ?

The Summit is prepared by an intergovernmental process, under the direction of the Preparatory Committee (PREP-COM), which consists of 191 national delegations representing the 191 member States of the UN.

From the beginning, this intergovernmental process is open to the participation of international organizations, private sector and civil society. It is following a “bottom-up” process starting at the national level, following at the regional level and ending at the global level.

At the regional level, all the regions of the world have had their regional conference :

- in Bamako (Mali), in May 2002, for Africa ;
- in Bucharest (Romania), in November 2002, for Europe and North America ;
- in Tokyo (Japan), in January 2003, for Asia and Pacific ;
- in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic), in January 2003, for Latin America and Caribbean ;
- in Cairo (Egypt), in June 2003, for the Arab League States.

At the global level, we have had in Geneva :

- in July 2002, PrepCom I – mostly on procedure ;
- in February 2003, PrepCom II – mostly on convergences on substance ;
- in September 2003, PrepCom III – mostly on divergences on substance ;

Prior to the Summit, there will be two last meetings, in November and in December, that will produce a Draft Declaration of Principles and a Draft Action Plan.

The first phase of the Summit will then open in Geneva, on the 10th of December 2003.

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WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF THE SUMMIT ?

The WSIS has three main goals :

1. To use ICT to achieve the Millenium Development Goals – adopted in September 2000 by the largest ever gathering of Heads of State and Government – and to reverse the Digital Divide and the Contents Gap ;
2. To address, at the national and international levels, policy issues relating to
 - broad participation of all stakeholders in ICT – related decision-making ;
 - ensuring privacy and security of ICT networks while protecting the free flow information and communication ;
 - protecting intellectual property and copyright while making ICT widespread a affordable for achieving the Millenium Development Goals.
3. To promote projects on e-governance, e-health, e-education, e-economy and einclusion in order to strengthen local authorities' capacities, for implementing and promoting the effective use of ICT throughout urban and rural communities

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WHAT ARE THE MAIN THEMES OF THE SUMMIT ?

The WSIS will discuss 4 main themes :

1. The technology dimension of the Information Society : infrastructures, investment, open source software, universal access, security, etc.
2. The social dimension of the Information Society : human development, cultural and linguistic diversity, role of the medias, employment, environment, applications, e-education, e-health, e-commerce, etc.
3. The policy and legal environment of the Information Society : freedom of expression, intellectual property rights, e-signature, cybercrime, privacy, ethics and values, etc.
4. The Millenium Development Goals : policies and strategies, financing the digital solidarity, international cooperation, role of international organizations, role of local authorities, etc.

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WHAT ARE THE MAIN CONTROVERSIES ?

The controversial issues of the World Summit are of two broad types :

- a) issues that are not specific to the Information Society and which many previous UN Summits confronted before, such as Human Rights, Freedom of Speech, Freedom of the Press or Cultural Diversity ;
- b) issues that are specific to the Information Society and for which the World Summit is breaking new ground such as Internet Governance, CyberSpace Treaty, Open Source or Security.

I would like to focus on this second type of controversial issues :

- a) Internet Governance : a majority of States consider that Internet Governance should be handled by an intergovernmental UN agency, but European Union and USA feel that Internet Governance should continue to be handled by a private organization such as ICANN ;
- b) Open Source : the States of the South would like to afford Open Source a privileged position, but the States of the North would prefer Open Source to be regarded as one among many possible models for software developments ;
- c) Security : the question is whether the concept of Information Security should be recognized or only the concept of Network Security. Russia is insisting on the phrase Information Security and references to military issues. European Union sees references to Information Security as a limitation on Freedom of Expression. And USA rejects reference to military security in the Declaration of Principles.

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Another controversial issue is the question of the Cyber Space Treaty.

CyberSpace is a new world, without limits, without rules and without authorities. It is a complex world. It is an invisible world. But this new world interacts with our own world.

Today, different governments believe that it has become necessary to set basic rules for this new world. National laws are inadequate. That is why they propose that the World Summit should consider the elaboration of an international treaty laying down the basic rules to govern CyberSpace and to deal with secrecy of communications, privacy, network security, intellectual property, cybercrime, electronic signature, and so forth.

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One last controversy is the question of the Digital Solidarity Fund.

The national governments of the South hope that the Summit will find new solutions to financing the various measures needed to reduce the Digital Divide and the Contents Gap.

Despite all the commitments undertaken and all the efforts deployed, national governments have never managed to achieve the 0.7% of GDP threshold for development aid in national budgets.

It is thus necessary to find financing outside national budgets. Under the impetus of Mr A. Wade, President of Senegal, the States of the South are thinking in terms of a flat-rate global contribution levied at source by computer and telephone manufacturers on each unit manufactured. The product of this contribution would be paid into a special foundation to finance actions for reducing the Digital Divide and the Contents Gap.

This Digital Solidarity Fund should combat the Digital Divide and the Contents Gap supplementing North-South cooperation with SouthSouth cooperation.

In the information technology field, NorthSouth cooperation - which is not always adapted to local realities - has not given the desired results. It needs to be supplemented by new SouthSouth cooperation calling upon cooperation between the emerging countries and less developed countries, in order to take better account of actual conditions in the field and of local knowhow.

With this in mind, the Summit should take a look at the achievements of some countries in the South. For instance, India has in preproduction a simple computer, called "Simputer", costing less than USD 200, and Brazil is testing a "popular computer", which is to the PC what low-cost airlines are to conventional airlines.

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The World Summit on the Information Society has high ambitions, but ones which tie in with the overall United Nations strategy for the beginning of the 21st century, and in particular the Millennium Declaration goals.

The Summit will address the radical changes that information technologies are bringing about in all fields of human activity. Having due regard for dialogue between civilizations and cultural diversity, it will look at ways of placing the information revolution at the service of human development, by combating the Digital Divide and the Contents Gap.

With the ultimate goal of sharing knowhow and disseminating knowledge more effectively by bringing them within the reach of all the peoples of the world, the Summit therefore constitutes a decisive step in the struggle to combat ignorance, which is one of the sources of misery.

Finally, following political globalization (establishment of the United Nations and structuring of the international community), and economic globalization (market economy and free trade), the Summit will address the fundamental issue confronting States and peoples at the beginning of the 21st century : the global cohabitation of identities, cultures and values.

The World Summit on the Information Society thus provides Heads of State and Heads of Government, and particularly those attached to a multipolar and multicultural world, the opportunity to promote a "dialogue between civilizations" in place of a "clash of cultures".

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