

# Introduction: Steps to Achieve a Sustainable Information Society

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*The Information Society is an evolving concept that has reached different levels across the world, reflecting the different stages of development. Technological and other change is rapidly transforming the environment in which the Information Society is developed. The Plan of Action is thus an evolving platform to promote the Information Society at the national, regional and international levels. The unique two-phase structure of the WSIS provides an opportunity to take this evolution into account. (Plan of Action, WSIS Conference, Geneva, December 2003)*

## From Information Society to Knowledge Societies

Though many authors express serious doubts about the validity of the notion of an Information Society (IS), a variety of criteria could be used to distinguish analytically definitions of the IS. Frank Webster (1995: 6), for instance, identifies the following five types of definitions: technological, economic, occupational, spatial, and cultural. The most common definition of an IS is probably technological. It sees the IS as the leading growth sector in advanced industrial economies. Its three strands – computing, telecommunications and broadcasting – have evolved historically as three separate sectors, and by means of digitization these sectors are now converging.

Throughout the past decade, however, a gradual shift can be observed in favor of more socio-economic and cultural definitions of the IS. The following definition, drafted by a High-Level Group of EU experts, incorporates this change:

*The information society is the society currently being put into place, where low-cost information and data storage and transmission technologies are in general use. This generalization of information and data use is being accompanied by organizational, commercial, social and legal innovations that will profoundly change life both in the world of work and in society generally. (Soete, 1997: 11)*

Others prefer to use the term Knowledge Societies (in plural) for at least two reasons: (a) to indicate that, depending on historical and contextual circumstances, there are more roads than just one to a future Knowledge Society, and (b) to clarify the shift in emphasis from information and communication technologies (ICTs) as ‘drivers’ of change to a perspective where these technologies are regarded as tools which may provide a new potential for combining the information embedded in ICT systems with the creative potential and knowledge embodied in people. *‘These technologies do not create the transformations in society by themselves; they are*

*designed and implemented by people in their social, economic, and technological contexts.*' (Mansell & When, 1998: 12) At the same time Williams' (1999: 133) wise remark should be kept in mind: *'While we have to reject technological determinism, in all its forms, we must be careful not to substitute for it the notion of a determined technology.'*

## **Global Regulatory Frameworks**

Global change and developments in ICTs are affecting practices of political conduct at all levels of society. In an increasingly globalized and regionalized European Union, politicians formulate their IS policies within an international and global framework, with national interests at stake. The first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), that took place in Geneva in December 2003, added another dimension to the already complex dynamics of global IS governance. The decade preceding WSIS was marked by a number of radical initiatives toward bringing ICT regimes increasingly outside the national domain, as the 1990s was marked by the European Union's and the United States' vigorous telecommunications and IS policies. Broadcasting, telecommunication and information policies are now converging at a European and worldwide level, along side technological and economic convergence. In this regard it is worth referring to the 1993 agreement, signed by 130 countries with the World Trade Organization (WTO), in which communication was treated as a service. This was a major milestone on the road toward an internationalized communications system. The 1997 *Agreement on Basic Telecommunications Service*, signed by 69 countries, set the tone for the opening up of domestic markets to foreign competition. At the European level, this has been made explicit in the *Green Paper on the Convergence of the Telecommunications, Media and Information Technology*, published in 1997, and its follow-up, the 2003 *Regulatory Framework for Electronic Communications Networks and Services*. The latter clearly indicates the EU approach, which is that all communications should be regarded as part of the same regulatory concept. Viviane Reding, the new European Commissioner for the Information Society and Media, confirmed this as follows: *'European Audiovisual Policy has consistently sought to provide a framework favorable to the development of the audiovisual sector and to support the transnational dimension of this essentially cultural industry. In this respect the Television without frontiers Directive is the essential centerpiece for a 'business without frontiers' drive. This is as true today as it will be in the future in a wider media perspective. The 'leitmotiv' is to create added-value at European level and not to seek to do what can better be done at national level.'* (Reding, 2004: 2) In her contribution to this book Barbara Thomas develops this argument further by arguing in favor of an inclusion of the Public Service Broadcast (PSB) philosophy in the WSIS agenda. Her analysis also points to the potential cross-fertilization of the PSB's current efforts with the WSIS agenda when discussing vital elements like increased access, capacity building and education, and support for cultural identities and diversity.

## Our Objectives

The above issues were explored and discussed in the first volume of the European Consortium for Communication Research (ECCR) Book Series (Servaes, 2003). This second volume is equally ambitious. It presents some of the papers presented during the March 2004 ECCR conference on the evaluation of the first phase of the WSIS, plus a number of additional chapters written by ECCR members.

One specific point of attention, both during the ECCR conference as well as in this book, is the assessment of the inclusion and role of civil society and other so-called stakeholders in the decision-making process, as Resolution 56/183, adopted by the 90<sup>th</sup> plenary meeting of the General Assembly on 21 December 2001, called for their active participation in the WSIS. In one of the EU's Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) documents, the summit itself was seen as a model for the future role of civil society (and commerce): *'The preparatory process is almost as important as the political outcomes of the Summit itself. The format and positioning of the Summit will be key factors for an event which will attract attention and activate a decentralized follow-up process, not only at political level but also in society at large.'* (EU, 2002: 12)

This touches directly on the second objective of the ECCR conference and this book. Since the Lisbon summit in March 2000, official texts of the European Commission teem with new terms coined with reference to the IS, such as e-Europe, New Information and Communication Technologies (NICTs), online world, knowledge and innovation economy, etc. The very same ambitions that are present in the WSIS discourse can be found at the European level. In the *eEurope 2002 Plan of Action* (EU, 2001: 4), for instance, a call towards the member states can be found in order to *'draw the attention of citizens to the emerging possibilities of digital technologies to help to ensure a truly inclusive information society. Only through positive action now can info-exclusion be avoided at the European level.'* As Bart Staes remarks in his foreword, these ambitions are not only situated at the level of merely creating access to ICTs. Equally important are the democratic needs of these citizens that are embedded in a diversity of user communities. The potential of ICTs to stimulate a democratic dialogue amongst them, however difficult this ambition is, should not be discarded. An example of this potential can be found in Stefano Martelli's article on the *Telematic Portal for the communication of the 'third sector' in Palermo*, which aims to visualize their pro-social activities.

This book's general objective is to analyze and evaluate these different ambitions. But, at the same time, we want to present a number of recommendations for consideration to policy-makers and researchers, which could contribute to a sustainable agenda for the future IS.

## Towards a Sustainable Information Society

While sustainability was initially formulated in terms of environmental preservation, the sustainability debate has broadened its scope to include social, economic and cultural aspects. What sustainability is all about has also changed – from static views that emphasize the preservation of current resources for future generations towards more dynamic views, which emphasize the development of greater opportunities for future generations. Therefore, today a more multidimensional view on sustainability is being presented which implies a holistic

and integrated policy framework of environmental compatibility, economic stability, social sustainability and cultural diversity. As Peter Johnston (2000: 9) argued, *'on each of these issues, three aspects are important. Firstly, our 'understanding' of the risks and opportunities for action; secondly, the commitment of key organizations to work together to maximize benefits and minimize risks; and finally, raising public awareness, not only to ensure democratic support for appropriate policy measures, but to engage every citizen in the 'life-style' changes that may be necessary for effective change.'*

Therefore, the key conclusion in Johnston's afterword to this book is that investment in ICTs must be accompanied by investment in skills and organizational change. Here he argues for a more systemic approach to development of a sustainable IS: greater synergy between RTD, regulation and deployment actions; greater investment in more effective public services, notably for health care and education, as well as for administrations; and more active promotion of 'eco-efficient' technologies and their use.

Whether ICTs will, in the end, contribute to sustainability or not, essentially depends on the further development of global environmental, economic, social, democratic and cultural governance frameworks and corresponding attitudes and values. Matthias Fritz and Josef Radermacher (2000: 57) argue that *'the design of these frameworks determines whether they will lead to new, resource efficient lifestyles and working methods which make use of advanced IS Technologies and improve the quality of life significantly in all world regions, i.e. encouraging tele-working, electronic commerce or life-long learning. Building such frameworks is the single most important challenge to policy, industry, research and the civil society when entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century.'* Therefore, the transition to a fully sustainable IS requires one critical ingredient: collective positive action to shape it. The WSIS was an attempt to create such a moment at the global level.

## Positioning WSIS

The proposal to host the WSIS was endorsed by the Council of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) at its 2001 session. The 90<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) officially adopted the proposal on 21 December 2001 as Resolution 56/183.

The General Assembly recognized *'the urgent need to harness the potential of knowledge and technology for promoting the goals of the United Nations Millennium Declaration (Resolution 55/2) and to find effective and innovative ways to put this potential at the service of development for all.'* In other words, the aim of the WSIS is to develop a global framework to deal with the challenges posed by the IS.

The WSIS differs from other UN conferences in that it is a two-phase process culminating in two 'world summits', the first one took place in Geneva from 10–12 December 2003, with the second to be held in Tunis from 16–18 November 2005.

More importantly, and again in contrast to previous UN conferences, the General Assembly placed a strong emphasis on the participation of non-state actors, as they encouraged *'effective contributions from and the active participation of all relevant United Nations bodies, in particular the ICT Task Force, and encourages other intergovernmental organizations, including international and regional institutions, non-governmental organizations, civil society and the private*

*sector to contribute to, and actively participate in, the intergovernmental preparatory process of the Summit and the Summit itself.'* (Resolution 56/183) The idea was that the deliberations at the WSIS should be of a consensual nature, incorporating the viewpoints of multiple actors. This has since become known as the so-called multi-stakeholder approach.

## **The Multi-Stakeholder Approach**

Despite the problematic issues inherent in the WSIS initiative, the novelty and significance of the program stems from the fact that WSIS was the first international event bringing together multi-stakeholders-governments, civil society, private interest groups and bureaucrats – from all over the world to reflect on the future of IS from a people-centered, human rights perspective: a perspective which is lacking in current national and supranational policies. This new multi-stakeholder approach, and especially the role and participation of civil society (including researchers and academics), is extensively analyzed and debated in this volume (in the contributions by Bart Cammaerts & Nico Carpentier, Divina Frau-Meigs, Stefano Martelli, Claudia Padovani & Arjuna Tuzzi and Ned Rossiter).

### **Civil Society**

Civil society is traditionally defined in opposition to the state. The values of civil society – 'civility', respect for individual autonomy and privacy, trust amongst peoples, removal of fear and violence from everyday life, etc. – operated as a counterpoint to the rules and purposes of the state whose centralized political authority administered the lives of people within a given territory. Many have argued that the mutually constitutive relationship between the state and civil society has been eroded with the advent of globalized economies, 'flexible accumulation' and the abstraction of social and cultural relations that attend NICTs. Others have suggested that the notion of 'civil society' should be abandoned due to its universalization of European values.

Although civil society was an integral part of the preparatory process, the collaboration was not always smooth and easy. By responding fast and to the point, with professionalism and expertise, civil society organizations (CSOs) had to earn the respect of initially hostile or skeptical nation-states. In their article Claudia Padovani and Arjuna Tuzzi point to the importance of civil society's external and internal negotiative capacities. CSOs – for instance those in the human rights and gender caucuses – showed that they were capable of working with governments. At the same time these NGOs, grass roots groups, activists and many other organizations and individuals proved themselves capable of setting up an internal dialogue. Divina Frau-Meigs elaborates this argument in her chapter, as she points to the increased legitimacy of the role of NGOs within the ranks of other civil society actors.

As a result of this capacity for arguing and for implementing a soft-yet-firm civil disobedience, which did not balk at intense lobbying with the official representatives of supportive nation-states, some gains were obtained. Most observers agree that civil society has positioned itself as a structuring, pacifying as well as constructive power.

Nevertheless, most authors in this book do not turn a blind eye to the problems

related to this ‘new’ form of global governance. Bart Cammaerts and Nico Carpentier scrutinize the power balances between state actors, intergovernmental organizations and civil society. Without disregarding the novelty of the shift towards more equal power balances, they conclude that ‘extended consultation’ might be a more accurate description than ‘participation’.

From a slightly different perspective Ned Rossiter argues that notions of civil society persist within an era of *informationality*. He suggests that organized networks and their use of ICTs invite a rethinking of civil society–state relations. The WSIS is considered as a temporary supranational institution through which civil society has established a new scale of legitimacy, albeit one that must now undergo a process of re-nationalization and re-localization in order to effect material changes. Rossiter proposes that organized networks – as distinct from networked organizations – are the socio-technical form best suited to address the complex problematic of multi-scalar dimensions of informational governance. In doing so, he raises doubts about the extent in which the multi-stakeholder approach can go *beyond some of the tenets of Third Way politics*.

This risk of incorporation places CSOs in an awkward position, as they have to engage in complex multi-scale negotiations and dialogues, both external and internal to civil society, but still find themselves trapped in unequal power relations and in the position to defend specific values that might conflict with the processes and outcomes of *realpolitik*. One of the advantages of these ‘organized networks’ as Rossiter calls them or ‘rhizomes’ as they are termed in Michel Bauwens’ article, is their mobility, contingency and elusiveness. This feature makes them capable of using a Janus-head strategy, combining strategic and partial incorporation with continued resistance and independent critique.

### **Networks and Communities**

Because of the importance of these networked social spheres, two articles in this book provide us with an in-depth analysis of on the one hand so-called virtual communities and the other P2P (peer-to-peer) networks.

Paul Verschueren reviews the concept of the ‘virtual community’ from three different angles. Firstly, it considers the virtual community in early utopian and dystopian discourses. Secondly, it deals with the electronic field studies that focus on virtual communities as interactional fields. Thirdly, it shows how research interest is shifting away from the virtual community as a bounded unit of social interaction towards a much broader, contextual and everyday life perspective.

Michel Bauwens explores the potential of P2P networks. Peer-to-peer is a specific form of a network, which lacks a centralized hierarchy, and in which the various nodes can take up any role depending on its capabilities and needs. P2P is an ‘egalitarian’ network, a form of ‘distributive and cooperative intelligence’. Thus, intelligence can operate anywhere, and it lives and dies according to its capacities for cooperation and unified action. He relates it to Alan Page Fiske’s typology in that P2P particularly ‘reflects’ and ‘empowers’ two particular forms of sociality: ‘Equality Matching’ and ‘Communal Shareholding’.

## **Not All State and Civil Society Actors are Alike**

As Sassen (1996) puts it, global processes materialize in national contexts. It is important, then, to understand the role of distinctive national forces and patterns in the context of globalization, regionalization and localization.

The point of departure for Miyase Christensen's case study of Turkey is the contention that telecoms infrastructure and the social shaping of national policy rhetoric constitute the building blocks toward the emergence of an IS in any context. At their current stage, telecoms policy and IS regimes in Turkey, a candidate to the EU, are shaped, first and foremost, by the binding policies of the EU and by Turkey's own national power geometry. The role of the newly flourishing civil society in Turkish policymaking remains minimal.

Despite the recent liberalization of the Turkish telecoms market in January 2004, as was pressed by the EU Commission, and despite Turkish efforts, marked by such initiatives such as *eTurkey*, to catch up with the EU's supranational policy context, Christensen proposes that national specificities in the form of institutional structures and power relations are the primary determinants that shape the IS in EU candidates such as Turkey today. During the WSIS, the Turkish participation did not go beyond the official national agenda, its emphasis on economic development and its lip service to social issues. Christensen also shows how in the Turkish case the rhetorics of access to information and knowledge become intertwined with the call to fight terrorism.

## **Absent Others**

The emphasis on civil society might give the impression that the multi-stakeholder approach was limited to state and civil society actors. In contrast to this impression, business actors were indeed explicitly included in the calls for multi-stakeholder participation. A major disappointment, however, was the low level of private sector participation. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) were hardly represented, and only a number of organizations linked to multinationals attended. Cammaerts & Carpentier counted only 28 CEOs who attended WSIS. The only 'big' industry players, within the information technology sector, who did send their CEO to the WSIS were Eutelsat (France), Nokia (Finland), Oracle (US), Fujitsu (Japan), Siemens (Germany) and Vodaphone (UK).

Also absent were the news media. This is even more surprising, since a number of important issues discussed at the WSIS, such as freedom of expression and freedom of the press, are often considered crucial by these media.

## **Declaration and Action Plan**

The first phase of the WSIS in December 2003 ended with the adoption of two official documents: a *Declaration of Principles* and a *Plan of Action*. Controversial issues such as ICTs financing in the South and Internet Governance were debated during the preparatory process, but no agreements could be reached on them. They were left out in Geneva and are to be re-examined in the second phase of the summit in Tunis. Two working groups will examine issues on *Internet governance* and the creation of a *Digital Solidarity Fund* proposed by Senegal as a financial mechanism for ICTs in Southern countries.

## Digital Solidarity Fund

Information and communications infrastructure is an essential foundation for an inclusive IS. Despite the existence of national universal service mechanisms, its construction is a task for which many countries, not only developing countries, require international cooperation.

The WSIS *Declaration of Principles* calls for digital solidarity and establishes the creation of a Digital Solidarity Fund, which, to be effectively operational, given the failure of many programmes based on principles of equity, requires convincing possible donors of the existence of ‘other’ interests.

The presence of network externalities in advanced telecommunication services and the role of telecommunications as a tool for the provision of global public goods (knowledge dissemination, economic development) are the factors proving that the advantages of this programme would not be restricted to the recipient countries. These issues are further questioned and explored in the chapter by Claudio Feijóo González, José Luis Gómez Barroso, Ana González Laguía, Sergio Ramos Villaverde & David Rojo Alonso.

## Internet Governance

The working group on Internet governance has four main tasks:

- To develop a working definition of Internet governance;
- To identify the public policy issues that are relevant to Internet governance;
- To develop a common understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities of governments, existing intergovernmental and international organizations and other forums as well as the private sector and civil society from both developing and developed countries;
- To prepare a report on the results of this activity to be presented for consideration and appropriate action for the second phase of WSIS in 2005.

There are two general strands in defining Internet governance. One centered on the governance *of* the Internet, which basically accounts for the technical mechanisms and generally focused on the operations of ICANN. Governance *on* the Internet meanwhile covers a broader range of issues such as pricing, interconnection, network security, cyber crime, spam and others. The ITU, along with other organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), International Consumer Protection and Enforcement Network, has been working on some of these issues.

Another area of concern relates to the very management of the Internet. The domain name system is basically controlled by the US Department of Commerce. This poses major sovereignty questions. Developing nations prefer to have an international agency, such as the ITU, govern the Internet rather than continue with the current arrangement with the US Department of Commerce.

Also other politically sensitive issues, such as intellectual property rights, trade of goods and services and debt release were hardly addressed. Delegations of

Northern countries (the United States, in particular) put a lot of effort in keeping them out of the WSIS agenda, arguing that it was not the appropriate forum to address them.

In sum, some people believe that the *Declaration of Principles* and the *Plan of Action* are too technical and have not succeeded in introducing the real social aspects, such as the human face of globalization, education in the IS, etc.

## Tunis 2005

Due to the difficulties faced to reach ‘strong’ agreements in the first phase of the WSIS and lack of a clear leadership, the Tunis phase of the WSIS has had a hard time to start. In June 2004 the first Preparatory meeting of the second phase was held in Hammamet, Tunisia. This meeting was dominated by a heated debate on issues of human rights and freedom of expression in Tunisia. One finally agreed that the focus of the preparatory process to the Tunis phase should be two-pronged: (a) it should provide solutions on how to implement and follow up the Geneva decisions by stakeholders at national, regional and international levels with particular attention to the challenges facing the least developed countries; and (b) it should complete the unfinished business in Geneva on Internet governance and Financing. The reports of the Task Force on Financing mechanisms and the report of the Working Group on Internet governance would provide valuable inputs to the discussion. A consensus was also obtained that the agreements reached in the Geneva phase should not be re-opened.

## Important Issues for the Future

Which are the important issues left for a discussion on the future sustainable IS? Before taking a more general stance, explicit emphasis has to be placed on what lies at the heart of the ECCR: research and education. In her article, Divina Frau-Meigs assesses the renewed place of research in the development of possible Knowledge Societies. She emphasizes the need to increase the social dimension of ICT policies, to develop new forms of awareness raising activities, to support cross-country research and to re-formulate the economic drivers of the digital growth. These points are also stressed in the ECCR afterword.

Below we provide the following (not exhaustive) list of topics, which are being further detailed and discussed in this book.

- Freedom of expression and the respect of human rights;
- Communication rights;
- Cultural and linguistic diversity, as for instance articulated in Unesco’s *International Convention on the Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Contents and Artistic Expressions*;
- Access to the WWW, often affected by the respect for rights and multilingualism, also remains an unavoidable issue, if a true IS is to become a reality;

- Internet governance as well as intellectual property issues are at the heart of the debate;
- Lifelong education for the Knowledge Societies of the future. Education must be given more attention since it is central to the use of technology;
- More fundamental academic research is needed to perform realistic and non-commercial assessments and recommend social solutions for a sustainable future;
- More groups and individuals should be invited to participate in the second phase, such as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and Open Source and Free Software groups.

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