



**REPORT ON THE DEBRIEFING SESSION
ON THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY
GENEVA, DECEMBER 10 - 12, 2003
ORGANIZED BY THE CANADIAN COMMISSION FOR UNESCO**

OTTAWA, ONTARIO

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DEBRIEFING SESSION ON THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

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**COUNCIL CHAMBER – CANADA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS
OTTAWA, ONTARIO**

1. Context and objectives

The Canadian Commission for UNESCO was given the responsibility by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) to ensure the participation of members of civil society in the preparatory work as well as at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) which was held December 10 to 12, 2003, in Geneva, Switzerland. The WSIS comprises two phases: the first in Geneva, and the second in Tunis, Tunisia, to be held November 16 to 18, 2005.

The debriefing session of the first phase of the Summit was held to allow the representatives of civil society who attended to reflect upon the past process, identify the priorities to be considered between the two phases and state their objectives.

The meeting brought together some thirty representatives of civil society, the academic sector, the private sector and the Canadian and Québec governments.

UNESCO is an organization especially concerned with human rights, ethics and the sociocultural and legal aspects of the main thematic areas within its field of expertise. The Canadian Commission for UNESCO carries UNESCO's message in Canada, and also brings the concerns of Canadian civil society to the appropriate Canadian authorities.

This report will therefore be distributed to the Canadian consultative committee of the WSIS to inform its members representing federal and provincial ministries and agencies, about the ideas and comments presented during the meeting.

The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the position of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

2. Evaluation of the first phase of the WSIS

A. Evaluation by the DFAIT representative - Marie-Isabelle Massip

Firstly, the WSIS was a success in terms of participation. The Swiss Government expected approximately 8,000 participants but in fact, 11,000 attended the Summit.

Until the eve of the Summit, no agreement had been reached on the Declaration and Action Plan. While it was feared that the Geneva Summit might have to open without agreed final documents, the expectation was that the parallel activities would be successful.

Agreement was finally reached on the texts. Had Canada drafted the documents, they would likely have read differently, however, in the end we were able to negotiate texts which protect Canadian interests, without having to compromise our principles. This is a significant achievement and we will have to take care that the documents not be reopened in Tunis.

The first phase of the Summit enjoyed very little visibility. The challenge will be to ensure that governments and the Canadian public are better aware of Phase II and the important issues addressed by the Summit.

The process has been remarkable for its transparency. Documents were posted on the web as soon as they became available and the discussions/negotiations were often webcast. We will have to ensure that the second phase of the process is as transparent as the first.

Insofar as Phase II is concerned, the work has not really started. An organizational meeting will need to be called to look at the objectives and plan of work for Tunis. The international community must also look at arrangements to link the two phases, such as monitoring mechanisms to ensuring implementation of the decisions taken in Geneva.

The WSIS was the first summit in which civil society was an integral part of the preparatory process. This integration was not perfect, but it nevertheless existed. We must ensure that further progress is made in Tunis.

Civil society worked efficiently, although there have been some problems, such as, the appointment of representatives. The most effective NGOs were those which had learned to work with governments, such as the human rights and gender caucuses.

One of the shortcomings of the Geneva Summit was the low level of private sector participation. Ensuring better private sector participation at Tunis will be a priority for the Canadian Government.

B- Evaluation by the representatives of civil society

Participation of civil society

Civil society has become somewhat of a counter force. Clearly, governments cannot ignore civil society. At the WSIS, civil society has reaffirmed itself as a structuring, pacifying as well as constructive power and this constitutes a true historical leap. Civil society participation has required extensive volunteer work on the part of activists throughout the world.

It worked at two different levels. It organized itself autonomously to provide its input on the process and organized its own parallel activities. It also offered its expertise to friendly governments. Civil society developed its own declaration which includes elements not included in the official declaration. Furthermore, the official declaration can be seen as a document describing the actual position of the governments, while the civil society declaration can be seen as a visionary document indicating future orientations.

As for Canadian civil society, the ground work accomplished with the Government, the International Development Research Center (IDRC) and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO has been praised. Civil society has been attentively and respectfully listened to by all participants.

Some were impressed by the networking at ICT4D (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) and particularly by the participation of two groups: the scientific sector (some were surprised by the weight given to sciences) and the visibility of countries such as Armenia.

The «private sector» banner did not represent small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) but rather organizations linked to multinationals. The role of SME was not clearly defined and they hope that Canada will facilitate their inclusion.

The media indifference towards this Summit cannot be explained. It is even more surprising, since a number of important issues discussed at the WSIS concern the media, freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

If the Summit has barely been covered by the Canadian and Third World countries media (in Europe, the coverage was better), it can be explained by the active email traffic. People from Southern countries were informed electronically of what was happening at the WSIS, something that would have been impossible a few years ago. We therefore believe that not all people communicate in the same manner and do not obtain their information solely from traditional sources. The information process has fundamentally changed. Visibility must be viewed differently.

Role of the Canadian Government

Canada played a major role in defending the recognition of human rights as a fundamental principle of the information society. Canada has also made some noticeable efforts on gender issues and Internet governance. It has defended the role of the media, freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

The fact that Section 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is included in the WSIS Declaration has been applauded, even if Section 29 is referred to in a following paragraph. (Section 29 reduces the scope of Section 19.)

Declaration and Action Plan

Some people believe that the Declaration of Principles and the Action Plan are too technical and have not succeeded in introducing all social aspects. It does not show the human face of globalization. Besides, there are inconsistencies between the Declaration and the Action Plan.

Greater emphasis should be given to education in the information society, particularly to adult education. It has been noted that education is not the main WSIS priority. Education is, at most, linked to literacy, and we should study this important theme more globally. The civil society Declaration went further in this direction.

Persons with Disabilities

Among all the computers provided to WSIS participants, none were adapted to the needs of the persons with disabilities.

At the opening ceremony of the Summit, Kiki Nordström, President of the World Blind Union and President of the International Disability Alliance spoke on behalf of civil society. Preparing her speech turned out to be a nightmare, since there was no Braille tool on the Summit site. Makeshift means were put into place.

Although Canada has tools for persons with disabilities, none were provided, (neither did other countries as a matter of fact). However, seeing what is done here and elsewhere in this area would have proven interesting.

Governments did not participate in the Global Forum on Disability in the Information Society where groups were able to talk and share their experiences.

Youth

This group can boast some very positive results. It succeeded in having its paragraph included in the Declaration. This is a first for young people, as far as a UN document is concerned and is no

doubt the result of the presence of a youth representative within the Secretariat. This Canadian was able to promote the interests of youth to governments. It would be useful to have representatives of other groups within the Secretariat, so that they would be in a better position to make their causes known.

National campaigns aimed at youth have been organized in about thirty countries throughout the world. These campaigns have allowed the mobilization of young people on issues discussed at the Summit. However, it has been impossible to organize such a campaign in Canada. Financial support required from Industry Canada has not been received, the Department electing to help the youth of Third World countries. Similarly, financing for young French speaking participants was withdrawn at the last minute. Similar situations have been deplored by representatives of other Canadian organizations.

Absentees

The absence of some important Canadian associations at the table and at the Summit itself was also deplorable. We are referring specifically to the Canada Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), both absent from the WSIS, a missed opportunity to have them contribute to the defining of the information society.

At the governmental level, CIDA was also not adequately present. In the past year, ICTs have lost importance as a development tool within the agency. There is no doubt that CIDA's contribution is essential to the success of projects implemented within the framework of the WSIS Action Plan.

3. Main priorities for the preparation of the second phase of the WSIS

Canadian Summit

Considering the information society issues, it would be beneficial to hold a public debate about the transition to a knowledge society. In fact, the organization of a Canadian Summit would allow for the discussion of these issues while improving the dialogue between the government and civil society. The project for a Canadian Summit has received the support of numerous participants.

Important issues

Issues on freedom of expression and the respect of human rights remain a priority for Tunis. The same is true for cultural and linguistic diversity. In addition to respect for human rights, the problem of poverty in Canada and in the world deserves particular attention.

Access to the web, often affected by the respect for rights and multilingualism, also remains an unavoidable issue, if a true information society is to become a reality.

Internet governance as well as intellectual property issues are at the heart of the debate.

Implementation of the Action Plan

The means of implementation of the Action Plan must be defined within two years. Also, we must ensure that non-controversial as well as controversial issues will be addressed. The tendency to give more importance to controversial issues raises concern. For example, education must be given more attention since it is central to the use of technology.

Canada has gained extensive experience in the field of online learning (e-learning). However, there are no national standards covering its transfer. Canada should develop a set of standards

for the creation of online learning content in view of e-learning which could apply to all platforms and be done in cooperation with the provinces and the Canadian Standards Association.

Canada must select projects for the Action Plan. Nevertheless, since governments have no follow-up strategies and there is no available funding at this time, civil society must develop its own Action Plan. Without disassociating itself from government actions, civil society must not wait for governments but must take action now. Generally speaking, we have the know-how; we must simply find the funding necessary to realize the projects. The importance of the role of each stakeholder in the implementation of the Action Plan and the fact that governments were not responsible to implement it, have been mentioned many times.

At the academic level, research gives way to structuring projects which propose solutions through « grids »¹.

An inventory of the best Canadian practices must also be done in all areas concerned with the ICT's, here and throughout the world, including projects aimed at persons with disabilities and those working for the preservation and promotion of languages. For example, the International Commission on Technology and Accessibility (ICTA) states that it has the funding to consult persons with disabilities and create a document of best practices. It is crucial that their needs be part of the Tunis Summit agenda and that this acknowledgement is posted on the Summit site.

As far as languages are concerned, Canada must be a leader in the development of tools to protect disappearing languages, such as First Voices, which allows for First Nation's languages to be archived. On the other hand, Canada has extensive expertise in the field of translation and could share this expertise by creating mutual portals in translation; by facilitating access to existing online dictionaries and lexicons; and by the standardization of terminology (translation of neologisms). The mobilization of Canadian resources in this field would significantly contribute to the development of these tools. With its head office in Canada, the *Réseau international de néologie et de terminologie* could also contribute. All these initiatives would facilitate mutual linguistic and cultural understanding on the web.

Networking

In addition to the increase of the WSIS visibility, interest must be maintained between the two Summits. Until now, Canadian reporters have shown little interest in the issues discussed at the WSIS.

It remains crucial to create links between participants networks of the first phase and with the totality of Canadian civil society and the rest of the world. One method to consider in the preparation of the second phase involves engaging and mobilizing civil society through virtual communities operated via open source code. Free software become unifying tools in anticipation of Tunis. Face-to-face meetings and traditional media still have their place. A diversity of strategies is needed in approaching civil society.

¹ Contribution of unused capabilities of thousands of computers, linked in a network, most often through the Internet, to do complex calculations. Each individual computer does the calculations requested by a server and returns the results which are then integrated to others. The so formed computer network is sometimes designated in French by the expression *grille de calcul* and, in English, by its equivalent *computational grid*, often reduced to *grid*. Office de la langue française - 2002

We must therefore engage in global networking at the local level “glocal”. It is hoped that the government will support NGOs that reach civil society and contribute to the animation of the local communities.

It becomes crucial to determine who is absent from the process and to ensure that these groups and individuals be included in the preparatory works of the second phase. Among others, we are aiming at small and medium-sized enterprises, «open source» groups such as Linux professionals, companies producing translation software and adapted technology and the community in general.

It is also imperative to ensure that civil society enjoys the same prominence in Tunis that it did in Geneva, if not more.

In anticipation of Tunis and in light of human rights concerns, Canada must be pro-active and develop a better knowledge of Tunisia, using the most trusted resources available here in Canada.

Elimination of categories

We must stop categorizing people. Some are marginalized two and three times because they belong to youth groups, women’s groups, groups of indigenous people or people with disabilities. These individuals must be invited to speak for themselves, to share their experience and expertise, and not because they belong to one or more of these groups.

Evaluation and benchmarking

We propose the creation of a benchmarking document to evaluate services and practices in order to improve them. This benchmarking must be universal to include groups such as persons with disabilities.

Ways of evaluating effects of the ICTs on the individual and on societies are well developed. In addition to quantitative measurements, qualitative evaluations must be carried out. The consolidation of research models and methodologies to monitor the information society would contribute to the progress of researches.

Free access

It is suggested that Canada take the initiative to convince other Northern countries to invest in private businesses to create a «knowledge warehouse» which would give free access to information to developing countries. In this regard, we have learned that, in British Columbia, there already exists a network giving free access to information to developing countries, the Open Knowledge Network (OKN). A deeper involvement with this network would be beneficial.

The question of access to information has been raised many times, even by users in rich countries like Canada. It has been demonstrated that researchers in the Southern countries cannot access the latest research documents on the web because they do not have a credit card, dollars, or euros. In the North as well as in the South, the creation of virtual libraries would cut document costs by 60% and facilitate access for student researchers.

Also, it is suggested that Canada become a promoter of open content licensing and that access be free of charge. It has also been demonstrated that research published on the web and the recipient of public funding from governments and international organizations should be freely available to users. Taxpayers should only pay once for the production of these documents.

4. Expectations and follow-up

By the DFAIT representative, Marie-Isabelle Massip

States now have official texts. After difficult negotiations, they adopted a Declaration and an Action Plan. It is unlikely that countries will wish to renegotiate everything within a Tunis Declaration and fall back into the same discussions. The principles of an information society, inclusive and without discrimination, where all stakeholders have a role to play and in which freedom of expression and opinion prevail, are always a priority.

The Tunisian Government may try to develop a Charter of digital solidarity, a non-binding instrument. However, we must prepare for the eventuality that the idea of a Declaration project may come up.

The resolution of some issues has been postponed until the Tunis Summit. They relate to Internet governance and funding. The question of governance touches many levels and must be studied by different actors. In the case of funding, there has not been any acceptable compromise. Some agree with the idea to create a digital solidarity fund, others do not.

It is also possible that, in Tunis, civil society will not be integrated into government discussions. If so their reflections will be parallel to that of the governments.

By the representatives of civil society

In the case of the Action Plan, expectations are quite high since some wish that it be considered a commitment, commitment at a high level, yet realistic.

One may wonder how to prepare for Tunis. Will it be an international gathering or a less formal event, like the ICT4D? If the latter is more likely, would it not be relevant to consider a conference of the Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP)?

Participation of the universities in the WSIS has been poor. To remedy the situation, the Communications department of UQAM has developed a course called "Multimédia et sociétés" studying the main themes covered by the WSIS. This updated program strives to encourage a deeper reflection of the stakes inherent to the issues discussed within the WSIS.

ORBICOM, the network of UNESCO Chairs in Communication, also based at UQAM, is planning many events in preparation for the second phase. The sequel to the research entitled «L'observatoire de la fracture numérique... et au-delà» or, in English, « Monitoring the Digital Divide and Beyond » will be updated with the latest data available and complemented with individual projects of regional or thematic nature.

An event marking the transition towards Tunis, a conference entitled «Médias et liberté d'expression en Afrique et dans le monde arabe» (Media and freedom of expression) will take place in Marrakech, November 22-24, 2004.

Finally, a meeting with the General Secretary of ASEAN: Asia-Pacific Region in Jakarta, on February 26 to 29, 2004, will allow for the preparation of the 2004-2005 edition of the «Digital Review of Asia Pacific». The book should be published in time for the Tunis summit.

The e-commons/agora électronique group is organizing a series of meetings to follow-up on the WSIS : February 5 in Toronto, February 19 in Montréal and February 29 in Calgary. The e-commons/agora électronique site (see Annex 1) is a source of information for groups and individuals and offers them the opportunity to discuss the issues within the framework of WSIS.

With the «Youth Digital Opportunity Coalition» which gathers approximately 20 NGOs from around the world, field projects receive support and offer young people training and tutoring programs in ICTs.

In virtual communities, such as the Vancouver Community Network, online participation will continue until the second phase. It is the most economical way to participate, especially if one lives in a remote region of Europe or Africa.

The possibility of unexpected and unforeseen developments between the two summits has also been mentioned. Sharing opportunities, like this debriefing session, provide think-tanks at which everyone is invited to participate. Outside the benchmarking and the Action Plan, new projects can emerge. Progress recorded between the two phases of the Summit will be influenced by the positive or negative perception of the Geneva Summit.

Moreover, one can work towards implementation of the Action Plan, but that will mean nothing without the empowerment and appropriation of the ICTs by civil society.

Conclusion

This debriefing session achieved its main objective, evaluation of the first phase of the WSIS and identification of priority issues, to be considered in preparation for the second phase, to be held in Tunis, Tunisia, in November 2005.

Participants made a generally positive evaluation of the Geneva Summit and demonstrated enthusiasm for Tunis.

They realize that they must get organized and that the two years between the two summits give them little time to realize their projects. Nevertheless, they seem to be ready to engage in a larger and more global reflection on the issues inherent to the building of a true information society.



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Approved by David A. Walden, Secretary-General, Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

The debriefing session was chaired by François-Pierre Le Scouarnec, President of the Sectoral Commission Culture, Communication and Information, Canadian Commission for UNESCO

ANNEX I

WEBSITES

Carrefour Internet citoyen / Global Community Network
www.globalcn.org

E-Commons / Agora électronique
www.ecommons.net

Institut de coopération pour l'éducation des adultes
www.icea.qc.ca/si

The book entitled Communicating in the Information Society, published by Institut des Nations Unies pour le développement social (UNRISD) has been mentioned. It can be ordered at the following address :

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or, for more information on this organization, visit www.unrisd.org

ANNEX II

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