

- WSIS Unfolds - Finding the right way to Tunis

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**World Summit on the Information
Society Phase II
Preparatory Committee 2
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Geneva, Switzerland**

*Report for Canadian Civil Society
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Background

The World Summit on the Information Society seeks to ensure that the benefits of the digital revolution in information and communications technologies are accessible to all while promoting specific advantages in areas such as e-strategies, e-commerce, e-governance, e-health, education, literacy, cultural diversity, gender equality, sustainable development and environmental protection. The Summit is being held in two phases: the Geneva Phase (2002–2003); and the Tunis Phase (2004–2005). The Geneva Phase addressed the broad range of themes concerning the Information Society and adopted a Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action. The Tunis Phase is focused more narrowly on resolving the outstanding issues of financing information and communications technology (ICT) for development and developing a framework for Internet governance. The Tunis Phase also seeks to enable a preliminary stock-taking of new activities undertaken since 2003 and to encourage govern-

ments to adopt an operational plan for the Plan of Action.

Following PrepCom-1 in June 2004, three working groups were created to assist the Summit stakeholders: Group of Friends of the Chair (GFC); Task Force on Financial Mechanisms (TFFM); and Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG). The GFC met four times between the first Preparatory Committee

(PrepCom-1) and the Second Preparatory Committee (PrepCom-2) to draft initial texts to use as the basis of negotiations.

The TFFM undertook consultations

in October and November to produce its report on December 22, 2004. The Working Group on Internet Governance held its first two meetings in November 2004 and February 2005 and released its preliminary report on February 21, 2005.

PrepCom-2 was intended to bring governments and other stakeholders together to make significant progress on four key issues:

- Financial mechanisms;
- Internet governance;
- Follow-up and implementation plan; and
- Format and rules for the Tunis Summit.

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Progress on the Official Documents

The majority of the PrepCom-2 agenda was focused on negotiations surrounding the two texts:

- Political Chapeau (Tunis Commitment)
- Operational part of the document (Tunis Agenda for Action)
 - Implementation Mechanisms (Chapter One)
 - Financial Mechanisms (Chapter Two)
 - Internet Governance (Chapter Three)
 - Follow-Up (Chapter Four)

Given the stage of negotiations, most discussions were held according to a sub-committee format, rather than in full plenary. This was intended to facilitate more rapid and thorough exchanges of views. Unfortunately, due to the complexity of the issues, the lack of substantive knowledge of the issues by many delegates and weak chairing, very little progress was made on the two documents. The format also served to make it challenging to civil society to participate fully in deliberations, compounding their invisibility in the draft negotiating texts.

Discussions surrounding the Political Chapeau were quickly bogged down between those governments who sought generic language reaffirming the spirit and intentions of the Phase I documents, and those who sought to add details from the Phase I documents into the chapeau as well. Given that the chapeau seems to be a document in search of a purpose, there should be little wonder at the confusion regarding how long or in-depth it should be. Once the document mentions any specific group by name (e.g., women, youth, disabled, indigenous) or specific issues (e.g., human rights, security, local languages), it will have to mention them all. The text of the Political Chapeau, as it stands at the end of PrepCom-2, together with a compilation document containing written comments and proposals, will be forwarded directly to PrepCom-3.

Debates surrounding the Operational Part of the document were divided into three segments: Implementation and Follow-Up (Chapters One and Four); Financial Mechanisms (Chapter Two); and Internet Governance (Chapter Three).

Of these, Implementation and Follow-Up appeared to

be the least contentious. Governments worked quickly to water down any language regarding achieving targets by 2008, suggesting potentially later dates, revising wording to simply “work towards” targets, and/or to note that targets should take into account “different national circumstances.” Additional suggestions were made regarding how to summarize the sections of the WSIS Action Plan, with many governmental and inter-governmental delegations and civil society representatives concerned that the short phrases missed important nuances hard-fought for in Phase I. However, there were heated debates regarding the coordination of the implementation of Action Lines and the overseeing body. Different interests quickly emerged surrounding whether to name the ITU or UN DESA as the agency responsible for coordination and reporting to the UN General Assembly on progress. Those seeking to keep WSIS technically focused seemed to prefer the ITU while delegations more interested in the MDGs and development impact of ICTs promoted UN DESA as the appropriate body. All stakeholders are invited to continue making contributions to chapters one and four. The Group of Friends of the Chair (GFC) will continue to draft proposals for chapters one (Implementation Mechanisms) and four (The Way Ahead) of the operational part. These new proposals will be in addition to the written comments and proposals presented during the first reading on February 21, contained in the compilation documents. These documents will be forwarded to PrepCom-3, where a decision on use of the new proposals will be taken. All stakeholders are invited to continue making contributions to chapters one and four.

The bulk of PrepCom-2 deliberations, however, were reserved for negotiations on Financial Mechanisms (Chapter Two). From the opening paragraph regarding the mandate of the TFFM to the final paragraphs on the Digital Solidarity Fund, there were significant disagreements and few compromises to be found. Hotly contested paragraphs included:

- 19 – regarding what constitutes an enabling environment for investment in ICTs;
- 21 – regarding the priorities for public investment in ICT, particularly whether to emphasize regional infrastructure; and
- 27 – regarding the Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF).

Discussions regarding the DSF were particularly cumbersome since there was no common agreement as to whether they were discussing the constrained DSF established by the Government of Senegal with the cities of Lyon and Geneva, or whether it still refers to a larger, yet-to-be created international fund. Many governments expressed doubts as to whether the paragraph was even necessary if it refers to the former. In general, there was a sense that it should be possible to address ICT4D through existing financial mechanisms, although there was a strong desire to expand the amounts of financing available and to improve systems for matching supply and demand for funds. The current text of chapter two, as it stands at the conclusion of PrepCom-2, will be forwarded directly to PrepCom-3.

Substantive discussion regarding Internet Governance was largely deferred to PrepCom-3 due to the overflow of debates regarding Financial Mechanisms. In addition, the preliminary report of the WGIG was only released part-way through the PrepCom and there was no draft text upon which to negotiate. The final report of the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) will be presented in mid-July 2005 (most probably on July 18). All governments and other stakeholders are invited to submit written comments and proposals for chapter three (to wsis-contributions@itu.int) by August 15. Thereafter, a compilation of these contributions will be forwarded to PrepCom-3, together with the report of the WGIG.

Across all areas of discussion, it was interesting to observe the strength and coherence of GRULAC, under the leadership of Brazil, as a negotiating block. On both points of procedure and substantive issue, GRULAC was frequently the first to raise objections and the last to give into compromises. Given the lack of civil society representation from Latin America at PrepCom-2, it is unclear whether the government positions in the negotiations reflect the general sentiment in the region.

Preparations for the Tunis Summit

While sub-committees considered the negotiated texts, the majority of the meetings of the Bureau and Civil Society Bureau focused on the modalities of the Tunis Summit. On the government side, there was a desire to maintain the structure and style of the Geneva Summit

without major modifications. However, in light of the poor attendance by government leaders and the low level of attendance in general at most formal sessions at the first Summit, some modifications have been proposed. These would focus primarily on modifying the format and composition of some roundtable sessions to enable greater dialogue and to reduce the “talking heads” at front tables. There is some hope among participants that the more interactive style of discussion or response pioneered at the World Economic Forum Annual Meetings might be introduced into the Tunis Summit.

Civil society presented a far greater diversity of concerns regarding the Tunis Summit. These ranged from the slow pace of accreditation for organizations entering the process

in Phase II, to the extent of quasi-diplomatic immunity granted to Summit participants to any potential privacy infringements based on delegate ID/tracking systems. The latter issues are of particular concern to human rights organizations that have concerns regarding their freedom of movement and freedom of speech while in Tunisia. It is unclear when/how these concerns will be addressed in the coming months.

Governments as well as civil society pushed the government of Tunisia and the WSIS Executive Secretariat to quickly clarify processes for organizing side-events and exhibits at the Summit. There continues to be a great deal of confusion over the number and location of venues, as well as the criteria for space/time allocation. Of most immediate concern is the impending April 1 deadline for registering “official side events.” It is still unclear what size and nature of events needs to be registered through this process, although there is hope that it refers only to multi-day events involving large (100+) numbers of participants such as the proposed “ICT4All Platform” and the “World Congress of Youth in the Society of Knowledge and Communication.” The greatest degree of confusion is regarding how/where stakeholders can register their interest in organizing one or more workshop sessions on specific

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themes during the week. This confusion was addressed to some degree when the ICT4All joint organizing committee released a document online on February 24 with greater detail (<http://www.smsitunis2005.tn/plateforme/docs/guidelines.doc>). The deadline for ICT4All event requests is now set at April 30 with decisions given to organizers by June 30.

Side-Meetings and Workshops

As with all UN PrepComs, the formal negotiations and discussions in the corridors about the texts are only a portion of the event. WSIS PrepCom-2 was used as a venue for workshops and side-meetings by many NGOs and UN agencies to showcase projects and to advance dialogue on difficult issues (<http://www.ngocongo.org/ngomeet/WSIS/PC2CSPROGRAMME.doc>).

In general, these meetings seemed to have less attendance than similar ones during Phase I. However, a few had significant attendance, including:

- Human rights caucus;
- CS WGIG Working Group Internet Governance;
- Financial Mechanisms for ICT4D;
- ICT4 Grassroots Perspectives from South Asia; and
- Promoting WSIS MDG Synergies.

As can be noted, most of these were of direct relevance to the main issues being discussed during this PrepCom, or were closely linked to sponsorship by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Additional Observations

Within the Tunis Phase of the Summit, effective civil society participation seems to have crumbled. At PrepCom-1, many people blamed the meeting's location in Tunisia for the problem. However, relocating the PrepComs to Geneva has not resulted in significant improvements. Many civil society groups and some government delegations spent a considerable amount of time at the PrepCom discussing the potential underlying causes.

Suggestions that arose:

- The WSIS leadership and governments have been very strict in terms of what issues they consider being “on the table.” These are Internet governance, financing and follow-up mechanisms to WSIS. For civil society, these are hardly ringing calls to action. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) tend to identify with words like education, human rights, environment, peace and health—which are seen as having been completed in Phase I.

- The structure/format of the PrepCom was not very civil society friendly. Most of the work was quickly referred into sub-committees rather than dealt with in plenaries. According to UN/WSIS rules, civil society can have speaking slots in plenaries, but in sub-committees, they only have observer status. So, CSOs have to work through governments. This was made additionally challenging due to difficulties in accessing the

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newest versions of the texts and accurate compilations of interventions by various governments. Civil society frequently ended up reacting to texts instead of being proactive in terms of stating what it really wanted.

- Civil society is not structured correctly to bring cross-cutting development issues forward into the topics that are being discussed. The family structure, based on stakeholder groups (women, youth, people with disabilities, etc.) worked well in Phase I when groups were fighting to see how many times they could get their group mentioned in the text. Now however, it is getting in the way of dealing with cross-cutting substantive issues in which the groups share a common interest. What is needed is some form of civil society leadership that can look at the issues each family has been raising for far, identify the areas of common concern and create working groups, and deal with speaking slots and travel fellowships based on *those* issues.

- There has been a significant reduction in funding available for civil society preparation and participation in Phase II of the Summit. This includes not simply funding for travel available through the WSIS Secretariat, but more importantly, funds available through donors to implement WSIS-related policy mobilization projects. Several million dollars flowed through such projects in Phase I, enabling civil society to build its capacity to understand and to proactively engage in the Summit.

- There has been considerable turnover in terms of people within families. For example, within the Youth Caucus only two members had participated in any of the Phase I PrepComs. Everyone else had only been able to participate in the Summit. The caucus organizers had assumed that everyone had experience in the issues and in the negotiating/lobbying process and skipped doing any capacity-building at the beginning of the PrepCom. This undercut its effectiveness.

- A corollary is that whenever there are new people involved in a process, there is a tendency to rehash discussions that have already been had and to reinvent the wheel. While completely understandable, it makes it hard to move forward onto new topics until everyone feels they have had their say on the fundamentals.

- Some civil society participants believe that the dramatic increase in new Tunisian civil society participation (particularly that of GONGOs, Government Organized NGOs) has been a strategy of the Tunisian government to undermine international civil society participation in the Summit. Described by some participants as a “denial of service attack,” Tunisian issues and concerns dominated many caucus meetings to the point where other topics could not be addressed and decided on in a timely fashion.

- And last, but *very* far from least, is that people need to feel like they are working for something. In Phase I, a lot of civil society believed that their participation would result in new funded partnerships and/or recognition through the media. That did not happen. There was no new funding for the majority of the new civil society partnerships and ideas and the northern media ignored the Summit nearly entirely (although there was more extensive coverage by Southern media outlets). So, in Phase II there is less motivation to be involved since fewer people believe there will be a personal or organizational payoff. You have to *really* care about the texts and principles to

spend 12 hours a day slogging through words and phrases.

Road from Here to Tunis

The Canadian civil society meeting scheduled for May 2005 on the theme “Paving the Road to Tunis – WSIS II: The Views of Canada’s Civil Society on the Geneva Plan of Action and the Prospects for Phase II” will provide an excellent opportunity to expand both the quantity and quality of debate in preparation for the Tunis Summit. With an agenda encompassing the specific issues under negotiation and a broader stock-taking, it will hopefully re-engage civil society on the full scope of development issues. The challenge will be in ensuring that the depth and breadth of responses are presented to the Canadian government delegation in such a way that they can have an impact on the negotiating positions for PrepCom-3.

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