

World Summit on the Information Society: *What Did it Achieve for ICTs and Development, What Did it Ignore?*

The second World Summit on the Information Society was held in Tunis on 16-18 November 2005. It was a huge – 17,000-delegate – international gathering on ICTs and development. It was also the conclusion of a long process that began well before the previous WSIS, held in Geneva in 2003.

It can only claim limited progress on its two official agenda items:

- On financing for ICTs and development, it produced a useful report but not much else. Its main new financing vehicle – the Digital Solidarity Fund – will be only voluntary. It is unlikely to produce significant new money.
- On Internet governance – the way the Internet is run – the Summit failed to wrest control of core domain and file management from ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers), a body strongly associated with the US government. It did agree the creation of a new UN body – the Internet Governance Forum – that will discuss cross-cutting issues like Internet security. Its importance in practice, though, is unclear since its decisions will be non-binding.

Two other issues muscled their way to a profile at the Summit. A group of international NGOs pushed a human rights and media agenda into the spotlight. As previously in Geneva, they were ably assisted by unsubtle policing at events organised with local colleagues. There was also a new toy for all to admire – the prototype of a US\$100 laptop launched by Nicholas Negroponte of MIT. The aim is that every child worldwide will have one.

That describes what was present. But what was absent? I'll highlight four things.

First, the IT sector: from cybercafes to data entry operators to Web site designers to hardware assemblers and IT trainers. These represent a thousand points of light in the information society; lights increasingly seen even within poor communities. This needs a much higher profile because it's a direct way to create jobs, incomes and skills from ICTs.

Second, resources for action. Most projects publicised at WSIS focused on inputs: putting technology in place, developing skills, delivering information. But, of itself, this creates no basis for development. No point giving a poor entrepreneur information on a new market opportunity if they don't know how to reach that market. No point giving a farmer information on new techniques if they can't afford the fertiliser or equipment involved. Projects must start thinking about how they resource users to turn information into development actions.

Third, independent research. Almost every exhibition stand, every presentation, every report or CD handed out was potentially self-interested. Private firms extolling the virtues of their technical solutions; NGOs praising the development benefits of their ICT projects; donors congratulating themselves on their ICT programmes. Where was the critical, independent research? Not there because no-one will fund it. And perhaps that lack of funding reflects lots of emperors who don't wish to be told what sort of clothes they are really wearing.

Fourth, big new ideas. Consolidating existing agendas is important. Any area of development, though, must also create a sense of forward motion and innovation if it is to attract political attention and funding. The \$100 laptop might help but that's too much of a new-solution-looking-for-a-problem for my taste. How about, instead, a major effort to see how the massive mobile telephony base can be used for development purposes? How about helping extend the trade in offshoring from its current home – Asia – to Africa? How about diverting outsourcing of IT from the private sector to social enterprise in developing countries? How about extending fair trade from coffee and chocolate to IT? These and no doubt other big ideas are floating around the margins. They need to be pushed towards the centre stage.

These criticisms are serious. Not just for the come-and-gone Summit but more importantly for the future ICTs and development agenda. But my bottom line for the Summit at least is: I hope there are similar events in future. It was a unique, invigorating experience. And – whatever the missing elements – it was a rare opportunity for thousands to focus on, and learn more about, that central transformative force in development: technology.

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