

UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Geneva 2003

by Amb. Daniel Stauffacher

*Al Siyassa Al Dawliya, Cairo,
Egypt*

December 2003

**The First World Summit on the Information Society
Geneva, 10 - 12 December 2003**

We are living today in a transition period that is taking us from the industrial society to the information society, in which information and knowledge are at the heart of all human activity. The objective of the *World Summit on the Information Society*, which was held in Geneva in December 2003, was to debate issues such as the digital divide, which separates the “info-rich” from “the info-poor”, and the application of information and communication technologies for social, economic and cultural development. In Geneva, representatives from States, intergovernmental organizations, the private sector, and civil society including the media, were expected to reach a consensus on a common vision for this emerging society.

The digital divide affects the South first and foremost, but also the North

Today, information and knowledge are at the very heart of all human activity; information on the price of goods allows markets to function; information on the prevention and treatment of diseases is the cornerstone of health policies; information on the world in which we live is a source of education; information is a prerequisite for good governance. Yet, information is precisely what is most lacking in countries in the South, and it is widely recognised that this shortage constitutes a major handicap for their social, economic, and cultural development. In fact, the gap that has always existed between the haves and have-nots might well get wider, as the developed regions of the planet put into place the *information society*. To the North-South divide that is characteristic of socio-economic disparities a new dimension has now been added in the form of a *digital divide*. *The latter results in* deepening differences in levels of development, as it deprives entire groups of people, even entire countries, from the benefits of information and knowledge. A few figures serve to illustrate these striking imbalances. According to the International Telecommunication Union¹, 83 countries have a teledensity of ten telephone lines per hundred inhabitants, while 25 countries have less than one per hundred inhabitants.

¹ Yoshio Utsumi, ITU Secretary General, United Nations General Assembly, New York, June 2002.

The situation is even more disastrous in terms of Internet access; in 61 countries, fewer than one person in a hundred uses the Internet. Such a gap does not only exist between North and South, it is also widening within the South, between the urban elite and the most underprivileged populations who live on the outskirts of huge cities or in rural areas. This dichotomy exists in the North as well, although on a much smaller scale. According to the Federal Office of Statistics, Switzerland also suffers from a digital divide: to mention just one aspect of the problem, half as many women as men surf the Internet.² Therefore one should not be surprised if many participants in the Summit wished to highlight in Geneva the discriminatory situation facing various segments of the population, who are disenfranchised or sidelined and who, as a result, are excluded from the information society.

The World Summit on the Information Society

It is understandable, therefore, that the digital divide has become a source of major concern for the international community, which has realised that governments and intergovernmental organisations (i.e. the political players) cannot meet this enormous challenge alone. It is essential that the private sector, bringing together the main economic forces, and civil society, which represents primarily the social actors, be closely involved in the debate. It is in this spirit that the International Telecommunication Union, backed by the UN system and all of its member states, took the initiative of convening a World Summit on the Information Society under the patronage of Kofi Annan. The Summit was to take place in two phases: the first one was held in Geneva from 10 to 12 December 2003, by invitation of the Swiss Government, and the second is scheduled to take place in Tunis in November 2005. All stakeholders are invited to take part, namely UN member states, intergovernmental organisations, the private sector, and civil society, including the media.

² www.infosociety-stat.admin.ch.

The Summit's first goal: to develop a common vision of the information society

The objective of the Summit, as defined by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2001, was to *“develop a common vision and understanding of the information society, and to adopt a declaration of principles and a plan of action for implementation by governments, international institutions, and all sectors of civil society.”* In other words, the Summit's mission was to develop a common vision of the information society, once solutions to bridge the digital divide have been identified. To this end, the Summit participants were called upon to deal with a wide range of both diverse and complex issues. In fact, the list of topics that could be on the Summit agenda is truly endless, because information and communication technologies (ICT) affect almost every aspect of our daily lives as societies or individuals. The information society is global in essence.

This being said, one must bear in mind that information and communication technologies (ICT) are not an end in and of themselves. But they can be a powerful tool to leapfrog over the existing development divide, and accelerate efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)³ of combating poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environment degradation and discrimination against women. Used with discernment and intelligence, they can boost wealth creation and improve the quality of life at both individual and collective levels, lead to greater equity and social justice, promote transparency and accountability, and foster effectively inclusion and empowerment. In other words, they have the potential for providing immense opportunities to stimulate economic, social, and cultural development, as well as democracy and good governance.

A priority : providing access to information and knowledge

The digital divide cannot be legitimately discussed without addressing the crucial problem of **access to technology**. Shortcomings in telecommunication infrastructure, coupled with the cost of computer hardware (PCs) and software available on the international market, are generally insurmountable obstacles. Their

³ United Nations Millennium Summit, September 2000

cost is often disproportionately high for the low incomes of the men and women living in developing countries. Moreover, equipment and software are usually ill-suited to the real needs of potential users because they are too sophisticated, and frequently offer many features that go unused, in effect rendering them useless. There are other barriers as well, such as the often prohibitive telephone and Internet access rates. It is somewhat paradoxical to note that while rates continue to fall in the industrialised world, they remain high in most developing countries, where the telecommunication sector is still controlled by state monopoly, and thus not open to competition.

But it would be erroneous to think that the infrastructure issue alone explains the existence of a digital divide. The gap is also about **access to content**, because access to information is a function of the user's ability to receive, understand, process, and store information, and also to create and disseminate it. The user's level of education, their ability to search, receive, and freely spread information and ideas, their belonging to a privileged or underprivileged language community, and their financial means are all factors which can favour, restrict or prohibit access to information and knowledge. One should not overlook the fact that the language barrier can be a real handicap for anyone who doesn't speak one of the major international languages. This is especially true of English, which has become the *de facto* universal language. However, the predominance of English should not discourage Internet users from creating local content in their native language, with a view to addressing the specific needs of their local communities, be it for the purpose of education, culture, health, farming, commerce, banking, and so on. A plurality of languages on electronic networks, particularly the Internet, is a *sine qua non* condition for safeguarding cultural and linguistic diversity in the information society.

Another sensitive issue is how to preserve the public domain, which is threatened by an ever-increasing commercialisation of information and knowledge. Many elements of knowledge, especially in science, that are seen as vital to teaching, research, or simply cultural fulfilment, should therefore belong to the public domain. Yet, information and knowledge are not accessible to everyone because they must be purchased at prices that are often beyond the reach of the poorest users.

Other issues of concern

Even though the digital divide and related issues top the list of concerns to be addressed at the Summit, both in Geneva and Tunis, there are several other questions that will keep the attention of the delegates and raise lively debates among the various stakeholders. They include information and network security, protection of data confidentiality, trust in online transactions, international cooperation in combating cyber crime, protection of intellectual property, etc. Discussions will also focus on how and when to establish a reliable legal, regulatory and political framework that is not only transparent and non-discriminatory, but also likely to promote public and private investment so that infrastructure can be put in place and new services developed.

Another related topic is Internet governance. Many developing countries argue that governments should have a direct say, and play a greater role, in managing and setting policy for the Internet. They challenge the private character of *the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers* (ICANN), which is entrusted to administer the allocation of the Internet protocol address space and to manage the domain name system and the root server system functions. Based in California, ICANN represents the American Government's commitment to private sector, self-regulation of the Internet. This is why several governments would like to hand over that authority to a United Nations agency, such as the International Telecommunications Union.

Last but not least, for reasons related to policy or security, a number of countries are exacerbating the impact of the digital divide by imposing more or less severe restrictions on the content available on the Web. The Internet troubles, and at times even disconcerts, some of the established powers. Still, unlike more traditional means of expression that are film- or paper-based, the Internet is much more difficult to control because its immaterial nature makes it virtually impossible to seize. This is probably why, in several countries, the Internet is less restricted than the traditional media. It is not surprising, therefore, that several participants in the Summit's preparatory process, particularly in civil society and media circles, have raised the issue of freedom of expression in cyberspace, asking the Summit to reaffirm

unequivocally the fundamental rights of free access to information and free flow of information.

A unique, but difficult Summit preparatory process

In reality, the preparatory process had to face very difficult and unpredictable obstacles. At the very beginning, the tripartite composition of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom), which was composed of governments, private sector and civil society, created great confusion on the respective rights and responsibilities of each stakeholder. The confusion reached a paroxysm at the first PrepCom, in July 2002, when governmental representatives decided on rules of procedure behind closed doors. In short, their decision was that all stakeholders would have the right to voice their comments, ideas and suggestions, but only governments would take part in the decision-making process. Tensions only quietened down when it became obvious that the consultation process would be conducted in an open and transparent way (all documents, from all stakeholders, have been distributed world-wide through Internet, without any kind of discrimination). Numerous consultations on the themes of the Summit were organised by a range of intergovernmental organisations, as well as by private sector and civil society entities. Preparatory meetings were held in all regions of the world (Bamako, Bucharest, Tokyo, B avaro and Beirut) to provide a better understanding of each region's specific needs and priorities.

A second difficulty originated from the wrong perception that the World Summit would be a conference about technologies, because it has been initiated and organized by the International Telecommunication. The ITU Secretary-General himself used several times the expression "*Summit on Information and Communication Technologies*". ITU is a UN agency specialized in telecommunications that has succeeded, for decades, in steering clear of political controversies. This wrong perception has been reinforced by the fact that a majority of the governmental representatives associated with the preparatory process were those dealing usually with ITU. Finally, thanks mainly to civil society and UNESCO's perseverance, the character of Summit has evolved slowly from a technological gathering to a global conference taking into account the content dimension of the information society and societal impacts of the ITCs. The nature of the controversial issues negotiated amongst governments at the very end of the preparatory process

is a clear evidence of this evolution: most, if not all, have no direct relation with the ITU domain of competence.

A third obstacle is related to the international situation, which has profoundly changed what I would call “the mood and priorities of the world political leaders”. September 11, the war in Irak, the situation in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, the world economic crisis, to mention the most dramatic and painful events, have contributed to weakening international solidarity, making differences more acute and strengthening distrust among nations and individuals. PrepCom 2 and 3 in 2003 were certainly affected by the negative climate that prevails in international relations.

Clearly, political, military, and security concerns, in addition to social and economic priorities, are currently at the forefront of leaders’ minds. In addition to these rather bleak circumstances, there is chronic scepticism regarding all international meetings: both in terms of time and money, their cost is viewed as being inversely proportional to the results achieved. It is no secret that there is a feeling of “fatigue” with respect to large-scale events organized by the UN system, which often result in declarations of intent that have no real impact on the daily lives of the vast majority of the world’s population, and more particularly on people living in developing countries.

The World Summit success criteria

An easy and simplistic way of assessing the success of the Geneva Summit would be to limit oneself to the consideration of statistical data: how many heads of State, how many participants, how many journalists ? While such figures are interesting, they have no determining meaning. Furthermore, one should not attach too much importance to the level of consensus or disagreement over the *Declaration of Principles*. Diplomats may have found the right wording to cover up their fundamental differences, but diplomatic language does not solve problems by waving a magic wand. In my mind, the real success will be measurable only in the medium term, say within two years, at the Tunis Summit, according to two criteria : first, the credibility and durability of the multi-stakeholder approach bringing together representatives from governments, private sector and civil society; secondly, the implementation rate of the *Plan of Action*.

Obstacles and difficulties notwithstanding, the preparatory process was very fruitful in this sense that it has led to a very wide consultation of all stakeholders. Hundreds of pages of comments and proposals were sent to the WSIS secretariat from all parts of the world. In this regard, the participation of civil society was very rich and stimulating. It has contributed substantially to the draft *Declaration of Principles* and draft *Plan of Action*. Even though only a small part of these comments and proposals went over the hurdle of governmental negotiations, the contribution from civil society has profoundly influenced the diplomats and experts' way of thinking. Its impact may not be very visible today in the text, but I am convinced that it has put the preparatory process on the right track, and I hope it will continue to do so during the second phase which should lead us to Tunis. Whatever could be said in favour or against the multi-stakeholder process, it will be recognized sooner or later that the Geneva Summit has paved the way for a new type of world governance. Even though Governments should and will keep full decision-making responsibility, the preparation of the decisions will rely more and more on a large consultation of all concerned, be it the private sector or the civil society. This consultation process is nothing new for Swiss people. In Switzerland, any governmental or parliamentary decision can be challenged by citizens through a referendum. This is why the executive and the legislative authorities, before taking a decision, have no choice but to consult all concerned broadly in order to build up a large consensus, for fear of being challenged through a referendum. This long-held tradition has guided the Swiss delegation, in which representatives of the Swiss private sector and civil society were included during the whole WSIS preparatory process. Wiser for its experience, the Swiss delegation did what it could during this period to preserve and strengthen the multi-stakeholder character of the Geneva Summit, and to make sure that the international civil society would have a voice. For instance, it was at the Swiss delegation's insistence that the PrepCom Bureau accepted the creation of a civil society bureau parallel to its own, in order to help to integrate better civil society into the preparatory process.

The second criterion to measure the success of the Geneva Summit is the implementation rate of the *Plan of action* in the medium term. It depends on many parameters, but the most important one is related to the concrete measures that the international community will effectively take to bridge the digital divide (who is doing

what and when?), and to mobilize the necessary financial resources. Following the example of all previous Summits dealing with environment, women, population, etc., the Geneva Summit could not avoid the traditional confrontation between industrialized and developing countries on the ways and means of mobilizing and using the financial resources needed to foster development in the poorest countries. While it is true that the current international political and economic environment is not very favourable, and the spirit of solidarity, I must say, is more vivid in the speeches of the politicians than in reality on the field. This problem is not new, and the Geneva Summit is no exception. President Wade of Senegal has proposed to create an *ad hoc* “*Digital Solidarity Fund*”, but many governments in the North are of the opinion that it would be more appropriate to use existing mechanisms and channels.

Conclusion

The information society is still in infancy. Building it on a universal scale will take years, if not decades. This Geneva Summit is only the very first step in a very long process. Its success will broadly depend on the ability of all stakeholders to continue working together, and to agree on the actions (including the practical modalities of their accomplishment) required over the coming years to ensure that this new society allows everyone – men and women, in the South as well as in the North – to have access to information and communication technologies. When that time comes, Switzerland will be able to pride itself on having taken a leading part in the political birth of this emerging society, and having actively contributed to giving it its first breath.

Ambassador Daniel Stauffacher

Delegate of the Swiss Federal Council for the WSIS

December 2003