

## **Building Dynamic Partnerships among Stakeholders: From the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) to the World Summit of Solidarity (WSS)**

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When I had the great honor and privilege, in the name of Mali and Africa, to become the President of the Prepcom of the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in July 2002 in Geneva, I quickly realized that this was a very specific Summit.

First, it is specific because of its topic: it is the first time that the United Nations organizes a Summit on the Information Society, a new and complex theme which required a long and difficult period to reach a shared vision regarding this question. This is what the Geneva phase of the WSIS was essentially dedicated to.

Second, it is also specific because it is organized in two phases. As a result of a political compromise between the two countries wishing to host the WSIS, the articulation of the Summit in two phases happened for the first time in the history of United Nations summits. Its articulation, in Geneva in 2003, then in Tunis in 2005, proves to be very beneficial for this demanding process, because it makes it possible, in the long-term, to address complex and sensitive questions, thus providing an opportunity to discuss the issues over time and to progressively build consensus.

Last but not least, this Summit is specific because it brings to the negotiating table, in one process, stakeholders who differ by nature and status, with different and sometimes divergent concerns, all wishing to contribute to the construction of a new society and determined to defend their interests, by claiming a specific role and place. Indeed, when the

General Assembly of the United Nations called for the Summit<sup>1</sup>, it invited Governments to participate in the WSIS and encouraged intergovernmental organizations, in particular international and regional organizations as well as non-governmental organizations, civil society and the private sector, to actively contribute to the intergovernmental preparatory process of the Summit and in the Summit itself.

In such a context, my first concern, as the President of the Preparatory Committee, was to raise awareness among the different stakeholders regarding the complexity of the process, to agree on the nature of the Summit, its important issues and challenges, as well as, of course, the ways and means to address these issues and find solutions to the challenges at hand.

I identified three main issues of this new type of Summit:

- To transform the digital divide into opportunities and especially into digital perspectives for all, in particular for the large majority of humanity living in the South, reducing in this way the social and economic divide;
- To accelerate the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), by ensuring optimal use of the new information and communication technologies in all fields;
- To promote linguistic and cultural diversity.

In sum, all involved stakeholders agree today that the essential global issue and the main objective of WSIS is to examine the means to place this digital revolution at the service of human development, not only by overcoming the digital divide, but also and foremost by addressing the social and economic divide, ensuring that new information and communication technologies do not kill our cultures and languages. In this way, we will ensure no citizen is excluded or marginalized from the Information Society.

The intense thinking process and exchange during the preparatory process of the first phase of WSIS has led to the conclusion, reflected in the Geneva documents, that information and communication technologies are not an aim per se. They are a means at the service of human beings and social groups. The participants of the Geneva session of the Summit agreed that cultural and linguistic diversity, the role of media and freedom of the press in the Information Society, the question of capacity-building and human resources, multiple applications in the field of education, health, environment, commerce, employment or prevention of natural disasters are major issues of society which need to find their place in

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<sup>1</sup> A/Res/56/183 : [http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/background/resolutions/56\\_183\\_unga\\_2002-fr.pdf](http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/background/resolutions/56_183_unga_2002-fr.pdf)

the WSIS Geneva Declaration. Technological issues have also not been neglected. The security of networks, the use of open source software or Internet governance have been prioritized on the list of challenges which the Summit must address, in the second phase of the process, as well as the question of financing of the digital divide.

Considering these challenges and the perspective of building a bridge between the Geneva 2003 and the Tunis 2005 phases, it was important to address the following three challenges:

- First, if not eliminate, at least reduce the great mistrust between the various stakeholders of the Summit, and to ensure that Governments, the private sector, civil society and international organizations learn to work together in a complementary manner, in order to build a consensus regarding the solutions to the major questions raised by the Information Society.
- Second, to construct a good articulation, both from the point of view of the objectives and the content, between the two phases of the Summit: if the credibility of the Summit was demonstrated in Geneva, Tunis now has to broaden its perspective and ensure that the commitments taken in the context of the World Summit on the Information Society become sustainable.
- And finally third, make of this Summit a starting point for a new era for international relations, where ideologies of negative and destructive competition are gradually replaced by universal solidarity.

Considering the great number of issues, challenges and stakeholders, it was essential to identify the best strategy, the essential leverage which was to guarantee some chances of success of our Summit: it seems to me, in retrospect, that efforts to address the first of the three challenges represent this leverage.

Indeed, at the very outset, the will to enable all interested parties to participate has clearly been expressed by Governments and has been reflected not only in the rules of procedure of the Preparatory Committee, but also in the Summit itself, as well, and foremost, through concrete facts. This represents one of the key achievements of the preparatory process: new means of involvement of civil society and the private sector have been developed and have been used extensively throughout the lengthy series of preparatory meetings. The perspectives of many sectors of civil society, the private sector and international organizations have been heard and found their way into the texts. There has been gradual progress from specific to more structured contributions, acknowledged by all stakeholders, transforming **the input into true impact**. In response to my call to “get organized”, civil society has – for the first time in the history of United Nations summits – established an

“International Civil Society Bureau”. Participants witnessed history in the making as joint meetings between the intergovernmental Bureau of the Preparatory Committee of the Summit, the Civil Society Bureau and the Coordinating Committee of Business Interlocutors (CCBI) were held, making the two latter quasi-institutional partners of Governments.

To involve all partners at the moment of the negotiations should have enabled them to naturally establish partnerships for the subsequent phases of the process. Each stakeholder – governments, international organizations, the private sector and civil society – can, and must, bring a unique contribution to the challenges already identified or in the process of being so: digital divide, inequalities of access, reinforcement of security of networks, capacity-building, creation of diverse content, and development of diversified applications. It is unlikely that each partner – whether governments, international organizations, civil society and the private sector – individually has the necessary means to have a major impact. Even if it were the case, coordinated efforts result in the achievement of the same objectives in a more effective or timely manner.

New alliances will therefore be more and more common: the Information Society inevitably leads to a governance of partnerships, in a participatory operational way, at the national level, as well as worldwide.

The time has come to mobilise all stakeholders of the Information Society, in order to build new partnerships taking into account the needs of all social groups, in particular the most disadvantaged ones, thus allowing all to reap the benefits of these new information and communication technologies. The time has come to allow each citizen to acquire a digital culture.

In this regard, the articulation of the Summit in two phases provides an excellent opportunity which will allow us to **better develop, in the long term, new partnerships in the service of the society of information and shared knowledge**. This is why the *process* itself – with an emphasis on the value of the principle of inclusion – is as important as the *objectives* of the Summit. And this is why we were vigilant to make sure **that the procedure does not kill the process**.

The ambition of the Summit, concerning a global project of society, represents enormous challenges. Beyond the technological and societal issues already cited, there exists an even more inclusive vision. If it is true that the Information Society enables circulating information and knowledge throughout the world; if it is also true that all of humanity can now potentially share knowledge and know-how; if it is true that creating and disseminating educational, scientific, cultural and informative contents is made possible for all populations around the globe, then it is possible to envisage a new solidarity among human beings, the

social groups and the nations in the entire world – a solidarity based on sharing knowledge, a true solidarity based on better understanding of the Other and on mutual respect.

This is where the real reach of this new type of Summit is evident. Not only through concern of integration of all key actors of the Information Society and through a participative approach; not only through developing partnerships at an international level and through the vision of global solidarity among peoples and nations, but also and foremost with **a political ambition to reinforce multilateral cooperation in a new form.**

I am deeply convinced that this Summit – because it is dealing with global politics of human society as a whole – could be the precursor of a new generation of Summits. It is desirable – probably indispensable – that in a world which is increasingly globalized, we make a qualitative shift, **moving from United Nations Conferences dealing with development questions to summits of Heads of States and Governments, called for every two to three years**, where the decision-makers of this world – which are the highest authorities of all Member States of the United Nations – participating on an equal footing in the future of our world, will meet as a General Assembly to discuss the important issues of our future society in construction, based on the reports prepared by the main stakeholders of the Information Society. It is through such a shift we can build progressively this **new project of a world society based on the values of solidarity and sharing.**

This is where, in my opinion, the greatest challenge of our process lies. The question is how do we go about building this new world society. From my point of view, the WSIS can be the starting point:

- By reinforcing the commitment of the different stakeholders regarding the implementation of the Geneva Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action, through the adoption, in Tunis, on one hand, of a political document which could be called “**Fundamental Principles of Digital Solidarity**”, and which would establish the basis for the rights, obligations and responsibilities of the different stakeholders in the Information Society, and, on the other hand, an operational document, grouping the **Regional Plans of Action**, and which would allow to perfect the generic Plan of Action, focusing on the specificities and priorities of the various world regions.
- By considering creating – at the level of the United Nations – a specialized agency in charge of providing the legal framework for the development of multi-stakeholder partnerships at the national, regional and international levels – responding in this way to a certain extent to the concern expressed in the Cardoso

Report and contributing to **the emergence of a partnership-based world governance.**

**Inclusion, partnership and solidarity** are key-words which characterize the entire preparatory process of the Geneva phase of the World Summit on the Information Society.

The success of Geneva will have been to lay the foundations of this new society – the society of shared knowledge – characterized by **real partnerships** which need to be built and reinforced **among the main stakeholders of the Information Society**, a partnership based on a new spirit of cooperation, listening to the Others, and, foremost, based on an active solidarity among States, among peoples and citizens of the world, **each being conscious of the interdependency between Actors.**

At a time when the new world order is searching for itself, where the absence of benchmarks constitutes the only benchmark, humanity urgently needs the input of all components in a spirit of equal footing and solidarity, **in order to transform imposed competition into wished-for interdependency, in other words, into voluntary solidarity.**

In Geneva, we have created a new spirit, the spirit of the WSIS, which is based on mutual respect, openness to the Others, active listening, **a constructive dialogue in the spirit of a partnership and the constant search for a consensus and dynamic compromise.**

When we speak about solidarity, this is what is at stake. And in the African culture, to speak about solidarity, this is what is meant: to express, through a sincere dialogue, a true commitment to address the specific concerns of the Other and a constant availability for common action, reflecting in this fashion a great awareness of a shared destiny!

This is what we mean by Digital Solidarity, which is, the African vision of solidarity applied to a Digital Society. In this way, from the Spirit of Geneva to the Commitment of Tunis, our common path should help us to make of this Summit “**the World Summit of Solidarity**”.