

## **Multi-Stakeholderism and Civil Society**

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United Nations Resolution 56/183, by which the General Assembly officially endorsed the holding of the World Summit on the Information Society, raised many hopes among NGOs used to working with the United Nations, because it encouraged “NGOs, civil society and the private sector to contribute to, and actively participate in, the intergovernmental preparatory process of the Summit and the Summit itself”. This resolution could potentially represent a turning point in the history of the United Nations – civil society relations, as the latter, as well as the private sector, had never before been so closely associated in the preparation and the holding of a United Nations summit. During the world conferences of the nineties, NGOs had indeed started to get organized and speak with a common voice at NGO fora, but these were “parallel” to the official events and sometimes even distant, both physically (see Beijing) and in the spirit (see Johannesburg) from the intergovernmental negotiations. Despite the undeniable impact of the NGO lobbying and advocacy activity on the intergovernmental deliberations, one could not speak yet of a true partnership between the United Nations and the emerging “global civil society”.

On the basis of the above-mentioned GA resolution, the WSIS could on the contrary represent an innovative approach and set a positive precedent, coupled by the fact that this time “civil society” at large was invited to participate in the event. Despite the ambiguity of this concept, the fact that formal non-governmental organizations didn’t have the “monopoly” of the interaction with the United Nations was seen by many as a positive and forward-looking indication.

However, when during the First Preparatory Committee (Prepcom 1) meeting civil society/NGO representatives were excluded already from the discussion on rules and procedures, – including on arrangements for accreditation of NGOs and other actors – they became very angry and frustrated: although a Civil Society Division (CSD) had indeed been

created within the WSIS Secretariat, the real possibilities of interaction with governments were very limited and civil society felt that it was de facto excluded from the preparatory process.

It was at this point that we – civil society activists from the North and the South – decided to become more proactive and organize ourselves. The Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CONGO), because of its longstanding experience of UN-civil society relations and of its mandate to facilitate the participation of civil society in United Nations activities, was pushed to the forefront by fellow NGOs. Together we started to convene daily civil society plenary meetings, which CONGO was asked to chair, in order to brief one another on current issues and determine a common strategy. We created the first sub-committees and the first thematic caucuses. We also succeeded to clearly distinguish ourselves as civil society apart from the private sector or business entities.

Despite the deception and relative failure of this first Prepcom, we kept the ball rolling. Several regional civil society gatherings were key in pushing forward our common agenda and trying to get more space in this Summit, according to the wording of the GA resolution. The Asian Civil Society Forum, organized by CONGO in December 2002 – shortly after the 1st Prepcom – called for a stronger inclusion of civil society, and adopted a methodology to arrive at the final outcome document that was taken over by the Asian Regional Preparatory Meeting held in Tokyo shortly thereafter.

Our efforts finally brought some results. At the second Prepcom, we were able to create three institutional arrangements to enable us to interact with the governments on a more equal footing: the Civil Society Bureau (CSB), the Civil Society Plenary, and the Content and Themes Group. The establishment of a Civil Society Bureau as a counterpart to the Intergovernmental Bureau was the first central step to the realization of the vision that governments, the private sector and civil society are partners when it comes to designing and building our societies of tomorrow. Structured through “families” as entities representing different elements of civil society, it complemented the Content and Themes Group that coordinated the substantive input from the Caucuses and the Civil Society Plenary that gave legitimacy to the overall activities. Civil society had thus organized itself in a way that allowed maximum participation and diversity of opinion. It created also the possibility both on-line and off-line to shape common positions for input into the ongoing negotiations of the outcome document.

At Prepcom 3 expectations were high among civil society activists about the effectiveness of the above-mentioned three institutional arrangements. We all hoped that these mechanisms

would lead us “from input to impact”. However, after two weeks of extensive networking and intensive negotiations, feelings among representatives of civil society organizations were mixed. Even though everybody welcomed the creation of these new entities, their effectiveness still needed to be improved to channel successfully our input. There was a real danger that they were seen as a simple cosmetic operation that concretely didn’t help channeling our aspirations.

And civil society had some reasons to be frustrated. The suggestions it had made for input into the Summit Declaration and Plan of Action during the Intersessional Meeting in Paris had almost completely been overlooked and ignored by governments. The emphasis NGOs and civil society organizations attach to human rights in the Information Society and to the fact that this needs to be explicitly mentioned in the outcome documents of the Summit had not been taken over in the official negotiations. The importance we attach to the concept of Internet governance and to having an information society that does not focus exclusively on technology but is open to the needs of all people had also been overlooked. The Plan of Action, as proposed, would not help humanity to bridge the digital divide. Concretely, while civil society proposed to put people at the centre of the Information Society, the draft Declaration and Plan of Action were still bureaucratic and technology-driven. From 86 recommendations made by civil society during an intersessional meeting in Paris, 49 – more than 60 per cent – had been totally ignored. Among the most important items that had disappeared were the importance of local authorities and communities in developing their own local content; the unhampered and unfiltered access to publicly available resources without manipulation and control; freedom of information as a means to reduce corruption; special needs for developing countries, and non-commercial groups in frequency allocations.

Yet thanks precisely to the existence of the Civil Society Bureau, we were able to prepare the meeting with the Intergovernmental Bureau and convey to them our general feeling of frustration. Even though as civil society we don’t share the same views on all issues, we succeeded to speak out with “one voice” and echo this voice also in a large way in front of the press.

But in order to be more effective in our negotiation style, we realized that we had to improve the functioning of internal democracy. It is not easy to organize the expression of so many points of view, which may even be divergent. Transparency in decision-making, accountability to one’s constituency and legitimacy of the organizations elected to represent the “families” in the Bureau are issues that are not solved once for ever. To some extent civil society still needs to learn “the rules of the game”. Governments are often well-disposed and willing to cooperate with us, but governmental delegates don’t have the same flexibility as we do to propose, negotiate and adopt any proposal. Most of the time, they have to refer to

their capitals for approval, whereas we are able to take decisions more quickly and defend our points of view.

Finally after almost two years of intensive preparations, negotiations and passionate involvement – at the international, regional and national level – we came in Geneva to the end of the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, the third United Nations Summit of the new millennium.

From a procedural and formal point of view, the preparatory process of the Summit has opened a door to a new era. In 2002, at the Earth Summit in Johannesburg, world leaders accepted the adoption of a “multi-stakeholder approach”. By the establishment of the Civil Society Bureau, this “acquis” has been taken over by the WSIS process and even reinforced, which constitutes a major breakthrough towards the achievement of more democratic governance at the global level. The structure of the Summit itself has reflected this change as it will radically differ from previous United Nations summits: instead of an official conference and a parallel, often remote and distant NGO Forum, the WSIS was conceived as a flower, with the core constituted by the governmental negotiations and the petals by side-events organized by civil society, that constituted official parts of the Summit itself.

Further, civil society delegations had been allowed to participate on an ad hoc basis in the negotiations, while at the same time not challenging Governments as the ultimately responsible carriers for the success or the failure of the summit.

After some deadlock at the end of Prepcom 3, we as civil society had adopted a double strategy. We were still committed to the process and to the success of the event, but we were also ready to produce our own declaration, should the benchmarks and minimum standards we had set at the end of Prepcom 3 not be met.

These relate to the North-South divide and the compelling need to bridge the digital divide, notably by creating funding mechanisms that would contribute to achieving the targeted goal of 0.7% of GNP for development cooperation and, thereby, work towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

In the Millennium Declaration, world leaders acknowledged that “the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world’s people”. In order to come to this end, it says, there must be “policies and measures, at the global level, which correspond to the needs of developing countries and economies in transition and are formulated and implemented with their effective participation”.

Substantively, the Declaration and Programme of Action adopted in Geneva after last-minute major improvements, reflected to some extent our aspirations and the concrete inputs we had tried to give during the whole preparatory process.

As civil society we were proud and **united** that we helped to move the discussion from ICTs as an end in itself to ICTs as a means to social and economic development. And although we became often frustrated during the process that our contributions were heard but not taken into consideration, we moved slowly from **input to impact**. We established essential benchmarks – our ethical framework –, and after the deadlock at Prepcom 3 started to write our own Declaration which became an official document of the Summit.

We are now in the second phase toward Tunis and seem to live in a new era, in which civil society debates the value of multi-stakeholderism and questions with whom to form partnership alliances. Civil Society at WSIS, although having made such an enormous step forward in the multi-stakeholder approach and having been recognized as an indispensable partner, is after Prepcom 2 in the second phase still very much divided about its own functions in this process. The months ahead towards Tunis will show if this new approach will survive and lead us into an inclusive information and knowledge society.