Civil Society in the WSIS – A Rite of Passage

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While direct participation by citizens in politics dates back to the roots of civilization, civil society as a concept, indicating direct participation by active individuals and groups to promote non-commercial, general policy interests and broad social change, has only been formally recognized in recent years.[1]

WSIS is the most recent example (but certainly not the only example) of an international policy process that formally recognizes civil society as a legitimate actor and a so-called "equal player" at the multi-stakeholder table.

For many civil society actors, from both developed and developing countries, WSIS was their first encounter with international lobbying, advocacy and political negotiation. In some cases, it was their first opportunity to engage with their own government representatives in an environment that enabled a certain degree of access, participation and dialogue, often difficult to find at home.

People came to WSIS armed with papers, passion, optimism, commitment and agendas, determined to make the most of what was heralded as a unique experiment in an international policy process.

Some left along the way, angered and frustrated that they weren't heard by their duly elected government representatives, by the emphasis on tools, technology and markets; by the refusal of powerful interests to acknowledge the place of community-led, bottom-up solutions to global problems (such as community media, free and open source software and

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[1] Paraphrasing of introductory text describing civil society participation in Internet governance, by civil society members of the Working Group on Internet Governance

universal design for all); by the reluctance of the powerful few to share benefits and resources with those the process deemed to serve – the millions of people who live in poverty, are disempowered, are unable to access the means necessary to take control of their lives.

Those who stayed with the process had to constantly shift gear, regroup and restrategise – constantly adjusting to the changing configuration of civil society as old colleagues left and new ones, struggling to navigate the terrain and find their place both on and offline, joined the process; responding to the challenge of a well-organized, pro-government civil society lobby from Tunisia that expressed opinions and values that were often at odds with civil society's long-developed advocacies; and attempting to make sense of a second two-year phase, which, with the absence of the issues of financing and Internet governance, left most civil society actors feeling like they had been invited to the wrong party.

The First Phase

Whilst the first phase of WSIS presented great challenges, civil society established ways and means to coordinate the efforts of hundreds of individuals and organizations, through a collective of over 30 regional and thematic caucuses. Through its collective action and multiple voices, not to mention thousands of hours of drafting, it shifted the emphasis of the process to one which placed people, rather than technology, at the heart of its vision of information and communication societies.

Generally speaking, the first phase was characterized by a spirit of cooperation, trust, consensus-building and solidarity. Most delegates expressed a willingness to be open to understanding complex social, political and economic issues, demonstrated for example, by the solidarity expressed between civil society – north and south - around the Digital Solidarity Fund.

This solidarity was most eloquently expressed through the civil society Declaration "Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs" the development of which was itself a demonstration of this spirit of cooperation: "Working together both on-line and off-line as civil society entities, practicing an inclusive and participatory use of information and communication technologies, has allowed us to share views and shape common positions, and to collectively develop a vision of information and communication societies".

The Second Phase

The second phase, however, presented a range of challenges that have hampered the work of civil society to the extent that it has, as a collective entity, become fragmented, disoriented

and lacking the fundamental trust and honesty that characterized the first phase. This has of course impacted severely on its ability to intervene effectively and substantially in the process.

Whereas during the first phase, civil society was largely able to present consensus positions on critical issues, the somewhat disabling environment we have found ourselves in during the second phase has meant that many have chosen, by necessity, to seek out and develop "like-minded" coalitions around specific issues – a sharp departure from the strategy of phase I.

The reasons for this are complex, and with the benefit of hindsight, it could be surmised that this is a normal process, possibly even a desirable one, and to be expected in the maturation or development of civil society as global actor on this particular international stage.

Although the "seeds of discontent" were emerging towards the latter stages of the first phase, events during the Hammamet Prepcom made it clear that civil society was at a crossroads in WSIS and had some very tough decisions to make.

As we prepare for the Tunis Summit, we are still struggling to deal with these events openly and honestly and have tended to revert to the creation of processes and rules (not in itself a bad thing) that we can use to ensure a modicum of respect and set parameters that will allow us coordinate and intervene as an effective entity.

The Hammamet Prepcom – seeds of discontent

Human rights, "north-south" issues and questions of representation and meaningful participation of civil society and a lack of clarity regards the objectives of the second phase were some of the key elements contributing to the rather dramatic events of Hammamet.

The Human Rights Agenda

The Prepcom took place against a backdrop of, on the one hand, wariness and caution regards holding the second phase in a country with a poor record on human rights, specifically with respect the right to assemble, protest and associate, and freedom of opinion and expression; and on the other hand, seeing Tunis as an opportunity to extend support and solidarity to local independent NGOs (a practice common to civil society advocates no matter the country they are active in) and an opportunity to leverage the process to encourage local authorities to improve their human rights record. In addition, acknowledging the importance of an African country hosting an international United Nations Conference,

particularly considering the primary objectives of WSIS – alignment with the Millennium Development Goals and adherence to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The "North-South" Agenda

Governments were unable to reach consensus on issues of **financing mechanisms** and **Internet governance** during Phase I. In general, Governments were split along traditional north-south lines with regards perspectives, issues and possible solutions. Civil society had, however, made some progress in deepening understanding of these issues (particularly Financing mechanisms) and supported the call from Southern Governments for the establishment of new development models and financing mechanisms.

This was an important gesture of solidarity and a beginning – certainly for many European organizations – of understanding what role they could play in bringing pressure on their Governments to redress this situation.

However, civil society did not sufficiently address the issue of representation and meaningful participation of southern-based organizations, nor did it understand the implications of **not doing so**, with respect the second phase, particularly with the process being held in Tunisia. This situation was evident in the "visible" leadership or facilitation roles certain civil society actors played, particularly regards coordination of thematic caucuses, the civil society Content and Themes group, and chairing of the Civil Society Bureau.

It was even more compounded by the use of the "virtual plenary" space where English language dominated and discussions tended to be dominated by native English speakers.

The "Implementation Phase"

The third element was a lack of clarity (certainly at the beginning of the second phase) with regard to the aims of the second phase.

Some talked of setting benchmarks and indicators; others of building great databases of best practice to showcase at the Summit in 2005; others of creating multiple layers of networks which would hub around the 11 themes of the Action plan – though questions of what form these activities would take, who would lead them, and who would pay for it all, loomed large. Though civil society contributed significantly and gave tacit support to the Geneva Declaration, it had not approved or endorsed the Action Plan, being given little to no access to the process of its development.

The "Incident"

The incident that ignited the seeds of discontent in Hammamet centred around the right of a representative of an independent, legally recognized, Tunisian human rights organisation to speak on behalf of the WSIS Civil Society Human Rights caucus.

Objections from pro-Government Tunisian Civil Society groups took the form of calling for an "African woman" to speak (which confused many as Tunisia is an African country), and that either all governments were referred in the statement, or none. The statement of course raised some general concerns regarding the human rights record of the Tunisian Government, specifically with respect to its hosting of a United Nations Summit which takes the United Nations Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights as its guiding framework.

Such was the opposition, a very well-organized and coordinated strategy to suppress all criticism of the Tunisian Government, that civil society was held captive to negotiating its way through this process for the entire three days of the Prepcom. It was unable to organize and strategise around any other issues and "the incident" was resolved through no less than an intervention from the President of the Prepcom, calling for the right of the independent Tunisian human rights representative to speak on the final day of the meeting.

The manner in which pro-government Tunisian civil society representatives implemented this strategy was complex and "obtuse" – often masquerading behind protests of lack of transparency, lack of democracy and a very successful attempt to construct and widen an image of a north-south divide amongst civil society actors.

After Hammamet, after Tunis

The tragedy of Hammamet is that critical complex issues including civil society representation, north-south solidarity, meaningful developing country participation, the universality of human rights, and strategies for consensus building and the space for the development of diverse positions – have been largely dealt with through bureaucratisation of civil society's ways of working.

This is not to discredit the enormous efforts of those who are committed to the WSIS process, believe in the United Nations system and the value of the multi-stakeholder approach. But in the absence of open reflection and honest dialogue in a safe environment, we will only be able to bring a superficial resolution to our experience, rather than deepening understanding, rebuilding trust and strengthening our resolve to work together for common objectives.

There is no question of the value civil society brought to the WSIS process. Irrespective of particular positions of specific actors from Government, the private sector or intergovernmental bodies by and large, it is recognized that civil society contributed enormously – in spite of our many weaknesses and flaws – to the quality of discussions and outcomes documents, animated and mobilized cross-sectoral interest in information society issues, and helped to place the ICT and media agenda on the tables of every government.

But what next? This year, the international processes that have provided civil society with platforms to advocate their positions have culminated in the review of the Millennium Development Goals and the WSIS process will end with the Summit in Tunis. New international discussion and decision-making spaces will emerge. Though the exact form and nature of them is uncertain, they will, due in no small part to civil society's work in the WSIS, be or should be, multi-stakeholder.

There is an insurmountable amount of work to be done at the national level implementing our priority actions and holding Governments accountable to the principles and commitments made in over a decade of United Nations conferences. But we are hugely under-resourced; we have to rely on ICTs to facilitate and coordinate most of our regional and international work, and in that respect, we are hampered by cultural, social and linguistic barriers. Many feel and are un-represented, and for millions the very concept of civil society is a new one, in some cases, a non-existent one.

The way of the civil society actor in WSIS has not been an easy one but one from which so many lessons have been learnt. Let's hope that we have the courage and honesty to address the challenges that we've been presented with and be open to finding sustainable solutions to real problems, to be respectful of differences whilst not sacrificing our beliefs and values, to fully exploit the potential we have as legitimate actors and demand our rightful place at the table.

All said and done, WSIS provided a nexus – a space that attracted a rich and diverse array of people and organizations from almost every part of the world, with extraordinary skills, experience and know-how, providing the possibility to connect, collaborate and build coalitions and alliances that we hope live well beyond the WSIS process, and continue to contribute to shaping visions of a fairer, more just and sustainable world.