WSIS and Multi-Stakeholderism

Claudia Padovani
Researcher, University of Padua

The World Summit on the Information Society, as a political highly symbolic event, has developed around a number of catchwords, amongst them are connectivity, development and digital divide. I suggested elsewhere (Padovani 2004) that "convergence" should be added as an underlying conceptual nexus: convergence in technology, in strands of debate (O'Siochru 2004), but also in actors' orientations and discourse as well as in policy-making practices. WSIS has offered a window of opportunity to collectively re-define the communication agenda for the 21st century: a process-aware agenda in which the idea of multi-stakeholder conduct of political processes emerged as a symbolic nexus, both in discourse and in praxis. I will briefly discuss what WSIS has shown in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of the multi-stakeholder approach, as a contribution to the development of participatory practices in ICT and communication policies in the future.

The multi-stakeholder approach can be conceptualized as a mode of governance (Kooiman 2003) that involves actors of different nature (governmental and non-governmental), expressing different interests, in a political process characterized by interaction among actors and interconnection among levels of authority. This is not something completely new in the arena of International Relations, and particularly in the recent history of United Nations Conferences and Summits (Dodds 2002, Hemmati 2002); yet the wide acceptance of the term should be placed in the broader context of global political transformations at the dawn of the third millennium. The new formula can be seen as a response to the articulation of global politics or cosmopolitan democracy (Held et. al 2000); a way to face the challenges posed by a "shifting in the location of authority" (Rosenau 1999) that characterizes global decision-making processes, producing forms of politics that are perceived as more and more distant from the people and "opaque" (Neveu 2000) and have therefore raised strong contestation "from below".

Furthermore, it should be stressed that the idea of effective stakeholders' participation in deliberation and decision-making processes at the global level has developed in parallel, and sometimes in close connection, with Information Society-related initiatives and strategies as in the cases of the G8 Digital Opportunity Task Force, the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, the Global Knowledge Partnership, the eEurope strategy and finally WSIS. This testifies to the awareness of the need to address the needs and challenges posed by the development of knowledge societies through the involvement of all those who will contribute, benefit and act as citizens of such societies: national and local governments, intergovernmental organizations, private sector entities and civil society organizations.

Yet the multi-stakeholder approach risks becoming "a practice without a model": **while there is a growing recognition of the need to innovate traditional policy-making practices, the idea of what multi-stakeholder dialogues can be, how they should be developed and to what extent they should affect the political process does not seem to be clear**. Moreover there is a wide variety of processes which can be defined as multi-stakeholder, yet the underlying assumptions concerning the different stakeholders, their interests and the aim and scope of their interaction are not clear nor shared. Thus, **multi-stakeholder processes**, practices and models appear today, not just as a way to conceive participatory governance to overcome criticism concerning the legitimacy of global institutions: they are **a major challenge in themselves**.

In this context, WSIS promised from the outset to bring something new into the governance of communication, raising strong expectations within the different sectors involved. As stated by the European Union:

> This UN Summit offers an excellent occasion to experiment with a new formula and show the public at large that inclusive processes are not only of interest to them, but also possible. [...] The preparatory process is almost as important as the political outcomes of the Summit itself. The format and positioning of the Summit will be key factors for an event which will attract attention and activate a decentralised follow up process, not only at political level but also in society at large. (EU, 2002)

In calling for the World Summit on the Information Society, the United Nations had invited "... intergovernmental organisations, including international and regional institutions, non-governmental organisations, civil society and the private sector to contribute to, and actively participate in the intergovernmental preparatory process of the Summit and the Summit itself" (United Nations, Res 56/183). Thus a four-actors understanding of the multi-

stakeholder approach deployed throughout the process; and formulas like "multi-stakeholder" and "all stakeholders" has pervaded the official documents (Padovani and Tuzzi 2004a), strengthening the symbolic participatory dimension, but also making the rhetoric clear, and the difficulties emerge, when the formula was to become reality. The WSIS process has shown potentialities and critical aspects of the multi-stakeholder approach.

The positive side

Multi-stakeholder dialogues can certainly help in tackling the complex issues we are confronted with in the emergence and development of knowledge societies, which are characterized by strong discrepancies, potentially growing divides but also by the co-presence of different media, new and traditional, all involved in the sharing and diffusion and circulation of information. Information, communication and culture are at the heart of all social processes; therefore no aspect of human and social life can be overlooked in developing "a common vision". This requires the articulation of knowledge, expertise and resources; it requires listening to different experiences and voicing of different needs. WSIS has proven how important (yet not always easy nor satisfactory for all) this articulation of voices is, through the definition of an enlarged agenda (if compared with the initial plan for discussion) in which infrastructural aspects are paralleled by the recognition of the human and cultural rights dimension; and reference to enabling regulatory environments goes together with the centrality of capacity building through education, training and research.

Dialogues among subjects who express different interests can contribute to more effective policy-making, especially if we consider the need for stakeholders to be involved not just in the identification of needs, but also in the creative elaboration of possible solutions and in the very implementation of policies. This way, if roles are identified and interest respected through the policy-making process, multi-stakeholder dialogues can also strengthen the legitimacy of governing institutions and governance mechanisms, avoiding the risk of cooptation of non-governmental stakeholders within a top-down mechanism without real participation. Yet this requires an operational structure and a normative basis.

The WSIS tripartite secretariat and the Civil Society Bureau instituted at the second Preparatory Committee of phase one were attempts to address the first aspect, through the development of functional structures to facilitate communication exchange among sectors. Both have been interesting innovations, which have not only contributed to a more direct exchange among governmental and non-governmental actors in the process; they have also "forced" those involved to organize themselves accordingly and develop a new cooperative awareness.

Rule 55 of the Rule of Procedure adopted at the First Preparatory Committee of phase one offered the normative basis, yet one which appeared not satisfactory for some stakeholders and raised criticism while reducing from the outset non-governmental expectations with regard to the multi-stakeholder dialogue. Nevertheless, the tension that exists between the productive dynamics and the structural constraints to participation can potentially lead to success in some areas.

Furthermore, **multi-stakeholder processes** take several forms and take place at different levels, from the local to the global, and therefore they **offer flexible mechanisms** for the conduct of political processes. This can be considered as a positive aspect; at the same time it opens the space for problematic issues, such as legitimate participation and representation of interests, which will be discussed below. Here I focus on flexibility as a resource, which would also include the **connection between formal and informal processes**: WSIS has proven how it may well be within the more informal spaces that innovative practises develop. This has been, for instance, the case of the encounters between the European Union official delegation and the civil society sector, which seems to have produced what some officials already consider "a positive tradition".

With specific reference to the policy field of ICT and communication, I believe the **multi-stakeholder concept** can be useful as a way **to articulate in a broader and more concrete way the dimension of "inclusion"**. If we aim at "people-centred and inclusive" information societies, the multi-stakeholder approach offers the ground on which to develop and understanding of inclusion as technologically supported, socially focused and grounded on participatory policy making. If, however, a multi-stakeholder process is organised and managed in such a way that it is reduced to mere window-dressing, the opposite of the initial goal, i.e. inclusion, will be achieved, namely, frustration, discontent and disengagement.

Finally, when multi-stakeholder processes develop in a concrete space, as in WSIS, there can be a number of positive side (yet not marginal) effects. One of them is that meeting physically to take part in a multi-stakeholder exercise has favoured the encounter of women, young people, media professionals, communities and coalitions especially in the case of the civil society sector, coming together "from different continents, cultural contexts, perspectives, experiences and competencies, members of the different constituencies of the emerging global civil society …" (Civil Society Declaration, Geneva 2003) to talk to each other, hear and be heard. Civil society as a stakeholder has proven to be itself plural and articulated, yet capable of producing collective meanings and coherent positions as well as linkages which will last in the future (Padovani, Tuzzi 2004b). This strengthening of linkages within a multi-faceted reality operating "from below", and the learning process that accompanied this, can be seen as the main positive outcome, though an unintended and

unexpected one. It provided a meaningful basis for the conduct of future dialogues and the development of common agenda's and strategies.

Problematic aspects

It has appeared clearly during the WSIS process that **different logics, languages and political cultures enter the scene, when different stakeholders share the same political arena**. Different expectations from the Summit as well as different motivations for being involved have certainly affected the dialogue. Even more problematic is the fact that stakeholders represent different conceptions of the political process, as they are themselves the expression of different political experiences; and this emerges in the way each of them articulate their belonging to a "sector" and its functioning, in the way they conceive the dialogue with other stakeholders and its function, and in the language they use among themselves and with others. Communication in highly diversified groups is a challenge and this should be taken into due consideration.

The very **concept of "stakeholders" is often ambiguous as it refers to constituencies which are highly differentiated within themselves**. This is particularly the case for civil society organizations, as they may be highly formalized non-governmental organizations as well as highly informal trans-national networks or indeed small national grass-roots organisations; they can have a profound knowledge and experience of global politics (formal and informal rules, languages, etc.), but they can also be completely new to the context and need the expertise of others in order to articulate their presence effectively. Civil society actors can certainly express the views of different constituencies and have diverse priorities, as well as gather in a global arena with more or less cooperative attitude and will to contribute to the creation of a true constituency for that particular occasion. Yet diversification pertains to the private sector as well, since it should always be recognized that small and medium enterprises have often very different interest and priorities with respect to major trans-national firms, which normally have a much better understanding of negotiation mechanisms and a longer and more structured experience of participation in global settings. Also, the fact that some stakeholder may not belong to any of the "formalized" sectors can pose a problem. With specific reference to WSIS, and for ICT policy in general, the role played by local authorities has shown that new categories of stakeholders should probably be considered in the future. It is not rational nor effective to place local authorities within a non-governmental sector since they are actually "representative governments" in themselves. Such conflation of different actors risks weakening the position of each actor. Finally, the whole picture appears even more problematic if we recognize the little knowledge and understanding stakeholders have shown with reference to other constituencies and their

acting within the process; and it should be said this was particularly true for individual governments' understanding of the civil society sector.

One of the most problematic aspects of the multi-stakeholder approach is the very meaning of "participation" in political processes and the underlying vision of governance. Here again expectations, political and organizational cultures and the overall understanding of the role of global forums come into the picture. Beyond the different theoretical perspectives concerning the possibility or non-possibility to improve the democratic quality of international relations, I am here referring to what stakeholders perceive as the goal for their respective roles in taking part of a dialogue. Different degrees of "active participation" derive precisely from such understanding: do we promote multi-stakeholder dialogues just to have more efficient mechanisms for information sharing? Or do we think of multi-stakeholderism as a way of conducting deliberative processes, through issue identification and consensus-building, while the decision-making power remains within traditional institutional bodies? Or do we, finally, think of effective and full participation (even the "right to participate" was stressed by civil society in its Declaration) as the way to foster good governance and of "making citizenship a reality, supporting active citizens … through participation in decision making processes" (EU IST call 4, 2004)?

If we refer to the formal rules and mechanisms set up for WSIS, Rules of Procedure n. 55 stated that civil society and business sector entities accredited to participate could designate representatives to sit as observers at public meetings. According to some stakeholder this formula already falls short of the expectations, making clear that the "active participation" foreseen by Resolution 56/183 meant in reality "silent observation". Yet it is interesting to recall that in the course of the process a few innovative mechanisms were developed, which testify to the fact that a multi-stakeholder context can "help" the political processes to innovate, fostering learning processes through which stakeholders' conceptions of multi-stakeholder dialogue can also be transformed. Initially non-state actors could submit written contributions, to be published on the official website. Then a "stop and go" mechanism was put in place (Kleinwächter 2004). Here again, the process had some shortcomings, with governments initially willing to conduct their negotiations in the presence of non-state actors; but then requiring them to leave the room when it became clear that this level of "participation" made problematic the diplomacy of "playing with words". Notwithstanding this, the "stop and go" procedure did show that there was some flexibility alongside the fairly strict "rules". The inclusion or, as other would claim co-option, of civil society representatives within official delegations, as was the case with Germany, Switzerland and Canada, is also an example of how the rules of procedure can be bent or by-passed. Eventually, it has been accepted as part of the process to have space for oral contributions from non-governmental actors on specific topics to be addressed by the governmental

subcommittee. Here the policy learning process appears more interesting than the actual mechanisms that have been put in place, while the core issues concerning "effective participation" still remain open. It should also be recalled that even within the same category of stakeholders perspectives may vary widely in this regard, as we have demonstrated with reference to the civil society groups attending WSIS (Padovani and Tuzzi 2004).

Another crucial element in multi-stakeholder processes is the "power dimension". This aspect is closely linked to what was discussed above and would require a much longer discussion. For the purpose of this chapter I will just refer to few very concrete aspects which are central to any exercise of power, be it hard or soft, high or deep, in a multi-stakeholder context: resources, knowledge and skills. High-level political summits are highly formalized settings, which require an understanding of the underlying norms and assumptions, which relate to the language and cultural environment of diplomatic practice. Previous experience is a crucial resource, as well as the availability of information, documentation and facilities (even for simple reproduction of documents). The issues that are being discussed, especially in the case of the WSIS, are highly complex and for some aspects only understandable by specialists, thus needing a deep understanding of processes, themes and language. A summit also tends to be held in expensive places for few days, if not weeks, and this does not facilitate participation, especially for non-governmental actors from developing countries. All this should be taken into consideration when discussing multi-stakeholder dialogues: pre-existing knowledge, availability of information, access to relevant actors in the process and even time and financial resources all make a difference in building the power base for stakeholders to participate.

Finally, **among the problematic issues** that are most often raised but rarely discussed in depth, are the **dimensions of legitimacy and representativeness of stakeholders**; which is most often recalled in reference to civil society organizations, but may well be the case for other stakeholders. During the WSIS process there have been attempts to clarify this issue: civil society groups have several times stated they had no presumption of being "representative of" a wider global constituency but only members of, gathered in Geneva and elsewhere to bring their specific knowledge and experience, to voice their concerns and to contribute, where possible, in defining priorities and solutions. The very fact that they have been formally invited is a recognition of their "legitimacy", which, as expressed in the recent Report by the Panel of Experts on United Nations-relations to Civil Society (2004) derives from what they do and not from who they are. Yet the "who" is important, especially when it becomes a diversified constituency. The issue remains a relevant one, as it is sometimes used as an argument to marginalise critical positions. The notion of representativity is to be redefined beyond representation through the ballot-box, in order to take into account the complex composition of civil society, especially its increased capacity

to build coalitions on a national as well as trans-national level. Meeting both physically and virtually in the WSIS community, through the several mailing lists, working groups and caucuses, has fostered another learning processes, which produced the setting up of a structure for participation (the civil society sector internal structure), capable of translating competence, knowledge and ideas into legitimate and productive input. A structure centred on the principles of inclusiveness and outreach to others in other spaces, thus creates a multi-level modus operandi from the global to the local, while continuously revising its working methods and mechanisms in order to guarantee respect for those very principles.

I have tried to articulate a few critical points concerning multi-stakeholder processes, starting from my personal experience at WSIS but placing this reflection in a broader context. More could be said, since governance modes are being transformed from the local to the global level; information and communication technologies are offering opportunities for collaborative exchange and information sharing which has proven to be crucial for political participation; initiatives stimulated in local spaces more and more affect the global context; while networks of people, initiatives and information flows are changing the very nature of the political space in which we act.

The challenges this situation poses to political processes are evident, while responses and possible solutions are still to be thoroughly and creatively imagined and developed. For this reason, multi-stakeholder discourse and practices, at different levels and in different policy environments, should be a matter of collective reflection in order to develop a better understanding of their potential – an understanding that should start from a critical analysis of existing experiences and be focused on the idea that the multi-stakeholder approach can be a meaningful tool if considered within the horizon of innovative participatory governance for the knowledge society and if seen as a step-by-step learning process for all actors involved.

Bibliographical references

Held, D. (1999) Democrazia e ordine globale. Dallo stato moderno al governo cosmopolitico, Asterios editore, Trieste (original title: Democracy and the Global Order)

Dodds F. (2002), "The Context: Multi-stakeholder Processes and Global Governance" in Hemmati M. Multi-Stakeholder Processes for Governance and Sustainability, Earthscan Publications Ltd, London

Kleinwächter, W. (2004) "Beyond ICANN vs. ITU? How WSIS tries to enter the new territory of Internet Governance" in Gazette. The International journal of Communication, vol. 66 n. 3-4 special issue (July 2004)

Kooiman J., (2003) Governing as Governance, Sage Publications, London

Hemmati M. (2002), Multi-Stakeholder Processes for Governance and Sustainability, Earthscan Publications Ltd, London

O'Siochru S. (2004) "Will the real WSIS please stand-up? The historic encounter of the 'information society' and the 'communication society'" in Gazette. The International journal of Communication, vol. 66 n. 3-4 special issue (July 2004)

Padovani C. (2004) editorial to the special issue of Gazette. The International journal of Communication, vol. 66 n. 3-4 special issue (July 2004)

Padovani, C. and Tuzzi, A. (2004) "WSIS as a World of Words. Building a Common Vision of the Information Society?", in Continuum. Journal of Media and Society vol. 18 n. 3 (September 2004)

Padovani, C. and Tuzzi, A. (2005) 'Global Civil Society at the World Summit on the Information Society. Reflections on governance, participation and the changing scope of political action' in Deconstructing WSIS: Towards a Sustainable Agenda for the Future Information Society, Servaes J. and Carpentier N. (Eds), Intellect Books, Bristol (forthcoming)

Rosenau, J. (1999) 'Towards an ontology for global governance', in Hewson, M. and Sinclair, T.J. Approaches to Global Governance Theory, State University of New York Press, Albany