

Cities and Regional Governments in the WSIS: From the Lyon Summit 2003 to Bilbao 2005

Louise Lassonde

Senior Policy Advisor, United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR)

Cities and regional governments have used the process of WSIS to prepare the ground for a new relationship between international development and public policy at the local level. In this respect, the cities and regional governments seek to bring a solution to the current global situation that neither public aid to development nor the mobilization of citizens have been able to radically modify.

Globalization coupled with decentralization leads cities and regional governments to assume greater responsibilities in development and to claim their place in international debates. The information society – and its technological tools – is a new field in which cities and local authorities wish to master their choices, whether it be infrastructure or the creation of e-content.

Cities want to set their information society strategy and priority objectives in function of their needs and local sensibilities. Certain cities have enabled the participation of citizens (e-democracy); others have tried to develop their cultural heritage. A great number, in the North as well as the South, have evaluated the new opportunities offered by the Information Society technologies in the social, cultural, educational, as well as economic fields.

Referring to the United Nations, the reform announced by the Secretary-General promised to open the door to a representation of cities as distinct actors, similar to parliamentarians, who do not want to be associated with civil society. Their argument is that they are “elected”; therefore they belong to another category of players than associations and NGOs. However, during the entire WSIS process and up to now, cities and local authorities have formally continued to be a part of “civil society” such as that defined by the rules of the United Nations.

The States are not in a hurry to question the current distinction between state actors and all the other players, including the private sector, which offers cities and regional governments little chance to have their voices heard, or to have a weight in the international debate, if they are content with the place to which the system relegates them.

Cities invite themselves in the WSIS

Cities and regions entered the process of the WSIS through the Bureau of Civil Society. In fact, within the framework of their mandate, the civil society division of the Executive Secretariat of the WSIS tried to support cities and local authorities so that they could establish an autonomous and well structured process in order to improve their vision of the Information Society, and above all, elaborate their own plan of action to be recognized by States as an indispensable level in a relationship of three levels: *State – Regional government – City*.

However, being one of the families of the Civil Society Bureau did not give cities and regional governments satisfaction due, on the one hand, to the weak interactions with other categories of civil society, and on the other hand, to the institutional nature of local authorities, which requires a specific institutional framework to make legitimate decisions. Thus, very early on in the process, cities and local authorities set up their own Summit, totally outside the WSIS, while participating at the margins of the prepcom of the WSIS and following its thematic debates.

The major protagonists and the process

The commitment of the Canton of Geneva has offered civil society, including cities and local governments, a strategic framework and a forum for self-organization indispensable to its participation in the WSIS process. The political impetus in favor of local authorities was essentially carried out by the City of Geneva and Greater Lyon. These two cities have truly taken charge of the process as well as the strategic political reflection on the positioning of cities and regions in the global debate on the Information Society.

Lyon associated with Geneva to commit cities and regions to embrace the theme of the Information Society and to define what is at stake today for local authorities. Thus, the First Summit of Cities and Local Authorities on the Information Society was organized in Lyon 5-7 December 2003. It was innovative in that it was the first Summit organized as a specific contribution of cities to global dynamics that were originally launched by States. It developed in parallel to the WSIS and established its own logic, its own rules and relationships between its players. All major associations of Cities and regional governments were actively involved

in the Lyon Summit: Citynet, FLACMA, Global Cities Dialogue, Eurocities, AIMF, PDM and many others.

During Phase I of the WSIS, Greater Lyon assured the leadership of the process. Senator Mayor of Lyon Gerard Collomb committed himself personally in the process; Pierre-Alain Muet, deputy mayor, assumed the direct leadership of the Summit. The mayor of Geneva, Christian Ferrazino, welcomed the delegation of cities attending the Lyon Summit to Geneva and actively contributed to profiling the Lyon Summit in the final phase of the WSIS. For their part, the Basque public institutions supported the organization of regional preparatory forums which took place in southern countries in order that the action plan truly be the expression of the vision of players on the ground on every continent.

Gerard Collomb and Christian Ferrazino together presented the results of the Lyon Summit to Kofi Annan, and, acting as a duo, addressed the participants at the closing session of the WSIS, which was also a first in the history of United Nations summits. This invitation was due to the open mind of the Swiss President of the Summit who used his discretionary power to grant the floor to non-State speakers.

What makes the Plan of Action of Cities different from the WSIS Plan of Action?

The preparation of the Lyon Summit used a different path than WSIS. Politically, elected officials had to be mobilized through their regional, national or thematic associations, especially Europeans, who already had structured networks around the issues of the Information Society and multimedia content creation. This mobilization was the first, on a global scale, around the theme of the Information Society, providing cities of southern countries a forum for meetings and dialogue that nourished decentralized cooperation projects.

Strategically a Declaration and a global Plan of Action had to be formulated, to provide cities and regional governments a framework for developing their concrete actions. The Declaration was adopted following a long discussion on a draft text compiled on the basis of work conducted by cities during the process. As for the Action Plan, it was formulated as a result of four regional conferences organized in Shanghai for Asia Pacific, Nouakchott for Africa, Curitiba for Latin America, and finally Bilbao for Europe.

The process of the elaboration of the Action Plan was totally different from the process of the prepcom of the WSIS. In fact, the methodological and scientific bases for the process prevailed over political considerations. During the regional conferences cities and regions were requested to identify their priority areas, the difficulties encountered, the success factors of their local policies, and finally, to define together the conditions for the

sustainability of good practices. The summary of these contributions went into the production of an Action Plan, based on an analysis shared by elected officials and their technical experts, which prepared the ground and provided the principles around which cities and regional governments intend to develop their information society policies. Above all, this process highlights the dimension of legitimacy and ownership by the elected officials of their Action Plan, which today remains the strategic framework of the second phase of WSIS.

The outcomes and perspectives

Two years later, in 2005, the same players are at the heart of Phase II of the process. The stakes have evolved. In the meantime, cities have organized themselves around a global organization, United Cities and Local Governments. City-to-city cooperation is intensifying and now also touches the themes of the Information Society. However, without a doubt the most interesting fact is that two great subjects that did not find a satisfactory response in the framework of the WSIS – financing, on the one hand, and the passage from strategy to action on the other – were taken up by the cities, which gave them concrete results.

In fact, the city of Geneva supports the Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF). Greater Lyon, for its part, is establishing a Digital Solidarity Agency (DSA) which will provide to cities, and also to States, the private sector and the academic community, diverse services aiming to put together the necessary competencies for an efficient action and will provide quality control for projects potentially financed by the DSF. Finally, the Basque public institutions remain equally very present through the hosting of the II Summit of cities and local authorities in Bilbao 9-11 November 2005.

Phase II of WSIS consolidates the pro-active role of cities in the establishment of new standards relative to the Information Society. There is a deliberate desire to create a multi-partner framework of action gathering cities, regional governments, enterprises, academic experts, players on the ground, and also States. The protagonists of the Lyon-Bilbao process have been a driving force in the inclusion of cities and regional governments in the international debate around the Information Society. The next steps of this process may be promising.