Road to WSIS II

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This paper was written in the spring of 2005, in the middle of the preparatory process for the Tunis Phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), providing a perspective on where we have been as well as our goals moving forward.

As President of the Preparatory Committee for Phase II of the WSIS, I have taken a very pragmatic approach to facilitating the process, concentrating on the key issues which were not resolved in the first phase as well as focusing on implementation and follow-up to WSIS after the Tunis summit concludes. As we prepare the Phase II Summit, one goal is certainly to have a successful outcome in Tunis. However, we also need to ensure that the work of WSIS continues afterwards by integrating these issues into the international agenda on an ongoing basis. Much progress has been made throughout the WSIS process in terms of identifying important challenges and opportunities provided by ICTs and building political agreement on these issues. While there is no need for institutionalization of WSIS itself, the issues addressed during the process should be integrated into other activities and bodies working on related issues to maximize the impact of the important work conducted by WSIS.

I have also been committed to facilitating the process and discussions in an open and transparent way with representatives of governments and other stakeholders. We will succeed only by working together – representatives of governments, international organizations, civil society and private sector. In that vein, the preparatory process of the WSIS has been almost as important as the Summit itself, providing a variety of venues and vehicles for all stakeholders to fully participate at the global, regional and local levels. The involvement of stakeholders in the WSIS discussions has been unprecedented in the United Nations system, particularly in the consultative process on Internet governance issues.

At this stage in the process, I am satisfied with the pace of preparations for the Tunis Summit. In the second preparatory committee meeting, during the examination of the report of the United Nations Secretary-General's Task Force on Financial Mechanisms, the Preparatory Committee agreed on an outstanding political issue from the Geneva Summit, the Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF). It was agreed that the DSF should be a fund of a voluntary nature, which would complement existing financial mechanisms and develop innovative approaches in terms of identifying sources of its own funding. After the official launch in Geneva of the voluntary DSF in March of 2005, the main challenge for the fund is to prove its efficiency in carrying out projects that can make a real difference on the ground. We expect to hear announcements about some of these new projects during the Tunis Summit. Work is progressing well in the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG), another expert group created by the United Nations Secretary-General. These issues will be addressed in the third Preparatory meeting in September 2005. We have also approved the summit format, and discussions on the organization of side events are well advanced.

While tremendous progress has been made, much remains to be done, and I look forward to continuing to work with all stakeholders in this process as we address the important issues of the Information Society, which will impact not only current, but future generations.

The unique nature of WSIS, structured in two phases, provides an opportunity for enhanced dialogue and partnership, enabling the international community to address questions about the Information Society in a comprehensive and inclusive manner. From the other side, it requires innovative approaches to the process. Phase I of WSIS culminated with a successful Summit in Geneva in December of 2003, during which a Declaration of Principles and a comprehensive Plan of Action were adopted. The second phase needs to build on that work and move towards implementation.

Moving from Principles to Actions

This is the motto of the Tunis phase of WSIS. The Tunis Summit should translate the decisions made in Geneva into concrete actions and policy decisions. The Tunis Summit should foster existing, and create new, partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society.

Throughout both phases of WSIS, a series of regional and thematic meetings have taken place, providing platforms for discussion on implementation, best practice and exchange of information. These meetings have broadened the inclusion of stakeholders, provided input from the regional and local levels and built a base of support for implementation. The regional meetings have provided platforms for discussing challenges and opportunities facing specific areas of the world. Thematic meetings have provided intellectual laboratories

on specific topics in which new and practical measures have been discussed and innovative solutions developed. As during the preparations for the Geneva phase, the regional and thematic meetings have played a key role in assessing the issues from a local perspective as well as provided critical input into the preparations for the Tunis phase. These meetings also have helped in generating interest and commitment at the local level and ensuring that more voices and perspectives are incorporated into the WSIS process.

The key challenge following the Tunis Summit will be to keep WSIS on the international agenda and to make sure that the work and recommendations of WSIS are implemented. Finding appropriate implementation mechanisms is not easy. No single United Nations agency addresses WSIS issues. These issues are cross-cutting and covered by many different United Nations agencies and other international bodies. Civil society and the private sector must be included as well. Therefore the creation of an efficient implementation mechanism, including all stakeholders and providing an efficient cooperation framework, was a big challenge for the Preparatory Committee.

To that end, we have been striving to link WSIS with the Millennium Declaration review process and the internationally agreed Millennium Development Goals (MDG). There are a number of references to the MDGs in the WSIS documents, and we are working on integrating WSIS issues into the review process. The report of the United Nations Secretary-General addresses the role ICTs and emphasizes the important role ICTs play as enablers of development. Our goal is to make sure that WSIS, and more specifically, the issues related to the work of WSIS, are mentioned in the documents adopted in September 2005 by the High-Level Plenary Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly as they review progress on the MDGs.

Conclusion

The information society has provided both opportunities and challenges for society. The WSIS process has provided a valuable assessment of these issues and provided an important basis of work for future action.

There is no disagreement about the existence of a digital divide. And there is a consensus that, if urgent steps are not taken, the divide will widen. More than lip service is needed. It will require a concerted effort by governments, international organizations, companies and civil society, working together to provide an improved environment for the Information Society in both developing and developed countries around the world as well as within and between populations of people.

It has been a privilege for me to serve as the President of the Phase II Preparatory Process. I wish to thank all of the people who have contributed to the WSIS process and would urge everyone to continue to push on these issues and commit to the implementation of the ideas and recommendations of WSIS long after the Tunis Summit has ended. The decisions taken through the WSIS process should not remain only on paper, but be translated into actions for the benefit of all stakeholders.