

Civil Society and Feminist Engagement at WSIS – Some Reflections¹

The points I raise through this paper are intended to flag the dilemmas, challenges and potential spaces for feminist advocacy in the WSIS process. I attempt to bring together a historical overview of the particular developments that led to the idea of WSIS, civil society engagement in the WSIS processes, and feminist advocacy in the context of WSIS, examining how Southern agendas needs to be evolved.

Part 1 – WSIS and Civil Society

The idea of WSIS was conceived in the days when everyone itched to do something with the new ICTs - the new wonder kid on the block. ITU, the international body of government and private players in the telecommunication sector saw an enhanced role for telecommunications and for itself in the new world order and in 1996, proposed a World Summit on the Information Society.

It was not entirely, as if “someone woke up one day and saw the Information Society peeking from behind the mountains that surround the city of Geneva”². The US had earlier proposed working towards the concept of a global information infrastructure, and Europe took a somewhat more socio-political view of the same and spoke of an emerging Information Society.

However, the visions of the ITU, US and Europe were all technology-centered and private-sector driven conceptions. In the year 2000, the G-8 countries adopted the Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society. The charter extolled Information and Communication Technology as ‘one of the most potent forces in shaping the 21st century’. Private sector was to drive the emerging Information Society, and the public sector would play an enabling regulatory role.

Co-option of Development Agenda to a Market-led Vision of IS

The Okinawa Charter also spoke of international cooperation for development and announced the setting up a Digital Opportunity Task (DOT) Force with wider stakeholder participation, including from developing countries. Some countries like India had taken significant strides in IT, in the software

¹ This paper is a work-in-progress. Requested not to be quoted

² Posting on WSIS-CS plenary mailing list.

industry, and most developing countries looked at IT as a huge “quick money” economic opportunity, in terms of export and job creation, that was possible with little capital investment and got on to the bandwagon. The development sector in developing countries, kept completely distant from this new development debate.

DOT Force commissioned a report on ICT related development activity, an area which had begun to be called ICT4D, that was authored by Accenture, the world’s top private consulting firm, Markle Foundation (a non-profit in the US oriented to concerns of US civil society) and UNDP. With neat private sector efficiency, the DOI report gave some key concepts to what came to be known as ICT4D, and notably, these form the basic framework of ICT4D thinking even today. The development view that the DOI report gave was understandably pro-market.

Most development activity has traditionally been associated with public efforts for social and physical infrastructure building but the DOI report came in categorically with its faith in market mechanisms - ‘those initiatives that employ a business model were most likely to succeed.’ The vocabulary of “business models” thus entered development discourse through ICT4D. Government responsibility with regard to basic development infrastructure had been the historical norm in the South, though the Washington consensus had begun to challenge this with prescriptions of user fees, notions of community’s financial stake, and public-private partnerships.

Within governments, multi-lateral bodies, and civil society, these neo-liberal approaches to development practice were often contested and a complex development debate still rages over these. However, in the case of ICT4D, there was no such resistance owing to the peculiar conditions of its conception, marked by the non-engagement of development ministries of government and of civil society actors. ICT4D was born congenitally pro-market, suspicious of ‘governmental interferences’ and ideologically distanced from traditional development actors.

So, in this environment, when the UN General Assembly in 2000, considered the ITU recommendation for a WSIS, it asked the ITU to take on the central role in organizing such a summit. Note that the ITU calls itself “an international organisation within the UN system where governments and private sector coordinate global telecom networks and services³”, professedly

³ The ITU website.

having nothing to do with development. And since it was the time of the historical Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals, the UN General Assembly gave WSIS the mandate to explore ICT opportunities in achieving MDGs, although there was no clear articulation of what process and substance was exactly involved here. Meanwhile the DOT Force had given way to a more 'representative and legitimate successor' in the form of a UN body, the UN ICT Task Force. The Task Force and its advisory body were dominated by representatives of IT multi-nationals and other private sector players. Thus, in the emerging global discourse on ICT, the default setting was the private sector. Perhaps, to justify such private sector presence in UN processes, the WSIS was mandated to officially be a multi-stakeholder process, where both private sector and civil society were given an official role.

Meanwhile, the UNDP and other multi-lateral and bi-lateral donors had adopted the DOI framework as their ICTD policy and activity framework. Southern governments still had little ICTD vision, and the ICTD activity if any, continued to be looked after by IT and telecom ministries which were riding on the glory of IT exports and IT jobs. They were happy to endorse the pro-market DOI ICTD framework for their ICTD activities, including of e-governance. It is under these circumstances that WSIS -Phase 1 was held at Geneva.

Communication Rights Framework in WSIS

There is another historical stream that met the WSIS, albeit not planned or even desired by the organizers. Around the time that the ITU came up with its technology-fascinated vision of an information society, UNESCO, which had been in the thick of controversy on the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) also proposed a Conference on Information and Communication for Development in 1998. It is not clear why UNESCO's proposal was not taken and the ITU's was accepted, neither is it known why UNESCO was not centrally involved as a co-organiser of the WSIS with the ITU, an idea that had been mooted. Informal reports also reveal that the ITU refused to share the WSIS.⁴ UNESCO was already in the bad books of some countries of the North on NWICO. Apparently, socio-cultural agendas were not favored by those who were driven by the vision of a market -led globalised Information Society.

⁴ Sean O Siochru, "Will the real WSIS please stand up?", January 2004.

Civil society was invited to participate into the WSIS processes officially in the much-hyped multi-stakeholder process – said to be a first for a World Summit. As mentioned earlier, this was partly to cover up the heavy presence of the private sector in every process around and precedent to WSIS. But civil society refused to conform to the mould of being invited to ‘contribute their hands-on experience’⁵ and insisted on broadening the agenda to bring in issues that the official organizers were keen on skirting. Partly, the WSIS was trapped in its own rhetoric. Since the movement of the ITU proposal from WSIS through UN processes had imbued it with the vision and statements about the emergence of a whole new society, these grandiose statements gave civil society space to put up some questions on basic socio-cultural issues.⁶ This succeeded to some extent in shifting the narrow technology and market focus of WSIS to a broader knowledge and communication processes based orientation. This needs to be noted as the first important re-alignment of WSIS and the Information Society debate.

This realignment is reflected in the evolution of the WSIS documents. One early text of the Declaration of Principles described the Information Society as "a new and higher form of social organisation where highly developed ICT networks and ubiquitous access to information... improve quality of life and alleviate poverty and hunger"⁷. Things were markedly better by the time the DOP was adopted. The final DOP spoke of ‘our common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life’, thus signifying a shift in IS discourse.

Primacy of knowledge and communication processes over economic obsession with the concept of ‘information’, and an affirmation of a people-centered vision of IS emphasising cultural diversity as against grandiose globalised notions of one Information Society, were key principles that civil society organizations advocated. The declaration of principles, at least in its opening paragraphs, is generally positive on these counts. However, as we move on to the Plan of Action, the language reverts to a market-and technology-orientation. The opening paragraph reads of POA reads....

⁵ Sally Burch, *Global Media Governance, Reflections from the WSIS experience*, 2004.

⁶ Sean O Siochru, “Will the real WSIS stand up?”, January 2004.

⁷ Steve Buckley, “Whose Information Society? A civil society Perspective on the WSIS.”

The common vision and guiding principles of the Declaration are translated in this Plan of Action to advance the achievement of the internationally-agreed development goals.....**by promoting the use of ICT-based products, networks, services and applications**, and to help countries overcome the digital divide. (emphasis added.)

The success of civil society intervention was not restricted to getting socio-political issues, and a communication rights framework, into the WSIS processes. A good part of civil society success lay outside the official processes. Civil society was able to use the WSIS CS forum for getting a wide range of non-government and non-market actors in the area of communication rights, IPR, ICTD and community media together on a platform. A little before the Geneva summit, civil society disassociated from the official WSIS process and came up with an alternative declaration.

This first battle by CS in WSIS was dominated by CSOs from the North with limited participation from Southern civil society.

Absence of Southern Perspectives in WSIS

In relation to WSIS, the context and concerns of the South is an area of engagement insufficiently underlined and requiring urgent attention. The development potential of new ICTs and innovative development possibilities that leverage new ICTs need to be articulated and placed within the WSIS discourse. As mentioned earlier, Southern governments are too preoccupied with the economic promise of ICTs to lead and direct an ICTD discourse built over Southern priorities in development. The CSOs of the North, with few exceptions, do not have an adequate understanding of the need and means to engage with these development realities and the opportunities ICTs bring to development. Though the alternative CS declaration and a few discussions in CS processes at WSIS do speak of issues of sustainable development, the engagement is rather superficial. Development perspectives on the IS can be shaped and refined only if CS organizations from the South take up this challenge to squarely address the IS challenges and opportunities.

While WSIS may be seen as bringing communication rights issues firmly back into global discourse, the significant opportunities for development through the use of ICT for institutional transformation in developing countries are as important. Anchoring these opportunities and developing a discourse and practice of ICTD that is centered in the development experience of the South is the second major re-alignment of the WSIS processes that we must steer.

Such realignment is imperative to architect a development-oriented information society that the WSIS Declaration of Principles aspires towards.

Part 2 - WSIS and Feminist Engagements

I now move on to examining the gender equality agenda within WSIS, and laying out the specific parameters for feminist advocacy.

The context of feminist advocacy in the UN

Gender equality advocates have pointed to the changing political economy landscape of their engagement in the UN process, tracing shifts in the ideological underpinnings that have informed the development discourse within the UN process. Ewa Charkiewicz⁸ points to 3 basic developments:

- The shifts in the underlying ideologies informing the notion of development – from social justice frameworks to neo-liberal frameworks over the decade of the 90s;
- The consequent emergence of a feminist vocabulary that increasingly resorted to making a business case for gender equity through arguments for the integration of women based on cost-benefit calculations, and efficiencies to be gained by the integration of women, and a valorization of this approach as against the social justice approach
- A reorganization of feminist engagement – from movements based forms to NGOs based ones necessitated by funding guidelines and UN access rules and a shift towards a model that de-linked the social movement from the grassroots

Feminist Advocacy at WSIS

In the context of the WSIS one might add, the post-9/11 anxieties about security, and more importantly the institutionalization of the multi-stakeholder negotiating format, signify the transforming landscape of global negotiations. Given the never-before sopranic heights of legitimization of

⁸ Beyond Good and Evil: Notes on Global Feminist Advocacy, by Ewa Charkiewicz, in Women in Action, <http://www.isiswomen.org/pub/wia/wia2-04/ewa.htm>

neo-liberal thought, civil society and feminist advocacy in the WSIS process have had to reconcile with cooptation into a collective space that privileges a pro-market approach to the extent that only those stances that are amenable to conversions in economic terms are validated. Thus, pursuing social justice frameworks are seen as tactical errors if substantial outcomes have to be gained, and what is good for the poor has necessarily to be argued as good for business interests⁹.

Perspectives on poverty, development and women's interests at WSIS have been researched and articulated by private consulting firms, a process that has thrown up complex questions on conflict of interests (many such consulting firms also espouse business interests) and legitimacy. WSIS also embodies the increasing marginalisation in the global policy arena of local and national movements and organizations. Even before the WSIS, the global arena has been marked by a division of labour between organizations focused on national and local work, and international NGOs, the latter obviously having greater access to and even greater legitimacy within the UN process. At WSIS, this division has been acute with a marked absence of local and national entities whose ability to garner resources to be at the right place, at the right time is non-existent.

Multistakeholderism - Towards Participation or Exclusion?

Multistakeholderism within the WSIS is seen as a cooptation of the gender equality agenda into neo-liberal formulations, the result of which is the marginalisation of the debate on the origins, location and social, ecological and political contexts of the information society, and an unquestioning acceptance of the neo-liberal policy discourse on ICT. Within this changing context of feminist advocacy, gender mainstreaming acquires distorted meanings, and sometimes ends up as the disaggregation of the term "people" into "men and women", as if the exclusion of women in the negotiating table can be offset by a linear approach in the recourse to semantic juggling. (The WSIS documents are full of examples of this formula-based approach.)

These are typical manifestations of the paradox of the givens. Strategic interventions end up as realpolitik stances that may do little to change the

⁹ At WSIS, CS language argues for public investments in communication infrastructure from the perspective that as more people join the network, the value of the network goes up for all existing users. The assertion of communication rights in itself seems to be inadequate for advocating public effort in this direction.

causalities of gender inequity in the debate, gravitating towards the lowest common denominator that will not be rejected by other stakeholders. Susanna George articulates this trend in her analysis of the Geneva phase: “The multi-stakeholder platform ...where NGOs were supposed to enact their “progressive” advocacy, was intrinsically flawed, with the unquestioned presence of the private sector, the multinational corporations, at the negotiating table. Yet, we were seen as being uncooperative when we said that the multi-stakeholder platform was an uneven playing field. Ultimately, civil society as an entity preferred to hold its peace in favour of the “collective” process, which produced a pro-market, pro-neoliberal policy Declaration. As activist women doing gender advocacy, we tried working with an multi-stakeholder entity known as the WSIS Gender Caucus for a while, until we decided that we simply could not put forward some of the critical arguments of NGOs in the South with other so-called gender advocates from multinationals and Northern GAD consultants.”

Under these circumstances, the politics of process seem to have overtaken the politics of resistance and especially in the context of the WSIS, the paucity of substantive positions is conspicuous and has been one of the reasons that “process” issues – of visibility, legitimacy, and the like have almost completely displaced issue-based politics and alliances. As Anriette Esterhuysen points out, “Most importantly, the consensus model has made it very difficult for participants in the civil society space to produce content that can inform, influence and critique the official WSIS discourse in a substantial way.”¹⁰

The nascency of feminist vocabulary in both analytical and alternative frameworks in the WSIS debates, combined with the preoccupation with process politics has seen an ambivalence in the alignments of gender advocates at WSIS. On principles, the consensus has not been difficult. But, in the Tunis phase, feminist advocacy has not come up with clear positions on the issues of financing and Internet Governance, and pro-South positions that implicate the majority of women have not been articulated well enough or as issues for gender-based advocacy. The issues of public finance and public policy discussed in prepcom 2 were not seen by many gender advocates as being pertinent to the discourse of gender equality.

¹⁰ Anriette Esterhuysen, “Multi-stakeholder participation and ICT policy processes”, APC News on WSIS.

The wisdom available in the cutting edge work of Southern feminists on gender and trade or gender and sustainable development analyses lacks parallels in the information society debates. With the result that feminist issues in the debates around ICTs have not sufficiently democratized. Practice and theory have not merged in the advocacy space. One could therefore ask, where are the movements that have engaged with the ICTs and development discourse, and where are the concepts in ICT for D that can act as building blocks of women's movements?

The absence of informed advocacy does not imply lack of visibility of the South per se. Rather, in the context of WSIS, the affinities of ICTD to neo-liberalisation of development have seen a showcasing of many initiatives in the South as "women's empowerment" projects, most of which valorize technology- and market-led models.

The Road Ahead

Southern feminism requires fresh strategizing to position gender equality and women's empowerment within emergent development and rights discourses. Perspectives need to be placed within social justice frameworks, clearly articulating alternatives so that a politics of resistance can be reclaimed. Yet within the current political arena, the legitimacy or clarity of positions alone is not sufficient.

In the politics of pragmatism feminist advocacy from the South seems to tire at the margins, but there is not much choice other than to engage in global platforms. Much as Southern feminist are outraged with the MDG discourse - their restriction to indicators that are quantifiable, their omission of important goals and targets, such as violence against women and sexual and reproductive rights; and their silence on the context and institutional environment in which they are to be met, the broad consensus is that spaces in global governance have to be appropriated, even as we might have to learn how to deal with working from the inside and from the outside.

Anriette Esterhuysen's article, cited earlier, captures this succinctly. "Given the absence of traditional development actors in the ICTD policy space, many of us working in ICT for social change (in developing countries) having to

tackle multiple issue areas and maintain relationships with our governments in which conflict and consensus has to be managed very carefully.... Having to tackle multiple issues and manage these complex relationships leaves us battling to find the time, and to build the knowledge needed to impact effectively on policy, which is why working with others, be they from the academic community, international human rights organizations, or the private sector, is so important.”

In the ICTD space, as argued earlier, multistakeholderism coming from neo-liberal ideologies is a shrill reality and this calls for both a critical stocktaking of what this means to feminism, and deriving from this, a strategising of “common interest” based alignments with diverse civil society actors, governments, and private sector entities. Feminists in the South have continued to manage the contradictions in such positioning – working ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ – supporting their governments in global platforms and many times opposing them back home. For example, in the context of WSIS, the wider geo-political issues of how out-sourcing exacerbates the unequal relation between capital and labour have to be balanced with the needs for creating greater employment opportunities for women in the South. Not all civil society actors of the North can appreciate the issues involved if a civil society organization from the South supports its official delegation’s position that advocates restriction on national governments from regulating out-sourcing in favor of local labour.

It is important to articulate our concerns at both levels – as rights issues and as development issues. The issue of open source is an IPR issue but from a development perspective it forms the building block of a soft IT infrastructure for development activity that is affordable, customizable to local situations and encourages domestic IT industry.

Open content paradigms have been limited to advocating open access to scientific information and journals, an equally important issue being that of free and adequate access to content to meet development needs of the marginalized. The latter is omitted in the Geneva Plan of Action, while open access to scientific information is mentioned, reflecting the absence of advocacy around the open content paradigm from a development perspective.

Open telecom networks in the context of development not only meet the need for community media, but more importantly, constitute a significant

opportunity for empowering engagements of rural populations with institutions of governance, market, development extension etc. These networks thus need to be conceived from an institutional perspective and not merely as technology networks supporting communication and information access.

These IS paradigms are the building blocks of a new institutional architecture for development and hold tremendous promise for redefining gender relations and women's empowerment.

Feminists from the South need to look at ways by which gender analyses can bring the debates on sustainable development, the political economy of globalisation, the intellectual property regime, and global governance institutions together with information society issues, to connect the local and national with the global. The recent submission from India at WIPO¹¹ where India asserted that "the primary rationale for Intellectual Property protection is, first and foremost, to promote societal development by encouraging technological innovation and that the legal monopoly granted to IP owners is an exceptional departure,..... to be calibrated by each country, in the light of its own circumstances, taking into account the overall costs and benefits of such protection", need to be claimed by civil society advocates in their lobbying for open source software, in the context of which, the Indian government delegation at WSIS, whose members are mostly from telecom and IT ministry, and therefore oriented more to markets than to development, takes a neutral position.

Conclusion

The first sightings of a second alignment in the WSIS process, mentioned earlier, are already visible in the Tunis phase as governments and CS actors come with greater experience of ICT opportunities in development. In the Geneva Plan of Action, the section on information and communication infrastructure defines the role of governments chiefly in terms of creating enabling conditions for the private sector to lay the infrastructure. However, two years later at the recent prepcom of the Tunis phase, the proposition that the private sector is the primary player in the IT and telecom sector was hotly contested both by Southern governments and Southern civil society. The emerging documents for the Tunis phase are far more assertive about the role of public policy and investment and for shaping the infrastructure and other requirements for a development oriented IS. However, the contours of

¹¹ Posting on 'Bytes for All' mailing list, 16th April 2005.

feminist engagement from the South are still to be evolved, towards the WSIS, and for an information society that empowers the women of the South.