

Framing a Global Information Society Discourse

The outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society held in Tunis in November 2005 were widely seen as “fuzzy”. But the WSIS was never mandated with a clearly defined global “problem”. The summit was held at a time when US-led interests were active in undermining several democratic forums of global governance, even as global capital appeared increasingly intolerant towards public policy regimes. Thus there was a consistent attempt to keep several substantive issues out of the summit discussions. Moreover, the private sector, as a supposed leader of the information society, was pushed in very questionable ways into various governance arrangements.

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In attempting to evaluate the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), two of its characteristics need especially to be kept in mind. One is the fact that WSIS, unlike earlier world summits, was not mandated with a more or less clear-cut global “problem”. It emerged out of the excitement generated by some paradigmatic breakthroughs in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) at the turn of the millennium. These breakthroughs were manifestly far-reaching, and to many they seemed to herald a “new model of social organisation” or a new kind of society. History testifies to such links between disruptive technologies and basic societal changes. Such a broad context to the WSIS meant that its mandate was never very clear nor well-formed. People came to WSIS with completely different ideas. The fuzziness of WSIS outcomes must be seen in this light.

The second important characteristic of WSIS is the global governance context in which it was located. The unilateralism of the US has become increasingly more menacing, and neo-liberal ideology is strengthening its clasp over the global policy and governance spaces. The ICT phenomenon has largely been private sector driven and such has been the domination of the private sector in this arena that it is often considered the primary expert on strategy and policy even when the use of ICTs has concerned social and developmental purposes. ICT multinationals have been becoming politically more powerful

than ever before, further sidelining the state and other legitimate political entities from the discourse on shaping an emerging “information society”.

In light of the above analysis, it is meaningful to discuss the outcomes of WSIS in terms of (i) what was achieved in substance and (ii) what are the implications of WSIS for global governance.

What WSIS Was About

The ICT and the “information society” (IS) phenomenon were born in the North. And their concepts and theories largely represent the dominant socio-economic paradigm of today’s world. At one level, new ICTs were conceived as bringing forth a new Global Information Infrastructure (a term used by the US) and at another, they were considered as underpinning a new economic system called the “knowledge economy”. The term “information society” was popularised by the EU, but its vision remained largely economic, and within existing paradigms.

The North-driven IS discourse has not really been willing to address the structural and institutional shifts implied in the far-reaching impact of the new ICTs on our social and political processes, even while vaguely acknowledging them, in the conception of a new type of society. This is quite understandable as the attitude of the “incumbent”. However, these new paradigms are more meaningful for the South, vast sections of the population of which are ill-served by the dominant socio-economic paradigm. Unfortunately, the leaders of the countries of the South

have mostly not shown the vision to grasp the new opportunities and have not begun to engage with the information society discourse on the terms determined by the interests of the South. Under these circumstances, the relevance of ICTs to development is also an arena whose theory has largely come from the North, predominantly in the form of a co-option into the dominant discourse on ICTs and the IS. Many initiatives – like the DOT force initiative of G-8 countries, the Digital Opportunity Initiative, and UN’s ICT Task Force – and their reports, build a largely neo-liberal framework of ICT for development (ICTD), which remains the default IS discourse in its developmental context.

Against this background, WSIS may be seen as having made considerable progress in terms of a broader and certainly more legitimate conception of a global information society. The WSIS outcome documents have a much greater socio-political vision and make greater reference to some paradigmatic and structural aspects of the impact of the new ICTs than the above referred documents on ICTD that seek to articulate a “pragmatic” and efficiency-based discourse, that is essentially neo-liberal.

WSIS has legitimised and given broad directions to the information society discourse – the real fruits of which, it must be admitted, lie only in the future. It was too much to expect a UN Summit, especially in the present conditions of global governance, to make paradigmatic visionary shifts to global policy, which any meaningful engagement with IS issues really calls for. The outcome documents do contain many “pegs” which can be used to shape an IS discourse in the required directions. The institutional basis provided by WSIS and its follow-up (however weak and poorly defined) provide the context and the space for a collective engagement with IS changes to guide them in directions of greater equity and social justice.

The arena of real struggles seeking to define the significance of the emerging IS in terms of greater equity and social justice, or in a more general way, in terms of a people-centric and development-oriented IS,¹ mostly lies outside the confines of WSIS. Already many contestations have been happening around us – in the open source and free software movement, in open content paradigms like Creative Commons and Wikipedia, in a

growing alternative or citizen's media, in "illegal" VoIP and in free public wireless connectivity models. An example closer home, in India, would be in the potential of the internet in "operationalising" the right to information legislation and enforcing transparency in many governmental processes. Of course, we have also been witness to the negative aspects of new ICTs as well, from the use of online spaces for sexual abuse to the role of ICTs in strengthening the stranglehold of global capital. While digital technologies promise greater democratisation of information and communication, the use of these new technologies to increase the state's interference in and control over the private lives of citizens is an issue that has greatly concerned civil society.

An ongoing information society discourse which sees these struggles in a broader and shared context can certainly help them along in a positive manner – both through their legitimisation – even if with contestations – and through sharing information and strategies across different spaces – both topical and geographic. The "either-or" attitude to these struggles and policy engagements at global and other levels must therefore be avoided, and complementarities between the two processes recognised and strengthened. WSIS may need to be judged more from the processes that it has set into motion than what it has achieved substantively.

Global Policy on 'Digital Divide'

In addition to establishing the role of WSIS in formalising and legitimising a global policy discourse on the information society, it is necessary to also assess it on more specific outcomes. In journalistic shorthand, WSIS has come to be associated with two basic issues: bridging the digital divide, and internet governance (IG).

The digital divide issue in its broadest scope includes a whole swathe of issues implicated in the gap between those who seem to be benefiting from the emerging information society and those left behind. Many of these issues – from the different approaches to software production, to telecom access models for free or affordable connectivity, open access to information, capacity-building, international telecommunication costs, R & D for affordable hardware, technology transfer on preferential terms, and the role of the state and public policy in the information

society, to community-based ICT initiatives – were discussed at WSIS, and they find mention in one form or the other in the outcome documents.

In its narrow conception, the issue of "bridging the digital divide" was seen in terms of financing the ICT infrastructure and other basic concomitant requirements for an inclusive information society in the South. Some least developed countries, especially from Africa, expected countries of the North to commit specific financial assistance for laying ICT infrastructure in their countries. This did not happen. Governments of the North are mostly wary of making funding commitments at UN summits, and, even if they agree on the basic proposition for specific funding, they prefer unilateral commitments or work through exclusive clubs like the G-8. However, WSIS failed even to establish the context and the rationale for considering ICTD financing at a level different from regular development financing. This was a huge failure of the WSIS.

As an information and communication infrastructure that represents an entirely new basis for organising a whole range of social and economic processes, new ICTs have to be seen as an essential public infrastructure. ICT financing therefore must follow a different logic than most economic goods and services. The fact however is that the same infrastructure that is seen by some as a potentially "equalising field" for faster development with greater equity and social justice among countries and among sections of the society, is also seen by others as the economic infrastructure around which a new set of comparative advantages have to be concretised for protecting their economic, social and political dominance. The question of whether "basic connectivity" and basic ICT capacities constitute a normal economic service, that should be subject to market forces, or whether they qualify strongly to be considered public goods best produced by public funds and provisioned in a non-rivalrous and non-excludable manner has not been discussed, much less sorted out, at WSIS.

This should, however, not come as a surprise since this basic issue is still strongly contested in ICT policy spaces in countries of both South and North. Two examples of such contestation are provided here, one each from the South and North. In India, the broadband project of the state of Andhra Pradesh to connect all villages

on a regulated per-connection price of \$ 2.3 per month recently ran into problems with telecom regulators. (The issue has since been sorted out.) Similar problems occurred earlier with some other developmental projects in India innovating affordable or free connectivity solutions. In the US, many state governments have threatened to bring in legislation to prevent municipalities from providing public connectivity systems. (More than 300 municipalities in the US have such public connectivity provision.)

As with connectivity, other "information society" issues like software models, bottom-up media alternatives and easier access to content are going through similar basic and far-reaching contestations and transformations. It is unfortunate that the dominant interests – governments and multinationals of the North – apart from not discussing the "public goods" paradigm for basic IS infrastructural requirements, were able to keep the important issue of IPR and freer access to knowledge out of the WSIS.

All these issues need to be articulated and advocated at both global and local levels, and the momentum generated by the WSIS on these or related issues needs to be carried forward by interested actors. This brings forth the twin needs for optimising the WSIS follow-up process, especially from a Southern point of view, the role of civil society, and the need for strengthening South-South collaborations, for further developing pro-people and pro-development IS paradigms and relating these to real policy options.

For the last 10 years, the US and the EU have been conducting formal annual dialogues on IS issues; it is geopolitically important that the countries of the South, and civil society, also engage continuously to discuss and, if possible, develop common positions on IS issues.

IS and Global Governance

WSIS took place at a time when US-led interests have been very active in undermining UN organisations and other relatively democratic forums of global governance. The growing intolerance of global capital for public policy regimes has been both a strong motivator as well as an ally in this process. These dominant forces conspired in many ways at WSIS to undermine the political legitimacy of global governance structures. At one level, there was a consistent attempt to

keep as many substantial issues out from the discussions as possible – using varied excuses, from claims that some of these issues were “legitimately” in the purview of other multilateral forums (IPR with WIPO and telecommunication agreements with WTO) to assertions that the summit lacked the political authority to “direct” the UN system and its entities towards one direction or the other and that these entities should be left to “act as they deem fit”. At another level, the role of private sector – as a supposed leader of information society – was pushed in very questionable ways into various governance arrangements.

It was because of the attitude of US-led governments of the North that a summit that had one of the widest mandates came out with very weak outcomes. And, except in the area of IG, it has left very weak follow-up mechanisms. Under much pressure from developing countries, US-led countries of the North budged only so much as to look into the possibility of changing the mandate of the ECOSOC Commission on Science and Technology for Development to include follow-up on “information society” issues. It is significant to note that in the MDG + 5 Summit as well, “information society” is dealt with under the section on science and technology. It is ironical that all the conceptual progress made in the last decade from seeing ICTs as merely another set of technologies to understanding their society-wide impact as a complex and far-reaching socio-economic phenomenon has been nullified through such exercises. It is not that countries of the North do not understand the significance of IS changes; they certainly do. For example, the EU has a very ambitious IS programme, and an IS commission, or a similar body, is one of the institutional arrangements that is recommended to the countries aspiring to join the EU. However, the countries of the North are not enthusiastic about relatively democratic and representative global governance structures like the UN having a strong role in “governing” the emerging information society. They prefer more exclusive arrangements – privileged membership groups like the G-8 or other systems that represent dominant geo-political interests like some private sector-led arrangements. The existing regime of IG is one such system. WSIS could not change the present regime though some significant processes of possible changes have been set in motion. This became possible because on this

one issue – where some unilateral exercise of power by the US, for example, its control over the DNS root zone file,² was unacceptable even to the normally amenable European nations – the EU broke ranks with the US in the last stages of the negotiation.

Though the present IG regime remains unchanged as of now, the tough negotiations that ensued after the EU breakaway have ensured that some processes have been put in motion by the summit to examine various aspects related to internationalisation of political oversight over the present technical and logical management functions of IG. Another significant gain is the setting up of a multi-stakeholder Internet Governance Forum (IGF) that will debate and present recommendations on various public policy issues related to IG. Governments, civil society and the private sector will participate on an equal footing in this forum, or so it appears from the reading of the summit outcome documents, and the precedent in a similar body, Working Group on Internet Governance, which had contributed to the WSIS process. IGF will be a significant new age institution – an organisation that is a true multi-stakeholder partnership dealing with some very significant and substantive global governance issues.

WSIS and Multi-stakeholderism

The concept of multi-stakeholderism in the WSIS remained controversial. While WSIS saw a greater official role for civil society and the private sector than any other global governance forum ever before, two significant aspects of this issue are worth taking note of. One, that often the presence of civil society seemed to provide a cover for a greater private sector role in the WSIS, and in the IS discourse generally. Two, the accent on multi-stakeholderism was at times used to further undermine legitimate global governance bodies like those of the UN, and thus played to the designs of the US-led governments of the North. In fact, civil society from the South was also often more interested in “showcasing” ICT for development initiatives at the summit rather than in contesting important issues taken up by the summit. A new class of “ICT for development” NGOs seem to be so taken up with “looking for real solutions in cooperation with all actors” that this multi-stakeholderism often comes at the

expense of engaging with purposeful advocacy for more structural changes. The need for such engagements, as discussed above, may be more rather than less relevant in case of an emerging IS.

However, the gains for civil society in terms of multi-stakeholder platforms for global governance are real and significant, even if WSIS was perhaps the most apolitical summit ever – generally, as also in terms of civil society’s role. One of the problems, as stated earlier, was that civil society that converged at WSIS came from too diverse a background. For some, human rights was the basic issue at stake, and for others WSIS was more about media and communication. Still others were looking at vast socio-economic opportunities for developing countries. For many, governments were the prime enemy; for others, like those concerned with development potential of ICTs, they were a necessary partner. Altogether, the range of backgrounds, interests and opinions were too wide for the civil society to present a strong political front at WSIS. Probably, it was due to the fragmented and depoliticised nature of the WSIS that progress could be made on the issue of multi-stakeholderism in global governance. What is significant is that since this procedural gain in global governance has been made, the WSIS precedent will always be useful to push for a greater role for civil society in the more politically contested global governance spaces like WTO, WIPO and disarmament negotiations, and issues like cultural diversity, environment and media. It is also necessary for all actors – and civil society needs to take a lead in this – to develop connections between these arenas of global policy and those that are more directly dealt with as IS issues. IS issues are by their very definition society-wide issues, and thus cut across other arenas. In fact the IS discourse provides the opportunity for advocating and leading meaningful positive changes in many areas of global policy and governance. **EPW**

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Notes

- 1 These terms are used by the Declaration of Principles of the Geneva phase of WSIS as an articulation of the vision of the “information society”.
- 2 The master file of Domain Name System (DNS) which directs the logical flow of data on the internet.