Information Society in the Asia Pacific –

Is there Life beyond Infrastructure and Market Competitiveness?

A Civil Society[1] response to the 'Draft Regional Action Plan Towards Information Society in Asia Pacific' proposed to be adopted at the High Level Asia-Pacific Conference for the WSIS at Tehran from 31ˢᵗ May to 2ⁿᵈ June 2005

Asia Pacific is a region where 70 % of the world's poor live, a point which is well made by the draft Regional Action Plan proposed for adoption by the 'High Level Asia-Pacific Conference for the WSIS' at Tehran, in context of the fact that the regional processes in the WSIS framework are expected to fine-tune the global level WSIS processes to regional realities. The civil society participating in the Tehran conference is however alarmed that instead of taking a social equity and inclusiveness based development agenda forward and beyond the WSIS documents, the draft Regional Action Plan (RAP) represents a retreat from both the WSIS outcomes and the earlier Tokyo Declaration.

The draft RAP seems to forget or ignore the vision stated in the Geneva Declaration of Principles,

> "…..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……"

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What we see instead is a complete lack of a development perspective and a preoccupation with technology and business interests. The conference website lists its main objective as to "share best practices of ICT Development". The draft RAP also mostly uses the term ICT development, and the term 'ICT for Development' is hardly mentioned. It appears that these two terms are taken to be un-problematically inter-changeable. WSIS is about ICT for Development, and ICT development is only one of the issues in ICT for Development.

The present draft is mostly driven by the limited vision of - technology for markets, and markets for technology. Economic competitiveness, jobs, and exports are crucial for economic growth in the Asia Pacific but to equate the WSIS process, and the Information Society agenda; only with these issues is a travesty that civil society cannot be associated with.

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[1] This is the position of some civil society participants in the Tehran Conference. However, the draft CS response document was circulated widely in CS mailing lists and comments and inputs invited. Some CS organizations not present at Tehran have also endorsed this document.

Though the draft RAP does not deal with these economic issues at length, the nature of its engagement with development issues shows a complete lack of commitment to rise above the dominant paradigm of private sector and business-interests driven ICT activity in most countries of the Asia Pacific. This has resulted in a document that speaks superficially about development, meanders aimlessly saying little of significance, and avoids making any substantive points.

The Asia Pacific civil society representatives would like to appeal to the government delegates not to adopt the Regional Action Plan in its present shape, and defer the development and adoption of a regional action plan to after Tunis. Meanwhile, this meeting can come up with broad principles on regional cooperation for shaping a development-oriented Information Society in the Asia Pacific, and on how WSIS implementation and follow-up will take place.

To give a snapshot of what is wrong with the draft RAP we give some examples here. However, a detailed analysis of the action plan with respect to the WSIS mandate, to the Tokyo Declaration, to other regional WSIS documents - of Africa and the draft plan for LAC - and most importantly, with respect to the regional realities of the Asia Pacific region, has to be made separately. The following comments therefore are illustrative and not exhaustive of the civil society's response to the draft RAP.

Role of government and all stakeholders in the promotion of ICTs for development

The Regional Action Plan has almost completely ignored the civil society when it speaks of 'all stakeholders' and partnerships. It seems only to mean government- private sector partnerships. In the tabulated plan, under this Action Line, the RAP calls for 'private sector to be engaged in concrete projects to develop the Information Society' completely avoiding making even the customary inclusion of the civil society in the threesome that multistakeholderism has come to mean. And the indicator for evaluating progress on the multistakeholder principle in the RAP framework is

> "Number of public-private, buyer-supplier (e.g. e-chaupal of India) and such other partnerships."

This formula of seeing partnerships exclusively in a public private framework is repeated at many other places in the document. The role of the civil society in policy making, capacity building, regional and global cooperation, carrying out specific projects, stimulating community processes, as well as in extracting accountability from government and other players on commitments, policy and practice is entirely discounted by the draft RAP.

In this respect, the draft RAP goes completely against the letter and spirit of the WSIS documents and can in no way be considered to be taking the WSIS process forward. The RAP also goes against its mandate given in the Tokyo Declaration where the references to

the civil society and the private sector are relatively much more balanced.

The exclusion of the legitimate role of civil society is seen not only in the draft RAP, but has also been expressed in action - in the manner that civil society has mostly been excluded from the Asia -Pacific regional WSIS processes. This has considerably downgraded the achievements already made in the WSIS process for multistakeholderism. (Civil society will separately take up the issue of how it has been systematically excluded from the Asia Pacific regional WSIS process.)

The effect of the exclusion of civil society from the regional processes shows on the draft RAP document in the way it runs roughshod over the development concerns of the people of the Asia Pacific. There seems to be a hurry to put together and carry through a document whose main purpose appears to be to abstain from substantial position on any issue. Such a document can hardly serve as the basis of shaping an Information Society in the Asia Pacific that the majority will find reasons to look forward to.

In the absence of a good and effective roadmap, and commitment of all stakeholders to implementing it, the development of an Information Society in Asia Pacific will follow the default route. Such a route will further the interests of those already entrenched in a position of greater social, economic and political power to the detriment of the interests of those disadvantaged at present. This is not the vision that the governments and other stakeholders have committed to in the WSIS process. An effective regional action plan for Asia Pacific can only come out of a process that is open, inclusive and transparent, and involves fully the participation of all stakeholders. This has not at all been true of the present Asia Pacific regional process.

Information and Communication Infrastructure

The tabulated part of the draft RAP speaks of the need for connectivity and appropriate access devices, and some weakly stated recipes for it like improving connectivity between Internet backbones and using wireless capacity for remote areas. But important issues in this very basic Action Line like of the respective role of public and private finance, USOs, different regularity policies for areas with complete market failure, public support and investments in appropriate technology etc are altogether missing. In this respect, it is surprising that the recognition of the important role of public finance in reaching infrastructure and appropriate technology to under-served areas and people, which was a major gain in the Prepcom 2 deliberations on financing ICTD, does not find mention in the regional plan of a region where this issue is most pertinent and important. The main engagement appears to be about connectivity for business and markets, and a pro-poor telecom policy is not proposed at all.

Even after governments have mostly agreed in Prepcom 2 of the Tunis phase that the role of direct public interventions is crucial to reach connectivity to underserved areas and people,

"We recognise that public finance plays a crucial role in providing ICT access and services to rural areas and disadvantaged populations including those in Small Island Developing States and Landlocked Developing Countries." (point 32 of the agreed draft of the Chapter 2 of the operational part of the Tunis Document, on Financial Mechanisms for ICTD).

The draft RAP stays single-minded on its exclusive reliance on private investment, with no mention of complimenting publicly funded initiatives.

"To assist Governments in the development of policies for ICT development and e-strategies to promote investment in the establishment of broadband infrastructure and the provision of e-services with incentives for extending the reach of the network to cover rural and remote areas. (point D 16 of Summary of Action in the draft RAP)." (Our Comment: Civil society feels that the term 'investments' here refers only to private investments. Such lack of clarity and specificity, and hedging issues, is typical of the document.)

And the identified way to reach radio and television to under-served areas is again through soliciting private investments.

"To encourage policies for private sector participation in Radio and TV broadcasting, particularly to cover hitherto unserved areas including remote and mountainous region and small islands". (Point 54 of Summary of Action).

It is difficult to come across any example where private investment spread the coverage of broadcast media to 'cover hitherto unserved areas including remote and mountainous region and small islands'. The options of greater public investment in these media and of promoting community media is not considered by the draft RAP.

The RAP does not give even a passing mention to progressive possibilities and paradigms like VoIP and open access telecom regulation- instead of vertically integrated telecom structures - that are also being advocated by many multi-lateral agencies today, and which can greatly transform the cost effectiveness of providing connectivity to poorer markets, as also provide possibilities for communities - towns and groups of villages - to own their own telecom infrastructure. Such a local community owned telecom infrastructure model is something which many cities in the developed world have already adopted. The WSIS documents make many references to the role of community based ICT initiatives, which is an important issue completely ignored by the draft RAP.

Access to Information and Knowledge

The draft RAP seems to equate access to information and knowledge with access to government information alone. Such a blinkered view of the all-important issue of access to information and knowledge, which is the very basis of the idea of an Information Society,

is very disturbing. The WSIS POA speaks in some detail about various things that are needed to be done under this Action Line. It also touches upon new content sharing paradigms in calling for encouraging 'initiatives to facilitate access, including free and affordable access to open access journals and books, and open archives for scientific information'. The Tokyo Declaration was also much more progressive in calling for 'a vibrant public domain'.

> "Enhance the sharing and strengthening of global knowledge for development by ensuring equitable access to information for educational, scientific, economic, social, political and cultural activities, leading to a vibrant public domain of information" (Tokyo Declaration).

However even these conceptions fall short for a clear commitment to an 'open content paradigm' for development and other socially useful content, that is often produced by public funding.

The Tokyo declaration did have a separate point on 'Ensuring balance between intellectual property rights (IPR) and public interest'.

> "While intellectual property rights play a vital role in fostering innovation in software, e-commerce and associated trade and investment, there is a need to promote initiatives to ensure fair balance between IPRs and the interests of the users of information, while also taking into consideration the global consensus achieved on IPR issues in multilateral organizations."

> "Copyright holders and distributors of content should be cognizant of the need to ensure that content is accessible for all, including persons with disabilities. In this connection, access requirements should be included in legal, regulatory and policy frameworks, where appropriate."

The draft RAP completely avoids getting into these territories - of IPR, public domain, and open access to development and socially-useful content.

Capacity Building

The present document equates capacity building with Human Resource Development, and its conception of capacity building for Information Society at no point goes beyond ICT for education. Issues of building capacities of communities and of institutions, the very basic and pressing agenda for an inclusive and development oriented Information Society have escaped attention entirely.

Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs

While the draft RAP does speak of guidelines for protecting privacy, it falls quite short of a more forthright expression in the Tokyo declaration, calling for 'respect for the constitutional and other rights of all persons, including freedom of expression.'

Enabling Environment

The draft RAP fails to stress the central role that governments have to play in creating an appropriate enabling environment for an inclusive Information Society in the Asia Pacific, a fact recognized in the WSIS - Geneva documents and something which is getting even greater recognition in the emerging Tunis documents. The role goes beyond providing a good regulatory policy, to actual interventions that are publicly funded. In its section on enabling environment, the RAP does make a passing reference to non-market enabling environment.

> "To create supportive, transparent, pro-competitive and predictable policy, legal and regulatory framework which provides the appropriate incentives to investment and community development in the Information Society."

However, it is not clear what exactly is meant by 'community development' here. Any positive hopes of a community-based development approach are quickly dashed on reading the three indicators given in the RAP for evaluating progress on this point.

> - Percentage of foreign equity allowed in ICT sector in each country of the region;
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> - Investment in ICT and market capitalization;
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> - Value of ICT and related Hardware and Software export.

ICT applications: benefits in all aspects of life

The actual uses that the ICTs are put to in order to achieve the objectives of development is of course the most important issue - something for which other issues are mostly meant to build an ideal ground. So it would have been expected that it is in this Action Line, of actual use of ICTs in various areas, that regional and national plans will be more expressive and detailed, keeping in mind specific development realities of the region. However the draft RAP in this part just makes some perfunctory remarks on use of ICTs for public administration, business, education, health etc but chooses not to elaborate. These issues seem to be taken as secondary to the infrastructure and economic issues that dominate the action plan. A look at the indicators of evaluation of the extent which ICTs are giving 'benefits in all aspects of life' is instructive,

- "Internet activities undertaken by individuals for dealing with government organizations/public authorities, business/commercial transactions, education, health care, getting agricultural information;"

(Civil Society's comment: The way new ICTs bring benefits to people, especially in development context, is varied, and actual 'Internet activity undertaken by individuals' is widely acknowledged to be mostly not a good indicator.)

- "Various activities undertaken by citizens in a democratic process;"

(*Civil Society's comment: What is to be measured is unclear. It certainly does not look like the language of an indicator*)

- "e-Commerce turn-over of the region compared to its total trade turnover respectively for intra-region and with the rest of the world;"

(*Civil Society's comment: E-commerce is just one e-application, and not even the main one for the business sector yet*)

- "Number of persons employed and % to total population in the IT-enabled and IT application services sector;"
- "Number of persons employed and % to total population in the ICT equipment hardware and software production."

(*Civil Society's comment: The above 2 points say nothing about whether the ICT industry is geared towards exports, or only towards the more prosperous parts of the national and local economy and market. It fails to capture the impact of IT on development sectors.*)

It is important to go into details while listing out the real possibilities of applications contained in the new ICTs for various developmental purposes like health, education, livelihood, responsive governance etc. Specific and detailed actions under each area, as also appropriate indicators need to be spelt out. It is in this Action Line that a more elaborate action plan, with many sub- action lines, is needed to be developed by the Regional Meet, if the purpose is really to work in the framework laid by the WSIS DOP for a people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society.

Also the action plan must emphasize sectoral e-strategies along with national e-strategies. This alone will lead to a meaningful mainstreaming of ICTs in all developmental sectors. National e-strategies tend to remain in the domain of the IT and telecom ministries and exclude any real involvement of development ministries in use of ICTs for development. Sectoral e-strategies developed by these ministries in consultation with the lead agency in charge of the national e-strategy, and in cooperation with all stakeholder in the development sector, including civil society organizations, are the biggest imperative today to reach the 'benefits in all aspects of life' (quoting from the language of the Action Line) of the people who most need such assistance.

Other Action Lines

The Regional Action Plan similarly does not do justice to the other Action Lines

- ❑ on cultural diversity and local content - (the evaluation indicator here is the 'number of countries in the region with websites dedicated to showcasing their cultural development and diversity' and not the extent of software localization work, extent of local language content in digital medium and on the web, the extent of use and accessing of local content on the web etc),

- ❏ on media, (the RAP speaks about role of media, but not the new opportunities in media like blogging, citizens media etc that are shaping up all over the world, including in the countries of Asia Pacific) and

- ❏ on international and regional cooperation (where the document for some inexplicable reason goes back to its preferred expression of public- private partnership' instead of the term multi-stakeholder partnership which is the established terminology in the WSIS process).

Specific Developmental Priorities

True to its general lack of a developmental perspective, the Action Plan gives little serious considerations to the special needs of the more disadvantaged groups. In referring to women, the present document in its guiding principles for the Action Plan goes back to instrumentalising women in development, a tendency which has been much contested by gender advocates, especially since the Beijing Summit.

> "……resolve to promote gender equality and empowerment of women *as effective ways to* (emphasis added) combat poverty, hunger and disease and to simulate truly sustainable development….."

In comparison the WSIS documents as well as the Tokyo Declaration have adopted more progressive language.

> "Gender issues: Unequal power relations and other social and cultural aspects have contributed to differential access, participation and status for men and women in the region. In this regard, more attention should be given to overcoming these constraints and ensuring that women can equally benefit from the increased use of ICTs for empowerment and full participation in shaping political, economic and social development." (Tokyo Declaration)

The gender insensitivity of this document is so high that even in areas where special needs of women clearly require specific mention like in the section of capacity building; there is not a single reference to issues of gender. Such omission, especially in context of the Asia Pacific, where women's inclusion in the emergent Information Society is deeply challenged by socio-cultural impediments, speak of an absence of understanding of and commitment to a gender equal Information Society.

In fact in the whole tabulated Action Plan the word 'gender' comes once, and there is one reference to 'women'. In the all-important part on indicators for evaluation, these words are not found at all.

Women's empowerment is a major development issue in the Asia Pacific and in this regard the new ICTs can play an important role in many different ways. The challenges and possibilities in this area require a separate action line on Women and ICTs. It is not enough to just mention this issue in the guidelines. Meaningful references to other disadvantaged

groups, like people with disabilities, for whom too new ICTs holds special promise, is as scarce in the draft RAP.

The Goals of Development

The WSIS documents have mostly referred to the need to achieve internationally agreed development goals, including the MDGs, but the present Draft Action Plan has a more limiting language of calling only for achieving MDGs. (except in the opening part where the 4 objectives of the plan are mentioned). The use of ICTs for development cannot stay limited to the specifically identified MDGs. The possibilities and the scope here is much wider. In fact, as we move towards regional and national implementation, language that stresses national and local development needs and priorities in addition to these internationally agreed development goals requires to be included in the policy documents. The WSIS documents also mention national and local priorities at many places.

Monitoring and Evaluation

While the issues listed in the draft RAP are themselves very inadequate, the evaluation indices have been developed with neither any sensitivity to development priorities nor any understanding of the specific contexts and manner in which development activity unfolds. While the draft RAP exhorts that

> "Every country at the national level may undertake monitoring of the progress against each MDG target and indicator by means of surveys, measurements, etc,"

It is difficult to understand why did the draft RAP itself not adopt any such MDG or other core development priorities based evaluation indicators. Under the circumstances, it is facile to ask the member countries to do it at their own level.

Implementation and follow-up of WSIS

One important substantive issue in the RAP is the manner in which UNESCAP has taken up the role of the regional lead organization for implementing WSIS outcomes and for the follow up of WSIS in the region. We welcome such a leading role in the region for UNESCAP since we are strongly of the view that Information Society issues are foremost social and economic issues. We are however uncomfortable with the fact that UNESCAP takes ITU and APT as its two natural implementing partners, exclusive of other organizations, in most references in the draft RAP.

In its closing section, the draft RAP mentions categorically;
> The cross-sectoral nature of the Regional Action Plan puts the responsibility on ESCAP to lead and coordinate the activities with active involvement of ITU and APT as executing agencies.

These organizations - ITU and APT - have an important role since technology is an important issue in Information Society, but it can not become the driving issue. The WSIS process is about a people-centered and development-oriented Information Society and the civil society will like to see a greater role of core development agencies like the UNDP, and socio-cultural agencies like the UNESCO, in the implementation and the follow-up process.

Call to develop a new RAP through an open and inclusive process and with due regard to development needs of the Asia Pacific

It is also important to note that the endorsement of roles of various organizations in the regional implementation should take into consideration the fact that the WSIS process has still to decide on such an implementation and follow-up structure, and the issue will be taken up by the Prepcom 3 and finally accepted at the summit. Under these circumstances, we once again appeal to the governments and other stakeholders gathered in Tehran for the 'High Level Asia-Pacific Conference for the WSIS' to defer the adoption of a detailed action plan for the region to till after Tunis. They should instead use the opportunity of this conference to develop an agreement on principles that will guide such an action plan, and set up an open, inclusive and transparent process, incorporating the principle of multi-stakeholderism in its true spirit, for developing a comprehensive action plan for building a people-centered, inclusive and development oriented Information Society in the Asia Pacific.

Civil Society calls for rejection of this draft Regional Action Plan and developing a new one that takes on from the WSIS - Geneva and Tunis - documents and builds in the regional perspectives with due attention to the development needs of the countries of the Asia Pacific, instead of slipping further even on the gains made at WSIS for the developing countries. And as mentioned earlier the present draft RAP also completely fails the mandate it expresses as having taken from the Tokyo Declaration.

Civil society will like to acknowledge and commend the inclusive and transparent process employed by UNDP-APDIP in developing recommendations for Internet Governance. This process has been in complete variance with the processes employed in developing the mainstream documents of the regional meeting.   And the progressive participatory processes employed by the APDIP also show in the quality of the document on Internet Governance that it has been able to put together. The new process for developing a 'Regional Action Plan Towards Information Society in Asia and the Pacific' should follow the lead of APDIP's work on Internet Governance.

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