

## **WSIS PrepCom 2: A South Asian perspective**

South Asia has one of the world's largest concentrations of the poor. This region, especially India, is also marked by rapid strides in IT capabilities, which has made it an important international centre of IT skills, and more recently, of IT-enabled outsourced services. This combination, of pressing development needs and burgeoning IT skills makes it the ideal place for large scale information and communication technologies for development (ICTD) activity. While the region does have a very large number of ICTD projects, the engagement of this region in synthesizing emerging trends through rigorous research and informed advocacy leaves a lot to be desired. This gap becomes particularly glaring in global platforms as was evident during the PrepCom 2 of the Tunis phase of WSIS as well.

Three things about South Asia's participation in the PrepCom 2 at Geneva stand out.

One, that there is a dichotomy between the governmental positions at WSIS and their attitude within their countries. The governments of this region have taken a very pro-ICTD view at WSIS deliberations, calling for international donor support, new financing mechanisms etc for ICTD infrastructure, capacity building and sectoral applications.

However, most delegates are from the IT and telecomms ministries, which back home are mostly involved with IT industry expansion and telecomms activity, both requiring close working with the private sector. These ministries either do not have any ICTD vision, or if they do, it is private sector-led. While at WSIS these delegates argue for the primacy of public finance and public policy at global and national levels for reaching the benefits of the new ICTs to all, and seek to highlight the limitations of private enterprise for this purpose, in their own countries their stances and pre-occupations are entirely different. This discordance was also evident at the Dhaka regional consultations on WSIS held in January 2005, where the government and the private sector in one voice made it look like WSIS was just about the competitiveness of the domestic IT industry.

The second important issue about South Asia's presence at the PrepCom was that though this time there were more civil society participants than earlier, it was almost entirely made up of what may be called the ICTD civil society sector. Civil society actors from 'traditional' areas of development - health, education, governance, media, civil rights etc- were not sufficiently represented. In South Asia, unlike in Latin America, Africa and even West and East Asia, the ICTD civil society does not seem to have developed enough linkages with these traditional sectors - especially of media and civil rights, two areas from where there has been significant input into the WSIS discourse from other regions.

The third point, coming probably from the unease about their own domain and positions, is of an almost complete absence of any interactions between the government delegates and the civil society participants at the PrepCom. This is in contrast to relatively closer interactions between these government and civil society participants from Latin America and Africa, who could at least be seen meeting and exchanging notes with each another. But in the case of South Asia, except for Bangladesh to some extent, the government and

civil society delegates from the same country looked like they had come from different places and represent different people altogether. The poor level of government's interest in civil society's role in WSIS was evident from the level of government participation and activity at the Dhaka consultations, and the lack of any initiative on their own part during the entire WSIS process to involve civil society actors in formulating country positions.

It is important that the South Asian civil society uses the period between now and the Tunis summit to strengthen linkages with their governments, as well as reach out to the civil society in the 'traditional' sectors. At the same time, South Asian civil society needs to develop greater structural linkages with civil society entities from other regions which will be needed for it to play an important part in the WSIS follow-up processes.

### **Foot note:**

Maud Hand interviewed a variety of delegates at PrepCom 2 for APCNews, including **IT for Change's** project leader, Parminder Jeet Singh. He told her:

"My organisation is unique in that we do ICT grass roots projects coupled with high level research and advocacy work. Straddling both spaces gives us a vital breadth of expertise where we draw from specific on-the-ground projects to intervene at events like WSIS.

A colleague's wearing a t-shirt which states that "***Internet Governance is important but more so if people had the internet.***" There's not enough emphasis being placed on financing mechanisms. We want it set squarely in the centre of WSIS. There's too much stress on limited private investment benefiting all. Without the role of public financing, ICT will not genuinely reach the poorer excluded South. There's definitely a hardening of positions by the governments of the North who argue that we'll have to make do with existing financial methods. But there are strong voices from the South pitching for a special fund for ICT for development and they're finally beginning to reach our own governments who accept that it's not enough to rely solely on private investment if we're to harness the real potential of ICTS for genuine social change and development."