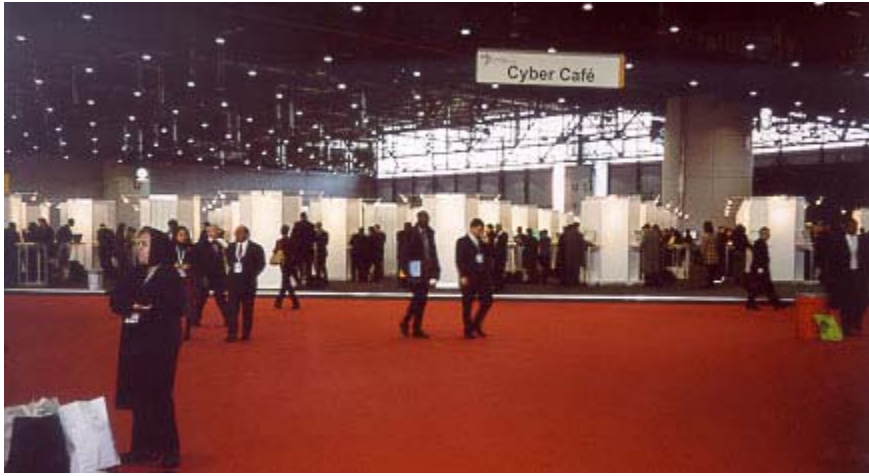


## ***Implementing WSIS***

By Wangu Mwangi



*Participants at the Geneva meeting take advantage of free internet access at the Summit*

The origins of the World Summit on the Information Society can be traced to a 1984 ITU report, “The Missing Link” that identified the telecommunications gap between developed and developing countries and recognised communication as a critical tool to boost the global quality of life. One of the key goals of the Summit was to ‘jumpstart and speed access and adoption of new technologies through active collaboration and commitment from all.’ The Summit’s key outcomes are a Declaration of Principles (‘a roadmap for today’s information society’) and Plan of Action. A second phase of the Summit, Tunis 2005, will gauge progress and set new targets.

Many heads of governments and other speakers at the Geneva meeting, held from 10-12 December 2003, underscored the challenges that lie ahead in translating the ambitious goals of the WSIS Platform into concrete action, thus underlining the need to make conscious efforts to link the outcome of the Summit with existing international development agreements. A number of key actors facilitated discussions to link ICT targets more directly to the UN Millennium Development Goals - which consolidated and refocused the outcomes of numerous UN Summits from the last decade into one global development framework, with 2015 as the D-day. The Millennium Declaration adopted by UN member states in September 2000, “commit(s) the international community to an expanded vision of development, one that vigorously promotes human development as the key to sustaining social and economic progress in all countries, and recognizes the importance of creating a global partnership for development.”

Concrete measures of success in the proposed WSIS Plan of Action include connecting all villages, educational institutions, health centres, hospitals and local and central government departments by 2015. Contentious proposals that have dogged the two year negotiations prior and that remain unresolved include issues on internet governance, human rights (‘the right to communicate’), a proposed digital solidarity fund, open source

software and intellectual property rights versus the public domain<sup>1</sup>. Hence the strong presence of civil society coalitions and other groups working on these issues, such as the Communication Rights Movement, Open Source Software advocates and independent media organisations.

One of several seminars held to consider strategies for implementing the WSIS Plan of Action, parallel to the official plenary negotiations, was organised by UNDP in collaboration with the Government of Italy, the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA-DPADM); the Inter-American Development Bank and the Development Gateway Foundation. Titled “Working towards the Millenium Development Goals: Leveraging ICT for Good Governance and Development Effectiveness” the seminar explored implementation of e-government initiatives, and monitoring and evaluating the use of ICTs to achieve the MDGs and other desired outcomes. Panel discussions focused on e-government as a working strategy to foster good governance and sought to develop a concrete programme to enhance ‘development effectiveness’ through partnerships at different levels. It was stressed that the goal of e-government should be to add value to government operations and enhance public consultation – rather than, in the words of one panelist, merely ‘digitising everything that moves’. A similar initiative was a two day workshop organised by UNDP, UNCTAD, the UN Regional Commission for Europe, the World Bank and the UN ICT Task Force to discuss national strategies for the information society.

Many of the best practice initiatives and lessons shared at the Summit featured communities in some of the remotest and poorest regions of the world – raising the hope that equity in the use of ICTs for development is an attainable goal. In spite of these rays of hope, however, some of the key contentious issues at the heart of the formal negotiations by governments remain unresolved. At the top of the list is the demand by developing countries for a special fund to boost ICT diffusion in the poorest countries. One of the most active African leaders in ICT issues, President Wade of Senegal, strongly pushed for the adoption of the proposed digital solidarity fund that would be maintained by earmarking a small percentage of ICT transactions such as international communication and computer/software sales for ICT projects. The proposal asserts that “Digital Solidarity could ... be achieved by raising large amounts of money collected painlessly because the contributions are so small. They would be used to finance the entry and maintenance of a large number of nations from the South in the digital snake. This is how the *digital gap* gradually would be closed, on the road to *e-civilization*.” While negotiations will doubtless continue before the next meeting in Tunis, many participants at the Summit preferred to focus their attention on how to tap into existing funding mechanisms in order to expand activities that are already underway on the ground.

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis is taken from official WSIS documents prior to the Summit. A more detailed analysis of the negotiation process can be found at the WSIS site ([www.itu.int/wsisis](http://www.itu.int/wsisis))

### *The Parallel Process takes Centre Stage*

While no agreement was reached on the proposed fund, greater progress was made in the 'concrete' part of the Geneva meeting. An innovative aspect of the Summit was the central place given to the so-called 'side events', coordinated under one umbrella, the ICT4D (ICT for Development) Platform. These were not the traditional fringe meetings organised by civil society groups, but well coordinated 'Multi-stakeholder' processes, bringing together intergovernmental organisations, national governments, NGOs, private sector and community groups working on concrete ICT projects. The objective of the platform was three fold: to showcase concrete projects, solutions, products, methods, experiences and lessons learnt in the field; to reflect on various perspectives and debate innovative approaches and methods; and to stimulate concrete action-oriented partnerships.

Among the numerous events organised by civil society networks included the Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) initiative, which hosted a two day World Forum on Communication Rights, to debate and strategise on human rights issues around the WSIS process; the Building Digital Opportunities (BDO) Programme – a collaborative initiative by five international communications organisations to build ICT capacities among poor and marginalized communities; and the Ubuntu initiative – a civil society led campaign to reform international institutions.



*A stand at the ICT4D Exhibition*

A special initiative by the UN ICT Task Force sought to raise awareness of the vast numbers of people that have been excluded, due to poverty, language and other barriers, from current ICT content. The 'Local Voices' project seeks to promote cultural diversity by supporting the creation and exchange of local knowledge. Some ICT solutions highlighted at the summit were mobile telephony, local language interfaces and text to voice software. A number of NGOs and civil society networks involved in similar

projects ranging from community radio and other media, online content, human rights, education and appropriate technology were well represented and organized through several thematic caucuses.

The substantive nature of this parallel process meant that even as contested language was being negotiated by delegates in the plenary sessions, successes in the field and lessons learned were being show-cased daily and new alliances and initiatives being forged, as an example of what could be achieved if more concerted action is taken. To aid this process, the WSIS secretariat has created a space for announcing such partnerships on the official website.

The organisers of the Platform, The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP) estimated that up to 40,000 people visited the exhibition and parallel events that were organised by 265 groups representing 80 countries. The large number of exhibits not only provided documentary evidence that there are many successful ICT initiatives linked specifically to development objectives, but more importantly, that these initiatives are being implemented through collaborative partnerships, which enhance knowledge sharing, promote more efficient use of resources and allow for scaling up of proven best practices.

In a separate, but related meeting, media representatives attended the World Electronic Media Forum held at the same venue.

### **URLs for some of the organisations/initiatives mentioned in this article**

The official WSIS site [www.itu.int/wsis](http://www.itu.int/wsis)

For projects and technologies showcased at the Summit, see [www.ict.4d-org](http://www.ict.4d-org)

The Millenium Declaration <http://www.un.org/millennium/>

ICT Development Showcase ([www.developmentshowcase.net/ict](http://www.developmentshowcase.net/ict)) A UNDP supported searchable database of projects, on-line streaming videos, webcast archives and documents that feature ICT initiatives related to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and sustainable development

United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force <http://www.unicttaskforce.org/> and [www.localvoices.org](http://www.localvoices.org)

UNESCO High-Level Symposium: Building Knowledge Societies: From Vision to Action (see <http://www.unesco.org/wsis/symposium/>)

The Information Society: How ICT Is Working to Reduce Poverty in the Developing World. Development Gateway Special, December 5, 2003 (<http://www.developmentgateway.com/node/130685/special/wsis/>)

The Global Knowledge Partnership, GKP (<http://www.globalknowledge.org>)

Information Solutions for SMEs in developing countries (UNIDO) <http://www.unido.org/en/doc/19585>

The Africa Information Society Initiative (AISI) at the UN Economic Commission for Africa ([www.uneca.org/aisi](http://www.uneca.org/aisi))

ICT Policy: A Beginner's Handbook, Association for Progressive Communications ([www.apc.org](http://www.apc.org))  
Communication Rights in the Information Society, CRIS ([www.crisinfo.org](http://www.crisinfo.org))

UBUNTU World Forum of Civil Society Networks ([www.ubuntu.upc.es](http://www.ubuntu.upc.es))