

On the table:

Africa's issues

Alice Munyua is a representative of the African Civil Society Caucus. Here she highlights some of their key concerns and priority issues.

The right to communicate

The advent of ICTs has changed human rights practice immensely. For African Civil Society Organisations there are two challenges with respect to ICTs.

The first is to unpack the human rights issues around the disparate development of ICTs on the continent. The second is to learn how to use ICTs effectively as an additional tool in both our work and in the broader struggle for human rights on our continent.

An information and communication society should have people and human needs at its centre underlining the importance of human rights standards as the core set of principles guiding its development.

In order to ensure freedom of expression and the right to information, WSIS should therefore not only reaffirm Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also commit to its active enforcement. In addition, the principles of a better-balanced flow of information, free circulation of ideas, press freedom, participation in the communication process, and knowledge sharing, will only become meaningful inasmuch as they are supported by a consistent articulation of rights.

Sustainable democratic development

An equitable Information Society must be based on sustainable economic and social development and democratic principles. ICTs have great potential for developing more democratic and participative processes of governance, from the local to the international level.

But technologies also have the potential to perpetuate the expansion of existing, undemocratic power relations and inequalities within and between peoples and nations. Democratic and sustainable development of the Information Society can therefore not be left solely to market forces; in order to balance commercial objectives with legitimate social interests, recognition should be given to the need for appropriate regulation and development of public services, and the principle of equitable access to services and affordable cost should be reaffirmed.

ICT use is also creating new environmental hazards. In view of mainstreaming ICTs into sustainable development, the action plan should include concrete proposals and policies to:

- ♦ develop renewable energy resources, particularly for remote communities;
- ♦ improve resource efficiency;
- ♦ dematerialise and reduce waste;
- ♦ increase the useful life of hardware;
- ♦ improve recycling conditions and ensure safe disposal of discarded ICT hardware and parts; and

- ♦ encourage the development of alternatives to toxic ICT components.

Appropriate policy and regulation

Most telecommunications policies developed in Africa have been the result of adoption of 'best practice' recommendations from international organisations and developed countries. The lack of local solutions peculiar to Africa denies the resulting policy the appropriate African perspective.

Intellectual property rights

The privatisation of knowledge and information through copyright, patents and trademarks is contributing to the growth of inequality and the exploitation of the poorest peoples and communities. Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) has affected the public's access to knowledge in the public domain and to copyrighted works; limited legitimate opportunities for cultural appropriations; and stifled learning, creativity and innovation thus placing curbs on the democratisation of knowledge.

Trade Related aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) favours industrialised countries and transactional copyright industries, while limiting the freedom of countries, especially less-industrialised ones, to design IPR regimes to meet their economic, social and cultural needs.

IPR must serve public benefits before personal ones by taking into account existing state obligations under international human rights instruments. The strengthening of IPR regimes should be pro-actively thwarted by other legal instruments related to biodiversity such as the Convention on Bio-diversity (CBD).

Particular attention should be paid to the opportunities and challenges of technological development of women and marginal economic agents. The WSIS must therefore include, as a principle and theme, the maintenance and growth of the commonwealth of human knowledge as a means of reducing global inequality and of providing the conditions for intellectual creativity, sustainable development and respect for human rights.

Community media

The marginal role accorded community media ignores the crucial significance of these media for the majority of the world population. In many parts of the world, community broadcasting thrives as part of a pluralistic media environment—radio stations owned and controlled by the communities they serve, whether these are communities of language, interest or geography.

The constitutional, legal and policy frameworks for community broadcasting in most African countries are not explicitly supportive of the growth of community media. There is a need for clearly supportive definitions and the recognition of the specificity of community media as a third voice apart from state media and private commercial media, which is crucial for the viability of democracy through participation.

Literacy, education, research

Urgent attention should be paid to the potential positive and negative impacts of ICTs on the issues of illiteracy in national and international languages of the great majority of the world's people.

Literacy, education and research are fundamental components of information and knowledge societies.

Knowledge creation and acquisition should be nurtured as a participatory and collective process and should not be considered a one-way flow.

But only an informed and educated citizenry with access to the means and outputs of pluralistic research can fully participate in and effectively contribute to knowledge societies.



Women's empowerment

Evidence of governments' commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment remain largely absent from the WSIS agenda and more specifically from the Bamako Declaration.

The WSIS Declaration must adopt as a statement of principle, a fundamental commitment to gender equality, non-discrimination and women's empowerment, and recognise these as non-negotiable and essential prerequisites to equitable and people-centred development within the Information Society.

Governance

In an information and communication society, good governance must be based on the values of participation, inclusiveness, transparency and accountability.

This particularly implies the democratic management of international bodies dealing with ICTs. Given the borderless characteristics of ICTs, decision-making bodies should respect the principles of democracy and openness, as well as sovereignty.

In particular, the management of the core resources of the Internet, like the Internet protocols, standards and identifiers such as domain names and

IP addresses, must serve the public interest at the global, national and local levels.

Furthermore, any decision made on protocols and standards should be compatible with international human rights standards articulated in the International Bill of Rights (the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), and specially the rights to freedom of expression, to privacy, and the principle of non-discrimination.

The current management of Internet names and numbers and other related mechanisms should be re-examined with the full participation of all stakeholders in light of serving public interests and compatibility with human rights standards.

Other regional and international processes

The weakness in representation of African concerns in international conferences assumes both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. The quantitative aspect is evident in the low number of African organisations that actively participate, while the little weight accorded African concerns indicates a qualitative

weakness.

Essential decisions are already being taken, in other regional and international political arenas, that have huge potential consequences for knowledge, education and culture. It is important for African civil society organisations to map decision-making in other political arenas that impact or intersect so that a monitoring system can be established to ensure that decisions taken in other political arenas that relate to the Information Society are consistent with the general framework established by the WSIS process.

It is also important that the international legal frameworks give preference to those bodies which empower the effective participation of developing countries in decision-making processes, to redress the current trend of exporting frameworks developed by Western countries to the global level.

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