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Collective contribution from several Asian NGOs

THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY: AN ASIAN RESPONSE

Final Document

Background

In anticipation of and preparation for the Asian Regional Conference of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) – to be held in Tokyo from the 13th to the 15th of January 2003 – Bread for All (Switzerland), the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC, UK) and the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum Asia, Thailand) organised the seminar: *The World Summit on the Information Society: An Asian Response*. The seminar was held in Bangkok from the 22nd to the 24th of November, with representatives of 34 organisations from 16 different countries. The organisations present were primarily NGOs with a communication focus.

The objectives of the seminar were:

- to achieve a clearer understanding of the importance, the process and the meaning of the WSIS for Asia, and to identify a common understanding of the Information Society;
- to discuss the current work and situation of Asian NGOs as well as their policy positioning for the following five key Information Society themes:
 - access
 - democratisation of media
 - freedom of expression
 - cultural and linguistic diversity
 - gender justice
- to define further issues, themes and proposals to be raised in the WSIS process and Summit, from the perspective of Asian civil society media organisations; and
- to draft a common position as official input to the Asian Regional Conference (Tokyo, 13th-15th of January) of the WSIS and to discuss the strategy and financial problems for further advocacy of Asian NGOs in the WSIS process

Focus and Issues

The participants approached the discussion from the perspective of their experience and of the WSIS process. The following points summarise the main issues raised.

1. Access

The reality of a digital divide between Northern and Southern countries, but also within Southern countries, is widely recognised. Access in Asian countries is largely confined to urban areas, profitable markets and to well-educated, upper income male users, thus widening existing social inequalities. In a context of globalisation and liberalisation, what regulations and policies are required to ensure global and national access and guarantee effective use of ICTs for all? What is needed to transform ICTs into a means of empowerment for all people?

2. Democratisation of media

Media ownership in Asia is undergoing profound changes. There are attempts to transform state broadcasters into truly public service entities, and under the pressure of liberalisation, private media are emerging. In this changing media landscape, what measures need to be taken to democratise and reinforce public media and to ensure the accountability of private media? What is the place, the role and the potential of community-based media and what measures need to be taken to ensure their sustainability and independence?

3. Freedom of expression

Human rights and freedom of expression are central issues to the information society for northern, as well as for southern and Asian countries. While government censorship of traditional media has decreased in many Asian countries recently, freedom of expression and diversity of opinion is far from guaranteed. Outright censorship continues to be found in some countries and in others the media engage in self-censorship in order to maintain broadcasting or publishing licences. Increased concentration of ownership of the media in a few private hands also threatens to restrict diversity and accountability. For the Internet new laws passed in the name of "national security" or "dangerous content" may threaten freedom of speech and the very open nature of this media. How must civil society respond to censorship and to questions of media and Internet content regulation?

4. Linguistic and cultural diversity

Over the course of the past few decades, the growth of a world-wide cultural industry has raised many questions about linguistic and cultural diversity. For the film industry, a few production centres, from Hollywood to Bollywood, are capturing huge segments of the market and threatening the diversity of content, symbols and processes. For the Internet, some predict that English and Chinese will become the predominant languages of use. In this context, what measures need to be taken to promote local Asian productions and to protect indigenous expression and knowledge? How do intellectual property rights protections reinforce these tendencies?

5. Gender Justice

ICTs are not gender neutral and there are many barriers to women's access to and participation in the Information society. Barriers are economic, political and social. They are built on deeply rooted gender inequalities, like gendered socialisation (women's general relationship to science and knowledge), lower average income, a shortage of time due to family responsibilities and a lack of participation in policy-making processes. Given this situation, how can a more democratic, inclusive and neutrally gendered Information Society be shaped? How can ICTs be used to empower women and respond to their needs?

WSIS: An Asian Response Final Declaration

Beginning with the issues raised and seeking to positively contribute to the Asian Regional Conference and to the WSIS process at the global level, the 33 participants have come to a consensus on the following vision, principles and plan of action.

Preamble

Asia is a region of great diversity—not only in terms of geography, culture, and language - but also in the ownership and distribution of wealth, knowledge, and power. Many of humanity's important cultures, civilisations and philosophies trace their origins to different parts of Asia, making the region a significant contributor to global knowledge and humanity's rich cultural base. It is home to more than half the world's inhabitants -including some of its most prosperous, but sadly, also a majority of the planet's poor. While Asia is seen as a centre of global economic dynamism—with some of its nations counting among the leaders of the world economy—gross underdevelopment persists in many economies and societies.

It is in this context that we as Asians now confront the deep social implications of what is now referred to as the emergent global “information society”. The **World Summit on the Information Society** occurs at a time when the region is struggling to confront the challenge of globalisation and its effects on the lives of Asians and non-Asians alike. As we therefore remain cognisant of the reality that new systems and technologies may reproduce existing inequities and divides among people, we continue to strive for an Information Society that enables citizens and marginalised communities to transcend these divides and build a global community that upholds the highest public interest.

Vision

Our vision of society, is one that is based on justice, equality, and human rights. The right to communicate is fundamental to the strengthening of the political, economic, social and cultural lives of our people. For us this vision is grounded in respect for diversity and plurality. It is a people-centred society and we envision our evolution into a truly communicative, just and peaceful society. The participation of civil society, especially from those communities who are excluded, marginalised and severely deprived, is critical in defining and building such a society.

Principles

The occasion of the WSIS must be utilised to carry all humanity forward. The declaration and plan of action that emerge from the summit must above all, be guided by this principle. The commitments made with respect to the output of the summit must be resourced, and transparent monitoring mechanisms must be put in place.

This must be guided by the following principles:

Communication rights are fundamental to democracy and human development and are already referred to in various international covenants, such as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The "information society" offers new opportunities to strengthen, further embed and universally endorse these rights

Democratic, transparent and accountable governance is fundamental to human development. The "information society" requires such governance, from the global to local levels.

While information and communication technologies can bridge many gaps, they also offer new challenges. Linguistic and cultural diversity, plurality and gender equity must be the cornerstones of the "information society".

Information and knowledge must be readily available for human development and not locked up in private hands. This requires a strong and viable public domain.

Information and communication technologies, new and old, offer enormous potential to enrich and expand education. Harnessed well, they can be a powerful tool to bridge learning gaps and promote lifelong learning.

Information and communication technologies are not an end, but only a possible means. If they are to be used to enhance human development, steps must be taken to ensure affordable access and effective use by all. This implies the need for innovative and gender sensitive policies, programmes, regulations and public investment; all designed to serve human needs.

Proposals for action

We, therefore, call upon Asian governments, civil society and other stakeholders to:

Strengthen community

For many Asians, particularly those in rural communities, the next generation information and communication technology would be a radio station located in their community. For others, it might be a community Internet access point.

Local, participatory and independent community radio speaks in the language and with the accent of its community, is not stopped by the barrier of literacy, and offers a forum for dialogue, cultural expression, and knowledge sharing. Local radio can vastly improve people's connectivity to their neighbours, their region and, when combined with newer technologies, with the information and knowledge from all over the world.

By sharing technology and offering training and support, community Internet access points, also known as telecentres or cyber cafes, offer poor people the possibility of accessing and using the world's information and knowledge and communication infrastructure.

By combining technologies, communities such as Kothmale in Sri Lanka (URL - www.kothmale.net) have discovered new ways of accessing and sharing knowledge by using the radio as a gateway to the Internet.

Therefore, there is a need to promote and support community-based media and access points through financial support, training, preferred access to licenses, frequencies and technologies, including technologies that facilitate links between traditional media and new ones.

Ensure access

Despite impressive growth and investment figures in the global information infrastructure, most people in the South – with their largest population inhabiting the countries of Asia – are yet to benefit from it in any significant manner. Tremendous disparities in access exist not only between the North and the South, but also within the countries of the South, and if the present trends continue, these divides will be further exacerbated.

It is therefore imperative to work towards and guarantee access for all starting from the community level. While that access should be affordable and premised on effective use of information and communication technologies, recognition should also be made that this requires not only infrastructure and technology but also meaningful content, capacity building and an enabling

environment that encompasses the needs based on gender, lack or total absence of literacy, ethno-cultural diversity and political plurality.

Enhance the creation of appropriate content

Asian countries are increasingly confronted by the challenges posed by Trans-national media conglomerates engaged in creating content that homogenise and offers unfair competition to local cultural production. Hence, there is an urgent need to:

Invest in capacity building that is focused on the creation of locally produced, audience sensitive content that responds to local needs, especially that of marginalised communities and indigenous groups.

Strengthen programmes focused on gender-sensitive curriculum in formal and informal education for all and enhance communications and media literacy for women and young girls, as a step towards increasing the creation of content that is relevant and welcoming to women.

Invigorate global governance

In the era of trade liberalisation, institutions outside the UN structure have assumed greater powers and eroded the effectiveness and relevance of the UN's global governance mandate. Consequently, Asian countries have been affected and national governance systems weakened. Hence, there is an urgent need to:

Recommit to principles of open, transparent, decentralised and accountable governance mechanisms at all levels, from the local to global, and in all spheres of society, including those related to the governance of information and communication systems.

Guarantee and extend the participation of civil society, in particular representatives from marginalised communities, indigenous peoples, women and youth, in the policy and decision making processes in all sectors and levels of the "information society".

Reaffirm the role of a more transparent, participatory, and effective democratic UN system as a truly legitimate forum for global governance.

Uphold human rights

Countries in Asia are witness to and experience varying degrees of conflict, unrest and underdevelopment. Regulatory and informal mechanisms have however restricted the flourishing of civil society as a necessary partner in peace and development. These include restrictions to freedom of information, expression and barriers to access along political, racial, religious and gender lines. Upholding human rights is a critical step towards resolving conflict and underdevelopment concerns.

Further, surveillance on people by governments, consumers by entrepreneurs, employees by employers, by utilising new information and communication technologies are a severe threat to human rights.

Therefore it is imperative to reaffirm the commitment to uphold the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, especially articles 19 and 28, all other recognised international conventions, and further embed and strengthen the right to communicate in all international treaties and conventions.

Guarantee and take appropriate action to protect the right to privacy, including freedom from surveillance at all levels of the "information society".

Protect independent and professional journalism in all media, especially in conflict areas, and guarantee freedom of expression in the political, the cultural and the social domains and in all types of information services.

Extend the public domain

While new information and communication technologies enhance the accessibility to the appropriate information and knowledge for people centred development, this possibility is frequently restricted by privatised intellectual property rights. Consequently, in most Asian countries, indigenous intellectual legacy and wisdom is endangered; and sharing within communities or public health severely threatened. Given the new challenges of the "information society" it is imperative to:

Review the Intellectual Property Rights regimes to restore a balance between private ownership and public domain.

Work towards harmonising exemptions for fair use of information and guarantee an extension of the public domain as a mean to ensure access for all to information.

Promote the development of open source technologies and free/open software as an alternative that favours innovation and the development of appropriate technologies and content.

Protect and promote cultural and linguistic diversity

The strength of Asia is its cultural, linguistic, historic diversity. This diversity and richness is under threat from the homogenisation resulting from globalisation and monopolisation of communication systems.

Hence, it is necessary to protect, promote and create possibilities for community-based forms of communication and expression, including the oral based traditions of knowledge transfer.

Recently, an international standards making body established technical standards defining how the Khmer language would be represented on computers without the input of native Khmer speakers. The result was far from optimal and has taken great efforts from the Cambodian people to resolve.

The development of policy, procedure and tools to ensure multi-lingualism in cyberspace, and in all other forms of media and communication systems, must respect the different language communities in the development of international standards.

Ensure public investment in infrastructure

New information and communication technologies have the potential to contribute to the socio-economic empowerment of the marginalised, and should be encouraged through infrastructure-building with public investments.

To this end, governments should commit to provide resources wherein people shall participate in policy-making, monitoring and evaluation.

Further, a fair distribution of such technologies must be ensured with home grown solutions in simple, feasible and affordable methods.

In conclusion, we submit our vision, principle and plans of action to contribute positively to the global dialogue. We bring our expertise and experience from different corners of Asia, representing a wide range of communities, and seek to define our common future and evolution into truly communicative communities.

List of Participants

The Workshop on

“The World Summit on The Information Society :The Asian Response”

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organized by FORUM-ASIA, Bread for All and WACC

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Indonesia	Alliance of Independent Journalists Mr Dwi Iswandono
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