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World Summit on the Information Society Draft Declaration of Principles and Draft Action Plan for Prepcom-3 Comments from UN-HABITAT

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General comments

UN-HABITAT welcomes the efforts already undertaken of drafting the declaration of principles and action plan for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) but believes that the current status of these two documents does not reflect a very coherent set of principles or plan of action. A theoretical construct or reference to communications theory is missing and the political objectives could be helped along by basing these two documents on sound theory.

The documents are more concerned about Information and Communication Technology (ICT), as media, than about societies in need of information and they seem to be decidedly western-centric and middle class in its orientation. Many places of these two drafts treat information issues from the viewpoint of the carrier rather than the content or the social context. There is also a danger that it may pre-empt further attempts to deal with information and knowledge in society at a more fundamental level.

Nominally, the subject of WSIS is society and how it uses information. Yet, both the draft declaration of principles and the draft action plan focus almost entirely on information infrastructure and how society assesses, organizes and applies the technical systems for carrying information. An Information Society consists of much more than the technology for transmission of information.

The infrastructure is essential to modern telecommunication, but so is the ability of members of society to conceptualise, formulate, articulate, recognize, understand, classify and apply information. Without a literate and educated civil society, all modes of transmission – high or low technology – are much less useful in the pursuit of societal growth and development.

There can still be delivery of entertainment products without an educated or literate population. And there can still be delivery of dogmatic and demagogic declarations. But where is the value added in terms of a society's knowledge base? Education and literacy are the *sine qua non* of the information society, not the Internet. The word "education" is included in the document but almost exclusively with reference to its role in gaining access to and using information and communication technology systems, not to its role in processing and using the social, political and economic information that flows over those systems.

Unless the conference revisits its own title [the last S really stands for Systems] – which is not very practical at this point – the declaration, at least, should make a strong statement on the ultimate beneficiaries of ICT being an educated and literate civil society, especially at the local level where people are most involved in social, political and economic processes.

Draft Declaration of Principles

A. Building the Information Society: a global challenge in the new Millennium

Please add on paragraph 1A, Option 3 at the end:

...including those with lack of education or illiteracy.

There is a pressing need for the Draft Declaration of Principles to acknowledge the critical role of local authorities as the sphere of governance most directly concerned with achieving the MDGs. Therefore, please insert the following after paragraph 3:

We acknowledge the critical role of local authorities as the sphere of governance most directly concerned with achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and therefore the pressing need to adopt policies and practices that will help improve access to and use of ICT, particularly by the urban poor;

In paragraph 4A, a reference is made to the role of ICTs as a "determinant of competitiveness" in a knowledge-based international economy. But, ICTs are also a powerful force for cooperation in a knowledge-based international society. This omission signals a bias in the document toward the centrifugal forces of commerce and away from the centripetal needs of society.

Therefore, please add on paragraph 4A after "knowledge-based international economy":

and society,

and after "determinant of competitiveness":

as well as social cooperation

B: Our Common Vision of the Information Society

Please add on paragraph 10 at the end of the list:

- An educated and literate civil society;

C. An information society for all: key principles

1) Information and communication infrastructure

In paragraph 19 it only mentions “universal access” but it seems that affordable access is not an issue. ~~Affordable-Universal~~ access can physically occur without the ability to actually pay for and use the service. Please replace in all three parts of this paragraph “universal access” with:

Universal and affordable access

Furthermore in this paragraph, there is a misunderstanding of the role that regulated competition plays in price reduction. In telecommunication, eradicating such monopolistic practices as allowing only one telecomm service to exist fosters universal access and usage. Simply privatizing the monopoly will not help. The principles of competition, if applied in a well-regulated manner, will reduce access costs to the individual. Nowhere in the declaration is this principle stated. The way this paragraph is written it simply encourages non-competitive practices to continue. Therefore:

Rewrite this paragraph to state unequivocally that monopolies in any form – state-owned, parastatal, private – are anathema to the principle of universal and affordable access.

2) Access to information and knowledge

Please add on paragraph 21-22 at the end of the list:

- universal education and literacy.

4) Capacity Building

Please add on paragraph 30 after “Everyone should be offered the opportunity to acquire the necessary”:
cognitive and technical

6) Enabling Environment

In paragraph 41, there is an implied linkage between integration of ICT into politics and the increase in economic productivity. This connection requires a lot more explanation. Is it universally true? What does it mean? Therefore:

Please delete paragraph 41

The Draft Declaration of Principles does mention good governance [paragraph 39] and the need for the Information Society to support participatory democracy, transparency and accountability and that information is the basis for a well-functioning and transparent decision-making process for both global society and local communities. Nowhere in the document, however, is there a statement on what sort of information, from what sources, is needed to assure good governance.

Please add at the end of paragraph 42:

Governments need to consider ICT, in their micro-economic policies, as a basic infrastructure and service, at the same level as with roads and bridges, health and education, and water and sanitation.

7) ICT-Applications

Please insert the following after paragraph 47:

The private sector should be encouraged to work closely with local authorities in promoting access by the urban poor to ICT.

Draft Action Plan

C) Action Lines

2) Access to information and knowledge

Please add after paragraph 15e:

f) Governments should actively promote the use of ICT as a fundamental working tool by local authorities. In this respect, the International Community should support capacity building for local authorities in the widespread use of ICT as means of improving local governance.

g) Governments and the international community should document best practices and policies in the use of ICT in supporting good governance and in attaining the MDGs.

7) ICT Applications

Please insert after paragraph 31:

ICT can only be effective in helping to attain the MDGs if content of relevance to urban poverty and good governance is readily available and accessible. Therefore, the action plan should:

- Acknowledge the need for the development of applications and content of direct relevance to the implementation of the MDGs.*
- Call upon the international community in partnership with all spheres of government and civil society to support the development and dissemination of applications and content of relevance to the MDG, in particular on pro-poor, gender-sensitive ICT policies and best practices.*

8) Cultural identity and linguistic diversity, local content and media development

Please add paragraph 41i:

i) Local authorities have an important role to play in determining and applying the content of ICT, because they provide enabling structures for facilitating independent initiative and creativity and have a potential for the development of local communities and enhancing civic engagement. Content development, translation and adaptation, as well as digital archives and diverse forms of digital media should be supported as tools that can enhance the functioning of local governance.