The status of critical communication rights ten years after WSIS

The Association for Progressive Communications

www.apc.org
Background

• Funded by World Association for Christian Communication (WACC)
• WSIS Declaration of Principles (2003)
• 197 respondents – 7 continents
• 14 interviews
• Civil society perceptions
A context of unstable perspectives

- People-centred information and knowledge-sharing society dependent on strength of democracy – litmus test for democracy.
- Distinction between principle and practice
- Rights and interlinked – e.g. freedom of expression and access to information. Weakness in one area might undermine strength in another.
Positioning of WSIS Declarations

• Third of respondents said both declarations had little impact on their policy spaces.
• Agreement that civil society declaration was not going to achieve concrete outcomes. “Tool”; “statement”; “frozen moment in time” – in itself it had no power.
• Registered a necessary process for a time of transition.
Visibility of rights

• Human rights more visible in global policy discussions, but no necessarily at the national level.
• Only 29% of respondents said human rights were considered in local policy discussions.
• 20% said laws that affect information and knowledge-sharing society were in breach of UN laws.
Women’s rights

• Women’s rights, media freedoms, FOSS all had greater positive impact on communications environment.
• 56% said there was a “medium to high” focus on gender injustices in policy processes.
• “Gender digital gap is closing”.
• But: “Gender equality is a whitewash”; “soft politics”.
Rights of youth and children

• Needs of youth underrepresented. Only 10% said this was not the case.
• “Lost generation”? Importance of youth programmes.
• Children’s rights are reasonably well protected. 56% said yes.
• But: only 38% said that content damaging to minors was controlled.
Rights of marginalised groups

• Little attention to rights of marginalised and displaced people, as well as disabled people.
• Least likely to contribute effectively.
• 31% said there was little information available for displaced people. Needs of indigenous people not frequently pursued in policy discussions. ICTs not being used to bring health and education to marginalized groups.
• Poverty eradication is a low priority in policy discussions. Lack of inclusion of poor people, absence of strategies to bridge the digital divide, lack of transparency in funds set aside for digital divide strategies.
• 30% said MDG goals were insignificant in policy making processes.
Freedom of expression/public debate

- 61% said media is free.
- Culture of public debate openly encouraged and supported.
- Mixed response to access to information. 14% said government does not share information; 65% said business does not share public-interest information.
- 30% said media ownership was diverse.
Access to technology

• Significant increase in access (e.g. mobile).
• Growth due to investment and business, rather than civil society advocacy/WSIS declarations.
• FOSS is explored for access initiatives.
• 11% said no basic literacy programmes in country. 35% said information literacy programmes for marginalised groups not in place.
• Strong need for adult-based training still felt.
• Overall, state security overrode the need to access information – technical developments of internet important.

• 16% said privacy not protected through legislation. Only 5% said strongly protected.
Multistakeholder processes

• Key outcome of WSIS.
• “A change in dialogue and discourse”.
• Influenced ‘closed’ institutions (e.g. ICANN).
• Adopted at local level – e.g. Kenya; World Conference on International Telecommunications.
• But: “Kenya stands alone”; problems with buy-in and understanding; issues of principles versus practice – in Malaysia it is seen as a “hypothetical concept” dominated by business.
• Groups excluded: e.g. poor people; marginalized people.

• Some global forums do not easily allow multistakeholder engagement – security, where discussions take place in multiple forums.

• “Framework for engagement” but not a “framework for sensitisation”.

• Still a need to “advocate very strongly from the grassroots”.