WSIS Forum 2010 report

Turning targets into action

The countdown to 2015 begins in earnest

Over 600 participants from different parts of the world attended the WSIS Forum 2010 which was held in Geneva on 10–14 May 2010. Implementers of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), including civil society organizations were well represented, as Figure 1 shows.

The WSIS Forum 2010 opened with a message from United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki moon, who set the Forum a challenge: “You meet as the global financial crisis and economic slowdown continue to endanger progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. Vulnerable and poorer communities are also coping with the growing risks associated with climate change and natural disasters. Information and communication technologies (ICT) are already part of the response; they can and must play an even bigger role moving forward.” Mr Ban encouraged participants to focus on the new and emerging issues of the information age, including risks to privacy, identity theft, and the abuse of ICT for racist and xenophobic acts, or for child abuse and child pornography.
In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly will review progress towards achieving both the WSIS targets and the Millennium Development Goals. Against this background, all stakeholders in the public and private sector made the best use of the Forum to identify constructive approaches to advancing the ICT development agenda.

Looking at the bigger picture, the WSIS implementation has been fruitful and successful. Many projects have been developed, financed and implemented. But as Dr Hamadoun I. Touré, Secretary-General of ITU pointed out, “We still have far to go. It is very encouraging that we will reach the five billion mark this year in terms of mobile cellular subscriptions. But three quarters of the world’s population still has no access to the Internet. And in the developing world, broadband access is still limited to just a handful of people.” ITU and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have jointly decided to launch the Broadband Commission for Digital Development to examine all aspects of broadband, from its practical application and its environmental implications to how it will affect the spread of knowledge in developed and developing countries.

UNESCO has focused on technology as a means to human development, based on the four key principles: freedom of expression; universal access to information and knowledge; respect for cultural and linguistic diversity; and high-quality education for all. In a video message to the Forum, Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO expressed her conviction that new technologies will contribute positively to the mutual understanding and inter-cultural dialogue that UNESCO seeks to foster in this International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures. She added that one way of bridging the knowledge divide is through the creation of the World Digital Library.

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That was the message from Art Reilly, International Chamber of Commerce, Business Action to Support the Information Society (ICC-BASIS).

High-Level Plenary Session

The opening High-Level Plenary Session sparked an interesting discussion on whether the WSIS targets are on track to be achieved by 2015, and whether they can really facilitate progress towards the MDGs, especially in view of the severe repercussions and detrimental impact of the recent financial crisis on developed and developing countries alike.
During the session, Dr Touré awarded silver medals and certificates to two guests of honour: Adama Samassékou, former President of PrepCom of the Geneva Phase of WSIS and Jānis Kārkliņš, former President of PrepCom of the Tunis Phase of WSIS, in recognition of their continuous contributions to the WSIS process.

Mr Samassékou stated that five years before the deadline for implementation of the MDGs, “the major challenge weighing on the conscience of the international community, remains how to exploit properly the immense potential that ICT hold for improving the well-being of humankind by reducing poverty and hunger in the world, bringing down infant and maternal mortality and providing basic education for all, in order to ensure the emergence of women and men capable of participating in the decision-making processes that shape their destiny.”

Mr Kārkliņš noted that internationalized domain names had the potential to make the Internet truly multilingual. “The Russian Federation, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates will be the first to introduce non-Latin characters in their country code top level domains. Another dozen countries will
join the list by the end of 2010. This development will stimulate not only the use of non-Latin characters in secondary level domains and e-mails, but also the creation of local content in local languages to the benefit of the local Internet user community,” Mr Kārkliņš said. He added that “local content means cost savings for the local Internet user community because of decrease in international traffic”.

Panellists in this session, moderated by CNN correspondent Adrian Finighan, included Genc Pollo, Albania’s Minister of State for Reforms and Relation with Parliament; Ivo Ivanovski, Minister of Information Society of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; Hassam Baryalai, Afghanistan’s Deputy Minister of Communications and Information Technology; Hoda Baraka, Egypt’s First Deputy Minister to the Minister for Communications and Information Technology; and Stanley Simataa, Namibia’s Deputy Minister of Information and Communications Technology.

Closing the session, Khédija Hamouda Ghariani, Secretary-General of the Arab Information and Communication Technology Organization (AICTO) observed that while the forecasts of attaining five billion mobile and one billion broadband subscriptions by the end of 2010 give cause for optimism, the recent unprecedented financial and economic crisis (being unlike previous crises such as the Internet bubble and the Asian financial crisis) had hit some countries hard.

“While it is true that the ICT sector is the least hard-hit and that investment in technological innovation has continued despite the crisis, this must still prompt us to look for shortcuts to enable us to achieve the targets set and reduce the digital divide, since the crisis appears to be making the already rich even richer”, Ms Ghariani said.

Aware of the prevailing challenges, committed to the MDGs and the WSIS goals, and viewing ICT as a strategic sector for development, the League of Arab States has drawn up a regional strategy for establishment of the information society by 2012.

Addressing the broadband divide

The broadband divide remains significant. Taking stock, panellists during a high-level debate on “Build on broadband” highlighted five years of achievements and the challenges for the five years ahead. Panellists, who included Edouard Dayan, Director-General of the Universal Postal Union, examined the evidence and discussed issues concerning how the roll-out of broadband networks could help achieve the MDGs.
While some countries and regions of the world are going increasingly high-speed, others risk falling behind. In the developed countries most households today enjoy a broadband connection. But penetration levels in the developing countries remain comparatively low. By the end of 2009, the fixed (wired) broadband penetration rate of developing countries stood at only 3.5 per cent, up from around one per cent in 2003. While these figures refer to broadband subscriptions rather than users (and one subscription is likely to benefit several users), they are still a good indication of the long way left to go.

The good news is that current developments in the mobile sector are expected to have a major impact on wireless broadband access in the not-too-distant future. Wireless broadband only started to take off in 2005. An increasing number of countries are offering 3G (and now even 4G) services, with subscriptions expected to rise rapidly. Given the importance of high-speed Internet access, ITU has called on countries to step up efforts to ensure that more than half the world’s inhabitants have broadband Internet access by 2015. To achieve this, governments need to take action on various fronts, including building the necessary infrastructure and providing public access, expanding skills, and creating relevant and local content.

A closer look at broadband applications for tomorrow

“As the basis for ICT, broadband is a uniquely powerful means of delivering the development goals that we aim to achieve by 2015”, said Houlin Zhao, Deputy Secretary-General of ITU. The power of broadband is that it makes all kinds of cooperation much easier and more effective. In this sense, wider availability of broadband will allow us to share more information locally and around the globe, and to build applications that share computing power, making a more efficient and flexible use of computing resources. It will also allow “smart grid” applications, and provide new tools for small and medium enterprises, even in remote parts of developing countries. These, Mr Zhao said, are the broadband applications for tomorrow, a future that will be all the brighter because of the opportunities they bring.

Mr Zhao, who spoke during a high-level debate on “Broadband applications for tomorrow” was joined by other panellists in highlighting that data traffic is growing exponentially, together with the
demand for higher bandwidth. The debate was moderated by Reinhard Scholl, Deputy to the Director of ITU’s Telecommunication Standardization Bureau.

Some countries are already looking for 50, 100 and even 200 Mbit/s to offer enough capacity for future applications, such as 3D video, which may be used in several sectors, for example health or education.

The broadband revolution also means “always-on” devices. These devices demand narrower bandwidth, but require permanent connections. This introduces new challenges for areas in which coverage cannot be guaranteed, such as rural areas or developing countries. To achieve universal broadband service, each country will have to follow its own plan, learning from best international practices.

As an example of a specific application, Hoda Baraka, Egypt’s First Deputy Minister to the Minister for Communications and Information Technology presented Egypt’s remote on-line teacher training programme, stressing that ICT are no longer a luxury but a basic tool to promote better education and reduce the digital divide.

Panellists agreed on the importance of promoting local content that is relevant for each country and society, in particular for under-represented regions such as Arab countries. John E. Davies, Vice President, Sales and Marketing Group and General Manager of Intel World Ahead Program, explained that the private sector can develop tools to help local authorities in this task.

Peter H. Hellmonds, Chief of Public & International Affairs, Nokia Siemens Networks; and Gabriel Solomon, Senior Vice President, GSMA highlighted the role of the public sector in creating an enabling regulatory environment and in removing bottlenecks. Recognizing the need to create multi-stakeholder partnerships to promote broadband deployment for universal access to the information society, their view was that governments should lead partnerships, setting expectations and being an early adopter.

Social networking opportunities and challenges

Social networking responsibilities include knowing your own rights and respecting the rights of others — that was the view of panellists, who went on to say that this requires media education and media literacy. The view was expressed during a high-level debate on “social networking”, moderated by Jānis Kārkliņš, UNESCO’s newly appointed Assistant Director-General for Communication and Information.

Social networking has the potential to promote freedom of expression, and political and civic participation. But it also challenges privacy, and existing media and journalism ecology. Recognizing young people’s active use of social networking, panellists gave special attention to the issue of how to both empower them through social networking, and ensure their security online.
In emergencies, community radio stations are critical in providing information to local communities. Disasters can be mitigated through early warning systems. “When disasters strike, we can use ICT to coordinate search and rescue operations, and deliver essential services such as telemedicine to the victims”, said Sami Al Basheer Al Morshid, Director of ITU’s Telecommunication Development Bureau. “Our goal is to ensure that ICT are universally accessible to all citizens and this is the spirit behind WSIS,” Mr Al Basheer added. From a development perspective, measures are being taken to ensure that the national high-speed networks being rolled out are not just for boosting economic growth, but also for delivering life-saving solutions. These views were shared in a high-level debate on “ICT and disaster management”, moderated by Cosmas Zavazava, Chief of Emergency Telecommunications at ITU.

Social networking tools have tremendous potential to promote freedom of expression and political and social cohesion. But social media open the door to online slander and criminal activity, as well as challenging privacy and data protection. Legal and regulatory instruments have to be applied in the gaps between countries in the online and the real world. To address these concern and challenges, there is a need to foster collaboration between the private sector, government and civil society. Intergovernmental organizations such as ITU and UNESCO should play an important role in social media governance.

Young people can air their views through the social media, but there is a need to be cautious and take measures to ensure their privacy and safety. The task is to fully exploit the potential of social networking, without compromising civil rights and liberties, including the right to privacy, the right to freedom of expression and the right to freedom of association.

ICT for disaster management

“Disasters reinforce that we are a global village,” said Sardar Muhammad Latif Khan Khosa, Pakistan’s then Minister of Information Technology and Telecommunications. During disasters, ICT can be used to warn populations and to coordinate relief. In emergencies, community radio stations are critical in providing information to local communities. Disasters can be mitigated through early warning systems. “When disasters strike, we can use ICT to coordinate search and rescue operations, and deliver essential services such as telemedicine to the victims”, said Sami Al Basheer Al Morshid, Director of ITU’s Telecommunication Development Bureau. “Our goal is to ensure that ICT are universally accessible to all citizens and this is the spirit behind WSIS,” Mr Al Basheer added. From a development perspective, measures are being taken to ensure that the national high-speed networks being rolled out are not just for boosting economic growth, but also for delivering life-saving solutions. These views were shared in a high-level debate on “ICT and disaster management”, moderated by Cosmas Zavazava, Chief of Emergency Telecommunications at ITU.

Cybersecurity and cyberspace

Cooperation is a key component in addressing cybersecurity, not only at the national level, but also at the international level. The question is how to formulate security and collaboration strategies for the future.
Protecting cyberspace is a joint responsibility in the context of enabling a more sophisticated use of the digital environment. Under WSIS Action line C5, in 2007, the ITU Secretary-General launched the Global Cybersecurity Agenda to provide a framework within which an international response to the growing threats and challenges can be coordinated and addressed. Then in 2008, ITU launched the child online protection initiative. The Internet has expanded the opportunities for children all over the world. It is a challenge to develop good policies and procedures for child online protection, but the bigger challenge is to build confidence and trust in the medium of the Internet itself.

Governments have to address cybercrime. But ICT networks are operated by the private sector, both nationally and internationally, hence the responsibility for cybersecurity is in reality shared among a wide range of stakeholders. New and sophisticated cyber-threats, cyberattacks and, more recently, cyberwarfare pose strong challenges to the safety, integrity, reliability and confidentiality of modern communications and the networks over which these are transmitted. International rules are required to protect the Internet.

Crime on the Internet is mainly aimed at stealing data, credit cards numbers, personal data and so on. Governments have to work with the private sector to build secure environments for cyberspace. Cybercrime is evolving and there is a need to raise awareness about cybersecurity.

Fighting cybercrime through cybersecurity might, however, encourage secrecy, to protect national data, rather than leading towards international cooperation. We depend on ICT infrastructure, but the digital world is fragile. It is important to come to a common understanding of cybersecurity, and to work towards developing an appropriate cybersecurity culture.

These were some of the views expressed during a high-level debate on “cybersecurity and cyberspace”, moderated by Arkadiy Kremer, Chairman of ITU-T Study Group 17 and Chairman of the Russian Association for Networks and Services (RANS). All participants recognized the need for international cooperation in cyberspace.

WSIS moving forward

WSIS Forum 2010 marked the way forward in creating a reflection of the “WSIS spirit” and the euphoria felt during the Geneva and Tunis Summits. WSIS stakeholders participated enthusiastically and eagerly in all the interactive sessions and debates, and the new forward-looking WSIS campaign “Turning Targets into Action” mirrors their ambition to achieve the WSIS targets by 2015.

Action Line Facilitators from various UN agencies, regional commissions, the private sector, governments and civil society not only reported and assessed their own efforts towards WSIS implementation and follow-up, but also shared their future plans to achieve the targets set in the WSIS Outcome documents.

The consultation process for WSIS Forum 2011 will build upon successful experiences from the previous years and will consist of three steps as follows:
- Online discussions
- Submission of official contributions
- Final review meeting.

Information on the process will be available soon at the new WSIS Forum portal at www.wsis.org/forum