

African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET)

Statement for the General Debate at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

By L. Muthoni Wanyeki

Human rights context

On behalf of the African, community media and gender caucuses at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), I am pleased to be able to make this intervention.

The recommendations made in this statement are based on human rights. The rights to the freedoms of expression and information are legally protected at the international level by the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), at the regional level by the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and at the national level by Constitutions and/or supportive legislation.

The global community media and information and communication technologies (ICTs) movements have also evolved the term 'the right to communicate,' which goes beyond the rights to express oneself and to access public and private information to claim the right to access and control the means of communication. Although this right is not legally protected, it implies recognition of the fact that the frequency spectrum is a public resource and should therefore be regulated as a public resource at both the international and national levels.

Media in the information age

As of the early 1990s, movements for political pluralism across Africa and elsewhere were accompanied by pressures for economic liberalisation and privatisation that have changed the media, ICTs and telecommunications sectors.

However, the focus of most advocates for freedom of expression and information has been on ensuring 'independent' media, without distinguishing between 'commercial or for profit' media and 'community' media—or even between transnational and national commercial/private media interests. Little attention has been paid to questions of access, diversity and pluralism.

Challenge of regulation

The regulation of media, ICTs and telecommunications remains one of the most critical challenges to the enhancement of access to and control over these sectors and the development of both independence and pluralism in these sectors.

States in Africa and elsewhere have now liberalised and privatised both broadcasting and telecommunications. The liberalisation and privatisation processes have failed to account for the particular needs of community media and to ensure gendered universal access to telecommunications—and, by extension, to ICTs—particularly in infrastructure-poor rural and low-income urban areas. The digital divide between developed and developing states and between rural and urban areas within developing states is widening and is gendered.

New ICTs are promoted uncritically as a solution to these divides. However, examples of community based and gendered access to and applications of ICTs are exceptions, occurring despite regulation rather than as a result of it. Support for regulatory measures to deal with these divides is necessary, through, for example, the setting of gendered rural teledensity targets and the promotion of gendered universal access through a combination of public and private sector mechanisms.

In addition, there has been a tendency to assume that infrastructural concerns can be resolved by the advent of newer and more expensive technologies rather than investment in older technologies more appropriate to rural and infrastructure poor areas. For example, cellular and satellite technologies are assumed in most regulatory frameworks to be the answer to universal access. Older technologies developed specifically to address problems of poor infrastructure remain high cost and inaccessible. Support for research into older technologies, such as high frequency (HF) or very high frequency (VHF) connectivity and solar power, would be a critical step forward.

Among those who are connected, the assumption of equal access to and use of ICTs is not necessarily true. Support for capacity building and training which goes beyond access and basic applications and addresses personal, institutional and systemic barriers as well as content development is therefore important.

Finally, there has been little investment in the development of theory around ICTs and high level ICTs skills, particularly among women and in developing states. Support for the incorporation of ICTs into existing communications training institutions and the development of high level training capacity is a priority.

What to do?

The limitations of current telecommunications sector reform must be acknowledged as a first step to maximising access to and utilisation of ICTs. Recognising the innovations of development actors with respect to access to and applications of ICTs in the telecommunications sector reform process is a second important step.

Within the WSIS, gender should be recognised as a cross-cutting issue and gender should be mainstreamed into policy development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Both traditional and new ICTs should be promoted, recognising that they are not gender neutral.

In addition, emphasis should be placed on policies and programmes that will:

- build the capacity of girls and women around the production, distribution and consumption of ICTs;
- recognise and protect media and ICTs products as cultural products;
- protect and develop public and community broadcasting;
- assure the availability of free and open source software;
- and, finally, assure the financing of gendered universal access to telecommunications and, by extension, to new ICTs.

I thank you.

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