

Australia

**COMMENTS ON THE WSIS DRAFT DECLARATION AND
ACTION PLAN**

by

The Roundtable for Australian Civil Society (RACS)

31 May 2003

1) General comments on the Declaration

- There is limited acknowledgment of the potential harms and misuse of information and communications technology (ICT) that can be inflicted by the two most powerful arms of the triumvirate (governments and business) upon the weaker of the three: civil society.
- Clause 3 “we *recall* our common resolve... to promote democracy and respect for all internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms...”).
- **Section 1 – A2 We recognize** that [knowledge information and] communication is at the core of human progress, endeavour, and well-being and that, although the dramatic increase in the volume, speed and ubiquity of information flows, which has been made possible through new information and communication technologies, have already brought about [profound]changes in some peoples’ lives, and are creating [enormous] new opportunities, they have yet to benefit the vast majority of the peoples of the world.
- **Section C2 – 22 Access to information [and knowledge]:** Individuals and organisations should benefit from access to information and ideas. The sharing of [knowledge] information and ideas to enable knowledge creation and strengthen global [knowledge]capacity for development can be enhanced by ensuring equitable access to information for educational, scientific, economic, social, political and cultural activities

- **Section C2 – 25 Barriers** : Barriers to equitable access result from the ways current technological innovations are shaped by western cultural patterns and driven by market imperatives. Global plurality [differences] in education and literacy levels, gender, age, income and connectivity, as well as [from] a lack of user training and cultural and linguistic differences and particular conditions of access to the relevant technology constitute barriers for the majority of people. ICTs can also be improved, developed and used in order to mediate [overcome] these and other differences [barrier] in society.

2) **Concepts for inclusion in the draft WSIS Declaration and Action plan**

CIVIL SOCIETY KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

- Community networking, in all its diversity, is a fundamental, continuous social process of knowledge production and use, comparable to any other in the educational and cultural sectors.
- Existing educational and cultural institutions are recurrently supported by government funds to foster public production, use and preservation of knowledge (e.g. universities, research organisations, public broadcasting, libraries, archives, museums, performing arts organisations, institutes of sport). However no comparable ongoing institutional support framework exists for community networks.
- It is now time for the first generation of short-term information society programs (such as Australia's Networking the Nation program) to be converted to permanent policy, funding and institutional arrangements to support community networking as a means of knowledge creation and sharing, benefiting citizens both present and future.
- Such change can be effected through review of the roles of existing public knowledge institutions and/or the creation on new institutions to foster community networking.

3) **Suggested changes to the draft WSIS Action plan**

• **Clause 30 (under Section 6: Enabling Environment)**

It is not entirely clear if this clause, which deals with “Standardization”, is dealing solely with technical (ie: electronic connectivity) issues, or whether standards are meant to have a broader practical interpretation. Generally, on issues of standards, it is important to acknowledge that the culture which largely created ICT is a middle class Western one and, as such, this cultural paradigm will inform the entire conceptual architecture and technical language which describes and operates it.

In this context the concept of “objectivity” is essentially meaningless. This system relativity has been amply proven by the medical sector (for example in clinical psychiatry) in which it has been repeatedly shown that concepts of health are culturally derived and the most objective standards and practice are, at best, confusing when applied in culturally inappropriate contexts.

Culture works at the deepest level of consciousness. First language and culture is so embedded that it suffuses all form of expression and thought. If we are to have real global access and equity in ICT, internationally agreed standards must be developed with an awareness of this issue and should be the result of thorough cross-cultural consultation and compromise. Standards should be, as much as possible, flexible, generic, simple and unbiased towards the interests of privileged cultural or economic groups.

- **Clause 39 (under Section 7: Promotion & development-oriented ICT for all)**

E-health has potential global population benefits. E-health has the capacity to record personalised data-records of individuals and to analyse sub-population and national population trends. This could create enormous benefit for both service delivery (efficiencies, practices and hence economic benefit) and for epidemiologists and other health researchers to gain understanding about the aetiology, treatment and/or vectoring of diseases both communicable and non-communicable.

However, E-health ICT has the potential to do harm if not properly policed or is conducted with ulterior motives. Personalised health records, for instance, could be sold or illegally accessed by potential employers or health insurers. Such records could also be used by Governments for a range of purposes, many of which could be detrimental to civil liberties, individual privacy rights and/or economic advantage.

It is important to insert a cautionary notation to help protect privacy and rights of civil society.

- **Clause 47 (under Section C: Strategies programmes, methods of implementation)**

The first dash point (“Establishing regulatory frameworks”) is ambiguous and, hence, inadequate. This point should be extended to explain what these regulatory frameworks should incorporate. From the Australian perspective the Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (FECCA) would suggest these include the protection of:

- Civil rights and the maintenance of public instruments to review, enforce and protect these rights (eg: Australia’s Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC)), and
- Civil society from the potential exploitation of the private sector (eg: market monopolies or oligopolic, collusive behaviours).

These relate to a fundamental goal of Australian (and other democratic) governments – the protection of the public good.

In this section (or under Section D) there is another clause which could be included: the role of global government. Clauses 48 and 50 define the role of the private sector and mass media (and the media have global interests that include the production, promotion and market control of convergent technologies). The global regulation of international capital (which is often far more politically and economically powerful than national governments) will be of fundamental importance to help ensure that the world's citizenry are not subject to systematic economic exploitation and control, cultural dominance and the loss of existing human rights.

Roundtable for Australian Civil Society (RACS)

Background

The Roundtable for the Civil Society (RACS) was formed as a result of the Australian Government agency the National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) sponsoring the COIN Internet Academy (Central Queensland University, Rockhampton, Australia) and the Centre for Community Networking Research (Monash University, Melbourne, Australia) to co-ordinate an Australian civil society response to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

Aim

Operating through RACS, the partners will establish an inclusive coordination forum for Australian civil society inputs to the WSIS process.

Membership

RACS will invite membership from representatives from Australian peak bodies defined by WSIS Civil Society Bureau, active groupings and interested individuals who can contribute to the development, delivery and participation in the civil society processes for WSIS.

A representative from NOIE will be invited to act as an observer and point of reference to provide a conduit between the efforts of RACS and the Business and Government sector inputs to WSIS.

Phase I Outcomes.

In the lead up to WSIS 2003, RACS will:

- Conduct a workshop involving key Australian civil society stakeholders and experts already cognisant of the WSIS process and those who can provide initial leadership and direction
- Commence a process of broad awareness raising, coalition building and contribution across the peak bodies representing the civil society in Australia.
- Conduct forums to develop coordinated proposals and responses from Australian Civil Society for the WSIS process.

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