

SECOND PHASE OF WSIS, (TUNIS, 16-18 NOVEMBER)

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ON BEHALF OF "THE CIVIL SOCIETY"  
INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

16 November 2005

Mr Summit Chairman,  
Mr Kofi Annan,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very honoured to represent NGOs and civil society before this assembly.

I hope that the United Nations Organization will add to its strength day by day, by increasingly taking into consideration the organizations representing civil society. This is particularly crucial because some governments are not genuinely elected by their people, and fail to respect their people's desires and interests when taking decisions at the international level.

In so doing, however, care must be taken so that undemocratic governments do not manipulate decision-making in international forums by stacking them with pseudo-NGOs that they have set up to spread disinformation about the situation within the country.

It should never be forgotten that governments are supposed to be serving their people; for how is it possible to imagine that people are born into this world only to be dominated by those who govern them and take decisions without their consent.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We live in an age in which access to information is the main factor in development, progress and hope. For this reason, the digital divide that we see between the industrialized countries and the developing countries will create a growing gulf between the rich and the poor, within individual countries and at the global level.

The burgeoning of the information society has, on the one hand, created a golden opportunity for development, a chance to improve the conditions under which people live; but it has also highlighted the precarious situation of the non-industrialized countries. Thus it is the people, who are the main users, the end-users for these information systems, who pay the price for their governments' negligence in dealing with this important issue and making the necessary investments.

By way of illustration, if we look at the national military budgets, whether in the developed world or in poor countries, we see how greatly the digital divide could be reduced if only military spending were trimmed.

There is also a need for the industrialized countries to make a contribution to all of humanity by helping the less-developed countries.

Around the globe, thirty developed countries, making up only 16 per cent of the total world population, spend some USD 750 billion every year on the military budget; compare this with the USD 100 billion that would be needed to lift the undeveloped countries out of IT poverty, and bring their information and communications infrastructure up to a decent level.

If we think of the world as a village, then everyone should benefit from its riches, especially knowledge; globalized aspirations and claims are incompatible with a situation where the greater part of the world's population is maintained in a situation of information impoverishment.

The other subject that is of concern to us is the degree of control, situated in Western countries, over the organizations that provide access, and over the internet itself. The question that weighs on the minds of people in other countries, who make up the majority of internet users is this: what guarantee is there that the governments of those countries will not one day decide, for political reasons or because of an economic embargo, to deprive part of the world of internet access?

Another problem facing the peoples, who are the principal internet players, is that of censorship. There are governments that use national security, morality or illegal commerce as an excuse to selectively block internet content, expose sites to selective filtering, and prevent people from gaining ready access to information that they need, and making themselves heard outside. Even worse, these governments punish loggers who dare to express the slightest criticism.

Tragically, in some countries human rights activists, authors and translators are imprisoned for nothing more than exercising their freedom of expression and opinion. Today, as the NGO representative, I call for political prisoners and prisoners of conscience to be freed, along with all those who have been detained for exercising their freedom of expression; I also propose that a Committee be struck, under the supervision of the United Nations Organization, and with the participation of representatives from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNESCO, UNDP and ITU, with one or more representatives of NGOs, to monitor the problem of content filtering, so as to eliminate the difficulties I have cited and prevent states from sacrificing their people's interests for political gain.

Thank you for listening.