

PrepCom II of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

The second Preparatory Committee meeting (PrepCom II) of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) met in Geneva from 17-28 February 2003 to begin elaborating a declaration of principles and programme of action to be adopted at the Summit's first phase, to be held in Geneva from 5-12 December 2003 and hosted by the Swiss Government. The second phase is scheduled to take place in Tunis from 16-18 November 2005, hosted by the Government of Tunisia.

The WSIS process is held against the backdrop of the profound societal changes brought about by the rapid spread of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs). It began as an initiative by the 1998 Plenipotentiary Conference of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and was subsequently endorsed in 2001 by UN General Assembly resolution 56/183. In the resolution, the summit process is meant to address “the whole range of relevant issues related to the information society.” ITU was identified to assume the leading managerial role for the WSIS Executive Secretariat.

Intergovernmental negotiations at PrepCom I, which was held in Geneva from 1-5 July 2002, mainly focused on procedural issues, notably accreditation and participation rules for “observers” —NGOs and other civil organizations, business entities, and international organizations (see *NGLS Roundup 95*). PrepCom II began the process of collating possible elements for the declaration of principles and programme of action into two working documents, mainly drawing on inputs from the series of regional meetings that took place in the interim period. Some elements were also drawn from other sources, notably an unofficial paper produced by the Chair of the PrepCom, Adama Samassékou (Mali), on the basis of an expert meeting he convened in late 2002.

The PrepCom agreed to entrust the Chair of the intergovernmental drafting group, Lyndall Shope-Mafole (South Africa), with the responsibility of revising the working documents with additional inputs from governments. In an innovative move, the PrepCom also decided that inputs from observers should be incorporated into a separate section of the revised documents, which were made available on the WSIS website (www.itu.int/wsis) on 21 March. These two documents (open for additional comments until 31 May) will serve as a basis for substantive negotiations that will begin at an intersessional meeting to take place in Paris (France) in July 2003, and carried forward at PrepCom III in Geneva from 15-26 September 2003.

A Broad Agenda?

On the basis of the embryonic intergovernmental negotiations at PrepCom I on the substance of the Summit agenda, it was very unclear how broadly Member States would be willing to venture in addressing “the whole range of relevant issues related to the information society” as called for by the General Assembly. It was clear that a set of ICT and development-related questions would be part of the agenda, such as seeking to overcome the so-called “digital divide” through infrastructure development, or promoting ICTs for health, education and other essential services. However, by the end of PrepCom II, a much broader set of issues appeared in the intergovernmental working documents, including: the role of traditional media such as broadcasting and print; the right to freedom of opinion and expression; “the right to communicate;”

the right for citizens to access information, including access to “a vibrant and rich public domain;” open standards and open source software as basic elements in developing more affordable access to ICTs; the protection of privacy; Internet governance; the creation of local content; and cultural and linguistic diversity. The observers’ section of the document covers a range of additional issues, such as excessive concentration of media ownership and the energy implications of much wider ICT use.

It should be noted, however, that these working documents are at this stage only the basis for negotiations, commencing proper at the July intersessional session, with the understanding that the whole content of both texts are in brackets—meaning none of their elements can be assumed to be subject to intergovernmental consensus.

NGOs and Civil Society Get Organized

In the lead-up to PrepCom II, the Civil Society Division of WSIS Executive Secretariat undertook consultations with focal points from different sectors of civil society with the objective of proposing the establishment of a “Civil Society Bureau” that would interact with the Intergovernmental Bureau on procedural matters and act as a communication channel with various civil society constituencies worldwide. Much of the civil society discussions during the first week of PrepCom II focused on this proposal. A key concern expressed by participants was to ensure that the functions of the Civil Society Bureau would not include representations on substantive matters, which they said should be left to thematic caucuses and working groups that coordinated their collective inputs during the second week through a Civil Society Content and Themes Working Group. Much of the input of that working group is reflected in the observers’ section of the official working document released on 21 March.

In the revised terms of reference of the Civil Society Bureau, it is recognized that the daily Civil Society Plenary is “the highest decision and policy-making body of Civil Society in WSIS” and to which the Civil Society Bureau reports regularly. The Plenary agreed to set up an electronic Civil Society Plenary list for consultations online if and when needed between the PrepComs. Thus far, the Civil Society Bureau is composed of elected focal points from different civil society constituencies, grouped into 22 “families,” ranging from academia and education to media. The full list of families and terms of reference of the Bureau can be found on the WSIS Executive Secretariat Civil Society Division website (see below).

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