

Pakistan @ WSIS

The presence of a 50-member delegation could not make up for a lack of community-based ICT initiatives from Pakistan



The first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), held in Geneva during December 10-12, 2003, attracted thousands of people including world leaders, thinkers, social scientists, technologists, civil society representatives and development practitioners.

The world spent two years preparing for this event: diplomatic manoeuvres, agreements and disagreements, PrepComs, regional meetings, thousands of presentations, hundreds of drafts...they all finally resulted in a Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action adopted by the world community until the second phase of WSIS, which is to be held in Tunis in November 2005.

The WSIS Declaration of Principles encompasses various ICTs for Development (ICT4D) themes, describing the future course of action with regards to a global information society. The declaration agreed to pay special attention to the interests of indigenous people,

especially when it comes to safeguarding their heritage and their cultural legacies. In addition, it agreed to proactively support the particular needs of people in developing countries, least-developed countries—as listed per the Human Development Index—and highly-indebted poor countries, along with countries and territories

that have been under occupation or are recovering from conflicts.

Civil Society@WSIS, however, unanimously adopted their own declaration entitled "Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs". The document was handed out to the President of the Summit at the last Plenary meeting on 12 December 2003, and said:

"...our voices and the general interest we collectively expressed are not adequately reflected in the Summit documents. We propose this document as part of the official outcomes of the Summit. Convinced that this vision can become reality through the actions and lives of women and men, communities and people, we hereby present our own vision to all, as an invitation to participate in this ongoing dialogue and to join forces in shaping our common future".

Pakistan's official delegation to WSIS was headed by the Prime Minister along with other officials (approximately 50 of them) who hailed mostly from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister's Secretariat, with only a handful (two or three) from the relevant Ministry of IT. The Prime Minister also addressed the summit during the first plenary session on December 10, 2003. He spoke about the government's focus and keenness to harness the potential of ICTs for economic advancement and social development of the people of Pakistan; in particular mentioning the resources earmarked by the government for the purpose of building the necessary infrastructure to develop ICT applications in health, education and public sector management.

One might agree that the personal presence of the Prime Minister of Pakistan at the WSIS was a clear indication of the priority accorded by the Government to the WSIS process and use of ICTs for social and human development in the country. However, one could also argue that more could be achieved if there had been



proper planning and serious pre-event preparation. Pakistan's official delegation would have better composed if it also had representation from various other stakeholders such as members of the media, academia or even the private sector.

During the better part of the global preparatory process for the summit, Pakistan was only represented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through its Mission in Geneva. Among other things, this skewed representation resulted in Pakistan becoming a villain in the civil society circles for taking a strong stance against its inclusion in the summit. The preparatory process had already dragged on for far too long when the government made the sensible decision to depute some degree of responsibility to a knowledgeable WSIS person in the Ministry of Information Technology.

The only success story from Pakistan presented at one of the summit events was the story of the Sustainable Development Networking Programme of Pakistan, a pioneering ICT4D initiative in the country. Another useful outcome, again initiated by an individual from the private sector was Pakistan's joining a very strong open-source movement by signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Linux Professional Institute. Pakistan became the first in West and Middle East Asia Region and eighth in the world to be part of this civil society initiative, connecting Pakistan with 40000 certified Open Source professionals community spread all over the world.

The only national consultation on WSIS was conducted from 17-19 November 2003 courtesy of the UN Headquarters, and facilitated by the IUCN-The World Conservation Union, with much-needed active support from the Ministry of IT. This consultation resulted in a multi-stakeholder National ICTs for Development Project to be implemented throughout the country during the two year time period between the first and second phase of the summit. Considered one of the major outcomes of the WSIS process in Pakistan, the said project—if implemented—will contribute significantly to the WSIS process in the country.

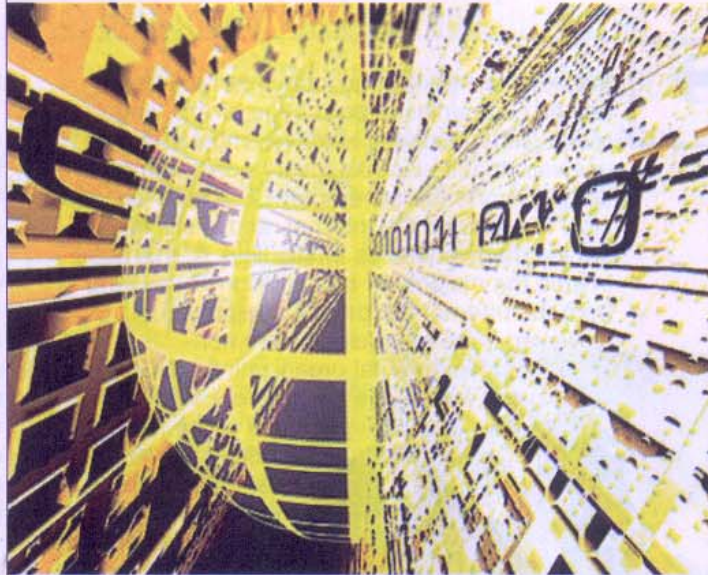
In his inaugural speech, Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, emphasised the same vision which had been incorporated in Pakistan's multi-stakeholder National ICT4D Project. While talking about the digital, technological, gender, commercial and content divides, he noted:

"...we cannot assume that such gaps will disappear on their own, over time, as the diffusion of technology naturally spreads its wealth. An open, inclusive information society

that benefits all people will not emerge without sustained commitment and investment. We look to you, the leaders assembled here, to produce those acts of political will..."

He further said:
"...information and communication technologies are not a panacea or magic formula. But they can improve the lives of everyone on this planet..."

The clock is ticking for the next phase of WSIS, to be held in Tunis in November, 2005. It is strongly recommended that a multi-stakeholder, high-level national body involving



all WSIS stakeholders with ICT professionals within Pakistan should be constituted immediately. This body should be entrusted with the responsibility to guide the nation in its transition towards an information-based society, as well as to advise the government on harnessing the potential of ICTs for human development and poverty alleviation.



Shahzad Ahmad works as information coordinator for IUCN Pakistan. He was Pakistan's sole civil society representative at the WSIS. You can reach the author at: shahzad@isb.sdnpc.org

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WSIS Plan of Action www.itu.int/wsis/documents/doc_multi-en-11611160.asp
WSIS Declaration of Principles
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