

# **THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY AND THE FORMATION OF THE GLOBAL SCHOOL NETWORKS ALLIANCE: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT**

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From December 10 through December 12 I attended the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva. [1]\* The WSIS was established to focus the attention of the world on how the benefits of information and communications technologies (ICT) could be to more widely accessible, in particular to those in the developing world, and how access to ICT could help address serious problems affecting the welfare of the world community.

This meeting attracted less attention in the U.S. than it did elsewhere in the world but, having attended many technology conferences over the years, the WSIS stands out as one of the most engaging, important, and encouraging conferences I have ever attended. My main purpose in attending the WSIS was to participate in the formation of the Global School Networks Alliance which occurred during the Summit. In what follows I will provide some background on the WSIS, give a sense what happened in Geneva, describe the formation of the Global School Networks Alliance, and share my thoughts on the experience.

## **Some Background Information on the WSIS**

The idea for the WSIS originated with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) [2] The ITU has its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland and is an international organization within the United Nations system which works with governments and the private sector to coordinate global telecom networks and services. In 1998, the ITU asked the UN top level executive coordinating board, called the Administrative Committee on Coordination, to consider the formation of a world summit. The Administrative Committee on Coordination reacted favorably and asked the ITU to play the major role in preparation and implementation of the WSIS. In December 2002, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution that supported the plans for the WSIS as developed by the ITU and placed the WSIS under the patronage of the Secretary-General. [3]

\* The bracketed numbers refer to the pertinent URL in the Appendix to this paper.

A couple paragraphs from the UN Resolution captures the rationale for the WSIS:

*Recognizing* the urgent need to harness the potential of knowledge and technology for promoting the goals of the United Nations Millennium Declaration [4] and to find effective and innovative ways to put this potential at the service of development for all,

*Convinced* of the need, at the highest political level, to marshal the global consensus and commitment required to promote the urgently needed access of all countries to information, knowledge and communication technologies for development so as to reap the full benefits of the information and communication technologies revolution, and to address the whole range of relevant issues related to the information society, through the development of a common vision and understanding of the information society and the adoption of a declaration and plan of action for implementation by Governments, international institutions and all sectors of civil society. (UN Resolution 56/183 – World Summit on the Information Society, p. 1)

The three objectives of the WSIS were: *Providing access to all* - i.e. How can the benefits of ubiquitous and affordable ICTs be extended to all the world's inhabitants and how can those with access be helped to use them effectively?; *ICTs as a tool for economic and social development and meeting the Millennium Development Goals* – i.e. How can ICTs be leveraged to help promote the common goals of humanity, such as those expressed in the UN Millennium Declaration?; *Confidence and security in the use of ICTs* – i.e. What steps should be taken to build confidence that the technologies are reliable and secure?

The WSIS is best understood as a process rather than as an event. Several preliminary meetings preceded the WSIS in Geneva. There were three Preparatory Committee meetings - "PreComs" - which were held in Geneva in July 2002, in February 2003, and in December of 2003 just before the WSIS meeting. In addition there was an "Intersessional" meeting in Paris in July of 2003 and regional meetings in Mali, Bucharest, Tokyo, Bavaro (Dominican Republic) and Beirut. These meetings were held in 2002 and 2003. The main purpose of the preliminary meetings was to work on the draft of the Declaration of Principals and the Plan of Action for the WSIS meeting in Geneva. There will be a second Summit meeting in Tunis in November of 2005.

Funding for the WSIS was provided on a voluntary basis. Thirty-one governments or agencies/organizations contributed about 4.4 million dollars. Contributions ranged from about three thousand dollars from Malta to about one million dollars from Canada. There were additional contributions from states in the form of personnel and other resources. The U.S. did not provide funding for the WSIS. Canada furnished the principal funding for the activities pertaining to the Global School Networks Alliance.

## The Summit Meeting in Geneva

There were eleven thousand participants at the WSIS. One hundred and seventy six nations were represented and the meetings were covered by close to a thousand media personnel. The WSIS was comprised of three elements. The first was the Plenary sessions. The second were the sessions that ran concurrently with the Plenary sessions, and the third was the ICT for Development Platform (ICT4D) exhibits.

**The Plenary Sessions** - The Plenary sessions were focused on the adoption of the final draft of the Declaration of Principles [4] and the Plan of Action.[4] There were presentations at the Summit from over fifty heads of state as well as presentations by other state delegation leaders, usually at the ministerial level when the head of state was not present. There were also presentations by representatives of NGOs and stakeholder groups. By the time of the WSIS in Geneva the wording of the Declaration of Principals and the Plan of Action was largely in place. The presentations at the Plenary sessions by the heads of state or the designated head of the delegation, and spokespersons for various stakeholder groups did not get into the details of the Declaration or the Plan; rather, the presentations tended to be “broad brush” in nature and introduced the issues of special concern to the respective state. These issues were the ones which state delegations advocated in the working sessions and in other informal settings.

Ambassador David A. Gross, the Coordinator for International Communications and Information Policy in the Department of State, led the U.S. delegation. The presentation to the Plenary was delivered by John Marburger who is Director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, His presentation identified the posture of the current administration. He called for private rather than governmental investments in developing the technology infrastructure, allowing the ICT channels to be uncensored, and protection of intellectual properties.

The presentation of President Wade of Senegal drew considerable attention. He spoke of the digital divide with particular reference to the situation in Africa and was the champion of an effort to have the formation of a fund for developing countries, the Digital Solidarity Fund, adopted as part of the WSIS Plan. This effort did not succeed. The best he could accomplish was to have the Plan call for a study of such a fund. Disappointed by the reluctance of the WSIS to create the Fund, on the last day of the Summit, President Wade and the mayors of Geneva and Lyon announced that they were setting up the Digital Solidarity Fund with donations from Senegal, Lyon, and Geneva amounting to a total of about one million euros.

The statements at the Plenary also provided an opportunity to air other concerns. For example, the President of the Cuban National Assembly expressed indignation at the continuing sanctions and hostile actions of the United States;

the Minister of Telecommunications and Information Technology of Palestine criticized Israel. It is not surprising that some heads of state and other government officials would make use a world forum to tuck in their positions on issues of abiding concern which transcended the purpose of the Summit.

The Geneva Summit ratified the Declaration and the Plan. A paragraph from the Declaration captures the spirit of the document and captures the fundamental theme of the WSIS:

Our challenge is to harness the potential of information and communication technology to promote the development goals of the Millennium Declaration [5], namely the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; achievement of universal primary education; promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women; reduction of child mortality; improvement of maternal health; to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and development of global partnerships for development for the attainment of a more peaceful, just and prosperous world. We also reiterate our commitment to the achievement of sustainable development...(Declaration of Principals, p.1)

The Plan for the implementation of the Declaration is a thirteen page listing of tasks. These tasks are categorized in categories such as: The role of governments and all stakeholders in the promotion of ICTs for development; Access to information and knowledge; Access to information and knowledge Capacity building Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content; etc. The Plan is vulnerable to the criticism of being “all things to all people” and at a level of generality or lack of precision as to provide adequate basis for action. There is in the plan numerous statements such as: “All stakeholders should increase their awareness of the ethical dimension of their use of ICTs;” “Governments, in cooperation with other stakeholders, should raise awareness of the importance of international interoperability standards for global e-commerce;” “Governments and stakeholders should actively promote user education and awareness about online privacy and the means of protecting privacy.”

It is important to recognize that the WSIS has no jurisdiction power. Thus, the items in the Plan are, in fact, less like action prescriptions than they are pointers which may lead to laws, policies, and practices at the level of individual states or agreements among multi-national aggregations. Indeed, the preface to the Plan, speaks of the Plan as an “evolving platform” rather than as a finished program.

**Concurrent Sessions** - A person who attended only the Plenary sessions might have left Geneva feeling as if there was little likelihood of the Summit having any real impact since no large fund was created and no new organizational structure put in place which was charge to implement the Plan. The concurrent sessions involved people from the one hundred and seventy-six nations. These sessions focused on topics pertinent to the objectives of the WSIS. The work which was described at the various concurrent sessions along with what one could learn at the ICT4D exhibits demonstrated the competence, energy, and commitment of a large cadre of people distributed worldwide to making use of ICT to improved the conditions of life on our planet. The number agencies and organizations and the nature of the competence, commitment, and energy of the people involved in work that is in harmony with the goals of the WSIS provides a measure of reassurance that the ability to make progress on the WSIS goals is more than wishful thinking.

Unlike the typical conference, the sessions tended three or more hours. One of the sessions I attended was organized by the Youth Caucus. This session involved speakers from Afghanistan, China, and several African countries dealing with ICT and human rights issues. One of the presenters at this session was Deborah Hurley who was the director of the Information Infrastructure Project at Harvard and an international known expert on this topic. She presented an exceptional presentation on her work dealing with human rights in the information society. I also attended hosted by Japan on the “ubiquitous information society” and one sponsored by UNESCO dealing on building knowledge societies – “from vision to action.” Along the same lines I attended a session dealing titled “Education for Knowledge Societies.” Since I am involved in a project dealing with the Ukraine, I attended a session which dealt with their draft national information technology strategy.

The length of the sessions as well as my interest in spending time at the ICT4D exhibits precluded my attendances at a number of sessions I wished to attend but many of the sessions listing in the Conference program provided Web (some of which contained typescripts or Power Points of the presentations) so that it was possible to do follow up on those sessions which were missed after the conference after the meetings had ended.

**ICT4D** - The ICT4D Platform was held in a large exhibit hall at Palexpo – the large exhibition hall in Geneva. There were 265 exhibits. Unlike the typical technology conference, the booths had less to do with sales and more to do with providing information. Thirty-eight thousand people along with forty heads of state visited the exhibits. It was not unusual to see a president or prime minister in the in the exhibit hall or outside the room where the Plenary sessions were held.

The exhibit/booths were sponsored by government agencies, civil society groups, private sector companies, donor agencies and inter-governmental organizations. Eighty countries were represented with one or more exhibits. The states or

agencies showcased their programs and activities related to harnessing information and communications technologies for development.

The exhibit hall was arranged thematically with several “streets.” The streets were: Innovating for Equitable Access Street; Fostering Policy and Implementation Street; Enhancing Human Capacity and Empowerment Street; Strengthening Communications for Development Street; and Promoting Local Content and Knowledge Street. Walking among the “streets” one could stop and talk with the people in the exhibits who were doing the work that was being described. I spent considerable time walking at the ICT4D exhibits since there was a wealth of information that could be obtained.

At the CERN exhibit, the server – an Apple Lisa – which was used by Tim Berners-Lee when the World Wide Web was created was on display. EUN and Cyberschool Bus had arranged for Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Tim Berners-Lee to send a greeting to students around the world who had participated in projects which the two organizations had sponsored prior to the Geneva meeting. At the exhibit I met Arie van Praag who is the High Speed Interconnect Project coordinator at CERN and who worked with Berners-Lee in the development of the World Wide Web. I had a delightful conversation with him and about the experiences of their team at CERN when the Web was created. It was informal conversations such as this with people in the exhibit hall that provided a rich opportunity to learn about interesting and important work dealing with the use of ICT worldwide.

## **The Global School Networks Alliance**

The meeting of the Global School Alliance was a day long meeting which took place on December 12. The meeting was organized by the UN Cyberschoolbus [6] and the European SchoolNet (EUN) [7]. The UN Cyberschoolbus is an online education project which operates under the aegis of the UN. Its mission is to promote education about international issues and the United Nations by building a global online community of teachers and students. Cyberschoolbus provides opportunities for students to participate in finding solutions to global problems, and to make the issues the UN deals with more accessible to children and youth. EUN is an international partnership of 26 Ministries of Education developing learning for schools, teachers and pupils across Europe and beyond. It provides insight into the use of ICT in Europe for policy-makers and education professionals. This goal of EUN is achieved through communication and information exchange at all levels of school education using innovative technologies, and by acting as a gateway to national and regional school networks.

Over the past several years school networks have emerged throughout the world. One type of school network is the national and multi-national networks. School Net Canada, Schulen ans Nets in Germany, and School Net India are

examples of the national school networks. Examples of multi-national networks are European School Net and School Net Africa. These networks run on the Internet and provide a broad array of services to school age children and their teachers. The other type was the trans-national topical “networks” which have a particular programmatic flavor. Some examples of this type of network is the International Education and Resource Network (IERN) and the UN Cyberschoolbus.

There were representatives from more than fifty school networks – national, multi-national and topical - at the Alliance meeting. In the U.S. there is no U.S. schoolnet *per se* but two national organizations, the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) and the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) provide many of the functions that the national school networks provide. I served as the representative of the Consortium for School Networking [8]. I also had discussed the WSIS with the president and executive director of ISTE before the meeting and have arranged to furnish ISTE with information and to assist both organizations to participate with the Alliance to the degree and in the manner which the two Boards of Directors see fit.

Prior to the meeting, I assisted Brigitte Parry at EUN and Bill Yotif at the UN in the development of the agenda for the meeting. Along with Ms. Pirjo Immonen-Oikkonen; Senior advisor ICT for the National Board of Education of Finland, and Hillar Addo Project Officer for SchoolNet Africa, I served as a *rappateur* as such we were responsible for chairing the discussion groups and developing the draft of the report from the meeting.

At this meeting the Global School Networks Alliance was created. The purpose of the Alliance is mobilize school networks to be involved in the implementation of the Plan of Action adopted at the Summit. Ulf Lundin, the Director of European Schoolnet, described the three main goals of the Alliance in this way:

1. To help teachers and students to get involved in discussions on global problems and in finding solutions to them. The Alliance will draw their attention to the Millennium Development Goals and offer them an opportunity to collaborate on its issues.
2. To work together in developing school networks further and extending their reach into more schools all over the world. The members of the Alliance will make its projects and educational resources available to any interested teacher and student and will demonstrate innovative ways of using new technologies. Together the Alliance will try to find solutions to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers.
3. To carefully study the Action Plan adopted by the Summit and contribute to its implementation by being an active partner in the discussions leading to the next Summit. The Alliance will give input to the next Action Plan in order to ensure that the potential of new technologies for high quality education for all is fully realized.

The discussions at the meeting showed that there was strong support for the formation of the GSNA was supported. It is important to understand the Alliance is not a new network but an alliance of existing networks. As such it exists, not in competition with them, but rather to provide new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration among the existing networks particularly as such is related to the goals embodied in the WSIS declaration. Understandably there was general consensus among those at the meeting about the need to have a clear expression of the mission of the Alliance and an implementation plan. At present work along these lines is underway and a plan for moving is being developed which be submitted to the participants in the Alliance.

## **A Concluding Thought...**

For anyone who reads newspapers or gets the news of the world via TV and radio, it is difficult to feel good about the state of life on planet Earth. On all sides one is beset with stories of one threat or another – be it from terrorism, environmental degradation, pandemics, or nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Perhaps the concern about the future is felt particularly keenly by those of us with young children, or as in my case, with young grand children. It is not comforting to speculate about the world they will inhabit when they are adults.

I left Geneva feeling good about having attended the WSIS and in particular of having been a part of the formation of the Global School Networks Alliance. Neither represent *the* solution to the complex problems the world faces. Yet the WSIS by focusing on the Millennium Goals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts before those of us who work with ICT in education the opportunity to confront issues which will be of considerable significance in determining whether there is a future to life on earth and what that future will be. I recognize that some may feel that the intents and purposes of the WSIS may be audacious – foolhardy! Such a posture is, I believe, more likely to be based of an assessment of the likelihood of accomplishing any measure of success rather than on the basis of contending that the goals are illegitimate.

It was an extra-ordinary experience to be in the company of so many people from so many places in the world who are neither turning their face away from these problems or merely wringing their hands but are working to confront them. In this spirit, the Alliance aims to be a means to compliment and extend the work currently being done by the networks serving schools throughout the world to involve the young people of the world as a resource in confronting the problems we need to face so that they may do better at than we have done at building a world that is hospitable to human life. I look forward to continuing to do what I can to further this effort.

## Appendix

### URLs Referred to in the Text

1. The URL for the World Summit on the Information Society  
<http://www.itu.int/wsis/index.html>
2. The URL for the International Telecommunications Union is:  
<http://www.itu.int/home/index.html>
3. The URL for UN Resolution 56/183 is  
[http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/background/resolutions/56\\_183\\_unga\\_2002.pdf](http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/background/resolutions/56_183_unga_2002.pdf)
4. The URL for the Declaration of Principals and the Plan of Action.  
[http://www.itu.int/wsis/documents/doc\\_multi-en-1161|1160.asp](http://www.itu.int/wsis/documents/doc_multi-en-1161|1160.asp)
5. UN Millennium Development Goals  
<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>
6. United Nations Cyberschoolbus  
<http://cyberschoolbus.un.org/cyberschoolbus/index.asp>
7. European Schoolnet  
<http://eunbrux02.eun.org/portal/index-en.cfm>
8. Universal Declaration of Human Rights  
<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>