

CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY ON THE PROCESS OF PARTICIPATION IN National Strategies for the Information Society (NSIS)

The process of the World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS), directly and indirectly through the action of the associated international organisations, has contrived so that the subject of the Information Society¹ is introduced in all national agendas. From the beginning of the process, the appearance of this issue in their agendas has been pronounced in several countries, shown by the launching of "Agendas of Connectivity" or of a "National Strategy for the Information Society" (N.S.I.S.).

At the same time, the same process of the WSIS tries to innovate and to experiment with multi-stakeholder approaches. This allows, to a certain extent, civil society, especially the component most knowledgeable in the subjects of communication and information, to try to make its voice heard and to contribute from its remarkable experience; there are many groups that have worked in this field for many years and that have accumulated knowledge of methods and lessons learned. This interest is shared, with less enthusiasm, by the private sector.

Evidently, these two sectors carry weight in their respective societies, in so far as they have established a process which has been adapted to allow for participation in these national agendas by civil society and the private sector, opening by this means a space which can be used for dialogue between civil society and the private sector.

Therefore a combination of factors exists capable of making participatory process in national strategy a very key matter. Civil society organisations specialising in ICT for development have a genuine interest in taking part in those processes from their field experience and in their role as intermediaries between the communities and the rest of the organized civil society.

The regional conference on the information society, to be held in Rio de Janeiro from 8th to the 10th June 2005, represents a landmark for the process of WSIS, - because it will be the second official regional meeting of this process – as much as for the national agendas of strategies for the Information Society, because it plans to establish regional strategic markers.

In that context, civil society needs to be aware of the conditions that are required to establish that the subject of multi-stakeholder participation is a fundamental part of the process that is agreed, and to avoid its being only a fashionable slogan at global and regional levels without real results at local levels.

For this, it is necessary to specify what should be understood by participation, and to fix precise guidelines of when a process can be described as participative.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION IN NSIS.

The process, in many cases only beginning, of the elaboration of national strategies for the Information Society, with the intention to frame them in multi-stakeholder

processes of participation, raises many questions, given its novel character and the lack of a frame of reference.

Is it sufficient to declare a process participatory to make this desire become a fact?

How can participatory processes that are also multi-stakeholder be handled effectively?

Is political will, at the highest levels, necessary so that the declaration of the governments that the process is participative and multi-stakeholder becomes a reality?

Is political will sufficient, if it does not embrace the necessity to include all the implications of a large process of citizen participation?

Is a will that embraces those implications sufficient, in a social context where the issues addressed are still unfamiliar to the majority of citizens including most of the actors involved?

Will it not then be essential to have the support of a programme of sensitization and education of the parties involved?

Can the support agenda comply with the terms fixed for the process of the WSIS?

Does a national strategy make sense if no strategic vision existed before, far less a strategy for the nation?

Is a national strategy credible without a pre-existing impact assessment?

Do instruments of impact measurement exist, appropriate for these contexts?

How can it be avoided that this process becomes simply a matter of infrastructure?

How can these processes be linked with other global or regional processes, like the Millenium Development Goals?

These are only some of the questions that arise when analyzing the processes underway, and every one will be able to propose answers based on their national experience. From the point of view of civil society, to throw itself into the accomplishment of a supposedly "participative" NSIS without at least considering those questions and trying to contribute serious and honest answers is to take a high risk of creating information societies without a real change of perspective and paradigm, that is to say to install technology without suggesting conditions so that it is taken advantage of for positive social change.

CONSIDERATIONS OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY

So that the participation of civil society is an effective and efficient reality and so that the participation is not just a word that responds to a global agenda without having other support at local level, with a limited number of meetings with a limited number

of participants who serve as a sop to the concept of participation; in short, so that the participation process is based in the paradigm shifts that are needed to achieve the whole concept of the information society (collaboration, networked society, collective construction of knowledge...) a series of conditions must be taken into account.

1. The participation cannot be a single event but rather a true process that must begin with the formulation of a draft strategy and must follow through the whole procedure, from conception to realisation and evaluation of impact.

That implies a design where the participative process is conceptually integrated and prepared with the proper methodology.

2. Participation cannot be reserved to the NGOs which specialize in the subject, but must include all civil society organizations and above all, the citizenship in general.

That implies a true support of the process centred around a concept of digital literacy and training that is not merely a technical qualification for access but a real holistic education that integrates applications, contents and particularly infoculture and social impacts. The stakes are great, complex, and in many cases in the short term; the society as a whole is not ready to evaluate them and therefore the subject of a true digital education is urgent and requires an important share of the resources mobilized.

3. The process of support required in turn raises a need for time that cannot be forced without distorting the participation process.

Therefore, the design of the NSIS must duly contemplate the integration of multi-stakeholder participation within a progressive agenda by stages that allow the process to advance in parallel and in a manner articulated with the support efforts that are driving the action.

In conclusion the recommendations of civil society are:

- a. To review the strategy of Social Funds for Telecommunications and to transform it into Social Funds for the Information Society. That does not change the way of collecting the contributions; nevertheless, it radically changes the way those funds will be used. In the end this means a generalization of the concept of universal access to telecommunications or rather its replacement with the broader concept of universal participation in the information society, including economic accessibility.

- b. In coherence with the concept of multi-stakeholder participation, to organize a management structure on this basis, that responds to the suggested criterion of participation which can function transparently and with accountability in the manner of the calls for proposals currently in the field.

- c. To finance from those funds, as quickly as possible, the beginning of permanent plans for digital literacy and training with a holistic vision and to mobilize the

enabled human resources, especially in civil society, so that they can disseminate this education.

d. For our part, we make a commitment to contribute by training and sensitizing civil society on the uses and social appropriations of the tools of the information society, to facilitate the political discussion between the several social actors, and to make possible the positive intervention of civil society in the process of sustainable human, social and economic development. In the short term, we are motivated by the possibility of undertaking an inventory, an evaluation and a collection of lessons learned about the national processes - ongoing or completed - of the multi-stakeholder participation in the N.S.I.S., with a focus on the involvement of civil society in these processes

Endnotes:

ⁱ Although countries like Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Honduras had started similar programmes before WSIS began, they did this without giving systematic consideration to the multi-sectoral participative process.