Vision or Hallucination?

"An open, inclusive information society that benefits all people will not emerge without sustained commitment and investment." That was the main message by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the world leaders gathered in Geneva in December 2003 at the first World Summit on the Information Society.

The Geneva Summit ended with a declaration of principles. Human Rights were emphasized as the cornerstone on which "to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life". Yet those high principles did not find at the time consensus on how to finance the investments needed to bridge the "digital divide" and provide all women and men access to the wealth of information and the potential to communicate that the new technologies offer. Nor was there agreement on how to govern that new territory called "cyberspace" or, to be more precise, whether the management of the Internet would continue to be the exclusive privilege of the United States or a shared responsibility involving all governments and other "stakeholders", a term which includes every person in the planet, considering the global nature of the network.

Finances and Internet governance, plus most of the issues that particularly concern developing countries, were left to be decided on during a second round or "phase" of the Summit, to be held in Tunisia mid-November 2005. Yet, the process of the Summit exposed many difficulties that Southern countries and civil society actors have in ensuring that their proposals are taken into account. In general, developing countries do not find it easy to make their voices heard and influence international

arenas where decisions are made on issues that directly affect them. With respect to information and communication technologies, the governments of these countries often do not have sufficient resources and information to be able to make informed decisions and negotiate effectively.

The opportunities for countries in the South to participate in an active and effective way depend on the ability that decision-makers have to access timely and appropriate information and analysis about the issues at stake, their impact and the possible alternatives. Frequently the views and interests of minority groups, women, young people and, in general, all those who have limited possibilities of influencing the policies adopted at global level are not expressed. The resulting policies end up privileging the already powerful elites.

In the negotiations leading to the Tunis Summit, and in order to articulate the points of view of developing countries and of the poor within them, the Third World Institute (ITeM) convened a team of researchers to look, with a Southern perspective, into the key issues at stake and to draw from their investigations concrete policy recommendations. The first of those papers, focusing on finances and making the case for recognizing the Information Society as a global public good, was commissioned by the Association of Progressive Communications (APC) and debated during the first meeting of the preparatory committee of the Summit. The others were possible thanks to the generous support of the International Development Research Centre of Canada (IDRC).

"Briefing papers" summarizing the outcomes of the investigations and offering alternatives for the debates and negotiations circulated widely among diplomats and civil society participants in the preparatory meetings of the Summit and were discussed in public events.

Special recognition should go to the members of the project's advisory board, who offered their guidance throughout the process, helped in identifying unexplored issues and recruiting investigators and provided useful comments to the drafts of the papers. Richard Fuchs encouraged us to develop the idea into a practical project and Alicia Richiero sorted

out all obstacles to make it possible for the results to be delivered in time. Magela Sigillito, head of the Internet operations of ITeM, provided the supportive network, leadership and inspiration for the team, while Pablo Accuosto coordinated the work with patience, dedication and enthusiasm. Inés Campanella and Ana Inés Abelenda committed to providing indispensable research assistance and Soledad Bervejillo's editing was essential in making the papers suitable for printing.

The results of that effort, which mobilized researchers from three continents to produce in record time a comprehensive package of analysis and proposals, are brought together in this book. Some of their recommendations made up their way into the final documents. Others kicked off a debate that will continue after the Summit.

At the moment of writing these lines the outcome of the meeting is still uncertain. This is a good sign. If all documents had been agreed upon two months before the Summit that could have been a sign of the negotiators having avoided the tough issues and settling instead for the lowest common denominator. Instead, all of the important questions were raised: How should the Internet be governed? How do we make sure that the infrastructure reaches every village? How should it be funded when the market fails to provide the investments needed?

Many of the key principles have been agreed upon. The "digital divide" has been identified and diagnosed, market failures have been recognized, civil society has been invited to the discussion table. But the political will seems to be missing when it comes to put those principles into practice and redistribute a share of power or resources. The decision-makers, whose responsibility is now to walk the distance from words to action, should remember what entrepreneurs like to repeat as a mantra: "Vision without implementation is just hallucination".

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