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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL, THE
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**Towards a Global Partnership in the Information Society:
Follow-up to the Tunis Phase
of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)**

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(Text with EEA relevance)

1. INTRODUCTION

The second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was held in Tunis from 16 to 18 November 2005. It provided a platform for exchange between a large range of stakeholders on important issues affecting the emerging global Information Society. Previously, the Geneva phase of the Summit (December 2003) had defined principles and action points for all major Information Society issues, from infrastructures to media pluralism.¹ Two major topics were left for debate in Tunis: **Internet governance** and **financial mechanisms to bridge the digital divide**. Subsequently, the **implementation of the WSIS commitments** and the **follow-up to the Summit** emerged as further issues during the preparatory process.

At the Tunis Summit, world leaders endorsed two documents that set out further steps for the policy debate on the global Information Society:

- The **Tunis Commitment** (TC)² recalls the Geneva Declaration of Principles (GDoP) and Geneva Plan of Action (GPoA), and upholds the fundamental principles underlying the common vision of the Information Society. The leaders reaffirmed their “*desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society*”³ that will be based on the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of expression and the freedom to receive and impart information.
- The **Tunis Agenda for the Information Society** (TAIS)⁴ goes even further by identifying the main challenges and showing ways to address them. In particular, it acknowledges the scale of the digital divide and the need to address it through different and complementary ways. As regards Internet governance, the TAIS sets out a way to carry forward the discussions. Finally, it shows how governments, regional and international organisations, as well as other stakeholders can implement the commitments they have undertaken.

This communication contains an assessment of the principal Summit results, indicates the EU priorities and makes proposals as to how the EU can help follow up the WSIS process. The

¹ Cf. the documents adopted at the Geneva Summit: Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action, www.itu.int/wsisis/documents/index1.html.

² www.itu.int/wsisis/documents/index2.html.

³ TC, para 2.

⁴ www.itu.int/wsisis/documents/index2.html.

Commission and the EU as a whole wish to remain driving forces in the process and to build on the success achieved during the second phase.

2. ASSESSMENT OF THE WSIS OUTCOME

The Summit has outlined a **consensus for a global approach to the Information Society**, common to all UN Member States and based on the two final documents (TC and TAIS), which complement the documents adopted in Geneva in 2003.

Thus, the Summit has reaffirmed the primary importance of democracy, of policy objectives such as sustainable development and cultural diversity, and of the **respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms**, including the freedom of expression and opinion, as well as the freedom to receive and access information. These are indispensable if information and communication technologies (ICTs) are to contribute to economic and social progress in emerging and developing countries.

The Commission welcomes this clear and unequivocal statement which takes on importance in the light of the incidents that surrounded the Tunis Summit. On the basis of this global consensus, the Commission will undertake determined efforts to prevent and counteract threats, risks and limitations to human rights posed by the misuse of ICTs, such as cyber-repression and breaches of privacy and private correspondence. In that respect, the Commission follows closely the ongoing debate in the US on ways to bar companies (Internet access and Internet service providers, providers of Internet technologies) from helping repressive regimes to restrict the free flow of information on the Internet. The Commission encourages the companies concerned to work on a code of conduct on this crucial issue, in close cooperation with NGOs.

A balanced agreement has been reached on the way to **bridge the digital divide**⁵ and to support vulnerable groups like the elderly and people with special needs. It encourages the adoption of programmes to help developing countries take advantage of ICTs to reach the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This needs to be coupled with the development of legal environments fostering competition and promoting investment in ICT infrastructure and the development of new applications and services. The Commission fully supports this approach at international level.

Furthermore, the Commission supports a **Digital Solidarity Agenda** which deals with the concerns expressed by developing countries as regards access to financing through a series of programmes and projects involving partner countries, including partnerships with the private sector and civil society. The EU will give greater importance to the potential of ICTs for contributing to attaining the MDGs by addressing the Digital Solidarity Agenda within existing mechanisms and helping decision-makers in developing countries make the most of these instruments. As regards the **Digital Solidarity Fund**, the Commission takes note of the

⁵ Overall, the digital divide has been reduced, but much remains to be done. The latest figures show there were 13 fixed phone lines and 19 mobile subscribers per 100 inhabitants in the developing world in 2004 (compared to 4 and 0 in 1994). Internet penetration in Africa was 2.6%, but the continent was home to only 0.1% of the world's broadband subscribers (Europe: 27.7%). Africa's share of global telecommunications investment was only 4%. (Source: *ITU World Telecommunication/ICT Development Report 2006*).

initiative, which is not of an intergovernmental nature and involves, in an innovative manner, local authorities and other stakeholders in combating the digital divide.

A compromise has been found on **Internet governance**. The EU has been one of the major driving forces in achieving a compromise. The wording of the EU's proposals contributed to reconciling the diverging positions of other delegations, in particular on the two most important questions:

- The EU stressed throughout the preparatory process that governments have a specific mission and responsibility vis-à-vis their citizens and that their role should be focused on the principal issues of public policy, while excluding any involvement in the day-to-day operations. The WSIS has taken this position on board by recognising the need for **enhanced cooperation** to enable governments, on an equal footing, to carry out their roles and responsibilities in international public policy issues pertaining to the Internet.
- Moreover, the TAIS lays the foundation for creating the **Internet Governance Forum**, a new forum for multi-stakeholder policy dialogue, another approach suggested by the EU in the run-up to the Tunis Summit.

Hence, the WSIS outcome represents a success from an EU point of view. It reflects the positions expressed in particular in the previous Commission communication on the EU contribution to the second WSIS phase⁶, the resolution of the European Parliament on the Information Society⁷, and the Council conclusions of 27 June 2005⁸.

3. FOLLOW-UP TO THE WSIS PROCESS

In order to implement the WSIS results, the Commission suggests that EU policies should take into account the recommendations made by the Summit, in particular in the areas of Information Society, Research and Development (R&D), economic and policy cooperation, and development aid. In so doing, the EU could draw on its experience with its own strategic framework for Information Society policies, the i2010 initiative.

The **i2010 initiative**⁹ (June 2005) presents three main action lines to allow the EU to take advantage of the mass deployment of ICTs and the latest waves of technological convergence, while ensuring public interest objectives such as cultural diversity, by:

- creating an open and competitive EU single market for Information Society and media services;
- considerably increasing investment in research on ICTs in the EU;
- promoting an inclusive European Information Society, with a strong focus on activities relating to the digital divide, at both geographical and social level.

⁶ *Towards a Global Partnership in the Information Society: the EU contribution to the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)*, COM(2005) 234 of 2.6.2005.

⁷ P6_TA(2005)0260, report A6-0172/2005 of 23.6.2005.

⁸ Cf. document 10285/05 (Presse 156).

⁹ europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/i2010/index_en.htm.

3.1. The fight against the digital divide

The Tunis Summit has recognised the benefits ICTs can bring to people, and the manner in which they can transform people's activities. The Internet in particular is becoming a critical element helping local communities attract businesses, provide healthcare, and improve education and access to government services. In that respect, the Commission will follow closely attempts to call into question the neutral character of the Internet.

3.1.1. The EU's internal experience

The Commission has recently adopted a communication on *Bridging the Broadband Gap*¹⁰, focusing on the EU's internal geographical divide. It shows that, while broadband stimulates economic growth in general, remote and rural areas have the most to gain from broadband deployment because it reduces the disadvantages of low population density and geographical remoteness from the main economic centres.

Furthermore, *e-Accessibility* is a major theme under i2010.¹¹ Intended actions build on ongoing e-Accessibility activities in the R&D field (web accessibility, "design for all", and assistive technology) and addresses issues relating to public procurement, certification, and electronic communications legislation.

To catalyse actions to address *e-Skills*, the Commission established the *European e-Skills Forum* to foster an open dialogue between stakeholders and promote multi-stakeholder partnerships and initiatives.¹²

3.1.2. EU activities at international level

At international level, the EU shares its internal experience in its external policy for economic and development cooperation.

The current Information Society dialogues with **Latin America (@LIS)**¹³, with **neighbourhood countries including the Mediterranean region (EUMEDIS)**¹⁴, and **emerging economies** (Brazil, China, India, South Africa) provide fora where the EU will promote, where appropriate, the WSIS recommendations. The next opportunity will be provided by the meeting between EU and Latin American and Caribbean countries due to take place in Lisbon.¹⁵

One major innovation in the EU's external relations is the **Partnership on Infrastructures** proposed by the "*new strategy for Africa*"¹⁶. With the support of funds from the 10th European Development Fund (EDF), development banks and the private sector, this Infrastructure Partnership will cover electronic communications on a pan-African scale in rural areas, in post-conflict situation, for trans-border communications or any other case where the market does not deliver.

¹⁰ COM(2006) 129 of 20.3.2006.

¹¹ Cf. the communication on this, COM(2005) 425 of 13.9.2005.

¹² europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/ict/policy/ict-skills.htm.

¹³ europa.eu.int/comm/europeaid/projects/alis/index_en.htm.

¹⁴ www.eumedis.net.

¹⁵ IV EU – Latin America and Caribbean Ministerial Forum on the Information Society, Lisbon, Portugal, 28-29 April 2006, cf. www.forumsi.gov.pt/index.php?lang=EN.

¹⁶ COM(2005) 489 of 12.10.2005.

This EU-Africa Partnership will operate according to the principle of African ownership and could cover in particular:

- **Strategy and regulation:** assistance measures to manage the transition to liberalised telecommunications markets in order to facilitate network interconnection and interoperability of services, while fostering the reduction of telecommunication costs and the introduction of new technologies. This would include training activities, technical assistance and sharing of good practices for regional policy makers and regulators.
- Technologically **neutral broadband telecommunication networks** as they are proposed by the Commission of the African Union (AUC) and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).
- **Development of non-commercial pan-African electronic services** such as e-government between the AUC, the administrations of its Member States and the regional economic communities, e-learning, telemedicine.
- **Research and education networks:** the aim would be to improve the connectivity of African national research and education networks and to interconnect them with the EU's GÉANT2. This would integrate African researchers into global research communities and limit the "brain drain".

The Infrastructure Partnership is being prepared by an **ACP ICT Programme** under the 9th EDF, providing €20 million to support the implementation of regulatory frameworks, mainstreaming ICTs in other sectors, and capacity building.

Moreover, **capacity building** plays a key role in the fight against the digital divide. During the Tunis Summit, the Commission organised, in partnership with industry, a successful *symposium on e-Skills* to foster multi-stakeholder partnerships and the acquisition of the necessary skills. Empowering people through *eSkills* is a prerequisite for local economic development.

Similar actions are under consideration for the **Caribbean and the Pacific region**, as connection to communications infrastructure and the use of ICTs can be very beneficial for the economic activity of both regions.

3.1.3. *International cooperation in Research and Development*

The importance of R&D is highlighted throughout the WSIS documents. In its previous communications, the Commission has stressed the need for international cooperation in ICTs to give developing countries easier access to new technologies. The latest call under the Sixth R&D Framework Programme addresses international cooperation.¹⁷

Under the next Framework Programme for European R&D (2007-2013), international cooperation will be considerably strengthened through the opening-up of all activities to researchers from third countries, and through dedicated coordination actions targeted at specific countries or groups of countries. This should provide substantial new opportunities. Possible fields for cooperation could be: early-warning systems, disaster and crisis response

¹⁷ € 30 million are earmarked in support of international cooperation. Cf. the published text of the sixth call: OJ C 325 of 22.12.2005, p. 25.

mechanisms, the contribution of ICTs to fighting poverty through low-cost technologies, priority applications, and system integration.

3.2. Internet-related issues

3.2.1. Internet governance

Building on the work carried out by the Working Group on Internet Governance, the TAIS sets out a working definition of Internet governance.¹⁸ Moreover, the TAIS highlights a range of key public policy objectives that need to be addressed at global level, from a range of development-related issues to the recognition that all governments must be able to participate equally in Internet governance to ensure the stability, security and continuity of the Internet. Among other things, the Agenda explicitly notes that there are a number of public policy issues that require attention and are not adequately addressed by current mechanisms, and it recognises the need for **enhanced cooperation** in the future to address this shortcoming. Such enhanced cooperation will seek to ensure that governments can, on an equal footing, carry out their roles and responsibilities in international public policy issues. The Commission underlines the crucial and positive role that the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) has had up to now in the day-to-day management of the Internet. The Commission strongly supported the creation and functioning of ICANN.

According to the TAIS, the UN Secretary General has called for the first meeting of a new **Internet Governance Forum (IGF)** to promote and facilitate multi-stakeholder dialogue. It will take place in Athens from 30 October to 2 November 2006. The meeting will be prepared by an Advisory Group to be nominated by the Secretary General of representatives of half governments and half civil society and the private sector. The first meeting of the Advisory Group is set for 22/23 May in Geneva. It is important to emphasise that the IGF will not replace any existing arrangements nor will it have any oversight function.

The EU has successfully convinced its partners to highlight in the Agenda key public policy priorities such as the freedom of expression and access, data protection, security, and the fight against spam. The Agenda clarifies that measures undertaken to ensure Internet stability and security, to fight cyber-crime and spam, must respect the principles of privacy and freedom of expression. The Commission will continue to actively follow up these objectives and, in particular, to support and promote the two new processes:

- Regarding the **IGF**, the EU would welcome a focused remit. Spam and relevant security-related aspects and multilingualism would be appropriate and substantive topics for the first meeting. From the EU's perspective these topics are of importance to all countries, regardless of their level of economic development. These topics were also suggested by many other stakeholders. In view of the Tunis Summit's emphasis on bridging the digital divide, the EU would also welcome initiatives by developing countries to bring forward additional topics of particular importance to them. Moreover, a large representation of European stakeholders at the first IGF meeting would be a key objective.
- **Enhanced cooperation** is one of the most critical and most difficult issues of the TAIS, as demonstrated by the time needed by the Secretary General to fulfil his mandate. In the international community, there is a wide range of views, from those which favour more

¹⁸ Para 34 of the TAIS.

direct government involvement to those which are satisfied that governments get more space within existing relevant organisations referring to the core functions of Internet governance. The EU has already identified its views on the main areas for enhanced cooperation in the COREPER conclusions of 9 November 2005; in particular, the cooperation should be light and efficient. The Commission will continue working closely with the EU Member States to identify further concrete proposals to contribute to the process. The US, on the other hand, seems to have a narrower interpretation of the Tunis consensus than the EU.

3.2.2. Security and stability of the Internet and other ICT networks

The security and stability of the Internet and other ICT networks is a major emphasis of the TAIS. Existing cooperation between governments in fields such as spam¹⁹ might benefit from being dealt with as part of enhanced cooperation at the global level. In order to build confidence and security in the use of ICTs, the TAIS calls for a global culture of cyber-security. It identifies the need for a common understanding of the issues of Internet security and for further cooperation to facilitate outreach, the collection and dissemination of security-related information and the exchange of good practice among all stakeholders.

This subject is part of the policy priorities set by i2010. In 2004, the EU decided to set up the European Network and Information Security Agency (ENISA) to help ensure the correct functioning of the internal market in this field. The Commission considers that ENISA will become a useful centre for cooperation and the exchange of information and commendable practices, both within Europe and between Europe and the rest of the world.

Furthermore, this matter will be addressed by the Commission in a comprehensive series of policy documents planned for 2006, including a strategy for increased security in electronic communications, expected to be followed by a specific initiative on spam, spyware and malware. A separate Commission communication will address cyber-crime.

3.3. Follow-up mechanisms

The WSIS process has triggered a broad dialogue between all stakeholders and focused the attention of the UN system on ICTs, notably in the development context.

3.3.1. Involvement of all stakeholders

The involvement of the **private sector** is of prime importance to achieve the Summit goals, e. g. through public-private partnerships. This is in line with the dynamic participation of the business community, in particular the European ICT industry, in the WSIS process, both through input to the political debate and through a strong presence at the ICT exhibitions that accompanied the Summits.

It is now the role of the business community to take up the opportunity to contribute to achieving the WSIS goals. Its involvement would help local populations in developing regions to get the economic and social benefits ICTs can offer; at the same time, this would

¹⁹ Between 1 July and 31 December 2005, spam made up 50% of all monitored e-mail traffic. This is a decrease from the first semester (61%). However, this does not necessarily signify a reduction as this decline is likely due to the fact that network and security administrators are using IP filtering and traffic shaping to control spam.

provide new market opportunities. Hence, the implementation of the WSIS goals represents a win-win situation for all parties. To support this, the Commission will continue its regular dialogue with the private sector.²⁰

A rich variety of **civil society organisations** have actively participated in the WSIS, which has set new standards for multistakeholder involvement in UN processes. Input from civil society has been crucial in relation to issues such as vulnerable groups of citizens, the development dimension of ICTs, and the role of human rights in the Information Society. The Commission wishes to maintain the dialogue, as the follow-up process will provide further opportunities for exchange. In addition, the European Parliament has established excellent relationships with civil society, and it would be worthwhile to pursue these.

Finally, the WSIS process has given birth to a number of **related initiatives**. Local authorities have launched the ***World Summit on the Information Society and the role of Local Authorities*** which took place in Lyon (2003) and in Bilbao (2005). The meetings have highlighted the active role local governments can play in bringing the benefits of ICTs to their citizens.

3.3.2. Institutional follow-up mechanism within the UN system

The TAIS also outlines detailed implementation and follow-up actions by specifying that UN ECOSOC should oversee this process. In an annex, it gives an indicative list of UN agencies that could serve as moderators/facilitators to oversee the implementation of the GPoA. The Commission welcomes the initiatives taken by the respective UN agencies to outline their activities within their areas of competence. Major conferences can provide an opportunity for reflection on and adoption of provisions to support the WSIS implementation, as was the case with the World Telecommunications Development Conference (Doha, March 2006).

In the initial discussions on the mandate for action-line moderators, the EU has expressed its preference for an open process. The Commission believes that the annex to the TAIS should be considered as a flexible list allowing for all stakeholders to step in according to their policy and business priorities. The Commission further shares the concerns expressed by the private sector and developing countries regarding the available financial resources and therefore stresses the importance of a light structure.

The WSIS follow-up will make Information Society policies a major part of the EU's relations with the UN system. Accordingly, the presence and active participation of the EU and the presentation of common positions should be maintained especially with ECOSOC, ITU, UNESCO and UNDP. This should also be the aim in the field of Internet governance as regards the positions of Member States expressed in international organisations.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The EU's influence on the content of the final documents was largely due to its ability to speak with one voice. The WSIS process has also shown that the priorities identified in the i2010 initiative are a useful tool for addressing similar policy issues outside the EU.

²⁰ Informal consultations were held in Brussels on 24 June and 24 October 2005, 9 March 2006.

In implementing the Geneva and Tunis recommendations, the EU should now strive to capitalise on these achievements. This can be done in EU programmes that contribute to fighting the digital divide, by promoting R&D cooperation with third countries or by setting up new partnerships in the field of ICTs. Another lesson from the WSIS is that Information Society policies should be mainstreamed in the broader context of economic and development cooperation, because ICTs are no longer only an economic or social priority, but are becoming a condition for the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The EU should maintain the momentum of the multiple dialogues established with other institutions and organisations. These dialogues have allowed the EU to present a coherent position on sensitive issues such as Internet governance, or financing the Information Society in developing countries. The EU will continue to play an active and positive role in the debates on Internet governance, through its participation in the IGF and the upcoming enhanced cooperation.