

Quito

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A Latin American Civil Perspective on the Information Summit

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### Information Society

The concept of Information Society belongs to the current colloquial language used. Nowadays, the term "Information Society" is lightly used as a synonym with media, technology and Internet. It's in fashion. However, when we use this concept, do we ask what information society we are building? Is information society civil organizations are building the same society other social sectors are interested in? Is it about building only one information society? The debate is still open, more interesting and important than ever. The next World Summit on Information Society organized by the UNO follows this fashion.

### What civil society proposes

Groups that have made fundamental contributions to the field of communication including radio stations and other community media, news agencies, telecenter projects, and Internet community providers, and other initiatives encouraging communities to use new information technologies, have many years of work experience. Therefore, they can considerably contribute to the preparation process of the World Summit on Information Society, WSIS.

Civil society organizations have key principles to build their concept of information society and have emphasized this process to stress the importance of protecting this concept. In the first place, for organizations, equality seems to be the cornerstone for its construction. In several congresses held in the region and in

national chapters about the World Summit, one posture seems to join the regional civil society: to leverage an equal construction of the information society based on economic and social sustainable developments, and on gender justice. In the opinion of most civil society organizations, it is evident that the information society can not only be supported by the market force. They had initial fears with respect to the responsibility for the organization of the WSIS, which was entrusted to the International Telecommunications Union, ITU, the consultative organ for large corporations like Siemens, Motorola, Bell, Nec, Alcatel, Ericsson and AT&T. According to the Summit organization body, the Summit should have a common vision and better understanding of the transformation towards an Information Society.<sup>1</sup>

Also these groups with wide community experience look for an Information Society based on right to communication as a human right. They think Internet and Communications access and use are fundamental rights as a guarantee to hear community voices. Therefore, the purpose of civil society organizations is to implement information and communication technologies as instruments to encourage democratic governability and citizen participation. Civil groups also have proposals on literacy and education, defend cultural and linguistic diversity, public domain of global knowledge, and information Security as part of the so-called information society.

#### Participation and mobilization

For many civil society organizations, the Information Summit is considered as a means, not an end. They expect to take this occasion as an opportunity to have a national and regional debate on priority topics related to information and communication. They want to generate a movement in the organizations and

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<sup>1</sup> Civil organizations are also concerned about the fact that the United Nations intervenes in the Summit, which will help develop a solid base for the economic development through new stable job opportunities and highly qualified jobs, as well as create local goods, equipment, software, content and service manufacturers, especially if there is no big debate.

citizens about communication themes of their interest. Many civil groups have participated from the beginning on the WSIS official process. Some of these groups want to open dialog spaces in several countries with their government, oriented towards building civil mechanisms for the design and implementation of communications, information and telecommunications public policies. For other organizations – that have had unnoticeable Latin American participation – the Summit is important to generate another kind of movement oriented towards a protest on the unequal development of the digitalized society. They are organizing in another way to highlight the inequalities and actually demand the same basic principles that motivated the chosen organizations to participate in the official process. An example of civil diversity is the range of alternative meetings to be held in Geneva in December 2003 to shape and strengthen the wide global scope of civil society.

#### Civil participation, the starting point to defend in the WSIS process

For civil society organizations, information society is a diverse society under construction whose development should imply transparent participation. Thus, diverse organizations that are involved in the WSIS process, fiercely defend what has been too difficult to accomplish within the Summit: to take into account not only the voices from the government and corporations in the discussion process, but also communities' needs, contributions, and proposals at the working table. From the beginning of the official process – that publicly began with the first Preparatory Conference in July 2002 – it was clearly stated to take respect and the guarantee of civil society inclusion as the initial action. Diverse and transparent participation was then the first action and defense of civil society organizations before the WSIS.

Therefore, the following aspects are very important:

- Civil organizations should keep exerting pressure in the WSIS official process to guarantee the effective inclusion of proposals from different sectors that constitute the civil society.

- Any efforts made by the organizations, groups and other initiatives to generate proposals including peoples and communities in their ruling center.
- Any initiative that encourages debate, analysis, and diffusion of civil society's postures in and out of the Summit's official process.

## Civil Organization Initiatives in Latin America

### The CRIS Campaign

CRIS [Communication Rights in the Information Society] was created as a global campaign in 2001 to influence the process, and the World Summit agenda. This campaign is oriented towards promoting democratically citizen mobilization for the right to communication, even beyond the WSIS framework. CRIS' mission is to "help build an Information Society based on transparency, diversity, participation, and social and economic justice principles, and is inspired by equality between genders and between different cultural and regional perspectives". To fulfill this mission, the CRIS campaign is oriented towards influencing on the definition of procedures, as well as on guaranteeing transparency in participation processes. CRIS has tried to widen the participation margin within the Summit official process, and it is basically looking for promoting the inclusion of social, economic topics and relevant policies that do not limit to simply use new information technologies.

Six are CRIS co-founding organizations in Latin America: The Latin American Association of Radio Broadcasting Education (ALER), The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (WACRB), the Third World Institute (ITM), la Rede de Informações para o Terceiro Setor (RITS), the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) and the Latin American Information Agency (ALAI). The campaign is currently composed of a large number of organizations and individuals that work on communication for the social change at the local, regional, and global

levels. It is difficult to exactly say the number of participants in the campaign since there is no registration form or any other instrument alike. The CRIS' modus operandi and raison d'être is to support scenarios that have been spontaneously generated or consolidated within the Summit framework to reflect, build networks, and take actions based on the analysis and proposals on the information society. That is to say that the creation of local entities is fostered to diversely analyze, discuss, and/or make proposals for the creation of one or more Information Societies. These agencies such as radio stations, discussion groups, assemblies, e-mail listing, school groups, telecenters, human rights organizations, women groups, and technical or academic groups, are convinced of the protection of communication rights.

#### E-mail lists as participation power

Electronic lists have had a major role in the organization of the civil process in the region with respect to the WSIS. In the last months, several organizations have been involved in the analysis and debate based on their participation on mail lists dealing with topics related to the information society. The origin of the Latin American Caucus is in these lists – which we will talk about later. Among the lists we can mention:

#### The Crisal list

In February 2002, CRISAL – CRIS electronic space for Latin America – was created. Using this e-mail lists, activists, researchers and other people interested in ICTs and the rights to communication have participated from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela. There are currently on average 300 people participating in CRISAL<sup>2</sup>. This list is aimed at offering information and inviting several civil society players in the region to collectively cooperate in the definition of WSIS

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<sup>2</sup> [http://comunica.org/mailman/listinfo/crisal\\_comunica.org](http://comunica.org/mailman/listinfo/crisal_comunica.org)

procedures, and to promote the adoption of relevant themes about a sustainable human development perspective. Initially, the civil coordination in the region was discussed. Based on this discussion, the first collective Latin American documents appeared and were submitted to the Summit official process.

#### The Mistica List

The Mistica List<sup>3</sup> exists since 1998. About 350 people, among activists and academic members discuss and make collective documents – some of them very linked to the WSIS – focusing on the "ICTs social impact" in the region. The list facilitates the players' distance participation with some presential probability and keep a synthesis of what happens in this and other communication processes associated to regional public policies.

#### The Socinfo list

Based on the great amount of data in English regarding the coordination of civil society in the Summit, socinfo<sup>4</sup> was founded to spread information in Spanish and coordinate actions from the First Preparatory Conference. Currently, it is an information scenario for several organizations providing data mostly from other lists.

Participation in these lists is open and the organizations that exchange data are not necessarily working in the Summit's lobbying process. That is to say that these organizations do not belong to the different entities created to directly work with the UNO, the governments, etc. There are many lists that do not work in Spanish, apart from the LAC caucus list and that one for Latin American education.

### Latin American participation takes shape in the LAC Caucus

The Latin American and Caribbean Caucus - LAC Caucus - is the meeting point of Latin American civil information, communication and human rights organizations,

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<sup>3</sup> <http://funredes.org/mistica> y <http://funredes.org/olistica>

<sup>4</sup> <http://lists.cpsr.org/socinfo>

some academic actors and other people interested in participating in the WSIS. This is a space for debate, topics, and incidence strategies with the governments. It is open to any organization or person who wants to work driven by the proposals from the regional civil society in the WSIS official process. Caucus is recognized as a civil space for Latin America and the Caribbean by its organizing body.

Caucus makes part of the necessity to build information societies based on human rights and their integral respect, especially the rights to education, to expression, and to regional citizen communication. Caucus considers communication as a public asset and a fundamental process to achieve sustainable economic, political, social and cultural development through ICT tools and other ways of communication and information. LAC Caucus' commitment is to search equal opportunities for genders, races, ethnics, nationalities and social classes in all information society policies and initiatives.

Caucus intends to create strategies to strengthen Latin American and Caribbean civil society presence in the WSIS process. Therefore, Caucus' purpose is to encourage topics of special regional interest including the development of regulatory frameworks to facilitate legalization mechanisms for the community media; the promotion of free software and democratization of country code top level domain names ccTLD; effective participation of our countries in the Internet and all international regulation agents; mechanisms for the legal protection of local knowledge; and community needs to directly participate in the discussion, formulation, follow up and assessment of ICTs public policies in the region.

The purpose of the LAC Caucus can be summarized in one sentence: "to strengthen the presence of the Latin American civil society in the WSIS process and to influence in it effectively". Therefore, best efforts are made to coordinate LAC's civil society organizations participation – on line and personal participation. Documents are being translated, contents are being designed and strategies for the governments and other actors' participation are being encouraged. Another

task undertaken by the LAC Caucus is to promote the participation in and support to other initiatives on information societies and the right to communication in the region. The LAC Caucus has its mailing list which gathers about 40 subscribers. It also has its own temporary web site<sup>5</sup>.

### Other civil society agencies in the WSIS process

#### Division of the Civil Society

The Summit organization created an official working team called Division of the Civil Society that is currently participating by supporting the civil groups in the entire process. In practical terms, the Division is a team of the WSIS organization that operates as a speaker between the Summit organization and the coordinated civil organizations. It presents proposals before the different civil agencies and recommends procedures. It has its web site<sup>6</sup> to post data from and to non-government groups.

#### Caucus

Apart from the LAC Caucus, the gender caucus<sup>7</sup>, Asia's and Africa's<sup>8</sup> caucus are active. All of them were created before the Latin American one. Apart from the existing Caucus, there are other bodies that have been created within the preparatory meetings.

#### Bureau of Civil Society and its "families"

This Bureau was formally incorporated during the PrepCom 2 in Geneva in February 2003. Its mission is to facilitate and improve communication and

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<sup>5</sup> LAC caucus list: <http://mailman.greennet.org.uk/mailman/listinfo/lac>  
site <http://lac.derechos.apc.org/wsisis/>

<sup>6</sup> web site <http://www.geneva2003.org/wsisis/indexa03.htm>

<sup>7</sup> gender caucus's web site: [www.wougnet.org/wsisis/wsisisgc.html](http://www.wougnet.org/wsisis/wsisisgc.html)

<sup>8</sup> African caucus' list: [Africa@wsisis-cs.org](mailto:Africa@wsisis-cs.org)

exchange between the organizations and the civil society members and the government and organizing body of the Summit. It does not have a decision vote. To reach the Bureau incorporation, “families” which are working teams that work on a common topic, region or any other work aspect, were first created. In the Latin American case, the LAC Caucus has “family” duties. Currently there are 22 families and each one has 2 contacts. All contacts constitute the Bureau.

#### Plenary of the Civil Society

This is the maximum legitimacy space that makes decisions of the civil society. In each prepcom and during the Summit there are presential plenaries of the WSIS civil society. In these plenaries, participation is open to all the participants from the organizations. Between each presential meeting, the plenary works on line on the list [plenary@wsis-cs.org](mailto:plenary@wsis-cs.org).

#### Obstacles and mistakes

In an attempt to make an overview of the most important obstacles that Latin American civil organizations have encountered in the WSIS process, we can mention the following aspects with respect to their relationship with the governments:

In spite of the statements in an opposite sense, weak political will to stimulate and guarantee participation of civil society is remarkable. This can be seen in the absence of official participation spaces, the little financial support received and the reiterate insistence of some governments to limit the presence of civil organizations as mere observers.

The governments still have a marked tendency to favor a technology and market-oriented scope (competence, deregulation, economic development..)

Some governments' lack of political will regarding the possible contributions that can be taken again from civil society is remarkable. Some of them fear to

incorporate contributions from the civil sector even in working documents making it impossible to have later contributions in official declarations and action plans. Regarding the governments in the region under the GRULAC\*, their posture is puzzling. Their proposals not always match the political openness they have directly reiterated to the organizations at the moment of signing official agreements.

Official documents are in English and their translation in Spanish appear much later. This situation together with on line discussions in English do not favor timely participation from many civil society sectors.

Regarding the coordination of civil organizations here are the following mistakes:

The economic situation of the organizations to cover expenses clearly limits the civil participation in the Latin America region. However, in on-line civil participation there are more observers than committed people to work on different activities.

Civil participation structures so far constituted – such as the families, Caucus and the Bureau of Civil Society – are complex.

The Latin American civil organizations coordination that has worked so far have to make more contacts with organizations from the Caribbean countries.

Also regional youth and human rights groups have to participate more.

### [Achievements in the WSIS' process](#)

Generally speaking, there are more documents counteracting the mercantilist approach of the Summit. Proposals with the support of different regions and specific action areas (gender, education ...) have been integrated.

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\* Group of Latin America and the Caribbean

There has been a fruitful analysis process in the Latin American region. If the topics are not alien to the work of many organizations, they have not been analyzed in other aspects with so many players and for such a long time.

There have been successful initiatives that integrate academic sectors to organizations.

The relationships with GRULAC governments

There have been very successful national processes including the national chapters of the CRIS campaign: Bolivia, Colombia, and Costa Rica.

## Challenges

Undoubtedly, the major challenge is to include Latin American civil society's proposals and needs in the declaration and action plans.

Another important challenge is to strengthen the civil coordination in the region. In this regard, the following aspects should be consolidated: the LAC Caucus; CRIS' national chapters in other countries; Latin American participation in other Caucus and thematic working groups; as well as greater regional participation in meetings alternative to the Summit.

It is important to have more relationships between the initiatives within the Summit official process and alternative initiatives to it.

It is mostly important that Latin American organizations increase the number of proposals with respect to contents and actions to be taken.

Another challenge is to have economic support to leverage civil participation in the Summit.

To quickly translate data to Spanish and include this language in the debate lists. This will facilitate the integration of more civil society sectors and voices.

A very difficult challenge is to participate in the Summit with real incidence since the risk is that at the end of the process, civil society participation has not had an impact, but has only served as an excuse for organizers to say that all sectors participated in the Summit.

### [Strengthening Latin American civil Society's relationships](#)

Beyond the specific results in the information policy field, the WSIS process has left interesting and warm experiences from the constitution of coordination bodies at the local, national, regional and global levels. Apart from contributing to building the information society with innovative ways of participation and transparency, civil society is also strengthened with this experience of coordination and membership. Membership initiatives of different civil, academic groups and other players are very constructive for the consolidation of organization structures that not only defend and demand, but that also substantially provide contents. The global exchange has been very enriching and particularly in the Latin American case, the experience has been very rich leaving new networks established in the region in the search of diverse, equal and sustainable information societies.