

Deconstructing multi-stakeholderism: The discourses and realities of global governance at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

Arne Hintz
Central European University, Budapest
arne.hintz@gmail.com

1. Introduction: Global Governance

The recent increase in cross-border flows and global integration, as well as the growing capacities of business and civil society actors, have changed the global political landscape. While in the state-centered world of the past two centuries, sovereign states represented the basic units in the international system and international policy-making was based on inter-state diplomacy, interconnectedness has increasingly restricted the choices made by states (Held/McGrew 2003). Constraints of distance and time on social organisation have been eroded, and some have even identified “an end to what could be called ‘territorialism’, that is, a situation where social geography is entirely territorial” (Scholte 2000: 46)

As the actual control most states possess over their territory has become limited, and as territory as such has become a challenged category, new approaches to international regulation have emerged – particularly the concept of global governance. *Governance* differs from a notion of *government* which implies the direct capacity of political leaders to steer society, and focuses instead on systems of rules and interdependent problem-solving by a diversity of actors on a diversity of policy levels. Governance is thus something broader than government, going beyond both state actors and the state level of policy making, but also beyond formal institutions and organisations. Rather, it involves “systems of rule at all levels of humanity (...) in which the pursuit of goals through the exercise of control has transnational repercussions” (Rosenau 1995: 13).

Even though a crucial rationale for the concept is its ‘global’ approach, global governance does not just transfer policy-making from one level (nation-state) to the next (global), but it involves qualitative changes. An illustration of global governance would encompass self-organising networks and webs of policy-making fora in which control is dispersed and capacity for decision-making and implementation is widely distributed, thus “layers of governance spreading within and across political boundaries” (Held/McGrew 2003: 11) in which new actors and levels have “transformed sovereignty into the shared exercise of power” (ibid.). The specific characteristics of global governance thus are:

- a) the participation of new actors, particularly from business and civil society,
- b) the re-distribution of spaces and policy layers between local and global, and
- c) the interaction and cooperation between different actors and layers.

Yet a network policy structure has only been emerging step-by-step and has been accompanied by a continuous struggle for or against the persistent centrality of nation-states in the global political arena. The Commission on Global Governance, presenting its report in 1995, still regarded states as the main actors and the United Nations (UN) as the “central mechanism” for facing the challenges of the future (Commission on Global Governance 1995: 8). Its main concern was about effective multilateral problem-solving between nation-states

within a strengthened UN framework, and this somewhat limited degree of innovation has been criticised as an institutional re-design of traditional international relations (Messner/Nuscheler 2003).

The world conferences of the 1990s offered a laboratory for going beyond a state focus. They invented a “new dramaturgy of world politics” (Messner/Nuscheler 2003: 4) by putting both the public and political focus on the global level, and by going beyond the diplomatic exclusivity of states which gradually lost their monopoly of international relations. The UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 set a precedent by focusing on a new space (the global), offering a new concept (the global commons), and integrating new actors (NGOs and business). A series of summits followed, including (amongst many others) the conference on human rights in Vienna 1993, the womens conference in Beijing 1995, and the Rio plus10 conference in Johannesburg 2002. These summits were still based on state-organised ‘inter-national’ multilateralism, and taking place within the UN framework, they were anchored within the old state-centered system. Yet UN-based summitry has represented an important point of departure – and a “construction site” (Fues/Hamm 2001) – for global governance.¹

When the preparation process towards a further UN summit, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), started around the turn of the millennium, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) as the main organiser promised to take yet another step towards new forms of global governance. It announced a “new kind of summit” which would be based on the “full participation” of “new” actors, particularly business and civil society. A discourse around “multi-stakeholder processes” emerged, and expectations were high that an entirely new form of global governance would be tested, with non-state actors participating on equal footing with government delegations.

In this paper, I will illustrate the struggles around multi-stakeholderism at WSIS and will analyse the innovations which it brought about, as well as its shortcomings. The paper is based on participatory observation of the summit process, analysis of summit documents and of debates amongst civil society actors, and it presents arguments put forward in a PhD thesis which was submitted in January 2007.

2. The promise of full participation

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was a summit in two parts, with the first part taking place in Geneva, 10-12 December 2003, and the second in Tunis, 16-18 November 2005. Both summits were preceded by meetings of the preparatory committee (PrepCom) as well as thematic working groups and conferences, with each preparation phase stretching over almost two years. WSIS was the first in the recent series of UN summits to deal exclusively with information and communication. Its objective was to develop a common understanding of the information society and a common response to challenges such as the digital divide. The thematic framework ranged from Internet governance to education, from cultural diversity to security aspects, from financing mechanisms to freedom of expression.

¹ The beginning of the new millennium has shown that the development towards network governance structures is not a smooth one and may temporarily be halted or reversed. Military conflict has re-intensified, especially after September 11th 2001; there has been a re-nationalisation of foreign and security policies; and the US as the world’s greatest military and economic power has undermined multilateral rule on a variety of levels. Hamelink’s observation from the early 1990s is still (or rather: again) valid: “In today’s world system the notion of national sovereignty is certainly under siege, but it has not yet surrendered” (Hamelink 1994: 37).

WSIS organisers promised to be innovative by raising the mode of participation of non-state actors – particularly the private sector (businesses, corporations, commercial entities) and civil society (NGOs and public interest groups) – to unprecedented levels. The ITU, the UN agency responsible for organising the summit, announced that it would greatly expand their role in the summit process:

“WSIS, while recommending representation from governments at the highest level, also invites participation of all relevant UN bodies and other international organizations, non-governmental organizations, private sector, civil society, and media to establish a truly multi-stakeholder process”.²

Civil society’s “full participation” in summit processes was announced by a senior ITU official in December 2000 (Ó Siochrú 2004: 333). The exact meaning of “full participation” was not defined, but it seemed to suggest that civil society would be able to participate on equal footing with governments and be included fully in the negotiation process. A “new kind of summit” was envisaged (idem: 330), in which private sector and civil society would be ‘partners’, rather than outside observers, in the summit process. The *multi-stakeholder approach* became the main buzzword expressing this partnership and characterising the novelty of the WSIS process. The new discourse not just reverberated through all the official WSIS literature, but re-appeared in civil society analysis and independent accounts. The claim that the multi-stakeholder approach applied at WSIS would constitute a true innovation became a common understanding shared by many summit participants.

A tripartite WSIS Secretariat was established which included three separate divisions, one for each stakeholder group. Underlining its key role, the Civil Society Division (CSD) was the first to take up its work. UNESCO complemented these efforts by holding a series of consultations with civil society actors to develop thematic consensus-building and to formulate proposals for civil society participation. Such proposals included the representation of civil society on the summit Bureau, the establishment of a fund for civil society participation, and the incorporation of civil society statements into the negotiation process. The demands were based on the assumption that civil society actors would be treated “as peers and equals to nation-states and private sector organizations/corporations” (Ó Siochrú 2004: 334).

A large number of NGOs and other civil society actors followed the call, appeared at the preparatory meetings and self-organised in a network of thematic caucuses and working groups, such as the Internet Governance Caucus, the Human Rights Caucus and the Community Media Working Group, to create effective mechanisms for lobbying, thematic exchange, development of common statements and thus fruitful participation.

However, to do so, they had to face a number of hurdles that cast some first shadows on the promise of full participation. The requirements for receiving accreditation for the WSIS process were geared towards large NGOs – applicants either needed to be an entity officially recognised by the UN, or they had to prove their credentials as formally established organisations with a headquarter, a democratically adopted constitution and annual reports. The registration process for the summit itself involved giving detailed personal information and receiving a badge with an RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) chip which allowed privacy infringements. Some civil society participants noticed special treatment as, for example, they had their bags searched every time they entered the summit compound. Several groups, such as the NGO Reporters Sans Frontiers and Tunisian human rights groups, were

² <http://www.itu.int/wsisp/participation/index.html>

not allowed to participate at all.³ Covering the expenses of participation was the most serious obstacle: the flight ticket to Geneva (where most PrepComs took place), two weeks of hotel accommodation, food and drinks in an expensive Swiss city – not once but two, three or more times a year. The civil society fund proposed by UNESCO was never established, and so, again, only larger NGOs which could mobilise sufficient funds, for example through established contacts with potential donors, could cope with this restriction.

3. The summit process and the struggle over participation

The beginning of the official negotiation process – and thus the entrance of government delegations sceptical towards an increased role of civil society – changed the welcoming tone dramatically. Rule 55 of the Rules of Procedure, as agreed by the governments at PrepCom1, noted that “Non-governmental organizations, civil society and business entities ... may designate representatives to sit as observers at public meetings of the Preparatory Committee and its subcommittees” (WSIS Executive Secretariat 2002). Thus the new non-governmental stakeholders were reduced to the status of “observers” who were allowed to attend only “public” sessions and given brief slots (at the beginning of these sessions) for contributions and statements, but who were excluded from actual decision-making processes and spaces. These modalities did not represent substantial progress from other recent UN practices.

The prime innovation concerned the private sector. Business had traditionally been represented at summits and other global governance fora through business associations, such as the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC). The WSIS Rules of Procedure changed this practice by allowing individual companies to be accredited at WSIS and participate in summit processes.⁴ This provision was based on ITU structures and practices. The ITU allows individual companies to become “sector members” and to thereby participate in the activities of one or more of the three main sectors (Radio Communication, Standardization, Development) into which the ITU divides its work.⁵ A further rationale for including them in WSIS processes was that these companies represented the actual producers of many of the products and services which were discussed at the summit. The result was effectively a double representation of the business sector: companies were represented both individually and through their respective business associations. In addition, the vague self-definition of the civil society sector at WSIS allowed some business actors, for example media corporations and publishers, to be represented in civil society structures, leading effectively to triple representation.⁶

Yet this set-back did not stop civil society actors from claiming broader participation rights throughout the process – and they had allies on the government side. Whereas some governments were eager to retain the negotiation and decision-making process as an exclusive governmental domain, others seemed to realize that some sort of adaptation of governance processes to a new multi-stakeholder reality would eventually be necessary to revive the legitimacy of decision-making and to make use of the observers’ expertise of the issues under debate, which often exceeded their own knowledge (Kleinwächter 2004; von

³ In their WSIS evaluation “Much more could have been achieved”, civil society participants of the WSIS process expressed the urgent need to develop “clearer and less bureaucratic rules of recognition for accrediting Civil Society organisations in the UN system (...) and to ensure that national governmental recognition of Civil Society entities is not the basis for official recognition in the UN system” (Civil Society Plenary 2005: 15).

⁴ This decision, in fact, violated established UN rules (Raboy/Landry 2005).

⁵ see www.itu.int/aboutitu/overview/index.html

⁶ In practice, however, the private sector made only limited use of the multiple official channels that were available. Large corporations, such as Microsoft, were absent from most meetings and instead chose to communicate directly with governments and national delegations through established non-official channels.

Damm/Schallaböck 2004). In the absence of a detailed framework for advancing the involvement of non-state actors, a struggle emerged between proponents of deeper inclusion – civil society actors, supported by the private sector, the liberal governments of the North/West, and some government delegations from Africa – and the critics – the delegations from Pakistan, China, Iran and Russia being the most vocal, sometimes supported by delegations from Latin America⁷ and unofficially supported by others. This *battle of position* continued throughout the whole summit process, dominated large parts of the debate and frequently overshadowed discussions on the actual WSIS themes. In a permanent one-step-forward, one-step-back movement, rules were sometimes stretched and sometimes restricted, limits were imposed and then lifted again.

The establishment of government-only drafting committees and thematic working groups from PrepCom2 onwards illustrates this process. These groups served to exclude the ‘observers’ from the spaces of actual negotiations, yet civil society protests led to openings, such as five-minute speaking slots at the beginning of each session, and in some cases the chairs of meetings allowed observers to attend whole sessions and even contribute substantially to debates. Thus rules were not always applied strictly, depending on the views of the chair of the working group and the level of resistance amongst the government delegates present at a particular session. As a form of “constructive ambiguity” (Aizu 2005) such practices occasionally led to cautious progress regarding the inclusion of non-state actors, but without setting hard precedents to prevent resistance by hostile governments.

The level of recognition of summit contributions by the ‘observers’ constituted a similar space of struggle. At PrepCom2 (WSIS1), a proposal by the governmental drafting committee to include statements from private sector and civil society directly in the official draft documents was opposed strongly by some government delegations, resulting in the compromise to only annex them as a separate document, with the explicit agreement “that the proposals by governments would constitute the basis of negotiations” (Heinrich-Böll-Foundation 2003). While the exclusion of their statements from the official drafts was a step towards restricting non-state actor participation, WSIS nevertheless accepted their contributions as official documents in a UN negotiation process and thereby went beyond the practices of most previous UN summits.

The contradiction between the narrow Rules of Procedure, based on traditional UN practices, and the widely perceived need to enable a far deeper inclusion of non-state actors, surfaced continuously throughout the process. During a long evening session at PrepCom2 (WSIS1), Adama Samassekou, PrepCom President of WSIS phase 1, announced to the government plenary that the issue of non-state actor participation in the summit processes touched on fundamental questions about necessary changes in international cooperation, but that he had no idea how to solve them within the WSIS framework (Heinrich-Böll-Foundation 2003).

The *vacuum of universally accepted principles* on non-state actor participation extended to the second WSIS phase. Two working groups were formed to deal with issues unresolved at WSIS1 – the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) and the Task Force on Financing Mechanisms (TFFM) – and they chose very different paths towards including non-state actors. WGIG came close to a true multi-stakeholder design; with 14 out of 40 members belonging to civil society, half of whom were core members of the civil society network at

⁷ Members of the Brazilian delegation explained privately that they primarily objected to deeper involvement of the business sector, while they did not object to an inclusion of civil society positions in the negotiation process. Here, the problem of lumping together private sector and civil society in the term “observers” became apparent.

WSIS.⁸ The work of WGIG was marked by a cooperative approach in which delegates from different stakeholder groups collaborated on equal footing. The TFFM, in contrast, was convened in a non-transparent manner, hand-picking members, among whom there was only one delegate from a civil society organisation. This set-up of the working groups coincided with the expertise and the level of debate amongst the WSIS participants from civil society: While from the outset the Internet Governance Caucus had represented one of the most vocal and most organised civil society working groups and assembled highly experienced Internet experts, a finance caucus only appeared half way through the WSIS2 process and was never able to establish itself as a forum of exceptional expertise. Also, civil society actors have traditionally had a larger role in governing the Internet, while financial assistance has rather been an activity area of governments and international institutions. However these factors cannot fully account for the differences. In the absence of agreed multi-stakeholder guidelines, as we have seen above, those responsible for designing the structure of each group had a significant impact on its later working practices. While WGIG-coordinator Markus Kummer chose to include a wide variety of stakeholders, the UNDP as the TFFM-convener chose a more traditional approach.

4. The political context of WSIS ‘multi-stakeholderism’

To understand the multi-stakeholder approach it is important to look at the context of WSIS. The summit took place at a historic crossroads between two developments. On the one hand, the UN had made significant efforts to expand its cooperation with civil society (and business).⁹ On the other hand, a crisis of legitimacy of UN summits, in particular, and of global multilateral regulation, in general, had emerged. Confidence in large summits had been dropping, as they had gained a reputation of over-sized resource-consuming talk-shops, leading to little action in their aftermath. The global political environment was marked by a shift towards unilateralism, and by the growing power of non-UN organisations and associations, such as the WTO and the G8 (Ó Siochrú 2004). Most significantly, as I would argue, the exploding protests against government summits and meetings of inter-governmental organisations and business associations of that time uncovered a crisis of legitimacy of global institutions which were perceived as undemocratic and elite-driven. The WTO protests in Seattle, 1999, and the G8 protests in Genoa, 2001, represented only the best-known examples of a wave of resistance against prevailing power structures and hegemonic policies. The outcry “Que se vayan todos!” – “They all must go!” – during the Argentine uprising in December 2001 showed the deep criticism towards political and economic institutions and elites (see, e.g., Notes from Nowhere 2003). These more radical perspectives were accompanied with increasing public scrutiny of what actually happened in global policy circles, and with questions regarding legitimacy and accountability. Summits as such did not anymore represent signs of hope for finding solutions to the serious global problems, but were widely regarded with scepticism.

Just six months before WSIS1, the Geneva region had hosted another global event – the annual G8 meeting – and the city had been the scene of serious confrontations between protesters and the police, in which at least two protesters received nearly lethal injuries. In spring 1998, Geneva had been one of the birthplaces of the global protest movement with the inauguration of the People’s Global Action network and a confrontational day of actions against a WTO meeting. A repetition of scenes of street battles, as in Seattle, Genoa, or in Geneva itself, could have become a publicity disaster for WSIS. There was an urgent need for

⁸ see <http://www.wgig.org/members.html>

⁹ This was, in fact, one of the core objectives during Kofi Annan’s term as Secretary-General, as highlighted, for example, in the report *Strengthening of the United Nations: An Agenda for Further Change*, UN document A/57/387.

innovation – or at least for a new discourse. So the (alleged) multi-stakeholder approach made a reduction or even elimination of protests possible by claiming to be open for everyone and by integrating potentially critical voices. It served as a response to a crisis of legitimacy on a variety of levels.

Accordingly, the central role of the multi-stakeholder claim was consistently highlighted throughout the summit process. In his opening speech to the very first meeting of the preparatory committee on 1 July 2002, ITU Secretary General Yoshio Utsumi referred to the presence of a variety of stakeholders in his second sentence, before even addressing the themes of the summit (Utsumi 2002). As progress of government negotiations stalled in the run-up to the Geneva summit, WSIS organisers further strengthened the claims of procedural innovation to maintain a positive public perception of the summit and to thereby guarantee its success. The official press statement at the end of PrepCom3 neglected the poor thematic outcomes but instead carried the headline: “Summit Breaks New Ground with Multi-Stakeholder Approach” (ITU 2003).

Civil society had moved from the margins to the very centre of the WSIS process. Even the most cautiously applied criticism by the often effectively excluded and thereby frustrated civil society actors led to sensitive reactions by the WSIS secretariat and many government delegations. When plans for an alternative civil society declaration were made public at PrepCom3 – plans which had the potential to destroy the carefully nurtured impression of broad civil society support to the official WSIS outcomes – PrepCom President Samassekou immediately visited the civil society plenary to promise new mechanisms for including civil society input into the negotiations, but also to warn the plenary of a too critical approach. Such quick attempts to pacify civil society did not lead to substantial changes in the thematic priorities set out in the summit documents, but they clarified the importance of civil society participation for the success of the summit. As if to underline this point, Samassekou repeatedly approached the civil society *Content & Themes Group* before addressing government delegations to find out which of his thematic proposals would have civil society support. So, even though civil society delegations could not offer any quantifiable trading issues as leverage in the negotiations, their support was perceived as being of fundamental significance. Their negotiation position was based on the necessity of the multi-stakeholder approach.

5. A new approach?

The analysis of the multi-stakeholder approach by academic observers and participants varies between the recognition of a development towards greater inclusion of non-state actors into governance processes and criticism of the insufficient realities of the WSIS. There is agreement that WSIS has helped to open previously closed spaces of inter-governmental debate to organised groups of citizens and activists, and in some instances, most notably the debate on Internet governance, the process was in fact led by those groups (Currie 2005). In its WSIS2 statement, the civil society network praised the “innovative rules and practices of participation” (Civil Society Plenary 2005: 7) established in some areas of the WSIS process “as a result of constant pressure from Civil Society” (ibid.), and it highlighted WGIG as a particularly innovative format “where governmental and Civil Society actors worked on an equal footing” (ibid.). The high degree of formalisation of civil society involvement in WSIS as well as the autonomous structures created by civil society participants, as argues Raboy, “form the basis of a new model of representation and legitimation of non-governmental input to global affairs” (Raboy 2004: 349), and as a result, “the rules and parameters of global governance have shifted” (ibid.). Having “shaken the status quo of global governance”, WSIS

“should be seen as a laboratory experimenting with a new distribution of power involving emerging as well as established social forces” (idem: 355).

Padovani acknowledges that “governments have shared the stage” with other actors (Padovani 2004), yet she is sceptical regarding the extent to which WSIS constituted a shift towards a substantially new mode of policy-making. Ó Siochrú notes that access by non-state actors to the negotiation process “was fragile, was frequently challenged and regularly withdrawn” (Ó Siochrú 2004: 338). He even sees a “roll back” of the influence of civil society (idem: 342): New modalities for civil society participation were not established, and even existing mechanisms were not fully applied.¹⁰ Civil society participants at WSIS repeatedly protested against their exclusion from more meaningful participation. At the end of the preparatory process to WSIS1, they publicly declared their withdrawal from the negotiation process, which was one of the most far-reaching options in their repertoire of contentious action at that time. Cammaerts/Carpentier (2006) conclude that WSIS offered ‘extended consultations’ to civil society actors but certainly not the ‘full participation’ which had been promised.

The background of the discrepancy between the ‘big picture’ and the actual implementation of multi-stakeholderism had several dimensions. First, and not surprisingly, it fitted with the general distinction in ‘discourse’ and ‘reality’ which was visible, for example, in the summit documents in which progressive declarations on ‘inclusivity’ and ‘participation’ were rarely followed by calls for concrete measures. The perceived need for an innovative discourse on multi-stakeholderism did not necessarily lead to a commitment by governments to share power. Secondly, it reflected a struggle between different forces in the summit process, some of whom – e.g., PrepCom President Adama Samassekou – agreed with the need for increased civil society inclusion while others – represented by the government delegations of Pakistan and China, but also Brazil – sought to limit participation of non-state actors and to retain decision-making power in the hands of governments. As Raboy/Landry (2005: 110) write, “[n]egotiation is an activity that rests on relative positions of strength and governments are not very excited about the idea of giving any ground to organizations that are highly critical of them”. Thirdly, the dimension of time may have contributed to a perceived “turn against civil society” (Ó Siochrú 2004: 342) during the period between the announcement and the conclusion of WSIS. With a return to unilateralism by, particularly, the US administration and a perception amongst some governments that the increased involvement of civil society in global governance had gone too far,¹¹ WSIS saw several “attempts to roll-back the influence of civil society” (ibid.).

6. Who is a ‘stakeholder’ in ‘multi-stakeholderism’?

Yet even the instances of successful implementation of the multi-stakeholder principle uncovered the need to create mechanisms for the less organised, less resourced and less policy-fluent parts of civil society to participate in governance processes. WSIS did not overcome the separation in ‘official NGOs’ and broader parts of civil society. Many of those who are building information society in their everyday practices were missing or participated

¹⁰ Ó Siochrú (2004) recounts that, e.g., the preparatory process towards the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002 officially included civil society positions in its records, and at Habitat 2 in 1996, composite text amendments were published as official UN documents. Habitat 2 even allowed civil society actors to take the floor and directly table proposals, which was not possible at WSIS PrepComs.

¹¹ This perception correlated with a view expressed elsewhere by the business community. At the World Economic Forum 2005, Sir Digby Jones, head of Britain's leading employers' organisation, charged: “The pendulum is swinging too far in favour of the NGOs. The World Economic Forum is caving in to them. Davos has been hijacked by those who want business to apologise for itself” (<http://business.guardian.co.uk/story/0,,1402183,00.html>).

instead in alternative events outside the summit compound.¹² autonomous media practitioners, free software developers, creators of grassroots communication infrastructure, such as citizen-based community wireless networks, etc. Michael Gurstein, a critical observer of WSIS processes, missed “significant participation from those working directly at the grass roots in initiating and implementing ICTs in support of community activities and development” and noted that “while there has been a very considerable degree of ‘talking about’ ICTs for Development there has been remarkably little ‘talking with’ those who are actually doing the job on the ground” (Gurstein 2005b).

Not only the official WSIS structures, but also the civil society networks were criticised for such shortcomings. Gurstein, again, described the civil society actors at WSIS as “youngish, brightish, well-groomed and well-educated, clearly the winners in the Information Society sweepstakes” who used the WSIS process to create networks amongst themselves but who failed “to reach out and link to other perhaps less privileged or well-placed networks” – to “those below and beyond” (Gurstein 2005c). If we continue Gurstein’s thoughts, this process of “networking the networked” (ibid.) would lead to the creation of a global civil society elite and raise the divides between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’.

Such criticism was reflected by controversial debates inside the civil society networks. One concern was the predominance of Northern NGO actors. As Benamrane noted: “The civil society is the image and the reality of the real world society, dominated by the North, by the governments associated to private sector and the IGO including UNO, dominated by english language” (Benamrane 2005). Research by Cammaerts/Carpentier (2006) points to European dominance in civil society participation, which the authors link to the unavailability of funding resources for civil society groups in the Global South. This predominance, according to some participants, was reflected in the thematic priorities which focused on human rights problems in the South rather than those in the North, e.g. by pointing to violations by the Tunisian government but having “no guts to talk about collection of finger prints and eye inspection whenever people from other countries enter the USA” (Park 2005).

Divisions also occurred regarding the proximity of civil society to government and business actors. While some hailed the “shared responsibility” (de La Chappelle 2005), the move “from competing legitimacies to combining legitimacies” (ibid.), and the “process of concertation” (ibid.) inherent in the multi-stakeholder principle, others pointed to the danger of watering down a distinct civil society perspective and warned that “we are being multistakeholdered to death” (Jordan 2005). Controversies over whether to forge alliances between civil society and the business sector caused some to conclude that “‘civil society’ exists as a false unity” (McLaughlin 2005), and others expressed the vast differences of interests and approaches within the sector by distinguishing between “jet set” (Fullsack 2005) civil society – the leaders of WSIS of civil society structures and of large NGOs – and “real” (ibid.) civil society, i.e. grassroots organisations “working in the field and near to their people and sharing their concerns” (ibid.). Such concerns highlighted questions of delegation and representation, i.e. “how to provide a meaningful and effective voice for this ‘larger civil society’ and some useful process of legitimation/accountability for those who are able/willing to become ‘representatives’ for CS in forums such as the WSIS Prepcoms” (Gurstein 2005a).

One particular structural challenge for the mechanisms and procedures of ‘representing’ civil society interests is the specific role that individuals play in information/communication processes. The skills and the knowledge of individual experts are often at the basis of

¹² Parallel to WSIS1 in Geneva, media activists and artists set up a series of alternative events under the name “WSIS?WeSeize!”.

communication activism, and collective entities have often been rather loose and temporary, with deep scepticism towards formal long-term structures. Internet development and online campaigning has often been conducted by individuals who do not correspond to any specific organisation or social movement. Personal reputation has been more relevant than representing the interests of a clearly defined collective. According to Vittorio Bertola, Internet activist and member of the Internet Governance Caucus, “the emergence of informal online movements and individual activism, side by side with traditional NGOs, is a key change that has happened in civil society in the last few years” (Bertola 2005a). From this follows, that new mechanisms have to be created which include those individuals in multi-stakeholder processes: “Bottom line is, we have to find a way to incorporate informal and individual activism in civil society participation to UN processes, otherwise you will only create a ‘conflict of the poor’ between older NGOs and these new forms of aggregation” (ibid.).

The radical approach, according to Internet activists, would be to do away with organisations altogether and to just create “a free assembly of women and men, each equal to each other” (Bertola 2005b). The former director of the Internet Corporation of Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), Karl Auerbach, agrees: “We should allow people to speak for themselves in the forums in which decisions (...) are made and not require that they act through artificial proxies” (Auerbach 2005). As a consequence, the term ‘stake-holder’ should be abandoned “because it forgets that at the bottom of things, all organizations and groupings are aggregations of individual people each with his/her own point of view” (ibid.).

Such an approach, however, neglects the diversity of interests, even within ‘civil society’, the different capacities and power positions which allow some to underline their interests more than others, and it does not give an answer on how to overcome the hurdles for participation mentioned earlier (funding, particularly). Avri Doria, another member of the Internet Governance Caucus, fears that the sheer volume of statements and positions “would tend to make all our voices disappear into an unmanageable mass” and that therefore “scaling in such a process seems to require that there be ways to combine our voices into the aggregate voice of affinity groups of like minded individuals” (Doria 2005).

7. Developing participatory governance

WSIS has offered significant starting-points for greater inclusion of civil society actors in global decision-making, but it has also highlighted a number of challenges which require further thought and action if there is a will to continue the road towards wider participation. These challenges, first and foremost, include a ‘lack of voices’, due to the inability of a wide range of civil society actors to fund participation in governance procedures and to access governance spaces.¹³ If a policy process is to be fully legitimate, the preferences and issues of a broader range of groups would need to be included into policy agendas. Fundamental access barriers to global governance arenas would need to be lowered; rules for registration and accreditation to consider the specific structural characteristics of grassroots groups and loose networks and allow non-formally-established organisations to participate; funding would need to be provided for these groups and networks for participating in negotiations.

¹³ While many civil society actors would like to participate in multi-stakeholder processes, many others reject current arrangements of global governance, such as global summits, because of a perceived state/business dominance (see, e.g., Dawkins 2003). This paper, though, does not offer the space for a deeper analysis of the reasons and the challenges for global governance. See, e.g., Hintz/Milan 2006.

However, there is a further set of “structural challenges” which point to the need for more profound institutional transformation:

- The disintegration of traditional forms of formal organisation and the increased role of individuals and loose networks.
- The crisis of representational democracy.
- The rejection of social-political centralism by many civil society actors, and the alternative of a diversity of social, political and technological infrastructures.

The challenge is, in other words, “how to shift (...) from closed and inter-locking compacts – however tripartite they may appear – into the broader, more inclusive, even ‘wilder’ reaches of democracy and inclusive and participatory decision making” (Gurstein 2005c). A conceptual focus on networks may offer interesting starting-points. As the individualist approach, it challenges “the illusion that the myths of representational democracy might somehow be transferred” (Lovink/Rossiter 2005) to the emerging era of post-territorial forms of human organisation, and it thereby calls “for a new logics of politics” (ibid.) characterised by “non-representational democratic models of decision making” (ibid.). However it retains forms of collectivity which allow for an aggregation of individual interests. “Organised networks”, according to Lovink/Rossiter (2005), link the informality of virtual networks and the formality of institutions, allow for fluidity and flexibility, but provide effective forms of collective organising.¹⁴

Applying such a ‘networks’ approach to the governance level, one result may be what Kleinwächter has called the “United Constituencies” (Kleinwächter 2005a). He argues that the concept of ‘constituencies’ has emerged as an important social category which identifies members not according to citizenship and geographical territory – as the category of ‘nations’ does, but according to common interest, a common history, and common language. ‘Constituencies’ thus take note of the “reconfiguration of social space” (Scholte 2000: 46) towards “relative deterritorialization” (idem: 50) and growing “supraterritoriality” (ibid.), and offer a way to move beyond what Scholte called “methodological territorialism” (idem: 56). The ‘United Constituencies’ says Kleinwächter, will not substitute the concept of nations – and thus the United Nations – but complement traditional national and inter-national structures, highlighting the need for “a new co-regulatory model, where nations and constituencies, that is different stakeholders, can interact in a way that human rights and cultural diversity, economic growth and social development is promoted on a global level” (Kleinwächter 2005b).¹⁵

If the concept of constituencies has reached the same importance (and may eventually supersede) the concept of nations, one may ask whether the term ‘united’, i.e. the concept of unity, may equally be transformed in the process. The practices and concerns of civil society actors at WSIS challenged centralist regulatory measures. From a networks perspective, a united global summit may increasingly look like a dinosaur. Rather than the actual summit with its common declarations, regional and thematic WSIS-related conferences and working groups offered more potential for involving a wider variety of actors and focused – as did

¹⁴ Diani’s focus on network approaches to studying contentious politics explicitly combines the role of individuals with a perspective on collectivities. He defines social movement networks as “informal interactions, between a plurality of individuals (...) on the basis of a shared collective identity (Diani 2003: 301) and consisting of “formally independent actors who are embedded in specific local contexts (where ‘local’ is meant in either a territorial or a social sense)” (ibid.).

¹⁵ Using similar terminology, but leaving the ‘territory’ of national concepts further behind, the Indymedia UK network which consists of several local groups all over the United Kingdom uses the abbreviation ‘UK’ for ‘United Collectives’.

WGIG – more on thematic expertise than on traditional state monopolies in decision-making. A system of interrelated policy clusters, each gathering constituencies from a particular thematic area, may offer more leeway to civil society actors than the attempt of creating unity – even if it is one with a multi-stakeholder face. Moving towards a decentralised and bottom-up approach to policy-making, such a system of clusters may be an important step from ‘extended consultations’ to participatory governance.

8. Conclusion

WSIS was a laboratory for developing and implementing new modes of governance, struggling between the promise of a multi-stakeholder environment, in which all actors can participate equally, and the attempts by many governments to retain a dominant role for state actors. It expressed the contest “between a traditional, hierarchical vision of global governance and a process of dynamic integration that is open to new actors participating at different levels” (Raboy 2004: 354). The WSIS process was thus situated at a strategic crossroads between an old model of an exclusive government sphere of decision-making – with some elementary but strictly limited attendance by non-state actors – and a new model of participatory governance. It did not offer a blueprint for such a new model, but it did put the need to develop new mechanisms clearly visible on the table. The struggle over the participation of ‘new’ actors in the WSIS negotiations reflected an underlying struggle over the new distribution of “agenda-setting and decision-making power in the globalised world of the 21st century” (Kleinwächter 2004: 51).

WSIS sent mixed signals to civil society – sometimes offering unprecedented levels of participation, then again pushing it out of negotiation spaces. Some civil society actors used the temporary openings to advance their inclusion in global governance, while others remained excluded. Universally accepted principles on non-state actor participation could not be agreed upon, and so the struggle for increased participation has continued beyond the end of the actual WSIS summits in the follow-up and implementation processes.

Multi-stakeholderism, WSIS-style, was born out of a necessity for discursive innovation and for responding to a crisis in legitimacy of recent global summits, international institutions, and global governance arrangements as such. The centrality of the multi-stakeholder discourse constituted the foundation of civil society’s negotiation power. To some extent, civil society actors were able to make strategic use of the perceived necessity to include a broader set of actors and transformed it into a leverage for strengthening their own position in the summit process.

The perceived need for an innovative discourse on multi-stakeholderism, though, did not necessarily lead to a sustained commitment by governments to share power. Furthermore, even the more successful implementations of the multi-stakeholder principle uncovered significant shortcomings in current global governance mechanisms. They point to the need to include grassroots actors, loose networks and activist groups into global communication governance and to take note of new forms of organisation which emerge beyond territorial and representational models.

This paper could only highlight a few of the concerns and ideas which have emerged around the WSIS process. Further research needs to be conducted on systematising these accounts and contextualising them in theories of global governance and transnational democracy. Such work may show ways to think beyond the liberal-institutionalist base of global governance models by including ‘networks’ (Diani 2003; Lovink/Rossiter 2005), ‘affinity groups’ (Day

2005) and ‘constituencies’ (Kleinwächter 2005a) as fundamental categories. Such an endeavour may contribute to the ongoing re-shaping and re-defining of multi-stakeholder processes and to their development into participatory forms of governance.

References

- Auerbach, Karl (2005), *Forgotten Principles of Internet Governance*, 22 October 2005, http://www.circleid.com/posts/forgotten_principles_of_internet_governance/
- Cammaerts, Bart and Carpentier, Nico (2006), ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Full Participation in a Global Context: WSIS and Civil Society Participation’, in Jan Servaes and Nico Carpentier (eds.), *Towards a Sustainable Information Society. Deconstructing WSIS*, London: Intellect, pp. 17-50.
- Civil Society Plenary (2005), “*Much more could have been achieved*”: *Civil Society Statement on the World Summit on the Information Society*, http://www.worldsummit2003.de/download_en_/WSIS-CS-summit-statement-rev1-23-12-2005-en.pdf
- Commission on Global Governance (1995), *Our Global Neighbourhood*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Currie, Willie (2005), ‘Creating Spaces for Civil Society in the WSIS’, *worldsummit2003.org*, 22 December 2005, <http://www.worldsummit2003.de/en/web/848.htm>
- von Damm, Tile and Schallaböck, Jan (2004), *Fehlende digitale Visionen – Bilanz des ersten Teils des Weltgipfels zur Informationsgesellschaft (WSIS)*, Berlin: PerGlobal.
- Dawkins, K. (2003), *Global Governance: The battle over planetary power*, New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Day, Richard J. F. (2005), *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, London: Pluto Press.
- Diani, Mario (2003), ‘Networks and Social Movements. A Research Programme’, in Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (eds.), *Social movements and networks. Relational approaches to collective action*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 299-319.
- Fues, Thomas and Hamm, Brigitte (eds.) (2001), *Die Weltkonferenzen der 90er Jahre: Baustellen für Global Governance*, Bonn: Dietz.
- Gurstein, Michael (2005c), ‘Networking the Networked’, *worldsummit2003.org*, <http://www.worldsummit2003.de/en/web/847.htm>
- Hamelink, Cees (1994), *The Politics of World Communication: A Human Rights Perspective*, London: Sage.
- Heinrich-Böll-Foundation (2003), ‘PrepCom2 negotiations end: Participation of non-governmental actors as a dividing line’, *worldsummit2003.org*, 28 February 2003, <http://www.worldsummit2003.de/en/web/242.htm>
- Held, David and McGrew, Anthony G. (2003), ‘The Great Globalization Debate’, in David Held, Anthony G. McGrew (eds.), *The Global Transformations Reader*, Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 1-50.
- Hintz, Arne and Milan, Stefania (2006), *Activist networks in communication governance. Potentials and challenges of their involvement in policy processes*, Paper presented at the annual conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), Cairo, July 2006.
- ITU (2003), *Summit Breaks New Ground with Multi-Stakeholder Approach*, ITU Press Release, 26 September 2003, http://www.itu.int/wsis/newsroom/press_releases/itu/2003/prepcom3closure.html
- Kleinwächter, Wolfgang (2004), *Macht und Geld im Cyberspace: Wie der Weltgipfel zur Informationsgesellschaft (WSIS) die Weichen für die Zukunft stellt*, Hannover: Heise.

- Kleinwächter, Wolfgang (2005a), 'Internet Co-Governance: Towards a Multilayer Multiplayer Mechanism of Consultation and Cooperation (M3C3)', in Petra Ahrweiler and Barbara Thomaß (eds.), *Internationale partizipatorische Kommunikationspolitik: Strukturen und Visionen – Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Hans J. Kleinsteuber*, Münster: Lit, pp. 75-98.
- Lovink, Geert, and Rossiter, Ned (2005), 'Dawn of the Organised Network', *fibreculture*, issue 5, http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/lovink_rossiter.html
- Messner, Dirk and Nuscheler, Franz (2003), 'Das Konzept Global Governance: Stand und Perspektiven', *INEF-Report 67*, Duisburg: Institut für Entwicklung und Frieden.
- Notes from Nowhere (2003), *We Are Everywhere: The irresistible rise of global anticapitalism*, London/New York: Verso.
- Ó Siochrú, Seán (2004), 'Civil Society Participation in the WSIS Process. Promises and Reality', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 18(3), pp. 330-344.
- Padovani (2004), 'The World Summit on the Information Society: Setting the Communication Agenda for the 21st Century? An Ongoing Exercise', *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies*, 66(3-4), pp. 187-191.
- Raboy, Marc (2004), 'The WSIS as a Political Space in Global Media Governance', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 18(3), pp. 345-359.
- Raboy, Marc and Landry, Normand (2005), *Civil Society, communication and Global Governance: Issues from the World Summit on the Information Society*, New York: Peter Lang.
- Rosenau, James N. (1995), 'Governance in the Twenty-First Century', *Global Governance*, 1(1), pp. 13-43.
- Scholte, Jan Aart (2000), *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*, London: MacMillan.
- Utsumi, Yoshio (2002), WSIS Preparatory Committee Meeting, 1 July 2002, Speech by the Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union, http://www.itu.int/wsisp/docs/pc1/statements_opening/utsumi.doc
- WSIS Executive Secretariat (2002), *Report by the Chairman of Subcommittee 1 on Rules of Procedure*, 4 July 2002, http://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-s/md/02/wsisp1/doc/S02-WSISPC1-DOC-0009!!MSW-E.doc

Emails from WSIS Listserves

- Aizu, Izumi (2005), "Re: [WSIS CS-Plenary] compilation of comments on Khan's paper on IG online", sent by Izumi Aizu (aizu@anr.org) to plenary@wsis-cs.org on 27 September 2005.
- Benamrane, Djilali (2005), "Re: Re: [WSIS CS-Plenary] suite du message coupe", sent by Djilali Benamrane (dbenamrane@yahoo.com) to plenary@wsis-cs.org on 5 March 2005.
- Bertola, Vittorio (2005a), "Individuals and organizations (was Re: [WSIS CS-Plenary] format for Tunis Summit)", sent by Vittorio Bertola (vb@bertola.eu.org) to plenary@wsis-cs.org on 18 March 2005.
- Bertola, Vittorio (2005b), "Re: [WSIS CS-Plenary] Proposed Guidelines for CS Plenary", sent by Vittorio Bertola (vb@bertola.eu.org) to plenary@wsis-cs.org on 27 September 2005.
- Doria, Avri (2005), "Re: [WSIS CS-Plenary] Participations to the Summit by individuals (was Re: from IHT...)", sent by Avri Doria (avri@acm.org) to plenary@wsis-cs.org on 2 Oktober 2005.
- Fullsack, Jean-Louis (2005), "Re: [WSIS CS-Plenary] CORRECTED VERSION:CCBI input on Chapters One and Four of Operational Part of WSIS-Tunis documents", sent by Jean-Louis Fullsack (jlfullsack@wanadoo.fr) to plenary@wsis-cs.org on 28 May 2005.

- Gurstein, Michael (2005a), “[WSIS CS-Plenary] RE: [WSIS CS-Plenary] Communiqué de Presse de la Société Civile”, sent by Michael Gurstein (gurstein@adm.njit.edu) to plenary@wsis-cs.org on 4 March 2005.
- Gurstein, Michael (2005b), “[WSIS CS-Plenary] RE: [governance] further comments on Global Alliance”, sent by Michael Gurstein (gurstein@adm.njit.edu) to plenary@wsis-cs.org on 14 April 2005.
- Jordan, Richard (2005), “Re: [WSIS CS-Plenary] CORRECTED VERSION: CCBI input on Chapters One and Four of Operational Part of WSIS-Tunis documents”, sent by Richard Jordan (richardjordan@lycos.com) to plenary@wsis-cs.org on 26 May 2005.
- Kleinwächter, Wolfgang (2005b), “AW: Individuals and organizations (was Re: [WSIS CS-Plenary] format for Tunis Summit)”, sent by Wolfgang Kleinwächter (wolfgang.kleinwaechter@medienkomm.uni-halle.de) to plenary@wsis-cs.org on 18 March 2005.
- de La Chappelle, Bertrand (2005), “[WSIS CS-Plenary] On legitimacy”, sent by Bertrand de La Chapelle (bdelachapelle@gmail.com) to plenary@wsis-cs.org on 27 September 2005.
- McLaughlin, Lisa (2005), “Re: [WSIS CS-Plenary] YJ's objection and the CS-PS statement”, sent by Lisa McLaughlin (mclaughlm@po.muohio.edu) to plenary@wsis-cs.org on 25 February 2005.
- Park, YJ (2005), “Re: [WSIS-CT] Background of my objection on final statement of Internet Governance Caucus”, sent by YJ Park (yjpark@mypark.com) to plenary@wsis-cs.org on 24 February 2005.