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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 of the Geneva Summit
of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS)**

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(Text with EEA relevance)

1. INTRODUCTION

The first session of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) was held in Geneva from 10 to 12 December 2003. There were about 11.000 participants from more than 150 countries, organisations, civil society representatives and the private sector. The second session will take place in Tunis from 16 to 18 November 2005. In its communication on the WSIS of May 2003, the Commission undertook to report on the results of the Geneva Summit.¹

This Communication contains an appreciation of the principal results of the Summit, indicates the EU priorities and makes a proposal on how to organise EU inputs for the second phase of the WSIS. Addressing the procedural aspects in a timely manner, including the co-ordination with Member States, will allow the EC and the EU to remain driving forces in the process, as was the case during the first phase concluded in Geneva.

2. ASSESSMENT OF THE GENEVA SUMMIT

On 12 December 2003, the Summit adopted a Declaration of Principles and a Plan of Action. These documents constitute the basis, for all the Member States of the United Nations, of “a common vision and understanding of the Information Society”.² In substance, both documents reflect a number of principles close to the EU approach towards an “Information Society for All”. However, much remains to be done, notably as regards “the strategic plan of Action for concerted development towards realising this vision”.³

As expressed during the EU ministerial co-ordination meeting on 11 December 2003 in Geneva, the overall result of the Geneva Summit was good. This is noteworthy, given the difficulties encountered during the preparatory process, and in particular in the last phase of the negotiations, with uncertainties remaining up to the eve of the Geneva Summit. In addition, the Summit vindicates the multilateral approach that the EU advocates. For the EU, the Geneva results can be summarised as follows:

¹ Towards a global Partnership in the Information Society: EU Perspective in the context of the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)-COM(2003) 271final, 19.5.2003

² Resolution 56/183 on the WSIS adopted by the UN General Assembly in January 2002

³ Resolution 56/183 on the WSIS adopted by the UN General Assembly in January 2002.

- The WSIS was the first global event on the Information Society, and the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action adopted at the Summit form the basis for an approach to the Information Society common to all the Member States of the United Nations.
- This is part of the EU’s efforts towards a ‘regulated globalisation’ pursued in the WTO and other appropriate global forums.
- The texts adopted are firmly grounded in existing international human rights’ provisions, with a clear reaffirmation of key human rights’ principles and, in particular of the freedom of opinion and expression and the freedom of the media.
- The participation of the civil society and the private sector was effective, including in the Summit itself, and the creation of the “Bureau of the Civil Society” in the process illustrates a welcome development in the UN system, even if the modalities of their participation still have to be improved.

2.1. The Declaration of Principles

The Declaration of Principles reflects the significant progress which was made in the Summit on several major questions. This is particularly the case for the paragraphs on human rights, access to information and media, but also for the importance of the involvement of all stakeholders in the preparatory process and the Summit. The principle of solidarity in the fight against the digital divide and the potential of ICTs as a tool in development policies, in particular in contributing to the achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals, were acknowledged.

The EU sees positively the results on the importance of the respect of fundamental principles, i.e. freedom of access to information, the role of the media, the preservation and promotion of cultural diversity and the concept of good governance. In addition, the decisive role of legal and regulatory frameworks in creating pro-competitive environments and the importance of intellectual property protection was rightly recognised as well as the need to devise e-Strategies at all appropriate levels.

As regards financing, the text reflects, in a balanced way, the diverging opinions voiced during the negotiations. An agreement was reached to evaluate the existing financing mechanisms and, at the same time, to carry out a study on the appropriateness of creating a new Digital Solidarity Fund. This work will be taken on during 2004 by a Task Force under the authority of the Secretary-General for the United Nations.

The WSIS agreed to set up an open-ended reflection process under the authority of the UN Secretary-General - ensuring a mechanism for the full and active participation of governments, the private sector and civil society - in order to make proposals on the governance of the Internet by 2005. This working group shall develop a definition of Internet Governance, identify the public policy issues relevant to Internet governance and report to the Tunis phase of the WSIS.

2.2. The Plan of Action

The Plan of Action reflects the principles set out in the Declaration. It constitutes a common reference for all stakeholders and in particular the major actors of the international economic co-operation and Development aid. Its implementation will be the major challenge of the second phase of the WSIS.

The association of stakeholders, civil society and the private sector, contributed to the success of the Geneva Summit and will prove even more important in the deployment of the Action Plan. The WSIS will therefore also need to look at ways and means for the promotion of stronger role for civil society and the private sector, while underlining the importance of the role of governments as political decision-makers.

For the Plan of Action, the EU has always advocated for focusing on a limited number of priorities in the areas of eLearning, eHealth, eGovernment and eBusiness. These priorities are reflected in the Plan of Action and it will now be important to translate them into actions with clearly identified targets, timetables and allocated resources.

3. THE WAY FORWARD FOR THE EU

In following up on the Geneva Summit, the concerns of the EC and the EU regarding the situation of human rights in Tunisia, the location of the second phase of the Summit, should be voiced. This has been addressed by the European Parliament on several occasions and the EU will have to be prepared to act in order to avoid facing an unacceptable situation in the event that progress during the preparatory phase up to the Summit in this field in Tunis is not satisfactory.

As far as action arising from the Geneva Summit is concerned, this will have to be at two levels:

- Based on the principles of the Declaration, EU policies may be adjusted where appropriate, with the aim of making an effective contribution to the Plan of Action;
- The EU and the EC have to define their input into the preparatory process for Tunis and the participation and contribution in the Working group on Internet governance and the Task Force on Financing placed under the authority of the UN Secretary General.

In addition, there are some questions which are still open and will need addressing, in particular the nomination of the President of the Preparatory Committee for the Tunis phase and the composition of the new WSIS Bureau. The role of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and other UN agencies involved in the WSIS will have to be clarified.

3.1. Implications for current policies of the Geneva undertakings

The implications of the undertakings in Geneva are in Information Society policies and policies related to Information Society, notably External relations, Trade, Economic Co-operation, Social and Employment policies, Development Aid as well as Research and Development programmes. The implied actions concern existing mechanisms and some new initiatives.

New or enhanced dialogue and co-operation could be commenced, for example, on eStrategies and in EU priority fields of application, in particular for eGovernment, eHealth, eLearning and eBusiness as well as eEmployment and eInclusion, taking into account the principle of equal participation of women and men to the Information Society as horizontal issue in all policies and initiatives. In addition, initiatives could be envisaged in the international Information Society Technologies (IST) co-operation and for the development of international networks for research and education. In this respect, it will also be important to look at new ways of mobilising existing mechanisms and programmes, including the

possibility of public private partnerships. The EU will also consider the implications of the first Summit of the Cities held in Lyon from 4 to 5 December 2003 with regard to the role of local authorities in the Information Society.

Specific attention needs to be paid to the request by Least Developed Countries to create a Digital Solidarity Fund. Synergies among existing donors should be improved and mainstreaming of ICTs in Economic Co-operation and Development Aid be ensured. The EU should also participate actively in the UN Task Force on Financing. The signature of the ACP-EU Joint Position on Information Society for Development, which will be followed up in our development programmes, in the margins of the Summit, constitutes a positive message towards our partner countries.

The Information Society will become a chapter of the relations of the European Union with the UN system. The Commission will elaborate further proposals on how to take into account the results of the Geneva Declaration and Plan of Action in EU policies and programmes in a Communication to the Council and the European Parliament which it will present later on in 2004.

3.2. How to organise for the preparation of the Tunis session

The second phase of the Summit will be challenging both from a political and a logistical point of view; it will be more technical and will mainly address specific issues of the Information Society. The preparatory process should reflect this orientation. Coherent EU contributions could again have a positive influence on the outcome of the Tunis phase. In particular, there is a need to convey in a timely manner the EU position in favour of a more efficient preparatory process.

The main objective of this process should be to fill the Plan of Action with concrete content in terms of programmes and actions. Each of the PrepComs, the first of which will be in April 2004, should work on the basis of an agenda focused on a limited number of specific topics.

3.2.1. EU co-ordination

The first phase of the WSIS clearly showed the need for a common EU position. This proved to be one of the key factors of the EU's central role in the negotiations before the Geneva Summit.

From the start of the Geneva preparatory process, EU co-ordination took place in the Telecom Council, which was regularly informed on the progress and adopted conclusions, based on a communication from the Commission⁴, at its Council meeting in June 2003⁵. At the end of the Geneva phase, EU co-ordination took place in Geneva, to allow rapid interaction with the preparatory process "on the spot" during final negotiations.

For the Tunis preparations, most of the issues relate directly to Information Society policies. Advantage could also be taken of contributions from existing formal and informal working groups with Member States, in particular from the e-Europe Steering Committee. Some cross-cutting issues, such as human rights or financing, will have to be looked at from a development or external relations perspective. EU participation in the Tunis preparatory

⁴ Towards a global Partnership in the Information Society : EU Perspective in the context of the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)-COM(2003) 271final, 19.5.2003

⁵ Conclusions of the Telecom Council, Doc 9776/03, 5.6.2003

process will be taken care of in Geneva and New York, according to the decision of the United Nations on the location for the preparatory process.

3.2.2. *Internet governance*

The Commission will in close co-operation with Member States examine how to contribute most effectively to the process on Internet governance set up by the WSIS. It is the Commission's intention to establish an EU high level group⁶ as a key tool to assist the Commission in the preparation of the EU position.

The EU reaffirms the need for an open-ended UN Working Group, with the participation of civil society and the private sector. Nevertheless, there is a need for an efficient mechanism to prepare effective debates on substance.

3.2.3. *Financing*

To a large extent, the observations on the Internet Governance Group are also applicable to the Financing Group - the importance of a mechanism to guide discussions. In addition, the EC could consider appropriate to contribute very concretely and finance part of the envisaged study to review the "existing mechanisms and efficiency and feasibility of a Digital Solidarity Fund". Furthermore, the Member States' Expert Group on Development chaired by the Commission could prepare the EU position on financing issues at technical level.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The EU has played an important role as contributor to the first phase of the WSIS in Geneva and should now try to capitalise on this momentum, both in its contributions to the second phase of the Summit and in its priorities for the implementation and follow-up of the Plan of Action endorsed in Geneva.

The way forward proposed in this Communication aims to allow effective follow-up in substance of the key issues of the WSIS. Substantive EU contributions to the WSIS will be prepared in due course during the preparatory process for the Tunis Summit.

⁶ Similar groups have been established by the Commission in the past in areas such as radio spectrum and security.