Towards Tunis 2005

Steve Buckley

In December 2003, Geneva played host to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), a United Nations intergovernmental conference in two stages. For civil society organizations the first phase of WSIS highlighted major fault lines in the global debate on the human communications environment. The second phase of WSIS is scheduled to end in a Summit in Tunis from November 16 to 18, 2005.

During the Geneva phase, civil society's role was to bring critical and independent voices to the debate. The main focus of the Geneva phase was clear--a political process that would lead to a Declaration of Principles and a Plan of Action. Simultaneously, a wide range of WSIS-related activities and outcomes occurred. These included conferences, partnership-based initiatives, publications, exhibitions, counteractions and demonstrations.

For the Tunis phase, the extent and the nature of engagement are likely to be significantly different. Governments have agreed the Summit should lead to a "political and operational statement... to reaffirm and enhance commitments undertaken in the Geneva phase."

Human rights in Tunisia

At the same time, the expectation is that Tunis will provide a less supportive environment for civil society groups. Human rights violations are commonplace in Tunisia, and media groups have been particularly concerned with Tunisia's poor record on freedom of expression. Activists may well be in a defensive role with regard to the Geneva stage commitments to human rights.

The first Preparatory Committee (PrepCom 1) meeting of the Tunis phase did not auger well. Meetings were overwhelmed by the physical presence of large numbers of Tunisian government sponsored "non-governmental" organizations (NGOs). During the first slot reserved for civil society interventions, Tunisian "NGOs" acted quickly to block the nomination of a respected Tunisian human rights activist as a speaker. Many of us were ready to walk out in protest until the block was over-ruled by the President of the PrepCom.

At the second Preparatory Committee meeting, held in Geneva (Prepcom 2) in February 2005, AMARC, together with twelve other members of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange launched a report, "Tunisia: Freedom of Expression under Siege"[1]. The report sets out the findings of a mission to Tunisia and makes detailed recommendations for improvement.
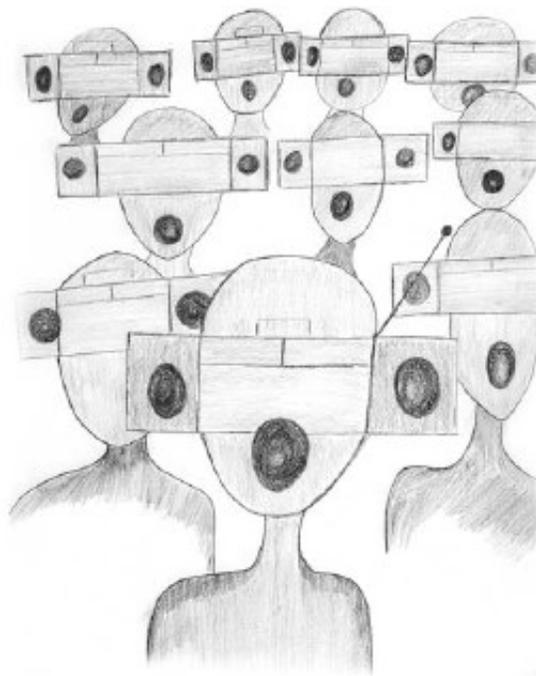
The freedom of expression groups have called on the Tunisian government to "release prisoners of opinion, end arbitrary detentions, end harassment and assaults on human rights activists, stop blocking websites, end censorship of books and newspapers, open up the press and broadcasting, respect freedom of movement, assembly and association, and allow independent investigation of alleged cases of torture". The Tunisian government has responded to the initial findings by denying any human rights violations in Tunisia and accusing the freedom of expression groups of "false allegations and conclusions reached in advance". At least there is a dialogue.

In the meantime, community media activists have established a WSIS Working Group to press for recognition of the vital importance of community media in the "Information Society". It has been a difficult struggle with opposition coming not only from authoritarian governments but also from certain governments where commercial broadcasters have excessive influence. El Salvador in particular has consistently moved to veto inclusion of the words "community media". Not surprising when the President of the country is a commercial radio proprietor.

Activism in action

Perhaps the most positive outcome of the WSIS process has been the growing links between a wide range of communication rights organisations in what may come to be seen as the birth of a movement. Together, our priority must be to reaffirm and enhance the commitments made in the Geneva phase by building an alternative agenda to WSIS, a Communication Rights Agenda.

This approach will require a commitment to sustained partnership. Building on the principles and priorities articulated in the Civil Society Declaration of the Geneva phase, its focus must be on building knowledge, networks, advocacy and activism in the communications field. It will require working within and without WSIS, including engaging with other critical spaces of debate on global communications policy and practice. Some of the headline issues include media diversity, freedom of expression, Internet rights, privacy and surveillance, public domain and information property, and financing of communications for development.

During the Tunis phase of WSIS we should develop a Communication Rights Charter applying to the communications environment the principles of human rights and the priorities of sustainable development. This needs to be supported by independent research, high level political engagement and practical grassroots activism. Tunisia itself should be a focus for a campaign on communication rights, especially freedom of opinion and expression, media pluralism, Internet freedom, access to information and freedom of association.

Beside the WSIS, activists organizing around the Communication Rights Agenda should seek to identify and highlight other spaces of engagement. These include the current debates in the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) on information property and the public domain; work within UNESCO on a cultural diversity treaty; and defending communication rights against World Trade Organization (WTO) policies on trade.

In November 2005 there will be a convergence of communication rights activists in Tunis and a wide range of actions linked to or in parallel with the World Summit on the Information Society.

Under the watchful eye of the Tunisian government the official Summit will talk about global information technology networks while quietly forgetting the communications divide leaves one third of the world's population out. Human rights will certainly be off the official agenda. It will be the responsibility of civil society organisations to remind governments that human rights are the rights of everyone and that sustainable development starts from the bottom-up.

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