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CIVIL SOCIETY COORDINATION GROUP
Letter to WSIS Executive Director
About the Informal Meeting on Content & Themes
Geneva, 16-18 September 2002

Pierre Gagné, Executive Director
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Members of the civil society plenary

10 September 2002

Dear Mr. Gagné,

We are writing you as the interim Civil Society Coordinating Group (CSCG). The CSCG was been mandated by the final civil society Plenary during PrepCom1 to pursue its work and set up a representative structure for civil society. We expect that, by the end of this month, the CSCG will complete its organization through this open process, to become a structure composed of representatives from all sub- committee and caucuses formed by the civil society organizations. The CSCG will then be ready, as we are informing the Civil Society Division (CSD) secretariat in a separate letter, to open out further to civil society, and also to begin to more formally relate to the WSIS process and engage in dialogue and cooperation.

In the meantime, civil society organizations that participated to PrepCom1 have been informed of the upcoming Informal meeting on Content and Themes, to be held in Geneva from September 16th to 18th. While we welcome the opportunity to participate on day 1 of this Informal meeting, we would like to raise the following concerns regarding the way the preparatory process is currently being conducted:

1. Civil society participation is discouraged.

The announcement of the informal meeting on content and themes was made on September 3rd by the CSD. In its invitation letter sent to civil society organizations, the CSD informed us that "the program of the day, the decisions regarding how many persons would speak and other arrangements for civil society participation in the meeting were decided September 2nd only. In order not to raise expectations that would not be fulfilled, it was seen more appropriate to send out the invitation after the role and time dedicated to civil society was clearly established."

Civil society organizations have then been invited only thirteen days before the meeting. Furthermore, no funding is available for this meeting.

In the document "Civil Society Final Statement on Rules of Procedure, Accreditation and Modalities for NGO participation", adopted by the final civil society PrepCom 1 plenary meeting on July 5, we stated:

"Effective participation of civil society will depend both on solid commitment and open cooperation of all participants, and on the practicalities and concrete circumstances of their implementation. This must mean maximum participation of civil society in the design and implementation of these modalities, and in the related formal and informal activities. Such activities include (but are not restricted to) the determination of the timing, location, duration, and selection of Chairs of Round Tables, and other events; and the nature, extent and determination of participation and participants.

Furthermore, the proposed modalities cannot yield balanced and effective participation of civil society without transparent, efficient mechanisms for attracting and distributing funds, from a variety of sources, and the level of funding must be appropriate to the need for balanced and effective participation during PrepComs and Summits, and between them."

In the same document we noted that the degree of flexibility retained in the modalities adopted by Sub-committee 1 "must be fully exercised in the direction of supporting participation". Unfortunately, not only is this flexibility not being exercised, but current practices such as late notification of the September 16 meeting and the lack of funding, are actually discouraging civil society participation.

While these practices impede participation of others, including governments (which for the most part will be represented by staff from permanent Geneva missions, rather than those with expertise in the meeting's agenda and responsibility for its implementation), they have much more impact on the representation of civil society's regional and thematic diversity.

2. Civil society inputs are not receiving enough consideration.

Among the list of official documents available on the web regarding the upcoming Informal meeting on content and themes, is a document dated August 13 and entitled "Compilation of Statements made at Prepcom-1 on Themes and Content of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)". This document has been elaborated by the WSIS Secretariat. Obviously this compilation, which has an official status, will serve as the basis of the ongoing work of sub-committee 2.

First of all we are concerned to note that this document has merged, in its part C, private sector and civil society inputs. While civil society groups have always stated an openness and acceptance to the involvement of all stakeholders in this process, we do believe that there are disadvantages to both sectors to have their view reflected together.

Secondly, this compilation only takes into account oral statements that have been made during the July 4th session of PrepCom1 on content and themes. The efforts of civil society organizations have been disregarded, since their many statements, circulated during PrepCom1 and available on the CSD website, have not been taken into account.

Thirdly, civil society organizations are being excluded from two of the three days of the informal meeting on content and themes, despite repeated assurances that closed meetings would be the exception rather than the rule. There has been no explanation as to what exceptional circumstances apply on this occasion. In practice, it appears to be considered the norm that governments should meet mainly in private.

This is surprising and very disappointing for the civil society organizations, which are doing their best for constructive and participative interaction, but yet do not receive in practice enough encouragement and consideration, despite the assurances that were made at the highest official levels of the WSIS to maximize civil society participation.

For the WSIS to be a success we urge you to address these concerns, not only during the upcoming informal meeting on content and themes, but in all subsequent events to be held in the framework of the preparatory process, at the global and regional levels.

On Behalf of the Civil Society Plenary at PrepCom 1
Interim Civil Society Plenary Coordinating Group

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