

The World Summit on the Information Society – WSIS
The ICT4ALL Exhibition Platform
The Africa Civil Society Village
Tunis, 15 – 19 November 2005
Report

Background

The process of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) has been a long and instructive one to the Civil Society in general and to the African Civil Society in particular. Through its two-phase organization, African Civil Society entities, researchers and experts in the Information Society has benefited in many ways.

One of the most important benefits of the WSIS process has been the engagement of the Africa Civil Society (CS) entities in the process of regional and international decision making. The African CS has engaged, to the best of its ability, in the preparatory processes, in online consultations, drafting of position papers, the strenuous workings of committees, working groups, thematic caucuses and meeting input deadlines.

One other very important gain has been the understanding of the inside working methods of the United Nations. This understanding has helped African CS better organize at local and national levels for the good representation and presentation of hitherto unrecognized results. The WSIS process has encouraged the African CS to come out and lay its results in the open. By so doing, it has been proved, to an interesting point, that African CS has best practices, and in some cases, better results than their Western counterparts.

Perhaps the very most important gain of the WSIS process is the opportunity it has presented to participating African CS to meet each other, network, share experiences and learn from and encourage each other in the hard task of African Development. Consequently, the impact of the African CS got better with each stage of the WSIS process. This was due to better exchange and networking, planning, online collaboration, stronger social ties and better organization both thematically and structurally. This improved networking has given birth to the Africa Civil Society for the Information Society – ACSIS, the network of African CS entities in the Information Society. The online working space of ACSIS (www.acsis-africa.org) can be accessed

at this link: <http://mailman.greennet.org.uk/mailman/listinfo/africa>. It is in this space that some 600 individuals, organizations and experts collaborate to ensure a better engagement of ACSIS in the African Information Society.

Motivation

During the first phase of the WSIS, the South African Civil Society partnership on WSIS which comprised the Media Institute of Southern Africa, Article XIX and SACOD organized the Africa Media Village. In this edition every day individuals shared their ICT experiences with WSIS participants. The village also had a community radio station, and an Internet Access Center running on Free and Open Source Software. The Africa Media village was home to all African CS in Geneva during the December 2003 summit. Tracey Naughton saw it through to its success.

For the second phase of the summit, we were glad to host it at home – in Africa – in Tunisia. The venue gave us the comparative advantage of involving more African CS from the continent as well as the Diaspora.

Objectives

We wanted to do so many things in Tunis ... But the most important things that were feasible with the meager means were to:

- ① Provide a real African space in the midst of the “technology city” of the ICT4ALL Exhibition Platform;
- ⊕ Provide a home for all CS participants, African and otherwise;
- ⊕ Ensure a warm African welcome to all WSIS participants;
- ⊕ Consolidate the social capital among participating African CS;
- ⊕ Showcase results obtained between Geneva and Tunis;
- ⊕ Showcase achievements of individual and collective African CS;
- ⊕ Speak for ourselves;
- ⊕ Present our projects and market them;
- ⊕ Seek partnerships;
- ⊕ Lay the foundation for moving from words to action.

Support

The Africa Village, unfortunately, did not get as much support as we had envisioned. It nearly did not happen. At the point when we had given up on the idea, the vision and the desire, the following entities helped to keep the vision alive.

1. The Netherlands Institute of Southern Africa – NIZA.
2. The South African WSIS Civil Society Partnership.
3. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa- ECA.

If there was an African Village in Tunis, it can be best attributed to the untiring spirit of those who engaged to make it happen: Nnenna Nwakanma, who coordinated it, giving personal resources and working full time for four months without pay, all participating CS entities, who contributed from non-existent funds and ACSIS leaders and resource persons who encouraged efforts all through. Mention may also be made of individuals, who, in their personal capacity proved that if they had more means, they would have supported the village more. These include Olivier Nana Nzepa, Thierry Amoussougbo, John Dada, Cissé Kane, and Ibrahima Guissé. There was also Otto Frei himself who believed in the vision and rendered instant support, and Filippo Cibolini, who demonstrated a capacity far beyond organizational skills.

The Pavilion

The vision of the village was that of a people-centered initiative. Our desire was to focus attention on people and not on structure. The principles included economy, simplicity, openness, accessibility, adaptability, free ventilation, nature, elegance, cost effectiveness. On these principles, we opted for a market place model. This was to entail simple wood frames joined in the form of a "Y" that could be moved around the 91 square meters. This idea came from the African open air market, which was capable of expanding and contracting as traders come in or leave. It then became possible to have organizations with lots of items to exhibit taking two sides of a Y and smaller organizations taking one side of the Y. One extra-large was made in the form of an ">---<" or double Y to accommodate a cinema hall.

All construction in the village was done by hand. Chris Kirchhoff brought his tool box from South Africa. Nnenna Nwakanma, her Assistant, Djakaridja Sissoso, and Gideon Chonia were the people in the team who bought the wood, cut it, drove screws, made cloth coverings and mounted the wooden structures. Wood came from the

local Tunisian market. Once they were bought, they were taken to the carpenter's, where Mourad cut them into desired pieces. Chairs and tables were hired from Nejmedinne, Mourad's neighbour, in Carthage Yasmina.

The African village, in its 91 square meters, was one of the rare pavilions which belonged to the Civil Society. It was situated in the Solidarity and Development quarters, on stand allocation 1309. Its neighbors included the Africa Development Bank (ADB), The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), The Universal Postal Union (UPU), the China NGOs, Open Knowledge Network, ICIMOD of Nepal and the Stockholm Challenge.

The village had electricity, broadband internet connection, warm African music from all over the continent, coffee and nuts. Three prominent features will remain in the minds of all WSIS participants who visited the village:

1. Over 60 African masks that were collected over the years from all parts of the continent. They were so captivating that none came back from Tunis!
2. The big poster of the Mozambican rural trader. This poster was 3 meters tall and 7 meters wide. The Mama, who was standing in front of her thatch-roofed shop in the village, was captured in a great pose with her children by the famous photographer, Chris Kirchhoff, who set the family in a rich African cloth spotting giant cocks calling sleepers to wake up and begin to work on African development. The Mama poster is now the property of an African-wide development institution.
3. The Xylophone! Aie aie aie! This wood, string and calabash instrument which exists only in Africa made thousands happy! At least five hundred pictures of it were taken with people from all over trying their hands at its peculiar music – the sound of the African Sahel! More than 50 requests were received of either individuals or organizations who wanted to keep it. It now lives in Bern, in the home of Lisa and Otto Frei, who in the space of the ICT4ALL Exhibition, became real Africans and were glad to show for it.

The Village people

The one intention of the village was to showcase, as much as possible, efforts of all African Civil Society entities. But lack of available resources placed us under conditions making it impossible for every entity that was willing to showcase to do. All the same, Civil Society entities braved through, making untold sacrifices to be in the village. We salute the efforts, the willingness, the patience, endurance, and the Ubuntu spirit. Among them:

1. Article XIX

Article XIX, based in South Africa is known and respected for its advocacy for the Freedom of Expression – FX. Led by John Barker, Article XIX showcased latest researches on human rights issues with particular attention to FX as well as other ongoing activities. You may get more information on the engagement of Article XIX on www.article19.org

2. Base Network Africa

Based in rural Owerri, in the eastern part of Nigeria, Base Network Africa is particularly concerned with youth in the rural areas. Base Network, apart from showcasing its activities, also featured Nigerian youth who have been actively engaged in the WSIS. Ugochukwu Nwosu, Base leader, was a good example, not just for Nigerian youth, but to the global youth. The online forum of Base Network is here: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/basenet africa/>

3. Bokk Jang Bokk Jeff

Fatimata Seye Ep Sylla, with her team from Dakar, Senegal, had a wonderful display of results as well as cultural wealth. Bokk has had an enormous impact in information sharing in Senegal. Check them out here www.bokk.org

4. CyberInstitute

Tora Hallway is one from the African Diaspora that we can be proud of. Cyber Institute has made it a vocation to share educational resources

online. More resources from Cyber Institute are here: www.cyberinstitute.net

5. Development Information Network – DEVNET

Development Network, which, in itself, is a network organization, was one of the very first Civil Society entities in Nigeria to engage in the Information Society. Beyond Lagos and Nigeria, DevNet has contributed enormously to building an informed society in Africa. Here is the web site: www.devnetnigeria.org

6. Environmental Development Action in the Third World - ENDA

ENDA has been instrumental in many themes in the Information Society, not just in Senegal but in the whole of the Africa region. The efforts of ENDA in the media, rural application, content creation and gender mainstreaming. ENDA is online on www.enda.sn

7. Free and Open Source Software Foundation of Africa – FOSSFA

A strong network of African FOSS experts, organizations and activists, FOSSFA has carried on its vision of sustainable Information Society development in Africa. More information on FOSSFA and IDLELO, the regional FOSS for development meeting is on www.fossfa.net

8. Highway Africa News Agency – HANA

African journalists, grouped under the HANA umbrella and their leader, Chris Kabwato, have accompanied the African society at large into the Information Society. HANA has brought home development information and has also taken it abroad. Their stories, images, experiences and reports have edified us all. Lots of information on the HANA network is here www.highwayafrica.org.za/hana

9. Organisation Internationale de la Lutte contre la Drépanocytose – OILD

This is a network of organizations using ICT in the tedious battle against Sickle Cell ignorance. OILD, and Didier Raymondo was the very embodiment of the hopes that Africa places on the close

collaboration between African Civil Society entities in the Diaspora and those at home. More information is available on www.drepanet.com

10. Panos Institute of West Africa – PIWA

The presence of the Panos Institute in West Africa has been of enormous support in media training, policy formulation support and Civil Society networking. PIWA, among other efforts, showcased the CIPACO project and offered over 200 samples of its publication on ICT Reports, Internet Exchange points in Africa, Media education, poverty and ICT knowledge. All the information is here www.cipaco.org and www.panos-ao.org.

11. SchoolNet Africa - SNA

Shafika Isaacs and her team of young people were really an encouraging group to behold! The various efforts of SNA as well as their results in youth capacity building, the results obtained in the distribution of computers to schools and their present projects were presented in the village. SchoolNet is also online on www.schoolnetafrica.net.

12. Southern Africa Communications for Development – SACOD

Tambudzai Madzimire achieved her bet – bring in African movies and show them in a cinema hall in the Africa village! The Visitors to the cinema hall had the opportunity to immerse themselves in the world of African communications – video and audio. Some more here: www.sacod.org.za .

13. The Advisory Network for African Information Society – ANAIS

ANAIS, one of the very rare Civil Society entities to come from the Central part of Africa, did showcase rural applications of ICT in the Sub-region. More information on the network can be obtained by contacting anais.ac@yahoo.fr

14. The Media Institute for Southern Africa – MISA

MISA is the leading force in media capacity building in the Southern Africa region. Luckson Chipare, whose institute also leads a coalition of South African Civil Society entities in a WSIS partnership, was an indefatigable player of the whole vision of the Africa village. More information on MISA is available here: www.misa.org.

15. The Shuttleworth Foundation

This wonderful team of young ICT activists, enthusiasts and experts was indeed an attractive one in the village. The one vision of the Shuttleworth team was to showcase the Freedom Toaster and they did it! Visitors to the Freedom part of the village had the great pleasure of actually choosing FOSS operating systems and getting them "toasted" into CDs for 0.00 Tunisian Dinars! Get more information on Mark Shuttleworth, his space trip, his software genius, and his foundation on these sites: www.shuttleworthfoundation.org, www.tsf.co.za.

16 Worldspace France

Getting information to the world's population as fast as possible on all possible formats is the intention of WorldSpace. Any information, any time, any where and any support. Pierre Genillion, of the African Diaspora, is keen to give more information on Worldspace. Other information is also available on www.worldspace.fr

Results

The Africa Village was the realization of our dreams. Among other results, we:

- ⊕ Provided a real African space in the midst of the "technology city" of the ICT4ALL Exhibition Platform. It was simple, lovely and people-friendly.
- ⊕ Provided a home for all CS participants, African and otherwise. The Cinema hall had sitters long and wide enough for rest after long hours of WSIS wanderings.
- ⊕ Ensured a warm African welcome to all WSIS participants. The "kitchen" was actually the most visited part of the village. There were no pointers nor papers explaining this or that. The Coffee aroma was magnetic enough.

- ⊕ Consolidated the social capital among participating African Civil Society organizations and networks, as well as those that were not showcasing in the village.
- ⊕ Showcased results obtained between Geneva and Tunis and got the opportunity to have close talks with several award committees.
- ⊕ Showcased achievements of individual and collective African Civil Society entities
- ⊕ Made the village a central point for meetings between African Civil Society and other stakeholders.
- ⊕ Presented our projects and sought partnership for the realization of future projects
- ⊕ Laid the foundation for future concrete engagement of the African Civil Society in all Information Society-related action frameworks.
- ⊕ Were able to hold a village square meeting to discuss the way forward.

Future perspectives

The ICT4ALL Exhibition platform was only a parallel event in the World Summit on the Information Society, which, in itself, was only an event. Neither of the two can replace efforts made on the ground to bring the benefits of ICT to everyday Africans in order to alleviate poverty. The great challenge still remains the application of the decisions to effect changes that will lead to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

The Africa Civil Society for the Information Society – ACSIS, which is the network of African Civil Society organizations actively engaged in building a viable Information Society, is in dire need for support. Today, it is no longer a question of whether the Civil Society is a viable stakeholder. The question is now how best the Civil Society can play its role.

The African Civil Society needs a lean and efficient executive team at the regional level. But the most urgent need is at national levels. African countries, all stakeholders included, need technical and financial support to be able to build a people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the

United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Further information

Extra information on this report, the co-exhibitors, the exhibition, photos and contacts are available from:

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