

# World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) – civil society



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The presence at the ALIA embassy reception hosted by the Australian Ambassador Her Excellency Pamela Fayle during IFLA Berlin in August of His Excellency Adama Samassekou, president of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) process for WSIS, acknowledged the lead Alex Byrne, IFLA president-elect, and IFLA is taking in promoting the international library and information community in the WSIS [<http://www.ifla.org/III/wsisis.html>].

Initiated by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in 1998 the WSIS was taken up by the United Nations in 2001 when the General Assembly agreed to a two phase Summit, the first to be held from 10–12 December 2003 in Geneva, Switzerland, and the second in 2005 in Tunis, Tunisia. The UN also recommended the open-ended inter-governmental Preparatory Committee process now in place to define the agenda of the Summit, decide on the participation of the stakeholders, and finalise the draft declaration and draft plan of action. Governments, inter-governmental organisations, non-government organisations, civil society and the private sector are participants in the PrepCom and the Summit.

The anticipated outcome of the Summit is to 'develop and foster a clear statement of political will and a concrete plan of action for achieving the goals of the Information Society, while fully reflecting all the different interests at stake'. In his address to IFLA Berlin Adama Samassekou emphasised three aspects of an Information Society that need to be incorporated into WSIS:

- in transforming the digital gap ensuring the right partnerships and at the right price;
- through ICT accelerate the objectives of the UN secretary general's Millennium Report 2000, in particular that by 2015, all children must complete primary schooling, with equal opportunities for both genders at all levels of education, and that in building digital bridges new technology offers an unprecedented chance for developing countries to 'leapfrog' earlier stages of development. Everything must be done by governments to maximise their peoples' access to new information networks;
- an information society should really be a new society with access to information, creating new knowledge, sharing knowledge, and promoting linguistic and cultural diversity. There is, he believes, danger in cultural and linguistic diversity, and indigenous knowledge being lost. The best outcome would be for these to be part of the shared knowledge

Alex Byrne reports from Prepcom3 held in Geneva from 15–26 September to discuss the draft Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action that 'the latest versions of those documents, which can be found at <http://www.itu.int/wsisis>, include a number of direct references to libraries, archives and information services but also many

mentions of our professional concerns including unrestricted access to information, freedom of expression, preservation and the need to strengthen and exploit the existing worldwide network of libraries. Those references are well embedded in the documents and have received considerable support from government delegates as well as our colleagues in the civil society sector.'

Adjourned without finalising the draft documents, PrepCom3 should resume on 10–14 November. Alex advises that 'many issues were agreed, or substantially agreed, but major points of division emerged. It did not prove possible for the various committees to discuss a significant number of issues raised by government delegations nor many of the substantial matters of concern to civil society.

'One of the major areas of division was the ownership and governance of the internet. Some major governments and significant regional groups have made conflicting proposals for inclusion in the Declaration of Principles. Their concerns hinge about the openness or otherwise of the internet and its status as either a private sector, market-oriented communications network or a shared resource governed in the interests of all nations and peoples. At this point, it appears unlikely that this fundamental difference can be resolved.' The WSIS report on Prepcom3 is at [http://www.itu.int/wsisis/newsroom/press\\_releases/itu/2003/prepcom3closure.html](http://www.itu.int/wsisis/newsroom/press_releases/itu/2003/prepcom3closure.html).

The Centre for Community Networking Research, Monash University (CCRN) and the COIN Internet Academy, Central Queensland University are developing a Civil Society statement to accompany that of the Australian Government (NOIE) [<http://www.ccnr.net/wsisis/>]. CCRN/COIN are working with a newly established Civil Society Roundtable which has diverse representation, including ALIA.

Consultations on the draft statement are underway. A central focus is the Australian understanding of distance and spatial isolation and from this how ICTs should be utilised equitably to bridge geographic, cultural, political, linguistic and other gaps in a globalised world and to benefit democratic participation and expression of diverse views. It recognises the vital role of ICT in the preservation and promotion of indigenous knowledge and culture, and access to education and training. It promotes the role of governments, including the Australian government, in supporting diversity online, particularly through providing its own information to serve all groups online; the importance of training and support for ICT skills, including literacy and information literacy in addition to access; and that civil society rights (personal and group or community) need to be protected and the government and private sectors should not diminish these rights through inappropriate use or restriction on the use of ICTs for either commercial or security reasons. ■

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