

The World Summit on the Information Society

Between 16 and 18 November 2005, the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) will be held in Tunis. It is the culmination of a two-year period of global discussion and planning that began in Geneva in December 2003. Chances are that this is the first time you have heard of the WSIS, yet its outcomes have the potential to affect library and information work greatly in the next decade.

The WSIS was established by Resolution 56/183 of the United Nations General Assembly and its work has been co-ordinated by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). The impetus for the Summit was the ITU's view that to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>) and reduce the growing digital divide in the use of ICTs between and within countries, there needed to be a global forum to discuss issues and plan for the future. At the Geneva Summit, 175 countries adopted the *Declaration of Principles* and a *Plan of Action*, which reflects the broad aim of the WSIS to ensure that the development of ICT infrastructure continues in all countries and provides equitable access to information and knowledge. The Principles relate to matters such as security and privacy, intellectual property, cultural and linguistic diversity, and internet governance. Between the first and second phase, there have been three Preparatory Committee meetings and a number of thematic and regional meetings across the world. Visit the website at <http://www.itu.int/wsis/> for information on the background and activities of the WSIS and for copies of WSIS reports.

In planning the Summit, there was a commitment to multi-stakeholder participation in the process and three separate sectors were identified; government, private sector and civil society. In Australia, the government contribution has been provided through the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA, <http://www.dcita.gov.au>). DCITA has sent delegations to meetings, made submissions on various matters, consulted with Australian stakeholders and undertaken a stocktake of Australia's ICT achievements as part of the WSIS global stocktake exercise (http://www.itu.int/wsis/documents/doc_multi.asp?lang=en&id=1665|1399|1556). DCITA has also supported the Roundtable on Australian Civil Society (RACS), established in 2003 as a forum for developing the local civil society response to the WSIS process. Representatives on RACS have come from a range of non-government organisations, community-based organisations, research centres and universities; ALIA has been there to represent the library and information sector.

The Centre for Community Networking Research (CCNR) at Monash University co-ordinated the preparation of a report, the *Draft Information Economy Strategy for Australian Civil Society*. This report made twenty recommendations reflecting the key strategic needs identified through the extensive consultation process: that the government recognise diverse voices of Australian civil society and develop whole-of-government and inter-government responses; and that ICT application and use is guided by standards for literacy, information and content, access, infrastructure, support and evaluation. For ALIA, one of the benefits of this comprehensive document is the opportunity to identify where ALIA can make a contribution to meeting the information and knowledge needs of Australian civil society by developing and implementing its own strategies and by lobbying governments on others.

At the Tunis Summit, key items for discussion and agreement will be the financial mechanisms for supporting global strategies and the recommendations developed by the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) (<http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs2/pc3/off5.pdf>). A number of high priority public policy issues were identified and the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholder groups set out. The WGIG recommended the establishment of a permanent discussion forum for all stakeholder groups, global public policy development and oversight and greater co-ordination of organisations involved in internet governance. It presented four possible organisational models for internet governance and argued that this function should be undertaken in a way which was multi-lateral, transparent and democratic. There have been varying responses to the report, particularly in relation to the proposed models. IFLA was active at the Geneva Summit, ensuring that the role of libraries in the information society was recognised, reporting on developments through its website (<http://www.ifla.org/III/wsis.html>). The global agreements reached on internet governance will be of great importance for all those involved in library and information work and will require close monitoring by all stakeholders.

As could be expected, the WSIS has attracted as much criticism as praise and there are many who doubt it can overcome the political divisions and cultural differences of the many countries involved to deliver on the promise of narrowing the digital divide. However, it is clear from the level of activity in many countries and regions, including the modest level of activity generated in Australia, that the WSIS has at least provided an opportunity for all sectors to engage with the serious social and economic issues raised by

inequalities in access to information and knowledge. It remains the responsibility of all those involved in library and information work to monitor developments and keep their voices raised in support of the Summit's global vision for an inclusive information society. Following developments at Tunis will be a first step.

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