

Highlights of the CRIS campaign

December 2000 – We first heard of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Barcelona at the Global Community Networking conference, from Mohammed Harbi, a senior ITU staff member. In his speech Harbi emphasised the need to involve NGOs and civil society organisations. We had the impression that we were the first ones to be invited.

For a few years there had been rumours of a UN summit on information and communication, with both the ITU and UNESCO being mentioned as lead organisations. The ITU's claim went back to 1998 when its Plenipotentiary conference in the United States resolved to hold the summit.

Following Harbi's announcement, the Platform for Communication Rights, a coalition of NGOs working in international communication issues that came together in 1996, started watching the process, although very little seemed to be happening at the time.

October 2001 – Apart from a leaflet, there was very little information about the WSIS. Letters to the ITU went unanswered. We did not understand why there was so little information only two years before such a large summit. At a meeting in WACC's London offices, the Platform for Communication Rights decided to launch the campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS). The Summit seemed to offer an opportunity to put communication rights on the global agenda, but, as more than one person at the meeting observed, our primary objective was simply to put communication issues on the global agenda, and if the WSIS turned out not to offer that opportunity, we would focus our efforts elsewhere.

November 2001 – After the October meeting we called Reinhard Keune at the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's office in Geneva to ask him for information on the WSIS and to help us initiate contact. He suggested that instead of a meeting with the WSIS, we organize a seminar. The seminar, Communication as a Human Right in the Information Society, was attended by forty people, mostly from public broadcasting organisations and NGOs specialised in communication. Representatives from the WSIS Secretariat, UNESCO and the ITU attended the second day of the two-day seminar.

Seminar participants critiqued the agenda for being primarily concerned with technical and infrastructure issues and for having a narrow understanding of access. One of the proposed themes was The Needs of Users and it was felt that this should be redefined as Information Society Citizenship. We are not users of the info society, but citizens of it with the rights and obligations that citizenship permits and imposes. Another theme, ICTs and Education, was about using technology to deliver education efficiently. It was felt that this should be broadened to include the range of education required to prepare people for the information society.

Discussions with UNESCO, ITU and the WSIS on the second day were very positive. All three agreed that the participation of civil society was key to the success of the Summit. The WSIS Secretariat committed to working transparently and to keeping civil society informed and involved.

The reports from the seminar are on the web at:

http://cris.comunica.org/documents/geneva_seminar/geneva_nov01.htm

January – February 2002 – CRIS's participation in panel and workshop at the World Social Forum attracted much interest and a Brazilian chapter of CRIS was formed soon after. Also in January, Sean O Siochrú and I began helping the Civil Society Division of the WSIS Secretariat in their efforts. The WSIS was supposed to be a tripartite summit, with governments, the private sector and civil society working together. The problem was, nobody knew what this should look like. We put together a small working group of experts and started to elaborate some innovative proposals for how civil society could participate as well as some arguments for why civil society participation was essential. The important documentation from this project is at <http://comunex.net/wsis/>.

CRIS used this period to start developing proposals for content and themes for the WSIS, working on a series of short presentations of some of the major themes and getting them translated, printed and put on the WWW. We also put together some of the tools we would need – a campaign leaflet, a website, and e-mail lists, including the CRIS Info list which now has more than 300 subscribers. If you are not on it, you can subscribe at http://comunica.org/mailman/listinfo/crisinfo_comunica.org.

In February, we got a copy of a letter sent by the ITU Secretary General to all governments inviting them to the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) in July. In the letter, the secretary general requested that governments 'strongly consider including representatives from the private sector and civil society in your preparatory team'. We sent the letter to the CRIS Info list suggesting that people contact their governments and ask how they propose to include civil society in the process. Two months later we learned that our distributing the letter was a violation of protocol of scandalous proportions, prompting us to suggest that the WSIS adopt a 'transparency protocol.'

April 2002 – In February UNESCO had held a series of four thematic consultations in Paris. In April, UNESCO and the Civil Society Division (CSD) of the WSIS hosted a 'plenary', with the participants of the four consultations plus a number of others. Of the 150 participants, more than twenty were members of CRIS and a number of others joined afterwards. Largely thanks to CRIS, the consultation came up with a series of very good proposals on modalities of participation. Content and themes proposals were also interesting, although less cohesive. The meeting formed

the basis of UNESCO's submission to July's PrepCom, which was very good but ignored.

Following the UNESCO consultations, CRIS continued to move ahead, with varying degrees of success, on the two tracks – themes and modalities of participation. Many of our proposals for themes were incorporated in a document presented by the CSD at Paris as the final official proposal to be discussed at the PrepCom. But when we arrived at the PrepCom in July, this version was nowhere to be seen – instead there was a confusing collection of proposals, once again emphasising technology.

July 2002 – The term Preparatory Committee invokes images of a small group taking care of the practicalities of organizing a meeting. A PrepCom, as it is referred to, is not at all like that. Held in Geneva's international conference centre PrepCom 1 was a massive and highly formal affair. For days at a time official delegates, many of them professional diplomats, read from prepared texts in a room so big you often cannot see who is speaking. Sequential monologues do not a dialogue make.

The more than thirty CRIS members who participated arrived with goodwill and optimism. We knew that the primary work of a Prepcom is to define the rules of the game, and were prepared to join in the process. However, others had other ideas about the role of the civil society. The discussions on the rules and procedures were to be held behind closed doors – government participation only – and a special programme had been organized for civil society, safely located across the street from the main gathering and concerned with thematic issues, rather than the strategic ones that governments were discussing. It could have been an interesting event, but we hadn't travelled to Geneva for a parallel seminar. We were there because we had been invited to be full partners in the WSIS.

The advance work that CRIS had done meant that we were well prepared for dealing with the reality of the PrepCom. CRIS members met the day before and decided to put CRIS's content concerns on the back burner in order to focus on supporting the whole civil society plenary. The rules governing participation were the important thing being discussed and there was a broad consensus about them. Thus, alongside the thematic programme arranged by the Civil Society Division of the WSIS Secretariat, civil society organisations, with the active support of CRIS, set up working groups to monitor the official meetings, develop positions, produce papers, and lobby. It was an impressive effort. The results were disappointing.

The civil society plenary was well organised, had access to the various sub-committees and national delegations, and its positions were received favourably by many, including the EC, many African and Latin American delegations as well as Switzerland, Ireland and Canada. However, the rules that were adopted were anything but innovative. They will not allow NGOs to participate in the bureau, the real decision making body for the summit, even as observers. NGOs can also be excluded from participation in the agenda development and have no guarantee of inclusion in significant parts of the formal process. The promise of innovation and partnership appeared to

have been forgotten.

The discussion of themes reached no conclusion, but if NGOs are excluded from the discussions, there is no reason to be overly optimistic. Evaluating the meeting on the final day, CRIS, and the civil society plenary, decided to continue to engage the WSIS on the basis of sceptical engagement. We will continue to participate in the process, in the hope that the restrictive rules will be reconsidered by the next PrepCom in February.

September 2002 – The WSIS announced an ‘informal meeting on content and themes’ for September 16, 17 and 18. CRIS found out about it on August 23, and sent the news to the CRIS Info list. The official invitation for civil society was only sent on September 3, leaving less than two weeks to prepare. We are also told that there will be only four spaces for civil society organisations to speak and that we will only be able to participate on the first day. On the other two days, government delegates will meet behind closed doors.

Pradip Thomas from WACC, a founding member of CRIS, agreed to present a paper on behalf of the coordinating group of the civil society plenary. The paper, is probably the most substantial document presented at the three-day meeting. It is on the WWW at

http://www.geneva2003.org/home/documents/doc01/16sept_en.pdf

With the support of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) CRIS commissioned six papers on key communication and information right issues. The papers, which will explore issues more deeply and map out proposals, will be ready for distribution at the next PrepCom in February.

So far...

CRIS has successfully put communications rights issues on the agenda of civil society organisations and governments, although we have not yet been able to have significant influence on the formal agenda.

CRIS is recognised as an important reference point – a link to its website features prominently on

the WSIS Civil Society Division's website and we are regularly consulted by the secretariat, listened to by the EC, many governments, the chair of the preparatory process and others.

However, there is still resistance, and on paper we haven't gained much. CRIS, like the rest of the civil society, maintains a position of sceptical engagement – as long as the WSIS provides a vehicle for putting communication rights on the agenda, we will be there. If it does not offer that opportunity, we will apply our energy elsewhere.