

WSIS II - PrepCom I - Hammamet 24 - 26 June 2004-06-24

Statement by Marc Furrer, Secretary of State of Switzerland, held at the opening ceremony of PrepCom I in Hammamet on 24 June 2004

Your Excellency, the Minister of Tunisia

Ministers

Secretary-General of ITU, Mr. Y. Utsumi

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

First of all, I would like to thank the Tunisian Government for the kind invitation to this first PrepCom in Hammamet, for their warm hospitality and also for the fact that they take over as host country the responsibility for the second phase of WSIS.

Switzerland appreciates the effort Tunisia is making in order to do the best for making the second phase of WSIS a success too. We appreciate this effort even more, as we know ourselves, how much energy, especially political energy, you will have to put into this.

As we have told you on several occasions, Switzerland will help you in the process of the second phase and will share its experience gained during the first phase with you.

It is good to be together again! It is now for the first time after Geneva 2003 that the whole WSIS-family is officially coming together again: All those who argued and fought for their positions - as this happens in any family - have come together here in Hammamet. But those who argued and fought in Geneva are also those who finally found a common view and agreed on actions to be taken, that means they agreed on a political declaration and a plan of action.

All those that are gathered here in Tunis are the ones who believed - and still believe - that WSIS is an important and worthwhile opportunity for the world in order to create an open and inclusive Information Society.

So in a way, I felt like at home yesterday in the special plane from Geneva to Tunis - for all passengers in that plane were WSIS-people. And I was not very serious when I suggested to our future president of the PrepCom, Ambassador Yanis Karklins, to sit next to the pilot of the plane and to take the onboard microphone and to tell us what we should do and where to go.

In the same spirit I propose you that we do the further negotiaton work like this: We could stuff all the different WSIS parties in a plane or in a boat to discuss and negotiate. And we would only be allowed to leave the plane again after having agreed on solutions in all the issues discussed. This would be a kind of modern conclave.

To be serious again: We need a firm and clear leadership for the process of the second phase of WSIS. And we expect this process to be led by the president of the PrepCom, the host country of Tunisia, and also by ITU, which is the relevant and competent International organization in the field of the Information Society.

By agreeing on the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action in Geneva 2003, we created a good basis for our future work. And I would again like to thank everyone of you who was actively involved in the process that led to this success.

But in Geneva 2003, we only made the first step in order to achieve our aim of creating an open and inclusive Information Society. There will be many steps ahead of us to create not only an Information Society, but also a Knowledge Society. Tunis is the second step on this road.

Before Geneva 2003, I kept asking myself when would we be able to call it a success and when would we have to admit that it was a failure. The same question we have to ask ourselves again now: when can we say that Tunis 2005 - and with this, WSIS as a whole - is a success, or when do we have to say that it is a failure.

I am quite sure that we will then be able to call Tunis 2005 a success when we will have made a step forward in all the relevant issues of the Information Society and when we will have involved everybody in working on this process. It will then be a success when we can show concrete actions and solutions to the world that will affect people's lives in a positive way.

This is ambitious, I know. But we have to be ambitious if we really want to move another step forward.

So, Tunis 2005 must move "from principles to action", it must be a "Summit of Solutions": The focus of the second phase should be on implementation of the agreed principles and action lines and must lead to concrete ways to use ICT as tools to improve people's daily lives in all aspects. Tunis 2005 should help advance in the achievement of the Millennium (and other) Development Goals and it should also help us create a global, inclusive and equitable Information Society.

What has been agreed upon in Geneva should not be opened up to negotiation again. Of course, the Plan of Action can be refined and completed.

In Geneva, we had three topics that proved to be most difficult to negotiate. These were: Internet Governance, Financing Mechanisms and the issue of Media. But of course, let us not forget about all the other issues that were discussed and negotiated in Geneva.

Let me briefly say a few words about those three topics I just mentioned:

Internet Governance proved to be one of the most delicate issues to find an agreement: The question was and still is: How much should we govern the Internet and who should do this? The process to tackle this question must be open and inclusive and all stakeholders and all regions of the world must be actively involved in it.

Financing the Information Society is still one of the most important issues of WSIS: about one third of the world's population has never used a telephone and more than half of it does not possess a telephone line. This is just one example that shows that we have to take actions and that we have to use money in order to create an inclusive Information Society. We have to think about new financing mechanisms, but first of all, we must make better and more efficient use of existing mechanisms. And - what is most important - we must help all governments to create an enabling environment that makes it possible for private sector to invest in constructing ICT infrastructure and providing services. Public money should mainly be used in order to initiate investment, to give risk guarantees and to provide services in areas where there is not (yet) a well-developed market. Of course, all financing mechanisms have to be transparent so that we know how the money is used.

Finally, we should not only talk about information infrastructure and information technology, but we also need to talk about the information itself, and about the ways people can exchange information. This is why the role of media, of cultural diversity and of pluralism of opinions is crucial for the development of the Information Society. An Information Society can be called as such, if everybody living in it can express himself freely and can collect information freely. This is why free access to all media, but especially free access to the Internet is essential.

Of course, such a free and pluralistic society includes certain risks and leads to political discussions that are not always comfortable especially for governments. But this is absolutely necessary if we want to create an open and inclusive and also peaceful Information Society. During the first phase, the issues of cultural diversity and free and pluralistic media were brought on the agenda at quite a late stage. In the work of the second phase we must not repeat this mistake, but deal with those important issues from the beginning.

In the preparation of the Tunis phase of WSIS, we have the opportunity to give a good example of working together with all stakeholders, governments, international organizations, private sector and civil society in an open spirit and in a constructive manner that takes into account the concerns of all parties involved. There will be hard fights on certain issues, but only by allowing an open discussion we will be able to come to solutions.

The second phase of WSIS can only be a success, if this open spirit and the multistakeholder approach we created in Geneva is continued and reinforced.

In Tunis 2005, we also need again a series of "Summit Events" in order to create an attractive format of the summit and to create an open platform for the exchange of ideas and to develop concrete solutions. This way, it will be demonstrated to the participants how in daily life new ICT-solutions can lead to a better society.

So let me repeat again my wish that Tunis 2005 will be a "Summit of Solutions".

Thank you for your attention.