world summit
on the information society
Geneva 2003 - Tunis 2005

World summit on the information society (WSIS)
Phase 1 in Geneva, 10–12 December 2003

Geneva

The WSIS

WSIS is the first Summit to address the challenges and opportunities presented by the Information Society.

The WSIS is the first Summit of the United Nations to be held in two phases:

• Geneva 2003
• Tunis 2005

The results of the Geneva Summit will consist of:

• a declaration of principles;
• an action plan.

The General Assembly of the United Nations charged the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) with directing the preparations for the summit by playing a leading role in the WSIS Executive Secretariat and in the preparatory process.

On-site at the Summit in Geneva Palexpo, Switzerland will organise a marketplace of ideas and best practices. This is one of several concrete projects being developed to apply the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to bridge the "digital divide". Such activities taking place during the Summit will offer opportunities for discussion between heads of state, civil society and the private sector.

Why a summit?

Over half of the world's population has no access to the information network and are missing out on the global knowledge economy. On the other hand, ICTs offer many opportunities to improve the human condition in the fight against poverty, illiteracy, diseases, etc. The summit aims to bring together offers and opportunities from the developed world to meet the demands of those in the least developed countries or, in other words, to use the opportunities created by ICTs to make the world a better place.

It will be a new kind of summit: governments will work together with the private sector and civil society to define action plans and solutions – in a joint effort and in two phases: 2003 in Geneva, 2005 in Tunis. In addition to the political declaration and action plan there will be a display of best practices and already existing solutions.

The topics

The summit is a starting point for those taking action to integrate the opportunities of technology used as an instrument for:

Good governance
• easier access for citizens to the services and information of governments and authorities;
• dialogue between citizens and political groups (e-democracy);
• support for schools and teachers (e-education);
• support for the medical system (e-health).

Geneva

Cultural and linguistic diversity
- the provision of local content;
- creating an open and free system of information;
- using new media to supplement traditional media;
- training of journalists.

Development
- facilitating the infrastructure for access to the network;
- transforming information for better conditions for trade and development;
- overcoming poverty by using this information.

Security of information
- safety against illegal use of ICTs;
- safety of the network;
- cyber-crime.

The participants

The summit is intended to offer opportunities for dialogue between the representatives of all stake-holders of the information society:

- Governments (heads of state)
- Civil society
- The private sector
- International organisations (ITU, UNESCO, the World Bank, UNDP, WHO, etc.)
- Other groups (UN ICT Task Force, etc.)

Heads of state
By participating in the summit, heads of state will be able to promote the new technologies in their countries among both the general population and private investors. They will play a pioneering role seeking new solutions to problems such as poverty, the lack of education, terrorism, etc.

Civil society and the private sector
Civil society and the private sector have been closely involved in the preparation of the summit. Geneva will provide an opportunity for a genuine dialogue between governments and these two sectors, with the presentation and launch of concrete actions and partnership projects.

The private sector will present projects and share experience and knowledge in order to help develop innovative projects. Even more, the Summit offers an opportunity to invest in new markets and define new financing strategies.

In this context, it will be possible to create "win-win" situations bridging the digital divide, opening up new markets, creating investment opportunities and providing opportunities for co-operation between the various players.

A vision

The information society should promote development, democracy, transparency and good governance. New technologies can be used to improve the living conditions of disadvantaged and margin-alised groups in our society and to facilitate their inclusion. Furthermore, ICTs are likely to offset the disadvantages caused by globalisation. The information society will be able to fulfil its potential only with the assistance and cooperation of governments, civil society and the private sector.

Thinking and working together

"It will be at the summit where we shall be able to bridge the gap between North and South, between cities and rural areas and between different cultures. This does not mean that we are looking to solve the planet's problems as part of a strategy for maximising profit. We should therefore invite groups motivated by a critical spirit to take part in our work."

Moritz Leuenberger,
Federal Councillor, PrepCom2 WSIS, February 2003

Switzerland's role

As host country, Switzerland wishes to contribute actively to initiate a process that will lead to a fair information society. The Geneva Summit will mark the beginning of this process. In committing to organise this Summit, Switzerland positions itself as an active member of the United Nations. In order to help develop Summit content, Switzerland shares its experience of strategy and initiatives already put in place for the information society, within the framework of development aid and cultural diversity, at the international level.

Swiss Summit preparations include logistics for the Summit, transportation, security for participants and coordination of all Summit-related events.

Switzerland has taken an active role in the Prepcom process, together with Tunisia, working with Governments to reinforce their Summit preparations. Switzerland is also working to mobilize the private sector for the Summit via initiatives of the International Chamber of Commerce, the UN ICT Task Force, and the World Economic Forum. Switzerland continues to work closely with representatives of civil society to develop joint projects for the Summit.

In preparation of the Summit, Switzerland has organised itself into a tripartite platform, including representatives of the administration, civil society and the private sector. Acting together, these multistakeholders are defining the Swiss position for the Summit.

What divide?

"A technological revolution is transforming society in a profound way. If harnessed and directed properly, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have the potential to improve all aspects of our social, economic and cultural life. ICTs can serve as an engine for development in the 21st century, and as an effective instrument to help us achieve all the goals of the Millennium Declaration - the landmark document adopted by a record number of leaders when they met for the Millennium Summit to address the key challenges of our time…"

Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General.

Events

Switzerland is coordinating a series of events, which will take place at the Summit venue (Geneva Palexpo), for example:

- a platform showcasing several hundred projects which are being implemented in some fifty countries within the framework of development aid (ICT4D);
- a presentation of different forms of culture within the framework of the information society;
- forums on the topic in several cities in Switzerland;
- events related to e-commerce;
- a workshop on statistics and the information society;
- and, in collaboration with UNESCO, initiatives for archives and libraries, among others.

Brazil, Canada, Finland, France and Ireland have announced their intention to organise exhibitions and stands. Other countries may follow.

The United Nations intend to organise a World Electronic Media Forum - WEMF), in cooperation with the European Broadcasting Union and the Swiss administration.

UNESCO will organise a symposium and meetings on content in education.

The UN ICT Task Force will present initiatives in the area of the new information technologies.

The International Chamber of Commerce will organise a day for the private sector.

These events will provide an opportunity to find out more about initiatives already underway, to exchange information, to establish business contacts, to set up ways of cooperating and to find forms of financing – all within the framework of exhibitions, workshops or conferences.

Congresses such as the Annual Meeting of InfoDev of the World Bank will take place before and during the summit.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

The new technologies offer some interesting opportunities to improve the quality of life in the following areas, for example
- health
- education
- research
- governance
- energy
- services
- industrial production
- agriculture
- transport
- leisure

Benchmarks

The summit will draw up an action plan that, for example, envisages connectivity
- in all villages by 2010
- in all universities by 2005
- in all secondary schools by 2010
- in all primary schools by 2015
- in all hospitals by 2005
- in all health centres by 2010

or coverage by a wireless network
- of 90% of the world's population by 2010
- of 100% by 2015

or the establishment of a website and an e-mail address
- for all central public services by 2005
- for all public services by 2010

A definition of the information society

The term "information society" covers the acquisition, storage, processing, transmission, distribution and use of information and knowledge.

(Source: Report of the Reflection Group "Switzerland and the information society", 1997, adapted definition).

For the latest information, consult the Swiss Executive Secretariat's website: www.wsisgeneva2003.org