



editorial

The Swiss way

As the host country, Switzerland is intimately involved in preparing the World Summit on the Information Society, which will take place in Geneva from 10 to 12 December 2003, in order to ensure that it is a success. Its own position on the Declaration of Principles and the Action Plan is currently being drawn up, by agreement with partners in the public administration, the private sector and civil society. This position will be determined purely on the basis of the most important elements which emerge from the meeting of the preparatory committee (PrepCom-2) in Geneva. By extraordinary good fortune, Switzerland has been selected as host country to launch an unprecedented platform which will bring together all the exciting forces involved in the information society on the planet. Their mission will be to lay the foundations for an original exchange of information intended to ensure the fair sharing of knowledge. Since the beginning of the preparatory phase, Switzerland has called upon various parties, in particular the NGOs, to make their contribution to the Summit and to ensure that their voices are heard in this world forum. Switzerland has also been active on the international scene for two years to ensure that high level representatives from government, business and civil society will contribute constructively to the preparations for a successful World Summit. Finally, in order to ensure the smooth running of the section concerned with the accompanying events, which represents a first for summits organised under the aegis of the UN, the Federal Council has decided to support this section actively, with the aid of the canton of Geneva and the Executive Secretariat of the Summit.

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PrepCom-2 A mini-summit in Geneva



President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal with Federal Councilor Moritz Leuenberger

At the opening in Geneva of the second preparatory committee, Federal Councilor Moritz Leuenberger's meetings with the presidents of Romania and Senegal laid the foundation for planet-wide mobilization. Switzerland is committed to global mobilization, putting the upcoming World Summit on the Information Society on the right track. President Iliescu is a first rate ally and hosted the European WSIS preparatory meeting in Bucharest last July. His presence in Geneva is a clear indication of continued Romanian commitment, alongside Switzerland, to the success of the meeting in December 2003. As to President Wade, whose country is a member of NEPAD, he too is in the inner circle of high-ranking public figures called upon to play a key role in the coming months, particularly in the context of the G8 meeting next June in Evian.

The heads of state that Mr. Leuenberger met with in Geneva are very involved in the world summit process. The Federal Councilor took the opportunity to assure them that Switzerland fully intends to strongly promote the content of the information society, in other words, to ensure



President Ion Iliescu of Romania speaking with Moritz Leuenberger

that it goes beyond mere technological bargaining. In separate interviews, he made a point each time of highlighting the need to do everything possible to make communication the cornerstone of peace building. Participation in these summit meetings included Mr. Marc Furrer, director of the Federal Communications Office and head of the Swiss delegation to PrepCom-2, and Ambassador Daniel Stauffacher, Swiss Federal Council delegate to WSIS. Prior to these meetings, the head of the Federal Department of Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications delivered a welcome

speech to the 1600 delegates from some 100 countries who are participating, until 28 February, in the drafting of a WSIS Declaration of principles and Plan of action.

Highlights

- *"Man does not live on bread alone. He has a right to more than just physical survival. Man is also a social being. He has the right to take his place in society. Therefore, access to information and to the means of communication is a human right."*
- *"I would like to say to government representatives and to politicians, and I am one, that we cannot solve problems alone. We need the support of civil society – i.e., of groups that do not have government representation – and we need the private sector's ideas."*
- *"In Switzerland also, organizing this preparatory conference led to media and NGO protests. I am happy about them, because they call for more commitment, more collaboration, and more empowerment. I therefore invite everyone to participate in the summit. In fact, what we want is to bridge the gap between north and south, between the city and rural areas, and between different cultures. This is not about a meeting of a few technology specialists who want to solve the planet's problems while maximizing profits. Let us include all critical voices into our work."*
- *"I fear that all that will be discussed are broad-band technologies, telecommunications networks, and deregulation, while forgetting to address the content of the information society, i.e. its cultural and political dimensions. Let us not forget that communication comes from community. And community is the basis for building peace. Community is what makes dialogue between cultures possible. And dialogue between cultures is an alternative to war. Since we believe in this dialogue, we must do everything possible to encourage it – as millions of people around the world demanded yesterday."*



Moritz Leuenberger opening the PrepCom-2 meeting



Welcome, Mr. Wade !



Switzerland-Romania: on the same wavelength

WSIS Into the final straight



The Swiss team led by Marc Furrer (right)

Although we are still nine months away from the summit, it is possible to say that, with PrepCom-2, preparations for WSIS are entering the last phase. There have been hundreds of consultations with states, intergovernmental organizations, the private sector, and civil society. Five regional preparatory conferences were held in Bamako, Bucharest, Tokyo, Punta Cana (Dominican Republic), and Beirut. What is striking is the relative ease with which states came to an agreement on the draft declarations adopted during these five conferences. Looking beyond regional sensitivities and priorities, one cannot help but notice the convergence of views in the texts. A consensus was rapidly achieved on some of the main principles such as universal

access to information technologies, cultural diversity and multilinguism in cyberspace. There was also agreement on multi-tasking these same technologies to serve economic, social, and cultural development, be it in education, health, or trade and on the very topical issue of security in cyberspace.

It is on the basis of these many views that the PrepCom chair, Mr. Adama Samassékou of Mali, has drafted a proposed orientation document, with the help of a group of independent experts and logistical assistance from the Swiss. This document might serve as a starting point for the declaration and plan of action that heads of state and government are to adopt next December.

Much work remains to be done for concrete proposals of action to accompany these "framework texts", before good intentions adopted around negotiating tables can be translated into reality. This is where the private sector and civil society can truly make a decisive contribution and can make a difference. They have experience in the field and are in daily contact with people, be they privileged users in the north or poor communities in the south. This puts them in a position to propose concrete measures in order to remedy insufficiencies and inequalities identified and highlighted throughout the long preparatory process. Many businesses and non-governmental organizations are prepared to invest in the enormous task of bridging the digital divide.

As a host country, it is Switzerland's duty to do everything possible to facilitate effective cooperation among all stakeholders. Because Switzerland is represented in all the intergovernmental bodies tasked with organizing the summit, it is in a good position to relay civil society and private sector proposals, and to subsequently defend and promote them.

Switzerland is also in a position to launch a debate of ideas and then to channel the many proposals that will no doubt be forthcoming, in order to find practical so-

lutions to the many concrete problems faced by the "info-poor" and the disenfranchised of the information society. Thus, the Geneva Summit will be about more than just "talk". It should provide an opportunity for raising the collective awareness of the need to "do", so that the information society can truly be a society based on the universal sharing of knowledge, one that is open to all.

Daniel Stauffacher

Ambassador

Delegate of the Swiss Federal Council for the World Summit on the Information Society

Geneva-Tunis WSIS coordination

From 13 to 15 February, a high-ranking Swiss delegation was in Tunis, where meetings were held with various representatives of ministries involved in the coordination between phase one of the World Summit on the Information Society, in Geneva in December of this year, and phase two which Tunisia will be organizing in 2005. The Swiss delegation was led by Ambassador Erwin Hofer, head of the UN and international organizations division of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). He was accompanied by Ambassador Daniel Stauffacher, Federal Council delegate to WSIS, and by Mr. Markus Kummer, DFA e-envoy.

The discussions covered many subjects on the WSIS agenda and broad agreement was reached, especially on the idea of both phases being successful.

For a more in-depth and concrete look at the conclusions of this first meeting in Tunis, diplomats of the two countries agreed to meet again in Switzerland to continue the exploratory work. WSIS is unusual because it will be a shared summit, according to the wish expressed by the UN.

Given the complimentary nature of WSIS' two stages, regular contacts are necessary to ensure the smooth progress of negotiations on drafting a declaration and plan of action at the two large preparatory meetings organized in Geneva (PrepCom-1 last July and PrepCom-2, in February 2003).

Swiss reception at ILO



Swiss NGOs

A platform and then what?

On 11 February, the eve of PrepCom-2, some 20 Swiss NGOs presented the press with their Swiss platform for an Information Society. These proposals for the WSIS declaration and plan of action reflect a more social approach to the information society. They are also less technological than that of the working document drafted by an international group of experts under President Samassékou.

For signatory NGOs, mainly from humanitarian organizations, the media and internet aficionados, WSIS holds much at stake for society. If the international community were to conclude from this summit that the information society is just a matter of technological development, this would not bode well for the fragile transition to democracy. Conversely, if it acknowledges that the information society involves free movement of both ideas and data as well as universal access to unbiased information and to NICTs, then the international community will be sending a strong signal that the information society can offer every man and woman a chance at a better standard of living.

The Swiss platform defines the founding principles of an information society in the service of humanity and tackles various announced themes, such as infrastructure and access, content, access to knowledge and information, governance, freedom of



Representatives of the Swiss platform in conversation with Moritz Leuenberger and his colleagues

expression, and freedom of information. It is an open platform. Several non-signatory organizations have already announced their intention to join; some would like to complete the platform or revisit issues. It might evolve by broadening its base.

If that is the case, then the platform will have met its first goal, which is to mobilize Swiss society around the WSIS challenges. The second goal is to push Switzerland to assume, as an organizing country, as great a role and as great a responsibility as possible. Not only is it incumbent upon us to ensure the smooth working of the summit, but also to provide an example of working towards the information society. Two suggestions from the platform's members take us in that direction. Switzerland could create an "Information Society Task Force". It could also use the NGOs' text in Switzerland's official position at WSIS.

Such a Task Force could bring together all the players – federal departments and offices, industry, academia, NGOs, the media, etc. It would be based on a tripartite foundation, with government, civil society,

and industry all having equal weight. With a mandate going beyond Geneva and Tunis, this board would steer our country, with the utmost transparency, toward an information society. It would be a practical application by our country of the great principles underlying WSIS!

Switzerland could use the inputs of its own civil society to give substance to the official WSIS position. It would be an experiment in direct democracy adapted to the information society!

In the immediate future, the Swiss platform for an Information Society will continue with its wake-up call and its efforts to bring everyone together throughout PrepCom-2. Several meetings have been scheduled with both the Swiss delegation and Swiss participants.

Swiss civil society is mobilizing for WSIS. Who can complain?

Guillaume Chenevière

President of the World Radio-Television Council.*

* The author, who belongs to the Swiss platform for an Information Society, is expressing his personal views.

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A web-caravan against exclusion



A caravan equipped with computer systems will soon be looking for the e-excluded in the neighborhoods and municipalities of Geneva. Some sixty institutional services and aid associations for the poor support this partnership project.

Public writers, trainers, accompanying staff and citizens will facilitate the access to, and discovery of, new technologies for underprivileged populations.

The web-caravan is currently being equipped. This concrete initiative to promote access to the tools of knowledge and the information society will be introduced to the public at PrepCom-3 in September.

(Information at: www.webroulotte.ch)