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Collective Learning in the World Summit on the Information Society*

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From the beginning, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process has come under criticism. One prominent strand of this criticism argues that the WSIS has raised unrealistic expectations of increased global cooperation and concerted action that simply cannot be fulfilled given existing political and institutional realities. Proponents of this view note in particular that the Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action agreed at the December 2003 summit in Geneva, which concluded Phase I of the process, do not have the binding force of international treaties. Nor were these texts accompanied by concrete national commitments to do anything in particular that governments were not already doing. Moreover, at the time of writing (Spring 2005), the prospects are unclear for significant implementation and follow-up efforts following the November 2005 summit in Tunis, which completes Phase II of the process. As such, these critics charge that the agreements reached to date are merely collections of "pie in the sky" aspirations and "lip service" statements that governments can easily sign off on and then forget about.

While the desire for strong agreements and hard commitments is understandable, international policy dialogues and negotiations need not achieve these outcomes to count as worthwhile endeavors. On the one hand, many international policy issues are tackled, often effectively, through a variety of "soft law" instruments such as recommendations, declarations, guidelines, voluntary standards, or even custom. Normative frameworks that lack "teeth" can still set standards of behavior and performance that can be used to encourage or pressure parties to comply in the years to follow. Moreover, soft agreements sometimes serve as preliminary, consensus-building steps on the way to stronger arrangements, including in other forums. On the other hand, if we shift our attention from the formal products of international cooperation to the process itself, it is clear that the simple act of engaging in dialogue can lead to notable improvements. Participation can provide governments and other parties with incentives to take steps on a decentralized basis to institutionalize programs and policies where none existed, or to bring those that do exist into closer alignment with what their counterparts are doing. Mutual adjustment toward a shared target can even make formal international agreements unnecessary, e.g. if there is harmony among what the parties are doing individually and this is sufficient to address an issue. As such, sometimes the process of cooperation itself is as important as the formal product, if not more so.

Viewed in this context, the WSIS does not look not look bad. It has provided the world community as a whole with a first opportunity to participate in an inclusive dialogue on a broad range of issues associated with the global information society. Certainly the process has generated some broad, baseline norms on both substantive and procedural aspects that can be built upon to encourage more collective action going forward. Similarly, it has contributed significantly to the institutionalization of global information society issues on the agenda of intergovernmental relations; in international organization work programs; within and among stakeholder communities (government, business, and civil society); and at the national level, particularly within developing countries. These byproducts of cooperation may seem diffuse and hence more difficult to observe quickly than whether strong agreements have been negotiated, but they help lay the foundation for long-term progress nonetheless.

In this paper, I focus on another foundation-laying byproduct of the WSIS process: collective learning. Like norm development and issue institutionalization, collective learning is a somewhat slippery concept because it is difficult to operationalize and measure, much less to definitively demonstrate its impact. While scholars have struggled with these challenges in many detailed studies of learning in international cooperation and global governance, my much more modest objective in this brief chapter is merely to be suggestive.[1] I argue that the WSIS process has promoted patterns of collective learning about the global information society that will have ripple effects across multiple levels, stakeholders, organizations and issues going forward. Collective learning matters because it builds individual and organizational capacity; helps the participants in international cooperation to sort out the issues and to identify their interests and negotiating preferences; and builds shared, intersubjective understandings of policy problems and the range of viable and unviable responses. Learning generally is not an independent cause of increasing and successful cooperation, as other factors such as power relations, material interests, and bargaining dynamics also come into play. But while it is not a sufficient condition of cooperation, it is often a necessary condition, particularly in policy space characterized by a high degree of complexity, uncertainty, and rapid change. And for much of the world, the global information society is such a policy space.

As is demonstrated in the relevant scholarly literature, there are many ways to categorize types of collective learning and assess their respective roles in international cooperation. For present purposes it is sufficient to radically simplify by focusing on two basic dimensions of the phenomenon: *procedural learning* about the formal rules and rule-governed conduct of a global dialogue; and *substantive learning* about the issues and interests in play. Within both dimensions, we can further distinguish between *incremental* and *transformational* learning. The former refers to learning that proceeds in small but potentially progressive steps within the boundaries of existing understandings of and approaches to a given issue. The latter refers to learning that fundamentally alters how an issue is defined, understood, and addressed. Reading these two binary distinctions against each other yields four types of collective learning that have been evident in the WSIS process.

1. Incremental Procedural Learning

The first type of learning pertains to actors' understandings of the formal rules and actual conduct of the WSIS process. With respect to formal procedures, civil society organizations (CSOs) that often had limited experience in intergovernmental settings had to learn how to organize themselves into an effective coalition, play by the rules, and

[1] For an example of a more detailed treatment, see, William J. Drake and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, "Ideas, Interests and Institutionalization: 'Trade in Services' and the Uruguay Round." In, Peter Haas, ed., Knowledge, Power and International Policy Coordination, a special issue of International Organization, 45 (Winter 1992), pp. 37-100.

optimize their opportunities to speak in plenary sessions, lobby governments, and so on. Similarly, with respect to the conduct of the process, everyone involved has had to learn how to deal with counterparts that are used to different modes of operation. For example, those observers that have been invited to join national delegations have had to figure out whether and how they could work within governments' requirements concerning information dissemination and the maintenance of coherent national positions. More broadly, business and civil society participants accustomed to open and fast-moving debates have had to adjust to formalistic and heavily structured intergovernmental procedures. Conversely, governments and business have had to learn how to deal with civil society counterparts that dress and behave differently, usually show up with laptop computers, demand wifi connections and full transparency, and email or blog the details of the discussions to readers around the world in real time.

Going further, the agreement to conduct WSIS as a multistakeholder dialogue in itself reflected learning. For some actors, this learning has been truly incremental, and even grudging. Particularly in the early stages of the process, a great many developing country governments had reservations about or were actively opposed to allowing active business and especially civil society participation, and they wasted a lot of time by demanding that these observers sit silently or be ejected from various meetings. But as the process wore on, much of this opposition abated, whether due to changed convictions or tactical calculations. Indeed, many formerly disinclined governments have learned not only that they could live with having observers in the room, but also that this could be substantively and politically useful in advancing the debate.

This shift has been particularly noteworthy with respect to CSOs. Whereas the private sector's control of information and communication technology (ICT) industries made it a force that had to be dealt with, CSOs were alleged to be comparatively unimportant actors of questionable provenance that did not need to be at the table for WSIS to succeed. But as the process moved forward, CSOs projected "soft power" by demonstrating technical expertise, normative influence, and the ability to improve negotiating texts by highlighting otherwise underemphasized or overlooked issues and dimensions. To be sure, the collective learning here remains less than universal among governments, many of which still fail to recognize that the observers can be useful allies on certain issues. Moreover, it is broader than it is deep; for example, while CSOs are now more or less welcome to participate in the WSIS' agenda setting debates, they are not in other aspects of the process. Yet while there are pronounced limits in the extent and depth of commitment to multistakeholderism, a small threshold has been crossed.

2. Transformational Procedural Learning

Thus far, this sort of learning seems to have been very limited in the WSIS. The only example that comes readily to mind involves the UN Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG). True, some governments would have preferred a purely intergovernmental group, e.g. under the auspices of the ITU, and only in the end agreed to a multistakeholder formula. Nevertheless, they did agree that unlike the larger WSIS

process, governments, business, and civil society participants would work in the WGIG as equal peers, with international organizations representatives limited to the role of observers. Arguably, that decision opened the way to some incipient transformational learning in various quarters.

As the WGIG discussions have evolved, it has become clear that the private sector and civil society participants---which have been relegated to observer status with limited rights to speak in other WSIS contexts---can more than hold their own. Indeed, it is now widely recognized that these stakeholders have frequently played leading, catalytic roles in the WGIG's discussions and in the preparation of texts.[2] Moreover, if the open consultations and WSIS preparatory committee debates about the WGIG process are any indication, governments generally appear to appreciate that peer-to-peer multistakeholderism is proving effective and impressive.

The most promising example of incipient transformational procedural learning concerns the post-WGIG future. In debating the possible creation of a new omnibus forum for Internet governance issues, virtually no delegation has stood up in open session to say that these should be purely intergovernmental. To the contrary: a number of key governments that previously were unenthusiastic about or even opposed to having business and civil society at the table now routinely state that of course, any new body must be multistakeholder in composition. While some of these shifts may be attributable to tactical recognitions of political realities rather than heart felt convictions, they reflect transformational learning all the same. And in other cases, the change appears to be deeper. Public pronouncements and private conversations alike indicate that a growing number of governments now "get it" and recognize that multistakeholderism is necessary not only to enhance legitimacy or co-opt potential opponents, but also to effectively govern a highly distributed arena in which businesses and CSOs are key and technically competent players.

That said, it is much too early to tell whether learning within and from the WGIG experience will have any broader impact. Some analysts and stakeholders seem inclined to believe that the WGIG constitutes a watershed in international cooperation, and that future global policy processes on ICT and perhaps even other issue-areas will have to adopt a similar model. In this context, the United Nations' proposed Global Alliance for ICT Policy and Development and the recommendations of the UN's Cardoso Commission Report are sometimes cited as harbingers of a broader shift toward multistakeholderism. Others of us are less sure. Internet governance may be a special case. Further, even here there are limits, in that governments do not appear to envision multistakeholderism extending beyond consultations, agenda setting, and technical operations into actual decision making. Nor are there indications of any willingness to consider spreading the model into exclusionary bodies such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the World Trade Organization (WTO), or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. In parallel, the private sector

[2] While the present author is a civil society member of WGIG, I doubt that anyone associated with the process would contest this observation.

does not appear to be eager to involve governments and civil society in many of the industry bodies that play key roles in various domains of ICT global governance. In short, while the ground does seem to be moving somewhat, it is very unclear whether this is a light tremor or an incipient plate tectonic shift.

3. Incremental Substantive Learning

In terms of frequency, this is undoubtedly the most robust of our four categories. The reasons are fairly obvious. On the one hand, because governments opted not to restrict the agenda to just a few issue-areas, as the United States in particular had proposed, the WSIS deliberations began with a wide range of topics on the table. And as the process progressed, the open agenda meant that many more issues could be added into the mix. While governments also were involved, CSOs played a new and special role in this expansion. The global mobilization of diverse groups with specific interests and agendas led to effective demands for the inclusion of, or heightened attention to, issues like human rights, mass media, the public domain, cultural and linguistic diversity, free and open source software, community-level ICT, and the need to consider the special challenges relating to gender, age, minorities, indigenous peoples, and marginalized social groups. In parallel, CSOs and some governments successfully pressed for recognition of the issues' multidimensional character. While the early secretariat drafts of the Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action were rather technocratic and focused on the need to build out information infrastructures, subsequent versions gave notably more emphasis to social and cultural dimensions and embraced "people centered" development and policy as an key theme. The net result was that in both quantitative and qualitative terms, the range of items that had to be thought through expanded substantially.

On the other hand, WSIS pulled together in one policy space an unprecedented range of actors, many of whom previously had not attempted to master and define positions on all of the issues in play. This applied in particular to many developing countries and specialized CSOs, but even the industrialized country governments and global business probably encountered at least some issues or dimensions they had not worked through. In short, the combination of a wide range of multidimensional issues and a huge and heterogeneous array of participants created the conditions, and requirement, for a significant degree of incremental substantive learning.

In the Geneva phase, incremental learning about the issues was driven in particular by the negotiation of the Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action. Whether the matter at hand was Internet interconnection charging, spam, voice over IP, intellectual property, the socio-cultural aspects of network access, network security and information security (and the boundary between these), or something else, the need to take positions on a multitude of proposed provisions provided the occasion to think things through. Of course, the extent to which actors actually did this varied; on any given issue, there were undoubtedly participants that adopted stances without first engaging in deep reflection or

probing debate with their colleagues. For some, the rather general level at which the two documents are pitched may have provided the temptation to fall back on easy assumptions or simply align themselves with bloc partners. But for others who cared enough to use the opportunity to work out a position or to try and persuade their counterparts, there certainly were incentives to increase their understanding of substantive problems.

In the Tunis phase, the focus has narrowed to development financing, Internet governance, and Plan of Action implementation and follow-up. As the debate shifted from general declarations to potential actions and the stakes thereby increased, participants had to drill down into and really engage the issues. Collective learning ensued, irrespective of various stakeholders' differing levels of satisfaction with the conduct and outputs of these three exercises to date. The report of the UN Task Force on Financial Mechanisms and related discussions in and out of the task force gave everyone a clearer picture of the range of extant ICT4D arrangements, and of the political and functional impediments to improving the mix. The WGIG has produced a plethora of working papers on individual issues and issue clusters, many of which governments and other participants have deemed helpful in understanding Internet governance. In the summer of 2005, the WGIG will release an integrated report that hopefully will deepen that understanding. Also helpful have been the many input papers and comments submitted by stakeholders around the world and posted on the WGIG website. As for implementation of the Plan of Action, one suspects that work on this topic have improved at least some participants' grasp of the issues, although this is more difficult to judge because the key dialogues have been restricted to exclusionary bodies like the ITU and the WSIS' Group of Friends of the Chair.

Incremental substantive learning has been evident not only with respect to the issues, but also with regard to the stakeholders' interests and their implications for the negotiations. By engaging in intensive small group interactions and enduring long plenary sessions, WSIS participants have learned where their counterparts stand on the broad array of topics, and why. In some cases, this has involved deepening their understandings of previously stated positions, e.g. by digesting more detailed explanations based on the functional merits or on political considerations that constrain and drive actors' policy stances. In other cases, it has involved hearing for the first time from actors, most notably many developing countries and CSOs, that had not articulated stances on all of the issues before. Either way, such learning has helped participants understand how the interest configurations line up per topic and what, in consequence, may or may not be possible in terms of forging agreements. Participants thereby have been more able to recalibrate their own preferences and tactics in an evolutionary process of mutual adjustment. Whether this process has promoted consensus building or has hardened alignments into opposing camps varies across cases, but either way it has been an important byproduct of WSIS that will affect future ICT policy dialogues.

4. Transformational Substantive Learning

This is the most interesting form of collective learning in global policy dialogues, and in some respects it is the most important as well. Transformational substantive learning can be likened to a Kuhnian paradigm shift, in that it involves the fundamental redefinition of the organizing assumptions, terms of discourse, and policy objectives that shape a global issue-area. Invoking the term may invite cynical jokes, particularly from world-weary veterans who have sat through lengthy international meetings without ever encountering a "big idea." But in fact, international policy dialogues have often generated or at least supported the development of such learning. Consider, for example, the case of climate change, which has certainly redefined much of global environmental policy. Similar dynamics have evident with respect to human rights policy, international trade policy, or, more recently, the burgeoning development of humanitarian intervention, conflict management, and peace building as a global policy arena. In these and other cases, governments and other participants have collectively relearned what the overarching problematique is about and have reconfigured their policies and programs accordingly.

Transformational substantive learning is no stranger to the global ICT policy arena, either. The transition from the long century of government ownership and monopoly control toward liberalization and competition in telecommunications was driven in part by the spread of new ideas and collective relearning. The idea that international telecommunications services should be viewed as international trade in services and brought under the aegis of the WTO was certainly transformational. Or, recall that while the global digital divide initially was narrowly framed in terms of Internet infrastructure and access, this later gave way to a more nuanced and multidimensional understanding of the social, cultural, economic and political barriers to developing countries' participation in the global information society. The collective rethinking of global governance mechanisms for technical standardization, international satellite services, networked intellectual property, and so on offer additional examples. In these cases and other cases, substantive learning went beyond incremental shifts within the existing framing of the relevant issue-areas to game-changing redefinitions of policy problems and responses. Whether these changes were good or bad, consensual or contested, or universal or limited in terms of the domain of actors involved are secondary matters; the point is simply that such learning occurred and was heavily promoted by participation in international institutions.

In the WSIS context, it is not obvious that transformational substantive learning has occurred with respect to any individual issues. But there has been transformational learning with respect to the interrelationship between these issues. As a baseline for comparison, recall the long-standing tendency to address global ICT policy issues on a fragmented, stand-alone basis. Topics like telecommunications regulation, spectrum management, Internet names and numbers, privacy protection, intellectual property, e-commerce, security, culture and content and so on *ad infinitum* have evolved as fairly separate spheres of analysis and activity. Each has attracted specialized expert communities who go to different meetings, participate in different international

institutions, read and write in different publications, and so on. While this is a natural consequence of the complexity and internal diversity of the various issue-areas, it arguably has had a limiting effect on our collective understanding of ICT global governance.

The WSIS process has chipped away at this fragmentation. Bringing many of the key issues together under one roof as the subject of an integrative dialogue has contributed to the incipient social construction of "the global information society" as a recognized, overarching global policy space. Within such a space, individual issues are effectively remapped as interrelated parts of a whole, both of which often can be more productively analyzed and tacked in a holistic manner.[3] In fields like climate change and sustainable development, the creation of compelling, encompassing rubrics has helped to catalyze the formation of global expert communities, policy processes, and programs concerned with both part-to-part and part-to-whole interrelationships. Similarly holistic learning has been visible in the WSIS process.

At the micro-level, individuals and organizations specializing in one issue-area, like poverty or freedom of speech, have become interested in nominally distinct issue-areas like international telecommunications accounting and settlements or intellectual property. This reflects an emerging recognition that their primary concerns are linked to and impacted by other issues, and that on substantive and tactical grounds there can be virtues to recasting them as part of a larger set that requires a coordinated response. At the macro-level, a civil society coalition comprising a highly diverse range of actors converged on the "global information society" agenda and, after feeling its way around the space to identify shared and divergent preferences, collectively developed a civil society declaration for the Geneva summit that applied core principles to a broad range of interrelated policy challenges. The development of the intergovernmental Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action involved roughly parallel dynamics, as does the current debate on the possible establishment of follow-up and implementation mechanisms for the post-Tunis world.

The debate on Internet governance provides a particularly clear illustration of the dynamics and transformational implications of holistic learning. Again, to appreciate the change that has occurred, one must begin with the *status quo ante.* For historical reasons that need not be recounted here, the nearly standard practice has been to equate the term, "Internet governance," solely with the social organization of Internet identifiers and the root server system and, by extension, the functions performed by the Internet Corporation

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[3] The Club of Rome takes this aggregation and holism even further, proposing that the set of all crucial problems---political, social, economic, technological, environmental, psychological and cultural---facing humanity constitutes a "world problematique," or the problem of all problems. As the organization notes, "the complexity of the world problematique lies in the high level of mutual interdependence of all these problems on the one hand, and in the long time it often takes until the impact of action and reaction in this complex system becomes visible." See, The Club of Rome, www.clubofrome.org/about/world_problematique.php

for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). This "narrow definition" was inconsistent with the empirical reality that there are a variety of collectively applicable, private and public sector rules, procedures and programs that shape both the Internet's infrastructure (physical and logical) and the transactions and content conveyed thereby. By focusing attention on only one, albeit critical, piece of the governance puzzle, the narrow definition had a number of deleterious, limiting effects on policy discourse, analysis, and practice.

As the WSIS dialogue progressed, participants continually raised a variety of issues that go well beyond the scope of the narrow definition and asked why these should not be considered to be instances of Internet governance as well. By what logic, they asked, can collective rule systems pertaining to intellectual property, security, privacy, e-commerce, and so on be deemed to be outside the realm of Internet governance? Similarly, where there are pressing international issues like interconnection charging or spam that are not currently the subject of effective rule systems, should not these be treated as priorities for the potential enhancement or expansion of Internet governance? In short, through an iterative process of dialogue and collective learning in which problems were posed and linkages were drawn, participants converged around the need for a broader, holistic conception that could encompass the full range of Internet governance mechanisms and facilitate their systematic evaluation and coordinated improvement.

In the Geneva phase, this emerging holism was reflected in many of the preparatory meeting interventions and documents, innumerable hallway conversations, and most importantly, the Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action. The latter is particularly notable in this respect. The mandate given to the proposed WGIG was broadly cast to include the development of a working definition, the identification of the relevant public policy issues, and the development of a common understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities of various actors. None of this would have been necessary if Internet governance was still understood to mean just ICANN and related functions. Moreover, the plan then listed fifteen related priority policy issues, with naming and numbering simply mentioned alongside such matters as the establishment of national and regional Internet exchange centers, consumer protection, privacy, electronic commerce, technical standardization, and spectrum management.

In the Tunis phase, we have moved much further down this road, and its transformational implications have become apparent. For example, the WGIG has based its work program on a broad understanding, and has undertaken an explicitly holistic assessment of the full governance terrain. We have evaluated a wide range of public and private sector governance mechanisms and related issue-areas in light of integrative, horizontally applicable dimensions, including the extent to which they conform with the Declaration of Principles' statement that Internet governance, "should be multilateral, transparent and democratic, with the full involvement of governments, the private sector, civil society and international organizations."[4] The WGIG report to be released in July

2005 will convey the results of this assessment and offer options for policy reform that go well beyond the governance of the Internet's logical infrastructure (e.g. the root server system and names and numbers). Among these will be alternative options (in the likely event the group cannot agree on every point) on the possible establishment of a new body designed to promote holistic analysis and dialogue on the full range of governance mechanisms and issues. As I have written elsewhere, such a body would be valuable in that it could facilitate, *inter alia*, the

- multilateral and multistakeholder inclusion of the entire global community in Internet governance deliberations;
- systematic and universally accessible monitoring and information exchange about disparate governance developments;
- comparative, cross-sectoral evaluation of governance mechanisms, with an eye toward "lessons learned" and best practices that could inform individual and collective institutional improvements;
- assessment of horizontal issues applicable to all arrangements, e.g. the promotion of transparency, accountability, inclusion, and other principles of "good governance;"
- identification of weaknesses and gaps in the governance architecture, i.e. "orphaned" or multidimensional issues that do not fall neatly within the ambit of any existing body; and,
- identification of potential tensions between separately developed mechanisms, and possibly some enhanced coordination among them.[5]

The open consultations held during the WGIG meetings and other discussions appear to indicate that many governments and other stakeholders favour the establishment of a new body that could take on these functions. Some governments would go further by mandating such a body not only to monitor and debate the issues, but also to take decisions, perhaps even by adopting "hard" instruments. In addition, there appears to be growing support for enhanced governmental input into/oversight of ICANN, whether it be through the above-mentioned body or a something separate. Of course, the fate of such proposals depends on a variety of factors, such as the course of the bargaining between the release of the WGIG report and the Tunis summit, the interrelationship with any other Tunis recommendations on follow-up and implementation, and the positions taken by the global private sector and the industrialized

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[4] World Summit on the Information Society, "Declaration of Principles---Building the Information Society: A Global Challenge in the New Millennium." WSIS-03/GENEVA/DOC/4-E, 12 December 2003, pg. 6. www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html

[5] See, William J. Drake, "Reframing Internet Governance Discourse: Fifteen Baseline Propositions." In, Don MacLean, ed. Internet Governance: A Grand Collaboration New York: United Nations Information and Communication Technology Taskforce, 2004, pp. 122-161 (book at http://www.unicttf.org/perl/documents.pl?id=1392). Also published as a working paper of the Social Science Research Council's Research Network on IT and Governance, 2004. www.ssrc.org/programs/itic/publications/Drake2.pdf

countries, especially the United States. But whatever happens in the end, surely the collective learning that has led to an increasingly holistic orientation qualifies as transformational, in that it has fundamentally altered how Internet governance is defined, understood, and addressed. Even if no new bodies are created, the game has changed.

Conclusion

The WSIS process clearly has promoted collective learning on both procedural and substantive matters. This learning will inform and enhance the ways in which global information society issues are conceived and tackled going forward, whether in new WSIS-engendered mechanisms or simply in other, existing institutional environments. In this respect, the WSIS has already made an important contribution to the governance of the global information society.