Participation of developing countries in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process: Ethiopia case study[1]

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I. Introduction and Background

This paper discusses progress made by Ethiopia in policy making as a result of the World Summit for Information Society (WSIS). It will analyse the extent to which local stakeholders mainly the public sector, academia, civil society, media and the private sector participated in the WSIS issues and forums. The paper reviews the national ICT policy-making process during the WSIS phase and quality of participation by Ethiopia in WSIS phase II issues such as Internet governance, Internet rights, ICT for Development and the financing infrastructure.

The paper was based on interviews with major players in Ethiopia that were conducted in January and March 2006. A review of relevant documents, press releases, action plans was also made between January and March 2006. The paper is organized as follows: second section of the paper discusses the WSIS as a policy negotiation forum and Ethiopia's participation in the process. Section three addresses the implication of WSIS for global policy making with reference to Ethiopia. Section four discusses Ethiopia's input to the key themes of WSIS II - Internet governance, Internet rights, ICT for Development and financing infrastructure. Section five analyses the participation of different stakeholders in the development of ICT policy and the impact of WSIS on domestic policy making in Ethiopia. The last section presents the conclusions.

II. The WSIS Process as an International Negotiation Forum and Ethiopia's Participation

The World Summit for Information Society was a global policy making exercise that effectively took place between 2002 and 2005. WSIS aimed to be inclusive, multi-stakeholder, democratic and transparent in its process and involved an iterative and multi-level (national, regional and global) process for ICT policy making. At global levels, the aim of the WSIS was to bring heads of State, executive heads of United Nations agencies, industry leaders, non-governmental organizations, media representatives and civil society together in a single high-level event. The regional and national preparatory processes involved civil society, private sector and state representatives to discuss issues of the development of information society within their respective regions. National consultations came a bit late in the WSIS process. The governments were at centre stage of these processes.

Since the WSIS was particularly concerned with addressing the "digital divide" it was important for countries like Ethiopia that are still grappling with appreciation of the implications of information and communication technologies for their social and economic development. Although the WSIS was originally focussed on infrastructure issues, the development of applications and content, access to information and knowledge, Internet governance, access to ICTs by communities and disadvantaged groups, ICT skilling, media and the impact of ICTs on art and culture have become important components of the process. This raised the hopes of countries like Ethiopia with social and economic challenges for benefiting from the process. This case study shows that these hopes were not realised.

As the issues of WSIS turned out to be clearer and relevant, Ethiopia became involved in the WSIS process. Before, the first phase of WSIS the main focus of Ethiopia was on access to ICTs, public sector computerization, promoting the capacity of ICT private sector and localization particularly the standardization of the Ethiopic script[2]. The second phase of the WSIS process saw a significant shift to implementation of high profile projects such as schoolnet and public sector computerization in Ethiopia.

Given its broad scope, the WSIS was conducted over two phases. Phase I culminated in the Geneva Summit in December 2003. Almost 50 Heads of State were present, with attendance totalling more than 11,000 participants from 175 countries. The Geneva Summit produced two key documents: the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action [3]. The Declaration of Principles set out WSIS's vision for a global Information Society and identified target groups and broad lines of action. The Plan of Action specifies 10 concrete ICT targets and more than 140 actions in 11 key areas for implementation by stakeholders in different countries.

The regional preparatory processes preceded the two Summits. The African Regional Preparatory meeting (Prepcom) for the WSIS was held in Bamako in May 2002. Thirteen participants from Ethiopia attended the meeting of which the majority were drawn from the civil society and private sector. Interestingly, there was no government representative in the first African preparatory conference of the WSIS. This was partly due to the holding of African preparatory meeting right at the beginning of the WSIS process before the main themes of the WSIS were made clear. At the time, the Ethiopian government was sceptical on the ICT issues and was not active participant.

Although, the Ethiopian government endorsed the outcomes of the Bamako meeting, it did not actually engage in the deliberations. The Bamako conference was held before participants from government, private sector and civil society had the opportunity to discuss WSIS issues and articulate long term mission. Neither the promoters had idea as to what to achieve from the preparatory process. Then despite its endorsement by many governments, the Bamako meeting did not include well-informed national policy dialogue and the views and perspectives of the private sector and civil society, women, and development actors engaged in mainstream development sectors.

Ethiopia's effort to constructively engage with the WSIS process commenced at the beginning of 2003 with holding of a national consultative workshop on the WSIS. The workshop was organized by the telecom regulator- the Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency in collaboration with the Economic Commission for Africa. About 50 participants drawn from government, private sector, civil society and development partners attended the workshop. The aim was to sensitise participants on the genesis, objectives and development of the WSIS, to assess Ethiopia's readiness for

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[2] Report of the National Consultative Workshop, February 2003,

http://www.uneca.org/aisi/Bamako2002/wsisprep.htm#et

[3] ITU, WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action,

http://www.itu.int/wsis/documents/doc_multi.asp?lang=en&id=1161|1160

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the information society in relation to the WSIS process and revisit the roles of various stakeholders.

Although, ICT experts who have known to each other for sometime dominated the attendance, the workshop heralded Ethiopia's engagement with the WSIS process. Discussion focussed on the WSIS' contribution to the ICT policy development process of Ethiopia, policy and regulation for supporting innovation, role of stakeholders, Ethiopia's input to Preparatory Committee meeting (PrepCom III), constituting a national WSIS task force and reviewing the state of the domestic ICT policy and capacity building. The workshop ended with establishment of a national task force on WSIS composed of three public sector, two private sector, one civil society and an academia representative.

The Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency, National ICT capacity building programme, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, private sector representatives (Cybersoft and ICTAfrica), the Ethiopian Information Technology Professionals Association (EITPA), and Addis Ababa University were selected to be the members of the task force. Given the size of the country and wide range of institutions, the number of the task force members was very small. For example, there was no representative of the media and marginalized groups such as women and youth. Development professionals were not present and represented. The Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency was selected as a focal point for the WSIS process.

Although, it was agreed to put a strong consultation mechanism in place including establishment of a public mailing list and awareness campaign, bi-monthly meetings and a news letter this did not happen due to various constraints. Consequently, the discussion on the WSIS process was confined to ICT experts form key organizations that were present at the meeting.

The elitist nature of the WSIS discourse is a reflection of the overall ICT programmes implementation process in Ethiopia. Major ICT initiatives tend to be designed and implemented by a few experts on trail and error basis than including a wide range of groups. Neither development professionals are consulted nor the civil society and academia provide constructive and critical input to flagship projects.

Ethiopia's participation in the subsequent preparatory committee meetings (PrepCom II and III) was headed by the Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency and the Geneva mission. While this provided continuity of the input and follow up, there was little by way of civil society and private sector participation in the process. Nonetheless, the participation in the Preparatory Committee meeting was important at least for articulation of WSIS issues.

A follow up workshop to the first meeting in February 2003 was held in May 2003 where Ethiopia's input to the WSIS was discussed. Ethiopia's response to the Draft WSIS Declaration of principles and action plans was issued in June 2003[4]. The

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4 Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency, Ethiopia's Response to Draft WSIS Declaration of Principles and Action Plans, June 2003, http://www.uneca.org/aisi/docs/Ethiopia%27s%20response%20to%20the%20WSIS–final.pdf

seventeen-page document emphasised the need for development of infrastructure, capacity building, preservation of linguistic and cultural heritage, promotion of sectoral application and access to information and promotion of partnerships. The document acknowledged the importance of policy and regulatory frameworks and the fact that Ethiopia lags far behind in this respect and promised some changes in policy front sooner.

> …Ethiopia recognises the fact that **enabling political, legal and regulatory environment** is one of the prerequisites for information society development. However, very little is done in this respect at national level, and efforts are underway to improve the situation that requires full support from regional and international partners. … (p 5)

The WSIS input document also lists a number of projects including community access, private sector development, public sector computerization, human resources development, policy and regulations. The document endorsed all the preceding declarations and the African Information Society Initiative and provided input to specific sections of the Geneva Plan of Actions and the Declaration of Principles.

Despite limited participation of the wider civil society, private sector and academia in the development of Ethiopia's input to the first phase of the WSIS process, the document created an opportunity for stakeholders to reflect on WSIS issues and national development challenges. Given Ethiopia's historical resistance to ICT related debates, the process signalled a new beginning in articulating issues and developing long term strategies within the framework of the World Summit for the Information Society.

Ethiopia's participation in the last Preparatory Committee (PrepComIII) remained the same in terms of the size of the delegates. The Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency (ETA) and the Geneva mission were the main participants. In effect the participation was only by the ETA, because the Geneva mission lacked the necessary expertise in ICTs to provide meaningful input.

The Geneva phase of the Summit was attended by a light delegate led by the State Minister of the Ministry of Infrastructure – a supra ministry that oversees transport, communications and the energy sector at that time. The small delegation reflects the limited engagement of the private sector and civil society in the ICT policy issues and WSIS process prior to WSIS I, and the inability of the government to forge a truly multi-stakeholder partnership.

In effect, Ethiopia's multi-stakeholder partnership did not improve further during the preparatory process for the second phase of the World Summit. For example, Ethiopia did not hold a consultation to provide mult-stakeholder input during the second African Preparatory Committee meeting that was held in Accra, although it supported the Accra commitments.

Ethiopia's participation in preparatory committee meetings for the second phase of the Summit remained more or less the same. The Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency and the Geneva mission were the main participants, along with one or two

delegates from the academia and private sector. A noteworthy preparatory work occurred only prior to the Tunis Summit when the government held a national workshop in September 2005[5]. The aim of the national workshop was to sharpen a response of the government's presentation at Tunis and to take stock of Ethiopia's progress in implementing the Geneva Plan of Action on WSIS. The discussions also covered issues of political commitment to implement the Geneva Action Plan, Internet governance and financing of information society.

The stocktaking exercise was useful in reflecting on the progress that was made in implementing the WSIS Plan of Action. It was indicated that the government has made some headway over the two years between phase I and phase II Summits. Progress included the implementation of an e-government portal that integrates public information resources, connection of video conferences to 35 town, connectivity of 600 schools and linking up universities and agricultural research centers to the Internet. The civil society pointed out that they have managed to put the use of Open Source Software on the agenda of national institutions, and a number of multipurpose community centres were established through the assistance of the British Council and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The implementation of a number of high profile ICT project such as a national fiber network, schoolnet, district networking, computerized tax administration provided policy makers with projects to showcase at the WSIS.

Interviews, however indicate that although the meeting and the stocktaking exercise were useful; these were mainly reaction to the commitments than proactive in the sense of bringing up original proposals or providing new input to the key WSIS issues – Internet governance, ICT for development, Internet right and financing of the infrastructure. Ethiopia has not played any significant role in defining or driving the agenda and outcomes of global governance issues discussed at the Summit.

WSIS Phase II culminated with the Tunis Summit that was held between 16-18 November 2005. Once more, almost 50 Heads of State were present, with attendance totalling more than 20,000 participants from 175 countries. The focus of WSIS was on three major issues – ICT for development, Internet governance and financing ICT for development. The Tunis Summit produced two key documents: the Tunis Commitment and the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society. The Tunis Commitment affirms the principles that should underpin the development of the information society globally. Amongst other things, it reaffirmed the WSIS vision for a people-centred, inclusive, development-orientated information society; emphasises the importance of access to ICTs, human rights (particularly freedom of expression) and the ability of ICTs to reinforce them and the special needs of target groups such as women, youth, indigenous people and people with disabilities.

The Tunis Agenda sets out actions to be taken, particularly in the areas of ICT for development financing and Internet governance. On ICT for development, the Tunis

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[5] Ethiopia consults Stakeholders on WSIS, http://www.uneca.org/aisi/iconnectafrica/v2n2.htm#2

Agenda calls for better use of existing and new financing mechanisms, including a new voluntary Digital Solidarity Fund, and a reprioritisation of activities. The Agenda calls for greater attention to project sustainability, small-scale enterprises, local activities, institutional reform and creation of a virtual forum for information sharing on ICT for development. On Internet governance, the Tunis Agenda broadly endorses the current and evolving Internet governance framework, while calling for 'enhanced cooperation' within it. The Agenda provides for stronger action of issues of Internet use and misuse like cyber security, Spam and privacy. It also calls for action in several areas of the Internet with development implications, such as developing country participation and capacity building. The Agenda also provides for the convening of a new Internet Governance Forum for multi-stakeholder dialogue.

With regards to the follow-up, the Tunis Agenda reiterates that the implementation should be based on a multi-stakeholder process at national, regional and international levels, with UN agencies to act as facilitators. The UN Secretary-General was asked to establish a group within the UN Chief Executives Board to facilitate WSIS implementation and to report to the UN General Assembly on interagency coordination processes. The UN's Economic and Social Council has been tasked to oversee follow-up across the UN system. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and United Nations Development Program were requested to convene a meeting of possible moderators/facilitators for the action lines from the Geneva Plan of Action.

Ethiopia participated with a high level of enthusiasm during the second phase of the Summit. A senior delegation led by the Minister of Capacity Building participated in the Summit. This partly reflects the progress Ethiopia has made in terms of implementing various information society projects and government's commitment to do more in the future. It also indicates the influence of the WSIS process on policy makers in Ethiopia. Interviews pointed to the fact that the WSIS process was critical in raising the awareness of senior policy makers and brought the information society debate to the table senior decision makers including the Prime Minister.

III. WSIS Implications to Participation in International Policy Making

The WSIS process was useful in some respects to participation of countries like Ethiopia in international policy making. In Ethiopia the process was instrumental in:

- providing opportunity for the country to participate in an inclusive dialogue on a broad range of issues associated with the global information society
- institutionalisation of global information society debate through the creation of a Task Force and identification of a lead institution
- improving the appreciation of policy makers of the enormous magnitude of opportunities and challenges of the information society

Nonetheless, Ethiopia's participation in the WSIS process was centred around government's agenda and influenced largely by international development agencies

than by strong contributions from civil society, private sector, the academia and the media. There was no strong civil society voice during phase I and II of the Summit.

The absence of a strong civil society and private sector voice both in quantity and quality indicates that Ethiopia has not achieved a truly multi-stakeholder partnership as envisaged in the Plan of Actions of the World Summit for the Information Society. Although WSIS was designed to provide a lasting forum for all the key stakeholders to discuss issues and identify the roles of various partners, this was not achieved. The learning opportunity provided by the WSIS was also lost in Ethiopia due to the absence of vibrant public and private sector engagement in the WSIS and domestic policy issue.

- First, the WSIS process was based on a UN style governance regime with strong government presence. In the face of weak domestic civil society this regime seems to have fitted very well with the prevailing culture in Ethiopia where government provides everything and citizens wait for government actions. WSIS considered the governments as pivotal actors, the private sector to generate material and infrastructure conditions and civil society to make contributions from a democratic perspective.

- Second, there was limited emphasis and support to the role of civil society and private sector in the WSIS process in Ethiopia. While the participation of the civil society in the information society debate at international levels has been fruitful particularly in changing perspective towards the role of public and private investment in information and communication, in the opening of the debate on Internet governance, more importantly in shifting the perspective from a market-oriented and technology-centred information society to equitable access to ICT infrastructures and human resources development, the same level of civil society participation and influence was not achieved at the national levels. In the case of Ethiopia, the role of private sector and civil society remained more or less the same – attending the meeting organized by the government. Neither the civil society and private sector were able to articulate ICT for development issues at national level nor they were able to engage actively in the WSIS debates particularly in the Internet governance, Internet rights and financing mechanisms.

- Third, the Ethiopian civil society and private sector was not well organized and remained weak. There is an inherent weakness of the civil society and private sector in Ethiopia due to long standing state-centred governance system over a couple of decades. The private sector and civil society were not considered as engine of growth during previous socialist regimes and it was difficult to develop a truly active ICT private sector and civil society with a common voice over the three years.

- Fourth, the WSIS was unable to improve the technical and coordinating capacity of policy makers that would have facilitated a true public, private and CSO partnership.

While WSIS has technically concluded, it has given rise to a range of follow-up activities. In the area of Internet governance the WSIS agenda calls for the

convening of the Internet Governance Forum, along with a range of other specific tasks. The weak participation of civil society and private sector in the WSIS process in Ethiopia will likely to result in inadequate presence of these actors in its implementation process.

This inadequate participation of the civil society and private sector would be a challenge during the implementation process, given WSIS' oversimplification of the impact of ICTs in development and Ethiopia's adoption of uncritical integration of ICTs in health, education and public sectors recently. The WSIS excitement seems to overshadow critical analysis of the challenges of mainstreaming of ICTs in major sectors. Mainstreaming ICTs could be problematic because sending computes to schools or districts and connecting these will not automatically lead to their effective use. Without strong presence of the civil society, media, academia and private sector that provide critical input to the government's plans, the WSIS implementation process will continue to be dominated by "trail and error" approach - a process that Ethiopia cannot afford to pursue further due to limited resources and time.

Ethiopia needs to develop appropriate ICT policy framework and implementation plans informed by active civil society and private sector engagement. The following section discusses the participation of civil society and private sector in international policy issues with reference to key themes of WSIS – Internet governance, ICT for Development, Financing Infrastructure and Internet rights.

IV.   Ethiopia's Input to the WSIS II agenda and the quality of participation of stakeholders

As Ethiopia began to make sense of the Declaration of Principles and the Geneva Plan of Action, the second phase of WSIS set in with the issue of financing infrastructure, Internet governance, Internet rights and implementation of ICT for development programmes. The shifting of debate from general declarations to potential actions on financing, Internet governance and Internet right was confusing for stakeholders in Ethiopia. Interviewees noted that although financing infrastructure and ICT for development were clear, the debate on Internet governance was largely imprecise.

Ethiopia's engagement with the WSIS II issues only began after the African Preparatory Committee meeting that was held in Ghana in February 2005 but no substantive national discussion was made until two months before the main Summit. This really means that stakeholders in Ethiopia did not discuss WSIS II issues in detail. Ethiopia's input to the phase II of Summit was encapsulated in a position paper entitled " National WSIS Preparatory process[6]" that was issued in September 2005. The document specifies Ethiopia's understanding of the challenges of Internet governance, financing of infrastructure and follow up actions.

- **Internet Governance**

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[6] The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, National WSIS Preparatory Process,
http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs2/pc3/contributions/co84.pdf

It was clear from Ethiopia's position paper that the issue of Internet governance was not on top on the agenda of the government compared to that of access or financing. This was exacerbated by limited understanding of the complex issues of Internet governance from the contexts of developing countries and lack of prior national Internet governance framework in the country due to state monopoly of telecom and Internet services. Evidently, Ethiopia's interest in Internet governance was on practical policy decisions that influence costs of access and content, speed, reliability and privacy of network services. The National WSIS Preparatory document states that…

> … although the identified problems [by the Working Group on Internet Governance] have indicated most of the major concerns of developing countries, the level of impact of each problem has not been adequately analysed. For instance, the problems associated with interconnection cost and multilingualism as related to access, affordability and localization would have greater implications on resources (human, institutional, financial, etc), especially in the context of developing countries and LDCs. (p, 21) [7]

In spite of these arguments, the mechanisms for participation in Internet governance were not put in place. Ethiopia needs to participate in the follow up to WSIS II particularly in the Internet Governance Forums (IGF) to learn more about the challenges of Internet governance. The IGF would provide an opportunity for discussion of policy issues that were not addressed prior to the WSIS process particularly those pertaining to access costs, content and multilingualism. However, its participation in the global forums would not make much difference unless the country embarks on creating competitive environment for participation of private sector and civil society in the delivery of ICT services particularly the Internet. This would allow for experimentation of different models of Internet governance at local levels and facilitate Ethiopia's contribution at international levels.

Internet rights

The issue of Internet rights was virtually absent from the discussions of WSIS in Ethiopia.

- First, the issues of communication rights were not articulated by the civil society mainly due to the absence of a strong civil society groups and lack of awareness of the subject privatisation of information/digital commons, media concentration/ plurality of content and other Internet right issues like privacy, freedom of expression, etc. The civil society did not only lack the organizational capacity and skills needed to engage with the policy formulation process but also weak to raise fundamental issues such as communications rights.

- Second, the political setting and overall governance atmosphere was not conducive for discussion of Internet right issues openly. Discussions of public

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sphere issues such as freedom of expression, access to information, a healthy public domain and a free and undistorted media and communication regime could raise eyebrows. Consequently, the WSIS debates were largely focused on infrastructure policies and ICT strategies.

- Third, the national WSIS process was government-led and the issues of Internet rights were difficult to surface around government agenda for the information society

- Fourth, Internet rights touch many issues including the right to privacy, rights to freedoms of expression, the right and the duty to preserve and promote the heterogeneity of cultures and languages and the right of human dignity that often opens to hosts of other issues such as reforming the media, creating new organisational models for the production, distribution, and usage of knowledge and information. These do not go well with governments and politicians.

However, there has been significant interest in Ethiopia in content that is culturally and linguistically relevant and the application of open source software. A substantial amount of effort is required to build the capacities of civil society to organize itself and bring less contentious Internet right issues to the table.

- **Financing ICTs Infrastructure**

Financing ICT for development was a key area of interest to Ethiopia due to its involvement in the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and commitment to the Digital Solidarity Fund. The national position paper to WSIS II states that…

> Ethiopia appreciates the global community for considering that ICT should be given higher priority and the need for improvement and innovations of financial mechanisms, including the creation of a voluntary digital solidarity fund in recognition of the existence of digital divide. The country also recognizes and acknowledges the special and specific funding needs of the Least Developed Countries like Ethiopia. Ethiopia also expects and looks forward for active financial support of bilateral and multilateral donors for ICT infrastructure projects and capacity building efforts. (p. 18)

The tone of the document mirrors the prevailing notion of reliance on donor agencies and development partners for financing ICTs. Ethiopia has not been proactive in introducing alternative strategies to financing. Some transformation is required to promote alternative financing mechanisms for deploying ICTs for example through strong focus on private investment, public and private partnerships, by integrating ICTs in sectoral development budget or by promoting integrated rural development where energy, roads, water and ICTs share resources and right of way, etc.

- **Implementation of ICT for Development Projects**

Promotion of ICT for development and taking stock of activities were other areas of the substantive focus of the government during phase II of the WSIS. The

implementation of high profile ICT project such as connecting over 500 districts to central and regional government, extending fiber optics links from the capital to rural towns, linking up over 600 secondary schools and providing them with online education, connecting universities and agricultural research institutions, introduction of ICT curricula to vocational training and computerization of a number of public services such as tax adminstration, trade registration, finance, land registration were achieved during this phase. While these provided the government with opportunity to present concrete projects and reflect on the relationship between these initiatives and the WSIS Plan of Actions, the stocktaking process did not lead to the evaluation of the actual and potential impact of these on the long term economic and social development.

Interviews and review of the various documents made it clear that, notwithstanding the achievement so far, Ethiopia still needs considerable work in:

- Engaging private sector and civil society in providing input to its ICT development plans and encouraging their participation in the implementation of various projects

- Promoting science and technology education and research. Ethiopia needs to focus on quality scientific research and development that underpins its current efforts to harness ICTs in public, private and social sectors

- The re-orientation of the educational systems towards science and mathematics, and the creation of an element of the national culture, which is supportive of innovation and high quality output

- The establishment of incentives to support the creation and growth of knowledge/research intensive enterprises.

- Promotion of private sector investment in the ICT sector by moving away its longstanding resistance to change and liberalization of the ICT sector

More importantly, the government needs to create enabling policy and regulatory framework for private sector provide quality information and communication services and to attract investment.

V. The Implication of the WSIS Process to ICT Policy Making in Ethiopia

The current ICT policy in Ethiopia is characterized by state monopoly of communications services including Internet, mobile and fixed phone services. This will remain a key challenge for the implementation of the Tunis agenda and commitments. So far, the ICT policy formulation process was largely driven by the state that has been resistant to change. Ethiopia was not able to make any headway in the policy front during the WSIS process, although it has been working on developing one for sometime.

The Ethiopian Science and Technology Commission was the first institution to popularise the concept of ICT policy through assistance from the Economic Commission for Africa and other agencies during the second half of 1990s. A series

of meeting took place between 1998 and 1999 where major policy issues were discussed and draft policy document was circulated. A parallel process by the ICT unit at the Prime Minister's office had also led to strategies for increasing ICT use in the public sector. The two initiatives were somewhat duplicative and therefore merged in 2001 following the government reshuffle and the calls for the reduction of the duplication of ICT policy efforts.

A key milestone in the ICT policy process was a conference "Ethiopia in the Knowledge Age" that was organized by the British Council supported by the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organization in 2001 where over 350 people representing policy makers, NGOs, international institutions and the private sector came together to discuss policy issues and made important recommendations. This opened up a significant window of opportunity for civil society and private sector participation in the ICT policy development process. However, the enthusiasm was short lived.

The policy process thereafter left to the Ethiopian Science and Technology Commission and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) that engaged an international and two local consultants to draw up a national ICT policy for Ethiopia! This was not entirely surprising since many African countries rely on external consultants to develop their entire ICT policies at the expense of limited or no involvement of the civil society, private sector and development professionals that have major stakes in the results.

The resulting draft ICT policy paper was issued in 2003 with focus on telecommunication infrastructure and human resources development, content and sectoral applications development, data security and standards, e-government, research and development in the ICT sector. Although, the government did not adopt the policy document at the time, it went ahead on implementation of some of the recommendations. For example, it has established the Ethiopian ICT Development Authority (EICTDA), which was mandated to oversee the development and implementation of a national ICT strategy. EICTDA has also been active in launching high profile ICT projects discussed above including a Woredanet project that aims to connect public institutions to each other and with major ministries at the federal levels. However, a study by the UN Economic Commission for Africa shows that enormous challenges ranging from poor communication between public institutions, poor analytical and functional literacy, shortage of skills to inadequate infrastructure and information management capacity should be dealt with before ICTs can make an impact on the decentralization process[8].

The main focus of the Ethiopian ICT policy during the WSIS process was on providing ICTs for improving public services than other aspects pertaining to the needs of the civil society and private sector. For example, there was limited attention to affordability and competition. There has been some progress with the introduction of ICTs to the public sector, in connecting federal, regional and local governments together, linking up secondary schools launching advanced computer, communications and information science programmes. However, commentators

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[8] UNECA, (2003), ICT for Effective Decentralization: A pilot Study in Selected Woredas (Districts) in Ethiopia, Proceeding of the Meeting of the Committee on Development Information (CODI), Addis Ababa, 17 May 2003

argue that these programmes and projects did not emerge from felt needs and through public discussions of priorities but rather based on the perspectives of a few ICT professionals and advise of donor agencies. For example, there is no policy in place to support the promising ICT industry in Ethiopia. About 200 ICT companies offer ICT services ranging from training on application packages, systems analysis and design, and computer maintenance and some companies have began to offer off-shore services. Failure of the ICT policy to stimulate the capacities of the private sector means their contribution to economic development was greatly stunted.

The absence of civil society means that the ICT policy and regulations tend to be one-dimensional and the policy provisions remain inadequate. Neither the policy process adequately integrates the social vision of development, nor does it cultivates diversity based on geographic, gender, economic, cultural and linguistic differences[9].

However, the government is in the process of reviewing the ICT policy and integrating key items of the Tunis commitment. Although the policy document has not been publicized yet, the process remained state and elite centric with limited involvement of the public. In theory, policies were to be developed to respond to the common needs of the nation as a whole where all with stake provide input; in practice, the process in Ethiopia tends to favor elite and state centric policy development process. Participatory public policies processes that are built around research results, free flow of ideas and innovation are not the norm in Ethiopia. The influence of ICT elites and development agency experts is higher than the public, civil society and the private sector that have more stakes in the ICT policy. The governance space for public, civil society and the private sector is often limited to the consumption of information about these policies. So far the understanding of development agencies and local ICT experts and enthusiasts seem to have informed the development discourse and trajectory in the ICT sector.

While the quality of governance and structural problems such as limited space for public engagement, inadequate drive for innovation and learning have contributed to limited public and private participation in ICT policies, discussions also showed that there is limited external support for the development of a strong civil society in Ethiopia. Surprisingly, except for the DFID funded CATIA programme that aims to increase the awareness of private sector and civil society stakeholders in ICT policy issues with particular emphasis on open source software, there has been little efforts by the donor agencies to engage with the local civil society organizations and private sector to promote the ICT sector and use these instituuions as agents of reform. Neither the WSIS process imporoved the capacity of civil society and private sector to engage in policy issues, nor the followup mecahnisms provide some gurantee for improved multi-stakeholder partnershinp in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia has a wide variety of institutions and networks, including peasant associations, women's associations, regional membership-based rural development associations, economic association, press associations, as well as a range of NGO, research, and academic institutions the could be nurtured to contribute to the development of information and communication technologies. Engaging these groups

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[9] Adam, Lishan (2002), Fostering the Capacities of the Ethiopian Civil Society to Influence ICT Policy, http://www.apc.org/english/rights/africa/research_reports/ethiopia%20civil%20society.pdf

in policy making would be useful for the governments to respond to expectations and strengthen its ICT policy design and implementation.

V I. Conclusion

The discussion above shows that the WSIS process has been useful in raising the awareness of policy makers on the role of ICT in development and creating an environment for government leadership of information society issues in Ethiopia. Before the WSIS, the impetus for ICT for development comes from development agencies such as the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, the United States Agency for International Development and the International Telecommunications Union. The WSIS has at least made clear that government-led policy discourse and a multi-stakeholder process is important for implementing ICT projects. Policy makers who would not have been able to participate in the process began talking about the information society.

The major lasting impact of the WSIS process in Ethiopia is the entry of the government in committing to the information society agendas identified in Tunis. The government has already established a web site (www.ethiopian-informationsociety.org) to continue to take stock of progress in implementing the WSIS plan of action. This will be useful for the country to evaluate itself against the Tunis Agenda and Commitment during the upcoming World Information Technology Form (WITFOR) to he held in Addis Ababa in 2007. The government has also integrated the Tunis agenda and commitment in a revised ICT policy to be issued during the second quarter of 2006.

The participation of government in the WSIS process has provided incentive for it to take up existing ICT programs and policies and bringing these in closer alignment with the WSIS commitments and plan of actions. The WSIS did also open an opportunity to see what other countries are doing and enabled Ethiopia to compare itself against them.

However, the WSIS did not resolve the serious void of policy-making capacity in Ethiopia that hampered the country's ability to make appropriate decisions. In effect, there was no significant change in policy and technical capacity in Ethiopia as a result of the WSIS process. The policy and regulatory process remained government-centred and ICT applications projects continued to be implemented on "trail and error" basis than on reflection based on analysis and public discourse.

The WSIS lacked specifics and focused on more list of recommendations that are difficult to implement at local levels. Experience of national e-strategies in Africa has already shown that translating a list of recommendations into actual policy propsals and programmes is difficult. Ethiopia has not embarked on the implementation of the Tunis Agenda and Commitment and did not put mechanisms for follow up and participation in upcoming meetings including the Internet Governance Forum.

Despite rethroric the actual participation of the civil society and private sector in the domestic ICT policy process has not been acheived in Ethiopia. Although the civil

society and the private sector were `represented` the actual democratic and multistakeholder partnership space was not created due to inherent weakness of the civil society and the failure of the government to engage them in domestic ICT policy and the WSIS process actively. Inadequate participation of civil society also meant that the minority groups such as youth and women were absent from the WSIS debate. For example, Ethiopia's input to the WSIS process does not have any specific reference to gender issues.

Ethiopia was able to rollout some high profile projects with assistance from the World Bank including the government information network infrastructure to connect the federal government with regional governments and district administrations, schoolnet and research networks. These projects were born from the conviction that information and communication are essential instruments for increasing transparency and democracy, empowering citizens and fighting against poverty. It is not clear whether these convictions have been achieved. The WSIS process did not provide a mechanism for governments to move beyond stocktaking to evaluate the impact of ICT programmes on development in a sustained and concerted manner.

Interviewees noted that much of the activities during the WSIS were focussed on quick fix or ad hoc "campaign" approach to provide input to the process than putting forward proactive and long term initiatives. Benefits from ICTs will not occur through connecting schools and public sector alone, they rely on good investment in human capital. Development of engineering and scientific talent that underpins progress in information society is very much needed in Ethiopia, but this will take sometime. Besides building human resources capacity, Ethiopia need to open up the ICT sector to various players to generate competition in telecommunication sector. Competition, liberalization, privatisation and regulations are the other building bocks for information society that are hardly mentioned in Ethiopia. Ethiopia's input to the WSIS process did not make reference to opening up the sector and building research capacity and entrepreneurship that underpin sustainable information society. For the countries like Ethiopia, the WSIS process seems to have improved awareness but did not provide them to make the right choices or move in the right direction.

List of Interviewees

1. Mr. Eshetu Alemu, Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency
2. Dr. Solomon Atnafu, Addis Ababa University
3. Ms. Wubalem Taye, Private Sector
4. Mr. Tarik Hagos, Ethiopian ICT Development Agency
5. Ms. Senait Berihanu, Ethiopian ICT Development Agency