



Report on the online forum:

An Information Society for Uganda

April 14 – 30, 2003

Organised by Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)

<http://www.wougnnet.org/WSIS/ug/isug.html>

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Acknowledgements

1 Introduction

The premise of the World Summit of the Information Society (WSIS) is to declare a common desire and commitment to building an information society based on the principles of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In particular, the new information and communications technologies (ICTs) will become an essential tool and accessible to all. Access to accurate and timely information by women and men can result in enhanced economic activity and social development, for example, increased food production, better hygiene and disease prevention.

While 80% of the Ugandan population lives in rural areas, the bulk of communication services are only available in urban areas. Furthermore, while women are particularly affected by this skewed availability of communication services since the majority of women are based in rural areas, effective participation of women in the information society is imperative if national development objectives are to be met.

In January 2003, participants at a WOUUNET meeting¹ recognised the following challenges in the application of ICTs -- "the essential tool of the information society":

- Language is a constraint to information access especially to the non-literate
- Lack of access to ICT equipment and services
- Lack of ICT skills
- Technophobia especially among women and girls. Gender roles also impact effective participation.
- Information overload and inadequate content

Participants made the following recommendations for the wide application and integration of ICTs:

- Information/content should be available in local languages and in easily accessible formats.
- Research needs to be conducted on information needs in order that appropriate and relevant information is made available
- Training is required in the usage and application of ICTs
- Traditional and modern forms of ICTs should be used for information sharing and dissemination
- Sensitisation and awareness campaigns should be conducted on the use of ICTs
- Regular public fora should be conducted for information sharing on ICT usage and application

In terms of the WSIS, a number of efforts are engaged in "putting gender on the agenda" including the WSIS Gender Caucus, the NGO Gender Strategies Working Group and regional caucuses. The general objective is to lobby for an enabling environment that includes national ICT policies that promote women's empowerment and gender equality. Calls are made for actions including:

- Integration of gender perspectives in the development and implementation of national ICT policies, programmes and strategies
- Promotion of women's economic participation in the information society
- Implementation of measures to ensure women's equal access to literacy, ICT education and training

¹ <http://www.wouUNET.org/Events/wouUNETmeeting1.html>

- Promotion of social responsibility of all stakeholders in an information society
- Promotion of women's rights as human rights
- Enhancement of cultural and knowledge production

"Putting Gender on the Agenda" by Anne Walker of the International Women's Tribune Center (IWTC) presents an overview of the WSIS process including an outline of the WSIS preparatory structure and process, and gender perspectives for the WSIS².

In April 2003, WOUGNET organised an online forum to facilitate contributions to WSIS documents and to Uganda's input to the WSIS. The focus of the forum discussion was to address the issues and concerns of men and women in Uganda. This report presents contributions of the online forum "An Information Society for Uganda" (ISUG) focusing on the two working documents of the WSIS:

- WSIS Draft Declaration of Principles (21 March 2003)
- WSIS Draft Action Plan (21 March 2003)

1.1 Purpose and objectives of the ISUG online forum

Following the WSIS PrepCom II in Geneva, two basic working documents have been produced: a draft Declaration of Principles and a draft Plan of Action. Comments to the two working documents may be submitted by May 31, 2003. PrepCom III will convene in Geneva from September 15-26, 2003, and will consist of two weeks of negotiations on Summit-related issues. There will be an Intercessional Period between PrepCom-II and PrepCom-III dedicated to refining the working documents for the Draft Declaration of Principles and Draft Action Plan ahead of the World Summit on the Information Society in December 2003. The working documents of the WSIS are available in Word and PDF format at: <http://www.itu.int/wsis>

The general objective of the online forum "An Information Society for Uganda" was to facilitate contributions to the WSIS working documents and to Uganda's input to the WSIS from a civil society perspective. The specific objectives of the online forum were to:

- Identify the key principles that should underline an Information Society in Uganda.
- Identify specific actions that are a priority in order to ensure equitable access by all within the Information Society.
- Identify the role of civil society in the development of ICTs and equitable information access in Uganda.

1.2 Background of Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)

Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) is a non-governmental organisation established in May 2000 by several women organisations in Uganda to develop the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) among women as tools to share information and address issues collectively. We define ICTs to include email, the web, radio, television and print media. However, our emphasis is directed towards email and

² <http://www.genderit.org/wsis/index.shtml>

the web, and how these technologies can be integrated with traditional means of information exchange and dissemination for maximum outreach.

The main goal of WOUGNET is to improve conditions of life for Ugandan women by enhancing their capacities and opportunities for exchange, collaboration and information sharing. Currently, WOUGNET operates primarily online and so most members are based in Kampala where it is relatively easier to gain Internet access. However, there are a few members who are based in rural areas or otherwise lack Internet access. Typically, these members have contacts with Internet access and who are able to serve as “information conduits”. In addition, members can interact with WOUGNET by alternative means such as by telephone, fax, post, or at the WOUGNET office.

Challenges to ICT use and access in Uganda are numerous and well documented. For example, in addition to being essentially localized within Kampala, the average cost for an individual local dialup Internet account is about \$50/month (telephone line rental and local call time not included). Women in Uganda face additional barriers to accessing the Internet since 80% of them live in rural areas. Furthermore, a 1998 UNESCO survey on the available sources of information for development in Uganda revealed that most of the available sources of information are either out of reach of rural women or fall short of their information needs³. This is a finding that still holds true today.

However, obstacles should not be perceived as deterrents. Eighteen months prior to the formation of WOUGNET, Dorothy Okello, a specialist and trainer in communication technology, maintained an email list through which women organisations in Uganda would share news and announcements, as well as tips on computer and Internet usage. As interest in the list grew, it became apparent that a structure and mechanism were needed to maintain and facilitate this communication. Until 2000, there was no organisation in Uganda facilitating information exchange from within and abroad. Consultations were held with several well-known women organisations, and the consensus was that a network should be formed and that WOUGNET, once formed, should establish a companion website on which to profile the work of women organisations.

Thus, WOUGNET emerged to fill the need for information sharing and dissemination by capitalising on the opportunities available with email and the Internet. Today, the WOUGNET website and mailing lists remain key sources of information about and for women organisations in Uganda, and are a key resource for members and interested partners. The website was launched in May 2000 and can be accessed at: <http://www.wougnet.org>

³ R. O. Ochieng. *Rural Women and Information in Uganda*, Presentation at the FAO High Level Consultation on Rural Women and Information, Rome, Italy, October 4-6, 1999.

1.3 Agenda for the ISUG online forum, April 14 – 30, 2003

The ISUG online forum proceeded according to the following schedule:

April 14	Introductions & Expectations
April 15 – 16	Key principles: Comments, changes and additions to the WSIS Draft Declaration of Principles (21 March 2003)
April 17 – 18	Specific actions: Comments, changes and additions to the WSIS Draft Action Plan (21 March 2003) and to Uganda's Working Document.
April 21 – 25	Role of civil society in the ICT policy process in Uganda: Discussion on how ICTs support the work of organisations, and how civil society organisations can play a role in the development and application of ICTs in Uganda.
April 28 - 30	Wrap-up: This period was to allow for continued discussion in light of the Easter holiday, April 18-21.

1.4 Participation of organisations and individuals

Thirty-six people participated in the ISUG forum, 22 women and 14 men. Participants were based in twelve countries: Uganda (20), DRC (3), United States (3), United Kingdom (2), Bangladesh (1), Canada (1), China (1), Ivory Coast (1), Kenya (1), Nigeria (1), Tanzania (1), Zimbabwe (1)⁴.

The ISUG forum began with introductions and expectations from the participants on April 14, 2003. Dorothy Okello, WOUGNET Coordinator, started the discussion. She commented that the WSIS, with its focus on ICTs as an essential tool for the information society, is an important avenue for creating awareness, sharing concerns and ideas, and for networking and advocacy on the issue of ICTs in Uganda. While WOUGNET's primary focus is on women and ICTs, indeed equitable access by all men and women in Uganda is a key factor for the transition to an information society.

She indicated that her hope for the forum was to be able to identify and discuss issues and concerns regarding the WSIS process, and that the forum would be an opportunity for creating awareness about various activities and for networking around the WSIS process and beyond.

Introductions from forum participants then followed. In general, participants' expectations for the ISUG forum were:

- Learn from the expertise and experiences of other participants.
- Exchange ideas, comments, and concerns about the WSIS preparation processes and the role of civil society in building a sustainable information society in Uganda.
- Discussion for the benefit of the information society not only in Uganda, but in all countries.
- Increase knowledge on the ICT sector in Uganda as well as contribute to shaping its future.
- Discussion for an ICT policy that emphasises the spread of ICTs countrywide and simultaneously ensures that current resources are fully utilised.

⁴ The number in brackets is of participants based in each country.

The following sections present participant contributions in line with the forum objectives.

2 Key principles that should underline an Information Society in Uganda, April 15 -16, 2003

2.1 Questions formulated to guide the discussion

What are the key principles that should underline a global information society, and in particular, an information society in Uganda? The common vision of the information society, as stated in the WSIS Draft Declaration of Principles, is that we seek to build an information society that is inclusive, where all persons, without distinction of any kind, are empowered freely to create, receive, share and utilize information and knowledge, in any media and regardless of frontiers. The key principles identified in the Draft Declaration of Principles address:

1. Information and communication infrastructure
2. Access to information and knowledge
3. The role of governments, the business sector and civil society in the promotion of ICTs for development
4. Capacity building
5. Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs
6. Enabling environment
7. ICT Applications
8. Cultural identity and linguistic diversity, local content and media development
9. Ethical dimensions of the Information Society
10. International and regional co-operation

For these two days, we call for contributions based on the WSIS Draft Declaration of Principles. Your replies, comments and examples to the following questions are greatly welcomed.

- Are there particular statements you support?
- What are your issues of concern on any statements?
- What modification and/or deletion of specific statements do you recommend?
- What addition(s) do you recommend?

Additional comments are welcome.

When making contributions specific to statements in the draft Declaration, kindly include the section and paragraph number that your contribution addresses. Note, Section 1 of the draft Declaration of Principles consists of contributions by governments, while Section II consists of contributions by observers (including civil society, private sector and international organisations).

2.2 Synthesis of the discussion

The discussion began with a participant noting that the Draft Principles do not emphasise a focus on the gender disparities as one of the main forms of the digital divide especially for women in Least Developed Countries (LDCs). She further noted that just as Section 1 - Paragraph 16 gives the young, a special interest group status requiring special attention, women too should be given similar status to empower them against the numerous unfavourable factors they face in learning and utilising ICTs.

The participant suggested that in Section 1 - Paragraph 20, "and the different social groups" be added after rural levels to cater for further classification of urban and rural communities into gender, age and disability. The last sentence of Paragraph 20 would be modified to:

"Targets should also be set to benchmark the penetration of ICTs services within communities at urban and rural levels **and the different social groups.**"

Another participant mentioned that the WSIS Draft Declaration of Principles is necessarily general in nature reflecting the forum of that magnitude. As an international declaration aimed at informing national or regional policy processes and strategies, he considered the document to be a fairly comprehensive pronouncement on the nature, opportunities, constraints or issues of the emerging information society. He further noted that Articles 19 and 42 (Section 1) address the role of information institutions in universal services, and standards and open source respectively. These are important for effective delivery of ICT benefits to the less advantaged and less privileged in society. He raised a question on what level of specificity would be required of such a document.

Another participant concurred that the Principles document is necessarily general. Based on her experience at the WSIS PrepCom 2, it seems the objective for both documents (Principles and Action Plan) is to have a degree of content and language that will enable consensus among the various governments worldwide. At the WSIS summit in December, it is expected that the Presidents/Heads of State from the various countries will be "agreeing to" a WSIS Declaration of Principles and Action Plan. The accompanying Action Plan document allows a further degree of specification in terms of actions and 'broad' indicators for the various principles. Finally, governments via their ICT policies, WSIS documents, or related mechanisms would "build upon" the actions document by producing a detailed "national action plan" based on their individual goals and priorities. However, the question was raised as to the level of commitment for governments to follow up on the WSIS documents and how binding these documents would be.

Finally, it was suggested that the information needs of the rural population including women, youth and farmers needed to be researched. Further, studies should be conducted to understand how the WSIS and the WSIS working documents relate to the needs of the rural and urban people in individual countries. For example, there is need to address illiteracy and also the need to have WSIS documentation available in local languages.

3 Specific actions to ensure equitable access by all within the Information Society, April 17 – 18, 2003

3.1 Questions formulated to guide the discussion

What are specific actions required in order to ensure equitable access by men and women in the information society, and in particular, an information society in Uganda? The draft Action Plan recognises that the information society has attained different levels of development across the regions and countries of the world. Therefore, it is necessary and more effective to design a flexible Action Plan that can be used as a reference

framework and as a source of guidance and inspiration at both regional and national levels. The list of nine issues addressed by the Action Plan are:

1. Information and communication infrastructure: financing and investment, affordability, development and sustainability
2. Access to information and knowledge
3. The role of governments, the business sector and civil society in the promotion of ICTs for development
4. Capacity building: human resources development, education and training
5. Security
6. Enabling environment
7. Promotion of development-oriented ICT applications for all
8. Cultural identity and linguistic diversity, local content and media development
9. Identifying and overcoming barriers to the achievement of the Information Society with a human perspective

Uganda's vision for ICT development is for a Uganda where national development, especially human development and good governance, are sustainably enhanced, promoted and accelerated by efficient application and use of ICT, including timely access to information. Uganda's Working Document addresses similar issues as in the draft Action Plan. Eight themes are highlighted:

1. Infrastructure: financing, deployment and sustainability
2. Identifying and overcoming barriers to the achievement of the information society
3. The role of government, the business sector and civil society in the promotion of ICTs for development
4. Education, training and human resource development
5. Access to information and communication technologies
6. Information network security
7. Development of a policy and regulatory framework
8. ICT Applications (education, health, culture, poverty eradication, government, employment, business)

Uganda's Working Document is available at: <http://www.ucc.co.ug>

For these two days, we call for contributions based on the WSIS Draft Action Plan and on Uganda's Working Document for the PrepCom II. Your replies, comments and examples to the following questions are greatly welcomed.

- Are there particular statements you support within the two documents?
- What are your issues of concern on any statements in the two documents?
- What modification and/or deletion of specific statements in the two documents do you recommend?
- What addition(s) to the two documents do you recommend?
- What challenges do you foresee in implementing actions proposed in the two documents?
- What recommendations do you make for the implementation of actions proposed?

Additional comments are welcome.

When making contributions specific to statements in the draft Action Plan, kindly include the section and paragraph number that your contribution addresses. Note again, Section 1 of the draft Action Plan consists of contributions by governments, while Section II consists of contributions by observers (including civil society, private sector and international organisations). For Uganda's Working Document, include the chapter, theme, issue and/or action as appropriate.

3.2 Synthesis of the discussion

The discussion began with more questions about who the WSIS documents target and how these documents relate to the needs of the “ordinary people” in different countries. One participant noted that it had been realised by many in civil society present at the PrepCom 2 that if civil society wants to have an impact on the nature of the WSIS documents, there is a need to provide input at local or regional level. This is because governments play a significant role in the WSIS. For example, in this case, it would be easier to raise issues and concerns with the WSIS documents and/or process with the Uganda delegation. In turn, if accepted by the delegation, they would raise these issues or concerns at the WSIS level.

The discussion then turned to Uganda’s Working Document for the Second Preparatory Meeting for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). The initial contributions were framed around the following themes:

Theme 1 – Infrastructure: financing, deployment and sustainability.

Add action item, 9: Integrate gender analysis in the evaluation of initiatives and programs for the inclusion of remote/underserved areas and of men, women and the youth in the deployment of infrastructure and in content development.

Theme 2 – Identifying and overcoming barriers to the achievement of the information society

Amend action item, 2b: The government to work with local authorities to develop indigenous information content in various formats, taking into account the special needs of men, women, youth and disadvantaged groups.

Amend action item, 4: Government should expeditiously conclude ICT policy formulation process. Government should ensure active participation of gender equality advocates in the policy formulation process so as to ensure that the national ICT policy integrates gender equality goals.

Theme 4 – Education, training and human resource development

Amend action item, 4: Set up ICT Standards Authority. Such an authority should include women and youth as well as representatives from disadvantaged groups as decision makers within the Authority.

Theme 8 – ICT Applications (education, health, culture, poverty eradication, government, employment, business)

Amend action item, 1b: Develop, implement, monitor and regularly circulate a comprehensive public awareness campaigns on ICT. Programme development and delivery should explicitly address issues of gender and disadvantaged groups.

Amend action item, 3:

Develop ICT applications in the various sectors (including health, education, agriculture, local administration, etc) with a view to enhance the quality of services and efficiency in service delivery. The development and implementation of the ICT applications should incorporate a gender perspective.

In regard to the phrase "disadvantaged groups" that is mentioned in Theme 2 and 8, a participant posed questions about:

1. Whether the term was previously defined in the document?
2. Whether there is a common understanding of who constitutes "disadvantaged groups"?
3. Whether inclusion of a detailed definition of the phrase is of significance?

The participant further questioned if, for example, the phrase should read:

"...disadvantaged groups (including those disadvantaged physically, mentally, economically, socially, or other ways that do not allow them to participate as fully in society as those without such disadvantages)."

She further clarified that in the US advocacy groups fight tenaciously to be specifically represented in anything that affects distribution of resources, and thus called for the Uganda document to include a standard phrase that is representative of the situation in Uganda. In addition, this phrase should be clearly defined in the document.

Another participant commented that the first appearance of the phrase 'disadvantaged groups' is under Theme 1 - Infrastructure: financing, deployment and sustainability, Strategic issue No.4, and the statement is as follows:

"Special attention should be given to inclusion of remote and underserved areas and disadvantaged groups including women, youth and persons with disabilities in deployment of infrastructure."

The proposed actions under Theme 1 include:

- Government should promote manufacture of ICT equipment locally.
- Government should reduce and where possible waive all taxes on ICT equipment and software and put in place mechanisms for follow up.
- Establish a universal access fund for infrastructure especially geared to underprivileged areas and disadvantaged groups including women, youth and persons with disabilities.
- Create incentives for local and Foreign Direct Investment
- Government to promote and support development of appropriate ICT solutions that are affordable and sustainable.
- Government should promote and where necessary invest in strengthening libraries, archives and documentation centres.

Additional comments were made regarding Uganda's working document:

1. With the convergence of telecommunication, computers, electronic media and other traditional media, there is an increasing inter-linkage between modern ICTs and traditional ICTs. This means that freedom of information; access to information, and freedom of the press should not be hijacked. Under *Theme 6 on Information Network Security*, while it is prudent to ensure network security and develop privacy laws, there should also be a clause promoting human rights, especially the above rights relating to information. This is especially important for African countries, including Uganda, whose media laws are still largely restrictive. If the media laws are left restrictive, how will we develop development-oriented e-commerce and other ICT laws?
2. Closely linked is the suggestion that ICT such as community radio should be recognised as distinct (in purpose and intent) from private media and should

accordingly be exempt from taxation in order to promote ICT for development.

Theme 1, Action 7 should be amended to reflect this difference.

3. Under *Theme 4*, specific mention should be made to develop human resources that can develop local content for ICT, especially women, who have a store-house of knowledge.

In response to the comments on community radio, a participant provided information about a campaign by Uganda Media Women's Association (UMWA) in 2002 for an exemption from paying for technical services it was receiving from government for the community radio station, Mama FM⁵. Participants were interested to know whether UMWA was successful in this campaign and what the Uganda government's position was on the debate on community and private media. UMWA was contacted for further information about the campaign, and reported as follows:

"UMWA/MAMA FM have never managed to get tax exemptions from government despite the efforts that were made. All the taxes were paid to keep Mama Fm on air. We were switched off for some time until we came up with the monies. And each year we have to pay 3.6 million for the use of government services, 5 million Uganda shillings for permission to broadcast and 200,000 Uganda shillings every month for the use of the frequency 101.7. So we are still in a tight spot."

The current exchange rate is about 1US\$ to 2,000 Uganda shillings.

Another participant also expressed her strong reflections that ICT should not be defined as the Internet, at least not for Uganda, or Africa. "Radios are still the most powerful means of bridging our own divide. If it's to bridge all divides, then Radio is it!", she added. She also informed participants that the Media Institute of South Africa (MISA) could be of assistance in developing policy guidelines for the establishment of rural radios, and concluded as follows:

"Rural radios are different from private radios. They serve different purposes. It is therefore hyper-and cyber-important that different licensing procedures be put in place for their functioning. She argued that governments should finance rural radios. Niger and Mali have done a great job in this issue. But in both cases, the civil society has always been before, beside and behind!"

This contribution was followed by observations on the document from another participant:

1. Explicit gender issues are non-existent in the working document. During the stakeholders meeting held in February 2003 to refine the working document, contributions were made to alter, add and be specific on issues that addressed women and men. The participant noted that from the ISUG discussion so far, it was evident that the working document still needed to be refined. She added that during the February stakeholder meeting, there were arguments on the inclusion and specificity of women and men within the working document. The participant concluded that it is clear that there is still poor knowledge and lack of awareness on gender issues and ICTs and their impact on development.
2. The term "disadvantaged" in the Ugandan document should be explicit and be uniform throughout the document and not hide in general terms. There is need to move away from general terms to more specific ones.

⁵ <http://www.wougnet.org/Documents/UMWA/MAMAcampaign.html>

The participant further informed members about a bitter and true experience relating to rural communications development in Uganda. Her organisation, Uganda Development Services (UDS) centre, is trying to promote and demonstrate the use of ICTs in facilitating rural development. One of the conditions for accessing an email connection was to have an international line, which UDS already had because of its fax services. A month ago or so all international lines were withdrawn from this remote town because it no longer made business sense to the service provider.

“Granted but;

- a) What about the committed customers like UDS?
- b) Bear in mind the service provider is one of the 2 national operators and currently have monopoly for provision of telecom services till 2005
- c) What happened in Kamuli is the opposite of the main objectives of the rural communications development policy
- d) Where is the social responsibility of the service provider? Was it right to take a decision without any consultations with or warning to the customers!”

She concluding by stating that it is going to be difficult to achieve equitable access by all with such cases. With such arguments of non-profitability, the digital divide is bound to perpetuate and widen.

4 Role of civil society in ICT development and in equitable information access in Uganda, April 21 – 25, 2003

4.1 Questions formulated to guide the discussion

Additional proposals to the WSIS Africa Regional - Bamako Declaration made at the PrepCom 2 included the following vision for the information society in Africa:

"The information society we envisage is the one which reduces poverty and creates wealth to satisfy the basic needs and rights of civilisation, reinforces democracy, dialogue and good governance through the use of information and communication technologies in all sectors of society.

It will be an environment where information and knowledge are disseminated and utilised by all sectors of the population, particularly, the disenfranchised groups such as women, youth and the disabled.

The building of an equitable and balanced information society will not be realised without a strong knowledge driven industrial and service sector, backed by accompanying political will and the involvement of all the stakeholders engaged in economic and social development activities, thus laying the foundation for sustainable development.

Beyond the responsibilities of governments in spearheading development activities in countries, experience has also shown that civil society and the private sector have an important role to play in the development process."

Uganda's Telecommunications Policy seeks to increase the penetration and level of telecommunication services in the country primarily through private sector investment. A

Rural Communications Development Policy has also been developed with a principle objective to ensure that basic communication services of acceptable quality are accessible, at affordable prices, and at reasonable distances, by all people in Uganda. The policy is available online at the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) website at: <http://www.ucc.co.ug>

For this week, we discuss the role of civil society in ICT for Development in Uganda and in ensuring equitable information access by men and women in Uganda. Civil society can certainly play a significant role, for example, by creating awareness, by conducting training, and by initiating/introducing information services within the communities they work. Your replies, comments and examples to the following questions are greatly welcomed.

- In what ways do ICTs support the work of your organisation?
- In what ways do Uganda's ICT policies support and/or hinder the work of your organisation?
- In what ways can civil society play a significant role in the development and application of ICTs in Uganda?
- With reference to Uganda's working document:
 - what programs that you/your organisation conducts support the proposed strategic issues and actions
 - what recommendations do you make for the implementation of the proposed strategic issues and actions
 - what additional strategic actions and/or issues should be addressed
 - what challenges do you foresee in implementing the actions proposed

Additional comments related to civil society's role are welcome.

4.2 Synthesis of the discussion

The discussion began with a participant noting that, in Uganda, the Gender and ICT advocacy groups should be doing more than they are right now. In her opinion, the role of such groups is to create awareness and to advocate for favourable rural (rural Uganda being the largest part of Uganda) communications development policy and implementation.

She further informed participants that in March 2003, a Civil Society Organisation (CSO) conference organised by the National NGO Forum and the Community Development Resource Network was held in Kampala on the role of civil society in policy processes. The major conclusions from the conference were that civil society needs to:

- get organised;
- decide to be knowledgeable;
- decide to participate;
- network and build coalitions around certain advocacy issues.

She believes the same is true for the role of CSOs in building an information society.

A participant raised the question about open source software and its potential, opportunities and challenges for ICT in developing countries. The participant asked if fellow participants were using such software in their programs and activities, and what local, national or regional actions were required to support the work they were doing.

A participant from Council for Economic empowerment for Women of Africa - Uganda chapter (CEEWA) indicated that they were using Linux for their internet/email server. Linux was chosen because of its reliability and security in the Internet environment, and because it is freely available. However, she noted that Linux is still a difficult software to use, especially as a client operating system for ordinary users. Language is an additional problem since all the programs and much of the information on the web is in foreign languages. CEEWA's clientele who are rural women entrepreneurs, the majority of whom have low levels of education, find it difficult to use the computer and internet.

In the context of CEEWA, the participant proposed that the local, national or regional action that can support their work would be efforts towards developing more user-friendly open software, customized for different languages, groups, etc. As an example, she proposed that software with capabilities of translating from English to the local languages would be a great service to the semi-literate population trying to get on the internet.

A forum participant who is also a member of the Free Software and Open Source Foundation for Africa (FOSSFA⁶) provided the following information about Open Source Software:

Open Source Software: What is it and what does it offer?

OSS refers to software that is developed, tested, or improved through public collaboration and distributed with the understanding that it will be shared with others, ensuring open future collaboration. It is available to anyone, usually at little or no cost, it does not attract proprietary licence fees and it may be freely redistributed. Users also have access to the source code revealing the inner workings of the software, hence the term "Open source software". Essentially OSS is developed through volunteers, who collaborate to develop the software and then improve and extend it over time. The software is then made available freely or with limited conditionality to any user. The model works best for software that has a wide application and a large number of users.

Opportunities that OSS offers

OSS has emerged as a powerful new way of generating knowledge and economic value. The model can have profound educational benefits but even without taking advantage of the freedom offered by access to the source, the non-proprietary status of open source software has huge implications for affordable IT solutions in both the public and private sectors. Such access has the potential of empowering people in ways that proprietary software (PS) does not allow. It offers users the choice to probe, modify, learn from and customise the software, harnessing the power of many small contributions from a large network of individuals to suit their needs. OSS is an especially useful tool to allow developing countries to leapfrog into the information age.

Involvement in OSS can range from simply using existing OSS, to procuring OSS software, to modifying existing OSS for internal use, to modifying OSS software

⁶ <http://www.fossfa.org>

and contributing the modifications to a collective development effort, to managing and supporting one's own OSS project. Each level of involvement has different benefits, requirements and commitment levels, and thus warrants separate approaches to implementation. Even with this breakdown, some levels can be further subdivided. For example, in the simplest case of using existing OSS, this use can be at the server level or the client machine level. OSS servers are extremely popular (i.e. OSS for web servers, database servers, etc.) because of their stability, security and support for open standards.

Using OSS on servers affects fewer machines and has much less impact on training than deploying OSS on client machines. Also, OSS desktops have not traditionally been widely deployed compared to OSS servers.

In summary, major benefits of open software and open standards include:

1. Reduced costs and less dependency on imported technology and skills
2. Affordable software for individuals, enterprise and Government
3. Universal access through mass software rollout without costly licensing implications
4. Access to Government data without barriers of PS and data formats
5. Ability to customise software to local languages and cultures
6. Lowered barriers to entry for software businesses
7. Participation in global networks of software development
8. Reduced security risks due to extensive review and access to source code

In direct response to the first participant's question regarding translation, he said that not only do they want to have the software to translate text into local languages, but we want to have the operating system in local languages as well. So even if you are not a programmer, you can still be actively involved in developing the software, by working with a programmer as a translator.

The Foundation is currently in the process of developing a 2-year Action Plan to develop and promote the use of OSS in Africa, and comments and contributions are all welcome. The document can be viewed at <http://www.wouqnet.org/ICTpolicy/opensource.html>

On the subject of access to the internet, a participant requested to know what local, national and regional statistics and studies were available on how many women, girls and other people have access to the internet. He proposed the such records should include the challenges specific to given areas. In addition, the participant wanted to know how business on the internet could be conducted in languages other than English.

In response, a participant provided a link to the study "Impact of cyber cafés on information services in Uganda" by Samuel Gitta and J.R. Ikoja-Odongo⁷. The paper assessed the impact of cyber cafés on the provision of information services in Uganda. The study focused on café users at 30 cafés within Kampala, and covered 63

⁷ First Monday, volume 8, number 4 (April 2003), http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue8_4/gitta/index.html

respondents. The respondents were categorised by age, gender, education level, and monthly income. In terms of age, most of the respondents were in the age group 20-39. In terms of gender, about 65% were male and it was assumed that Ugandan females usually shy away from technologies and are not usually adventurous. In terms of education, most had attained university education. In terms of monthly income, most did not report an income (and it is explained that this is because the majority of the respondents were students). All female respondents indicated e-mail as one of their Internet applications.

The study concluded that cyber café use demonstrates a tremendous future for the Internet society in Uganda and that the potential for meeting user needs in Uganda is high. It was however noted that the application of the Internet in the various disciplines and professions is hampered by low user skills, limited facilities, lack of support for the rural community, low downloading speed, high charges, and a lack of monitoring. Recommendations suggested that ICT policies be instituted and computers and the Internet be made part of the school curriculum to equip Ugandans with the necessary skills and that these new Internet services be extended to the Ugandan rural community as well.

In response to the article, a participant noted that the statement "females usually shy away from technologies and are not usually adventurous" was not empirically tested by that study. He further asked whether the statement was yet another pointer towards gender inequalities in as far as ICTs are concerned.

The participant further noted: "...What is interesting (or not so interesting) with Internet cafes is that most of them, if not all of them, employ "beautiful girls", as reported in the New Vision late last year. Does that suggest that women have taken up strategic positions as "ICT intermediaries" and not end users? Or are proprietors of the facilities only exploiting the "beautiful girls?" ...". He added that he sensed an element of exploitation and suggested that Internet cafes shouldn't employ girls because they are beautiful but look out for skilled people or better still provide an opportunity to acquire required skills. He then asked whether his proposal was a valid (and gender sensitive) response?

In response to the study, a participant asked: "Given the majority of women in Uganda (1) are in rural areas, (2) have lower education and literacy levels than men, (3) have less income than men, if this article presents the situation in Kampala ("the most connected place"), what can the situation in the rural areas be like?"

She informed participants about the Kampala Know How Conference hosted in July 2002 by Isis-WICCE⁸. Among its goals, the conference was to facilitate networking so as to create programs that make information on women's issues and concerns highly accessible and visible. Recommendations relating to rural women included:

- Surveys and studies already underway on information needs of rural women should be supported and new research is recommended.
- There is need to raise and earmark funds for increasing rural women's access to information.

⁸ <http://www.isis.or.ug/knowhow>

- Rural multi-purpose community telecenters should be supported and encouraged, with special effort made to develop programmes that are appropriate, relevant and in local languages for women farmers and other marginalised sectors.

Another participant concurred with an earlier contribution that, in many towns in his region, he has seen several cafes use the “beautiful girls”. However, he added that in the rural areas, the primary problem was that people had low levels of education and knowledge of foreign languages such as French and English. Without some knowledge of English, he explained, it is very difficult to access and make use of the Internet tools and it is also difficult to have more girls and women trained in internet skills.

He further agreed that the study is an indicator of the challenges involved in making internet access widely available. This is because such access requires one to be able to read and write, and the internet information is not available in local languages. He concluded that the projects to make internet access widely available to men and women should have the following strategic views:

1. The community should be engaged in the formation of access points, and should be economically empowered to make use of these facilities.
2. The community should be equipped with the necessary skills to locally manage the internet centre.
3. All children within the village should have the opportunity to access the centre.

A participant raised a point of concern that action plans might leave out other significant portions of the population who do not have activists to intervene on their behalf. She then raised the following questions:

- How many in Uganda have been incapacitated by the war? Will it not be great to think about handicaps right from the beginning?
- How many are out-of-school? Have-been, never-went, and would-love-to-but-cannot?
- How many can neither read nor write and would need ICTs to be repackaged?

She also raised concerns about how governments would follow through on the WSIS documents:

- What certitude do we have that governments will build their national action plans on the principles and action plans of the WSIS? Can we assign a percentage?
- On national plans, how varied will the difference between what the documents say and what is implemented be?
- What measures are they to follow-up on each of these steps?

Finally, in regards to the role of civil society in the implementation and development of Uganda's ICT vision, the same participant had the following questions:

- In what ways can civil society play a significant role in the development and application of ICTs in Uganda?
- How strong is the civil society in general? How organized? How focused? What is the decision-maker/CSO relationship like?
- How many CSOs are in the ICT arena? Are they the same as Human Rights CSOs - women rights, children rights, environment etc.?
- Is there coordination for ICTs with the CSOs?

Another participant concurred with the concerns on the availability of activists to campaign for the interests of various groups:

- What can be done to ensure that all groups are catered for?
- How can we create awareness around ICTs for development so that we can have more groups lobbying and actively participating to ensure that their needs are accounted for?

She also noted that while it is true or at least the sentiment is that the Principles and Action Plan documents should enable governments to build their own plans, what is still unanswered is how binding these documents are upon the governments.

The discussion concluded by a participant giving a summary of a project planned for implementation in a rural area:

Project Objectives

- To increase literacy levels among community members
- To promote use of information, communication technology
- To create large scale job opportunities
- To transmit information of project in Saboti community
- To offer affordable communication, advertisement and promotion services to the public
- To act as a vehicle for local commerce

Project/system description

Establishment of a local radio station as an integral part of an existing project. Radios are the main mode of communication for the Saboti inhabitants. Hence the radio station will be useful for information exchange, for transmissions by interested groups and emergency services, and for broadcasting information on cultural and sporting activities. In addition, PV Televisions will be set up for study purpose in schools.

Project Status

The project work plan is ready though organizational preparatory work will take place from August 2003 to April 2004 before full project implementation.

5 Concluding Remarks

Among the issues highlighted by the ISUG online forum, two primary issues have emerged:

- The need for gender equity to be addressed at all levels, at the WSIS level and also within national plans
- The need for action plans to cater to all segments of a country's population. Particular attention should be placed on the information needs and access of rural communities.

It is hoped that the concerns raised by participants in the ISUG forum will be taken into account by the Uganda WSIS Taskforce. Furthermore, it is hoped that this document contributes to the work by others in civil society worldwide seeking to ensure an equitable information society for all.

In closing, the WOUNET Coordinator thanked everyone for their participation in the ISUG forum. She informed participants that the ISUG report would be distributed to the participants, members of the National WSIS Taskforce, and to the content group of the WSIS Africa Civil Society Caucus so that participants' contributions could be channeled to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Secretariat as well.

The participants thanked the coordinating team and the members of the forum for a lively discussion that has definitely enriched the understanding of ICT policies and country experiences in ICT. They further hoped this marks the beginning of an ongoing information policy discourse, experience sharing and collaborations.

In regards to the ISUG forum itself, participants' evaluation reveals that the forum benefits have included the following:

- Opportunity to get a variety of pertinent and useful comments about Uganda's working document
- Opportunity to get updated on the WSIS process and documents
- Opportunity to learn about the WSIS process
- Opportunity to learn about the diverse issues of ICTs, civil society and sustainable development
- Opportunity to share ideas and to learn from colleagues with an interest in ICT and gender equality in the emerging information society

However, it was noted that the limited time for the forum did not allow for in-depth analysis of the issues. Calls were also made for similar discussion opportunities at national levels in other African countries.

Finally, the following topics were proposed as topics for future forums:

- Gender and ICTs in rural areas
- Critical analysis of what has been done since, for example, Bamako 2002, Addis 2002.
- Role of libraries in the information society. Libraries employ a significant number of women and, therefore, put women at the forefront in the information transfer process. If these institutions are afforded more visibility in policy processes, specifically universal access initiatives, so will women's role as providers and users of ICT to access development information.

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