



Internet Governance Forum: 2007 and Beyond

February 9, 2007

WITSA & The IGF

The World Information Technology and Services Alliance (WITSA), a consortium of national and regional IT industry associations in more than 60 countries around the world, was pleased to be an active participant at the inaugural UN Global Internet Forum, which took place in Athens, Greece, on October 30 – November 2, 2006.

Previously, WITSA had been an active participant in the preparatory meetings for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) since its inception, and further contributed to this process as a founding member of the Coordinating Committee of Business Interlocutors (CCBI) – an umbrella group established by the International Chamber of Commerce to provide unified business input to the WSIS. WITSA is also a founding partner and member of the current industry initiative, Business Action to Support the Information Society (BASIS), which explores issues related to the IGF and beyond.

WITSA has published several statements related to the IGF, WSIS I and WSIS II, stressing the importance of education, the underlying telecommunications infrastructure, and applications that benefit society such as e-health and e-education. WITSA also called on governments to identify and focus on a set of priority issues that highlight the fundamental building blocks of an information society, and to recognize that capabilities based on ICTs can serve as vital tools for sustainable economic development, knowledge sharing, societal interaction and freedom of expression, particularly in the world's least developed countries.

WITSA was satisfied with the final decisions made by the Tunis Summit, in particular those that continued support for the security and stability of the Internet. In particular, WITSA praised the decision that private sector representatives be able to participate in the IGF on an equal basis with governments and other stakeholders. WITSA is a strong supporter of the IGF and its important role in providing a multi-stakeholder forum for the exchange of views on Internet governance related issues.

WITSA strongly supported the four inaugural IGF themes, openness, security, diversity and access, as well as the crosscutting theme of capacity building. Indeed, WITSA presented a detailed report in preparation for the Athens forum, which proposed a ten point plan with emphasis on the security and reliability of ICT networks and services; the integration of ICTs in government services; and the establishment of pro-competitive, predictable, transparent and non-discriminatory national legal systems. The WITSA report also urged the removal of trade and innovation barriers, and encouraged the creation of public-private partnerships in education and training to develop much needed skills.

WITSA also contributed to the inaugural IGF program in Athens by hosting one of the event workshops, entitled "Enhancing Multi-Stakeholder Participation in ICT Policy Making", in cooperation with the Global Information Infrastructure Commission (GIIC). The WITSA/GIIC Workshop explored effective policy processes that enhance access to ICTs and the Internet, and provided real life examples from several different WITSA affiliated countries (including Uganda, Egypt, Bangladesh, Kenya, Lebanon, Japan and the U.S.).

Looking Ahead

As a WSIS accredited organization, WITSA is looking forward to participating in and contributing to the February 13 IGF stocktaking session in Geneva, Switzerland, with a view to pave the way forward to the next phase of the Forum, taking place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from November 12-15, 2007.

A high level of business participation at the IGF is critical to its continued success, and in that regard, WITSA will reach out to all of its members to encourage their attendance of the November forum and to be an active part of this important interaction and dialogue on Internet Governance. Moreover, WITSA promotes awareness of and interest in the IGF at its conferences and meetings; notably the November 4-6, 2007 Global Public Policy Conference (GPPC 2007; www.gppc2007.com), which will take place in Cairo (Egypt), as well as the May 18-22, 2008 World Congress on IT (WCIT 2008; www.wcit2008.org), which will be held in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia).

As the IGF looks ahead to Rio and beyond, it should not seek to change or expand its mission, which was the result of lengthy and careful negotiations within the WSIS. It has a unique and key role to play and should seek to extend its reach within this mandate. Moreover, the Advisory Committee should not take on an authoritative role by developing positions themselves, but must remain focused on important process issues and continue to be a critical resource to ensure even-handedness between vast groups of stakeholders.

At the February 13, 2007 IGF stakeholders meeting, the focus should be on creating a standardized framework and format that can be relied upon as the structure of future IGFs. Having a framework for how the forum works will augment the ability to focus in on the substance and interactions, rather than a continued debate about the structure of the event.

While the inaugural IGF in Athens was an undisputed success on most fronts, WITSA has made a few observations and suggested improvements with regard to the plenary panels and workshops. The massive size of the plenary panels inhibited spontaneous exchanges and kept discussions more superficial than they might have been with fewer discussants. It could be more useful to have three to four panels no more than 90 minutes in duration, rather than two at three hours each. As regards the workshops, WITSA supports both lengthy and shorter high-level workshops. However, workshops should not be scheduled while plenary sessions or other closely related workshops are in progress.

Thematically, the IGF should continue to emphasize the role of the Internet in economic development and the importance of capacity building as a vehicle to boost Internet access in developing countries. Beyond capacity building, information infrastructure, access, and security remain very important topics to WITSA members in 2007.

Finally, WITSA supports an independent IGF Secretariat with appropriate staff support that can support the IGF events, and maintain continuity between its annual meetings. WITSA applauds the Secretariat's efforts to provide online content, including web casts and audio casts, as well as real-time transcriptions from the IGF sessions. However, greater transparency on the operations of the Advisory Group would be welcomed, including the publication of meeting minutes or summaries.

WITSA remains committed to the success of the IGF, consistent with the mandate from the WSIS, and anticipate an even greater business presence at the IGF Rio conference in 2007.