UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT (CSTD)

Contribution to the CSTD ten-year review of the implementation of WSIS outcomes

Submitted by

UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Ten Year Review of WSIS Implementation: Questionnaire
Submission from UNHCR
28 August 2014

Introduction

UNHCR is mandated to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide. Its primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. It strives to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another State, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally or to resettle in a third country. In addition, UNHCR plays an important role within the UN system in the protection and pursuit of solutions for internally displaced persons. UNHCR also plays an important role in the identification, protection, prevention and reduction of statelessness.

UNHCR is a humanitarian agency; however, as part of UNHCR's work, the agency promotes and advocates for the establishment of a favorable protection environment for refugees and other persons of concern as well as undertakes capacity building activities with government and civil society to ensure that there are fair protection process in place for refugees and that populations of concern have opportunities to meet their basic needs and have access to essential services.

By end-2013, 51.2 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations. Some 16.7 million persons were refugees: 11.7 million of whom under UNHCR's mandate and 5.0 million Palestinian refugees registered by UNRWA. The global figure includes 33.3 million internally displaced persons and close to 1.2 million asylum-seekers. If these 51.2 million persons were a nation, they would make up the 26th largest in the world.

It is in the context of UNHCR's work to protect and secure solutions for refugees, internally displaced and stateless persons that we are offering our reflections on the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society over the last 10 years.

1. **To what extent, in your experience, has the "people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society", envisaged in the opening paragraph of the WSIS Geneva Declaration of Principles, developed in the ten years since WSIS?**

As reflected in UNCTAD's report to the Economic and Social Council on progress made in the implementation and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society of 3 March 2014, progress in achieving the vision of the World Summit has been uneven. While the supply and demand for information and communication technology (ICT) has continued to grow, there remain significant gaps in access and availability. The Declaration of Principles from the World Summit states that "we shall pay particular attention to the special needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups of society including … internally displaced person and refugees" and states that "we are resolute to empower the poor, particularly those living in remote, rural and marginalized urban areas". Refugee and internally displaced persons are typically found in just those areas and in many instances, even if there are efforts and programmes to ensure that marginalized populations have fair and reasonable access to ICT, refugees and internally displaced are not included in these programmes, and in some case specifically excluded, often out of concern that there inclusion will create an incentive for more persons to seek asylum or sanctuary. There are exceptions of course, but UNHCR's view is that refugee and internally displaced person have not fully benefited from the "people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society" envisioned at the summit

nor have they been sufficiently targeted for support by states to ensure their access to the benefits that access to ICT can bring.

2. How far do you consider the implementation of specific WSIS outcomes to have been achieved?

As indicated in our response to the earlier question, and in relation to specific WSIS outcomes for refugees, internally displaced and other persons of concern to UNHCR, it is clear that refugees and internally displaced person in many cases remain among the most marginalized of groups and do not have appropriate access to modern information and communications technology including the telephone, television, personal computers and the Internet.

3. How has the implementation of WSIS outcomes contributed towards the development of a "people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society"?

In UNHCR's operations where access to ICT has been facilitated and promoted, one can see significant and tangible benefits for refugees and the internally displaced. ICT is an important tool for empowering these communities to enable them to achieve a greater degree of self-reliance and to communicate with family members and communities from whom they are separated. Of particular importance for refugees and internally displaced has been the success in using ICT for education.

The challenge around this, given the location of many refugees and internally displaced in remote areas, is the lack of infrastructure and connectivity. While there are good examples of efforts to mobilize service providers to bring connectivity to remote areas where both local populations and refugees are located, much more needs to be done to promote public/ private/ international partnerships to deliver connectivity and ICT services to refugee and IDP populations without such access today. It is often the case as well that local populations co-located with refugee and the internally displaced also lack access to ICT services.

4. What are the challenges to the implementation of WSIS outcomes? What are the challenges that have inhibited the emergence of a "people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society"?

In relation to UNHCR's mandate for international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide, significant challenges remain in terms achieving the vision of a "people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society". While host countries around the world continue to display extraordinary generosity in providing asylum for asylum seeker and refugees, there remains a critical need for increased international cooperation to share burdens and responsibilities in order to improve the conditions of asylum and enable refugees to live in dignity, enjoy basic rights and benefit from access to ICT.

The challenges are attitudinal, political and financial. The attitudinal challenges relate to continued reluctance on the part of countries to provide asylum in a generous manner and a belief that restricting refugee rights will deter population movement while granting rights will create a pull factor for more people to move. The political challenges relate to the lack of political will to address the root causes of conflict, violence and human rights abuses that lead to population displacement. When the number of displaced persons continue to rise and systems for support risk being overwhelmed, issues such as improved access to ICT services are often de-prioritized given the necessity of ensure basic needs and services are provided. The financial challenges have to do with the need to broaden the coalition of support for refuges and internally displaced persons so that more equable burden sharing can be achieved.

5. **How are these challenges being addressed? What approaches have proved to be effective in your experience?**

It is evident from our experience that bridging the digital divide and ensuring access to ICT for refugees and internally displaced persons is not and cannot be the responsibility of one entity alone. What works is partnership, and UNHCR has successfully worked with government and non-governmental partners to improve access to refugees in camps as well as in urban settings. What is needed is to expand these partnerships, and, critically, begin the partnership and coalition building process at the beginning of refugee emergencies.

6. **What do you consider the most important emerging trends in technology and other aspects of ICTs which have affected implementation of WSIS outcomes since the Summit? What has been their impact?**

In terms of ensuring that refugees and displaced persons benefit from the emerging information society and have access to connectivity and ICT services, the most important emerging trend is the increased recognition of the potential of information technology and an increasingly informed and connected world to improve humanitarian action and empower affected populations such as refugees and IDPs. New tools and improved communication in particular hold enormous potential to improve the quality of humanitarian action, and there has been a surge of innovation around how to tap this potential across the humanitarian community. The challenge is to mobilize this increased recognition of access to information and communication services and bridging the digital gap in a manner that leads to tangible improvements for refugees and the internally displaced.

7. **What should be the priorities for stakeholders seeking to achieve WSIS outcomes and progress towards the Information Society, taking into account emerging trends?**

In terms of ensuring that refugees and displaced persons benefit from the emerging information society and have access to connectivity and ICT services, there needs to be renewed commitment to focusing on the special needs of marginalized communities including refugees and displaced persons through both better integration of these groups into development programmes and provision of special support to enable them to use access to ICT services to empower themselves and enable them to become increasingly self-reliant.

8. **What role should information and communications play in the implementation of the post-2015 development agenda?**

Increasing access to the benefits of information and communications for marginalized populations including refugee and internally displaced persons should be prominently reflected in the post-2015 development agenda. In spite of the important progress in access to connectivity and ICT services across the world, there remains a large scale digital divide between those that have access to modern ICT and those who don't, or have restricted access. Shrinking and bridging the digital divide will be an important means of improving literacy, promoting democracy, support social mobility and economic equality as well as supporting improved economic growth not just for refugees and the internally displaced but for marginalized populations and communities everywhere.