

Draft WGIG Issue Paper on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

This paper is a 'draft working paper' reflecting the preliminary findings of the drafting team. It has been subject to review by all WGIG members, but it does not necessarily present a consensus position nor does it contain agreed language accepted by every member. The purpose of this draft is to provide a basis for the ongoing work of the group. It is therefore not to be seen as a chapter of the final WGIG report, but rather as raw material that will be used when drafting the report. This draft working paper has been published on the WGIG website for public comment, so it will evolve, taking into account input from governments and stakeholders.

1. Issue (what?)

Please identify an issue listed on the table “Inventory of Public Policy Issues” and describe this issue.

Cultural and linguistic diversity

With the rapid proliferation of the Internet, one of the biggest challenges facing the industry is effectively catering to a wide array of national regional and local markets by providing content and applications that are adapted in accordance with cultural and linguistic needs. Despite being the dominant and most pervasive communications medium and axis of modern economies, the Internet can also be the unwitting vehicle for social exclusion, suppression of vulnerable cultures and language, and penalization of already marginalized communities through the requirement to learn and adopt alien culture and language in order to partake of its promises.

Some of the impediments leading to linguistic and cultural marginalization on the Internet include the technical (e.g. lack of set standards of alphabetic characters; lack of e-translator software; lack of representation in the UNICODE, lack of necessary keyboard drivers; lack of enough natural language processing research and development; etc.). Other types of impediments are economic (e.g. languages spoken by small groups or economically disadvantaged groups – “Languages do not have economic power”).

In its common vision of the Information Society the WSIS Declaration of principles declares a “common desire and commitment to build a people-centered, inclusive Information Society where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and people[s] to achieve their full potential and improve their quality of life in a sustainable manner.” Without attending to the issue of cultural and linguistic diversity, this vision cannot be attained for the simple reason that culture and language are necessary in the creation, accessing, utilization and sharing of information and knowledge. This calls for the cultural and linguistic diversity across the world to be reflected in the content of the Internet.

2. Attribution to category / ies

Please attribute the issue to one or more of the five categories on the table “Inventory of Public Policy Issues and Priorities”.

Multilingualism and Content

3. SWOT Analysis

Please assess the strengths and weaknesses of the present system (internal factors). What are its opportunities and threats (external factors)?

Threats: Present system not Internationally coordinated; dominant cultures and languages already catered for – others have to fight for the vulnerable; vulnerable cultures and languages unfortunately often correspond to communities that exhibit poverty and low-literacy and whose Internet presence now and in the foreseeable future is not strong – creating doubts about sustainability of interventions; Already dominant culture and languages have taken their toll on the vulnerable through other means such as television and cinema; governments of developing countries are faced with challenges of meeting basic needs of citizens (including meeting the MDGs), to find this issue of priority.

4. Actors (who, with whom?)

Please identify the main actor (government, private sector, civil society or international organization) dealing with this issue and who else among the relevant stakeholders is involved.

Main actors include international agencies e.g. UNESCO, Multi-lateral organs e.g. Council of Europe, and associations e.g. Association des Etats Generaux des Etudiants de l'Europe (AEGEE). Others include ACALAN, Francophonie and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). In general the Governments of developing have not yet taken up the issue seriously.

5. Forums (where?)

(a) who participates

(b) nature of forum

Please describe where this issue is being discussed or dealt with and at what intervals? Do these meetings make decisions? What is the nature of possible decisions? Who participates in discussions and decision-making processes? What are the decision-making procedures?

- a) The main participants are usually those associated with the actors mentioned in 4 above.
- b) Mainly international conferences e.g. 6-7 May 2005 “multi-lingualism through cultural diversity” conference in Bamako, Mali.

6. Governance mechanisms (how?)

(a) objectives of the rules system

(b) content of principles, norms and rules

Please describe the overarching objectives of the rules system or norms in question. What is the actual content of the principles, norms and rules designed to achieve these objectives?

- a) To achieve worldwide access to e-contents in all languages, improve the linguistic capabilities of users and create and develop tools for multi-lingual access to the Internet.
- b) To encourage the learning of other person's languages and cultures by using the Internet in order to bring the world's people together, remove barriers and fears.
- c) To preserve endangered languages and cultures
- d) To promote and facilitate “life-long language learning”
- e) To transform communities that use marginalized languages into cyber communities
- f) To use the Internet as a teaching tool to marginalized communities through using their own languages and cultural approaches.

7. Adequacy measured against criteria / benchmarks set out in Declaration of Principles:

(a) Multilateral

Yes if done through UN agencies such as UNESCO

(b) Transparent

Not applicable since many actors

(c) Democratic

Not applicable since many actors

(d) capacity to address Internet governance in a coordinated manner

Not coordinated since many actors.

(e) multi-stakeholder approach

Not applicable since many actors

(f) other

Please assess whether the mechanisms described above are adequate when measured against the criteria or benchmarks set out in the Declaration of Principles. Are they multilateral, transparent and democratic? Are they addressed in a coordinated manner? Are they based on a multi-stakeholder approach? Are there other principles they respect or should respect?

8. Additional comments

Please make any additional comments you may wish to make with regard to this issue.