

Beyond the Information Society

Enabling Communities to Create the World We Want

(A statement prepared for “Paving the Road to Tunis – WSIS II: The Views of Canada’s Civil Society on the Geneva Plan of Action and the Prospects for Phase II,” Winnipeg, May 13-15, 2005)

All around the world, communities are at the heart of social and economic life. On-line and off-line, they are dynamic, creative, adaptive and adoptive. We see communities as the social networks that will, together, forge the “Learning Society” that national and international governments seek to facilitate.

Each with their own context and form, communities share the following characteristics:

1. Communities, whether of place, practice or interest, are central to a Learning Society.
2. Communities are dynamic and self-organizing. This is the basis of their formation and governance.
3. Effective communities are composed of individuals who choose to act in a common space and who share a sense of commitment and responsibility to others in that space.
4. Individuals in their communities are able to make effective use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) to inform their choices about what they produce, what they consume and what they do in relation to others. This requires more than passive “access” across a digital divide.
5. The internet is a global commons and a public good that is fundamental to the networked structure of a Learning Society.

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Policies and practices that enable the transition to a Learning Society are currently being considered on the national and international stage. But acting to realize the opportunities of community as it goes online requires a vision of open systems of access, design, practice, and policy debate. To ensure those policies and practices align with the quality of community essential to that society, we recommend that:

- national and international processes affirm the central role of the individual in community as the key to world development.
- financial and program responses to the “digital divide” at home and in Less Developed Countries be designed to support community-based initiatives.
- changes to internet governance not impede the development of the internet as a commons.
- strategies for support of ICT use and development at home and in Less Developed Countries ensure self-identification, openness, inclusion and participation.
- those working to design, implement and operate systems of ICT use take responsibility to ensure that the characteristics of communities are respected and included in the outcomes of their professional work and practices.

This statement is presented by Telecommunities Canada (<http://www.tc.ca/>). We are a group of community networking advocates and participatory researchers who act to understand and shape the uses of ICTs in our communities. We seek to remind Canada's public policy debates that existing community networks are experienced in the effective use of ICTs for community development. Together with like-minded groups, our goal is to connect policy and practice in ways that expand and improve the ability of communities to design their own future.