

Human Rights in the Information Society: Civic Participation in Shaping the Future

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At present, the prevailing practices and institutions of global governance are ill suited to shape future information societies in a humanitarian way. The kind of global governance that is required needs the active intervention of civic movements. In spite of encouraging initiatives around the world, this is a slow-moving process at a time of great urgency. Citizens are at the crossroads: but can they decide where to go? This needs reflection and consultation. However, time is limited and risks are real.

Human Rights as the Normative Standards in Shaping the Information Society

The implementation of human rights, as Hossain rightly observes, requires ‘good governance.’ “Governments as well as powerful corporations must adhere to respect human rights and be accountable for their conduct measured by human rights standards” (Hossain, 1997, p. 20). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights offers important guidance in Article 28, provides that “Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.” This claim is equally valid for the organization of physical as well as of virtual societies. The relevant question thus is, Which standards should guide the social and international order that guarantees the protection of human rights and freedoms in the Information Society?

In recent years, the notion of good governance has become very fashionable in international development cooperation. In this context it has often amounted to a rather paternalistic assessment of the performance of governments in poor countries by standards such as respect for human rights, rule of law, multi-party democracy, and accountable administration. To judge one’s partners by standards of social morality seems in itself a useful idea lest one end up with parties that demonstrate more talent for corruption and gross human rights violations than for sustainable social development. However, within the framework of international human rights law, such standards should apply equally to all the parties involved. They would thus be the moral measure for governments in both poor and rich countries, for intergovernmental development agencies, but also for non-state actors such as transnational corporations and the development assistance non-governmental organizations (NGOs). If all participants in international development efforts were to be assessed in terms of good governance interesting conclusions would emerge. International institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank have in the past years not contributed to the development of democratic institutions in poor countries. Instead, most of their programmes have undermined such institutions (Korten, 1995, p. 171). They have also themselves not been paragons of democratic governance (Korten, 1995, p.