

General Assembly's overall review of the implementation of WSIS outcomes

Official Form for Written Submissions

A. Your Information

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B. Formal Input

1. To what extent has progress been made on the vision of the people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society in the ten years since the WSIS?

In the ten years since the WSIS, the information society has undoubtedly expanded to include and/or touch the lives of many more people worldwide. However, the effect of this evolution and expansion of the information society on the lives of the world's people has been uneven. Many people in the developing world remain unconnected, for a wide spectrum of reasons ranging from lack of infrastructure (no connectivity, no electricity, ...), over costs, to social and cultural reasons (such as gender biases). Beyond this, while ICTs, and the Internet in particular, have at times provided important support to the enjoyment and exercise by the world's people of their human rights – including the right to development – ***the empowering potential of ICTs has not been tapped fully by far.***

Indeed, in many respects, it is now clear, the information society in its current avatar frequently exacerbates, rather than attenuate, existing inequalities. It has often undermined existing protections of human rights, either directly or indirectly, such as in the area of labour. It has also given rise to new forms of human rights abuses. Some of these, such as mass user surveillance by governments and big corporations alike, lead to a widespread breakdown of trust which further diminishes the contributions that the Internet and technology more broadly can make to the development and quality of people's lives. All too often, the development of the information society

¹ When specifying your stakeholder type, please indicate one of the following: Government, Civil Society, Private Sector, Academia, and Technical Sector.

has by default served first and foremost the interests of big corporations and governments, rather than those of users and people in general. If the expanding information society is to genuinely serve people and their development, an explicit recalibration of policies and practices in a range of areas in line with these objectives will, thus, be essential.

2. What are the challenges to the implementation of WSIS outcomes?

There are a range of challenges to the implementation of WSIS outcomes. A first one is ***the fast pace at which technology changes; as a consequence, the WSIS outcome documents, though wide-ranging in their scope, fail to recognize or sufficiently prioritize a number of key trends today.*** These include the ways in which the qualitative access gap has sharpened even if the quantitative access gap may have decreased, but also the growing transnational dominance of a fairly small number of Internet/technology corporations and the ways in which this concentration of market power in a small number of hands undermines development and empowerment.

A second challenge lies in the fact that ***technology use does not in and of its own remove existing inequalities; rather, without conscious attention being paid to their obliteration offline as much as online, technology use often reflects and even amplifies inequalities.*** It is for this reason that a number of digital divides are now visible even more sharply than they were ten years ago. These include the gender digital divide, and the growing qualitative access divide between developed and developing countries, even where the quantitative access divide is slowly closing. Disproportionate or inappropriate security measures such as mass surveillance and controls of speech, too, while rampant today, tend to disproportionately affect historically disadvantaged groups. Without concrete policy interventions, reversing such trends will not be possible.

A third challenge lies in ***the growing disconnect since the WSIS ten years ago, between people's perspectives on the one hand, and governments and the UN agencies responsible for overseeing the implementation of the WSIS, on the other.*** The two summits were marked by an unprecedented participation in the formulation of priorities for the information society of organisations and movements for whom people's interests, and especially the interests of marginalized and vulnerable people, were of central concern. Though both governments and UN agencies have done very important and valuable work since then, dedicated inclusive spaces for consultation and engagement with civil society initiatives were, however, not institutionalized in the years that followed the summits.

As a consequence, the voices of people in the Global South in particular, and of marginalized people in general, frequently find only very little space and reflection in the concrete processes of policy-making and implementation. This is true both at national levels and at international levels: though the global Internet governance regime in many spaces welcomes all stakeholders, in practice participation is frequently dominated by actors from the developed world – and this despite the fact that not only will the next billion come online in developing countries, some of the biggest markets for technology use are in developing countries already. Without the voices and interests of the most

vulnerable people of our world fully represented in Internet governance, a people-centred, development-oriented inclusive information society can not become a reality.

This brings us to a fourth challenge to the implementation of the WSIS outcomes, and that is the ***lack of strong commitment to a diversity of effective financing mechanisms for measures that can help bridge the various digital divides***, whether deeply entrenched or emerging. Such measures can be substantive in nature, such as capacity building or transferring technology. They can also be more process-oriented, such as ensuring that Global South voices are as well-represented in global Internet governance decision-making processes and events as those from the developed world. To make a people-centred, development-oriented information society a reality, both types of measures are urgently needed.

3. What should be the priorities in seeking to achieve WSIS outcomes and progress towards the Information Society, taking into account emerging trends?

In the above, a number of concrete trends have been identified as being crucial issues to address at the moment. In accordance, the following should be prioritized to achieve WSIS outcomes and progress towards the information society:

- ***Bridging the large number of, often sharpening digital divides*** that continue to persist, including the gender divide and the growing qualitative access gap between developing and developed countries;
- ***Countering, or curtailing, the growing dominance of a small number of corporations on the Internet***, and the negative effects this dominance brings with it, such as widespread corporate surveillance without meaningful user consent;
- ***Ending the violations of human rights, as well as the undermining of existing protections of human rights***, by states and corporate actors alike, facilitated by the Internet and technology more broadly;
- ***Making Internet governance processes genuinely multistakeholder*** by ensuring the adequate representation of the voices and interests of people from the Global South, and of marginalized people in the developed world in such processes, both at the national and international levels;

Both at the national and global levels, ***this will require a substantive recalibration, and sometimes development, of policy in accordance with principles that safeguard the free and open nature of the Internet, such as net neutrality, and with international human rights frameworks***. Without a translation into substantive policy of such principles and frameworks at both national and international levels, a people-centred, development-oriented inclusive information society can not become a reality.

In order to bridge all digital divides, focusing only on narrow Internet governance issues will, moreover, not be sufficient, as such divides often reflect inequalities that have been long-entrenched offline. On this topic, a broader approach is, thus, essential.

It deserves to be pointed out that approaches that imagine that ICTs can be mobilized in the service of the realization of the SDGs in any straightforward manner are, therefore, deeply faulty. In so far as the SDGs seek to address some of the long-standing inequalities that pervade this world, their achievement may do as much to support the implementation of the WSIS Outcomes as ICTs will do to support the SDGs. Indeed, as much as technology can support the realization of the SDGs, for the empowering potential of ICTs to *fully* come into play, the SDGs need to *already* have been realized. The two processes should, thus, be conceptualized as working in tandem: they are implicated in each other, rather than in a hierarchical relationship.

Finally, as argued earlier, bridging all digital divides requires ***strong and concrete commitments to effective financing mechanisms*** for both substantive and process-related measures that can help bridge them. Such financing mechanisms are equally needed to ensure adequate representation of the voices and interests of historically disadvantaged people, especially people from the Global South. While financing mechanisms can include public-private partnerships, they can not be limited to these. To eradicate inequalities fundamentally, strong government involvement is essential. An exploration of such mechanisms and concrete commitments should start at the earliest.

4. What are general expectations from the WSIS + 10 High Level Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly?

The WSIS+10 High Level Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly should ***reaffirm the WSIS vision*** of a people-centred, development-oriented inclusive information society. It should

- firmly ***reinstate the focus on development*** that the WSIS once had, including by framing the discussions around the reform of Internet governance from this perspective. What reforms of Internet governance, at national and global levels, are required for such governance to fully support the realization of the WSIS vision?
- strongly ***confirm substantive support for principles that safeguard the free and open nature of the Internet, such as net neutrality, and for international human rights frameworks.***
- fully ***endorse multistakeholder approaches to Internet governance*** at both national and international levels, including by strengthening the Internet Governance Forum following its renewal, which the meeting should confirm as well.

In addition, the High Level Meeting should outline an ***action plan, or roadmap, consisting of concrete steps***, to ensure that multistakeholder processes are put into place to address each of the challenges that are hampering the realization of the WSIS vision as outlined under question no. 3, in an encompassing and comprehensive manner at the appropriate level and in the appropriate institution. Due to the limited nature of this year's Review, the current process will likely not be able to comprehensively address all the priority challenges identified. For this reason, the Review should focus on identifying the appropriate way forward to ensure that each of these challenges will get adequately addressed in the foreseeable future. ***This exercise should include the identification of concrete timelines and appropriate mechanisms.*** The latter would include the incorporation of UN

Women as one of the lead UN agencies in the WSIS processes; UN Women should become the focal organization for addressing all aspects of the gender digital divide.

Finally, it is expected that the WSIS+10 High Level Meeting will be conducted ***in an open and inclusive manner, with meaningful participation possible for all stakeholder groups***, and will fully take into account the views of all stakeholders, both in its outcomes and throughout the preparatory process.

5. What shape should the outcome document take?

The outcome document should be a political declaration that addresses all elements mentioned under question no. 4. Concrete proposals, as suggested under question 4, should be developed in the declaration in relation to all priorities outlined under question no. 3.