

## CSTD'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE WSIS+20 REVIEW

### Informal Note for the 27<sup>th</sup> session of CSTD

15 April 2024

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#### Background

CSTD has had a major role in reviewing progress towards achieving the goals of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) since it was held in 2003 and 2005, in accordance with a mandate established by ECOSOC in 2006 that requires it to:

- *review and assess progress at the international and regional levels in the implementation of action lines, recommendations and commitments contained in the outcome documents of the Summit;*
- *share best and effective practices and lessons learned and identify obstacles and constraints encountered, actions and initiatives to overcome them and important measures for further implementation of the Summit outcomes; and*
- *promote dialogue and foster partnerships, in coordination with other appropriate United Nations funds, programmes and specialized agencies, to contribute to the attainment of the Summit objectives and the implementation of its outcomes [in pursuit of] internationally agreed development goals.<sup>1</sup>*

In fulfilment of this mandate, CSTD prepares annual reports on WSIS outcomes for the Secretary-General<sup>2</sup> and its annual sessions agree and submit resolutions on WSIS implementation to ECOSOC that form the basis of subsequent General Assembly resolutions.<sup>3</sup> The CSTD Secretariat also prepared and published major reviews of WSIS outcomes after five years (in 2010)<sup>4</sup> and after ten years (in 2015),<sup>5</sup> the latter making a vital contribution to that year's General Assembly WSIS+10 review.

The General Assembly agreed in 2015 to organise a further high-level meeting in 2025 (the WSIS+20 review) 'to take stock of progress on the outcomes of [WSIS,] ... identify ... areas of continued focus and challenges' and contribute to the review of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which is to be held in 2030.<sup>6</sup> This review will be informed by a number of international events, including the WSIS+20 Forum to be held by ITU in May 2024, and by negotiation of the Global Digital Compact (GDC) and the Pact for the Future by the General Assembly later in the year. The zero draft of the GDC has now been published.<sup>7</sup>

Member-States welcomed a roadmap presented by the Secretariat at the 26<sup>th</sup> session of CSTD which proposed a programme of work to prepare a WSIS+20 review document and invited voluntary financial or other contributions to enable its implementation. This programme of work has been endorsed by ECOSOC.<sup>8</sup> The roadmap set out a provisional workplan, whose final scope would be dependent on extra-budgetary financial contributions, to include stakeholder consultations and the preparation of a report by the Secretariat for discussion at the 28<sup>th</sup> session in 2025 prior to the submission of CSTD's input to the review through ECOSOC to the General Assembly.

This paper reports on developments since the 26<sup>th</sup> session, outlines the plan of work now proposed for implementation between the 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> sessions and, in an annex, summarises findings from the initial online consultation phase.

### **Developments to date**

A full discussion on the review was held during the intersessional meeting of CSTD held in Lisbon in November 2023.

Successful consultation sessions have been held by CSTD at two international events, where these could be undertaken without extra-budgetary resources: at the 18<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) which was held in Kyoto in October 2023 and at the UNCTAD eWeek which was held in Geneva in December 2023.

An open invitation to contribute inputs to the review was published through an online questionnaire, available through the UNCTAD and ITU websites.<sup>9</sup> A total of 148 submissions had been received to this questionnaire by the end of March 2024.

A Memorandum of Understanding has now been agreed with a Member-State to provide financial support for the review. This will provide sufficient resources for the work proposed below. Any additional work will require further extra-budgetary funding.

### **Proposed programme of work**

#### *Timetable*

The following overall timetable is proposed for the review:

April 2024	Preliminary discussion at the 27 <sup>th</sup> session of CSTD
May to December 2024	Consultations, literature review and other research
October 2024	Progress report to the intersessional meeting of CSTD
October 2024 to February 2025	Drafting of report
April 2025	Discussion of report at the 28 <sup>th</sup> session of CSTD
May 2025	Final revision of report and submission to ECOSOC
September to November 2025	Presentation by CSTD during General Assembly meeting

As with the WSIS+10 report prepared in 2015, it is proposed that the outcome of the Commission's discussion of WSIS outcomes should be included in a resolution to ECOSOC and that the report prepared by the Secretariat should be submitted alongside this as a Secretariat report.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Research and literature review*

There have been extraordinary developments in digital technology and the Information Society since WSIS was held in 2003 and 2005. These have had major impacts across all WSIS outcomes. Adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 has also profoundly affected WSIS Action Lines and other aspects of digital development.

An enormous range of literature has been published since the Summit concerning WSIS outcomes and further developments in the Information Society, including their impact on the SDGs and other aspects of human development. Much of this literature, particularly that from United Nations agencies, has been referenced in the annual reports prepared by CSTD for the

Secretary-General. The WSIS+20 report will draw on this wide-ranging literature and other material referred by Member-States as well as on the consultation processes described below.

CSTD has itself published a significant number of studies in recent years concerned with the development of digital and other advanced/frontier technologies that will play an important part in the Information Society as it moves forward beyond 2025. The review provides an opportunity to make further use of these reports, building on their content and the discussions that have been held around them at annual sessions and intersessional meetings.

Contributions by Member-States, United Nations entities and international organisations

Member-States of the United Nations will be invited to make further written contributions and submit publications to the review setting out their experience of WSIS implementation, the developing Information Society and their priorities for the future.

United Nations agencies and other international organisations that submit inputs to the Secretary-General's annual reports on WSIS outcomes will be invited to submit overviews of developments in their mandate areas since 2005, particularly since 2015, alongside their annual reports for 2024.

The WSIS+20 Forum to be held by ITU in May 2024, particularly meetings of WSIS Action Lines, will be a further source of inputs from Member-States, UN entities and other stakeholders.

The Secretariat will monitor activities and events related to WSIS+20 that are organised by other UN entities, as well as the preparation and outcomes of the Global Digital Compact and the Pact for the Future.

Other written consultations

An initial open consultation was held through a questionnaire on the CSTD website. A preliminary report on this consultation is attached as Annex 2.

It is proposed to hold a further open consultation, with a further round of questions, towards the end of 2024, after agreement has been reached on the Global Digital Compact and the Pact for the Future.

In-person consultations

Five regional multistakeholder consultations will be held in conjunction with UN Regional Commissions or other regional bodies:

Africa	with UNECA	to be scheduled
Asia-Pacific	with ESCAP	during Asia-Pacific Digital Ministerial Conference in Kazakhstan from 3-5 September 2024
Europe	with EuroDIG	Lithuania, 17 June 2024
Latin America & the Caribbean	with ECLAC	during eLac ministerial conference on 16-18 November in Chile
Western Asia	with ESCWA	UAE, May 2024

Many critical issues within the WSIS Action Lines are concerned with the impact of the Information Society on different development sectors within the SDGs. It is proposed to hold several online multistakeholder discussions, in conjunction with other UN entities, to address specific issues such as e-government, the digital economy, environmental and gender impacts.

### Report

The extra-budgetary funds that have been generously contributed by a Member-State may allow to provide for a report of between 30,000 and 40,000 words, which should make a substantial contribution to the review that will be undertaken by the General Assembly during 2025. This report should build on the literature review and consultations described above to:

- assess the changes that have taken place since WSIS, and particularly since WSIS+10, in critical aspects of the Information Society, including developments in technology and services, access and inclusion, the digital economy, digital governance and human rights, and impacts on global development including issues covered by the Action Lines and SDGs;
- review stakeholders' perceptions of the successes and ongoing challenges emerging from experience since WSIS, opportunities and risks arising from these, and priorities for the future development of the Information Society; and
- consider the impact of emerging new technologies on the future evolution of the Information Society and their implications for WSIS outcomes, Action Lines and SDGs.

A preliminary structure for the report is attached as Annex 1.

As indicated in the timetable above, it is proposed to draft the report following the conclusion of negotiations on the Global Digital Compact and the Pact for the Future. A progress report on the literature review and consultations will be made to the intersessional meeting of the 28<sup>th</sup> CSTD in autumn 2024, and the draft report presented to the 28<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of CSTD in 2025.

## ANNEX 1: PRELIMINARY STRUCTURE FOR THE WSIS+20 REPORT

The final structure for the WSIS+20 report will depend on the literature review and consultation processes, discussions at the WSIS Forum and other international meetings, the outcomes of agreement on the GDC and Pact for the Future, further discussion at the intersessional meeting. The following table briefly outlines the provisional structure that is currently proposed.

Introduction	Overview of changes that have taken place since WSIS and WSIS+10
	Summary of the WSIS outcome documents and institutional framework
Part 1: The record since WSIS	The changing context for digital development (including the SDGs and other international agreements, the COVID-19 pandemic and other economic and social developments)
	Developments in technology
	Developments in the digital ecosystem (government, business and other stakeholders)
	Access and inclusion
	Impacts on development sectors (drawing on Action Lines and SDGs)
	Challenges of digital development (including trust and security, environmental and rights issues)
	Digital governance (including Internet governance)
Part 2: Where we stand today	Overview of progress in achieving WSIS goals and priorities identified in the literature review and consultation process, focusing on:
	The current state of digital technology and the digital ecosystem
	The Information Society and sustainable development
	The Information Society and human rights
	The Information Society and equality
Issues of governance, including outcomes from the GDC and Pact of the Future	
Part 3: Looking to the future	Overview of the trajectory and pace of innovation in technology and digital applications
	Opportunities, priorities and risks identified in the literature review and consultation process, including international and regional initiatives currently underway and planned
	The future context for understanding and implementing WSIS outcomes (including issues concerned with monitoring and measurement, foresight analysis, financial investment, and international and multistakeholder cooperation)
Conclusion	Summary of findings

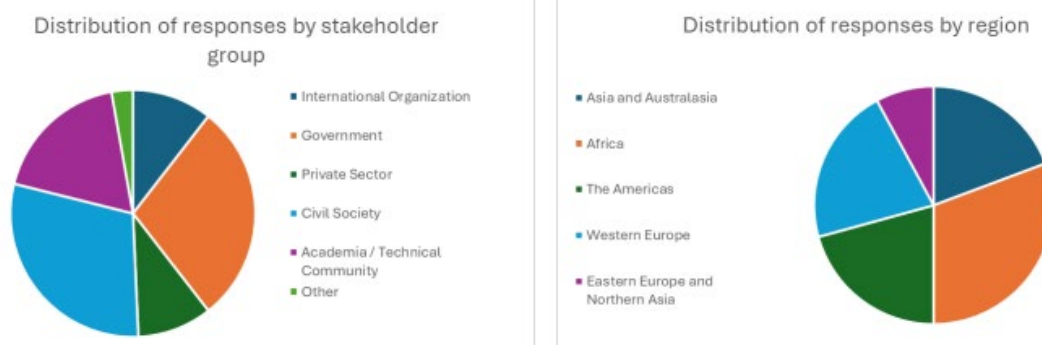
## ANNEX 2: PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE FIRST WSIS+20 CONSULTATION PROCESS

The CSTD Secretariat conducted a preliminary open consultation for the WSIS+20 review between October 2023 and February 2024. A questionnaire, published on both UNCTAD and ITU websites, sought responses from all stakeholders to the following eight broad questions:

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* been achieved?
2. How has the implementation of WSIS outcomes contributed towards the development of a “people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society”?
3. How much progress do you believe has been made in implementing specific WSIS outcomes?
4. What are the challenges to the implementation of WSIS outcomes?
5. How are these challenges being addressed? What approaches have proved to be effective in your experience?
6. What do you consider the most important trends in technology and other aspects of ICTs which have affected implementation of WSIS outcomes since the Summit? What has been their impact?
7. What should be the priorities for stakeholders seeking to achieve WSIS outcomes and progress towards the Information Society, taking into account ongoing and emerging trends?
8. How will ongoing trends and new developments in technology, especially in the deployment, access and use of ICTs, impact future progress towards human development, specifically in relation to the SDGs?

Respondents were invited to add further observations if they wished, and to submit relevant documents for consideration.

Just under 150 contributions were received from stakeholders, including a number received following extension of the deadline to the end of March.



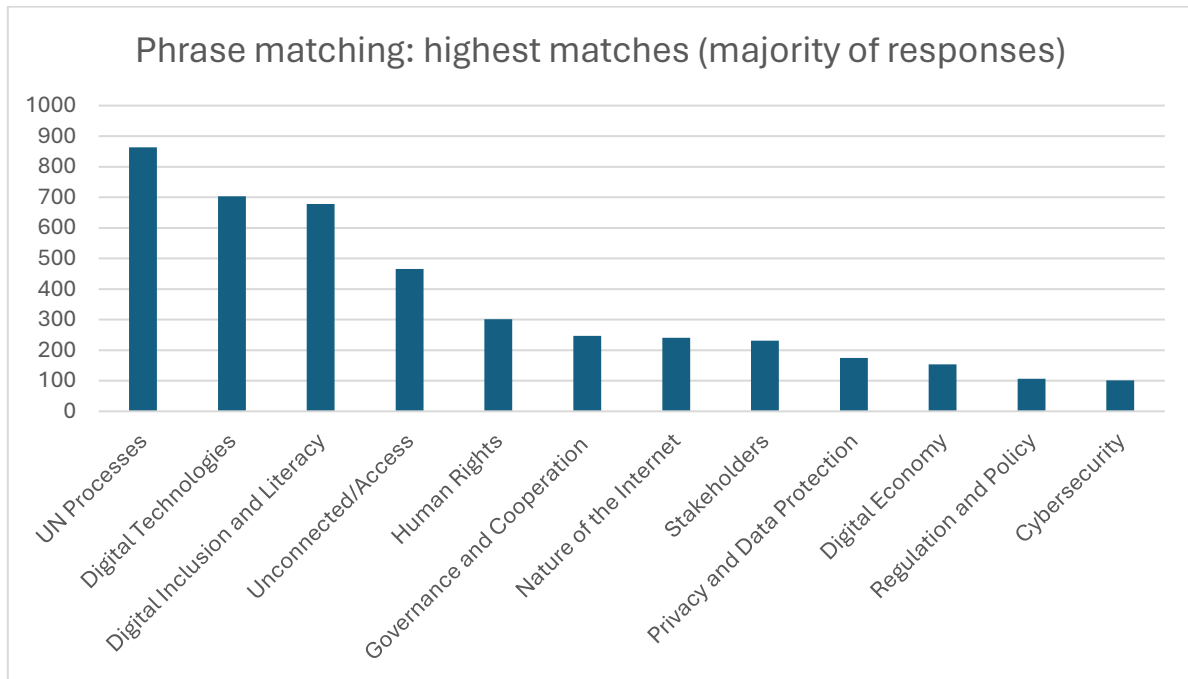
The Secretariat is grateful for the assistance of the consultancy DNS Research for help with tools to facilitate the analysis of contributions, which will be completed following this annual session.

As is usual in such consultations, the scope and scale of contributions varied significantly. As indicated in the summary below there was a strong focus on issues related to the WSIS Action Lines concerned with technology and infrastructure, access and inclusion, and digital priorities

such as cybersecurity. Fewer contributions addressed issues related to Action Lines concerned with economic, social and cultural development, suggesting the need for greater focus on these in the second consultation phase.

Some governments and some other stakeholders provided valuable insights into experience in their own countries, while others responded in more general terms.

The chart below indicates the most common thematic phrases identified in preliminary analysis of a majority of responses.



The following preliminary observations summarise contributions based on analysis to date. Further analysis of these responses will be undertaken by the Secretariat following this meeting..

1. The majority of respondents felt that substantial progress has been made towards achieving WSIS goals, but that there is still a considerable way to go, particularly in promoting inclusive access and participation (closing digital divides, including the gender digital divide), digital literacy, and achieving international cooperation to optimise progress towards global development goals.
2. WSIS was seen as having provided a platform for dialogue and sharing of experience, particularly through the WSIS Forum and the IGF, facilitating resource mobilisation, encouraging the development of national digital strategies and helping governments and other stakeholders to formulate constructive policies and practical interventions. Some government respondents, in particular, described ways in which the WSIS outcomes have provided guiding principles for digital strategies and regulations and helped to improve national economic and social, as well as digital, development.
3. The pervasiveness and increased reliance of human activity on digital technologies and services was recognised as a principal change since WSIS, and the root of wider economic

and social changes described in some responses as digital transformation. Some respondents noted that this had been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Contributions on trends in the Information Society since WSIS focused mostly on technology, particularly mobile networks and services, cable and satellite infrastructure, cloud computing, the Internet of Things, big data analysis and the emergence of artificial intelligence, together with platforms and applications (including social media) that are reliant on these. Some respondents addressed specific aspects of digital infrastructure such as Internet Exchange Points.
5. These technological developments were generally seen as having contributed positively towards WSIS outcomes, but there were relatively few detailed discussions of economic and social impacts in responses. Positive economic and social outcomes identified included increased access to resources and opportunity through the deployment of e-government and enhancement of public services, the growth of the digital economy as a catalyst for innovation and economic growth, new opportunities in education, telemedicine and financial inclusion. While some respondents considered these substantial, others felt that they were partial or, in some cases, disappointing when compared with the aspirations expressed at WSIS.
6. The pace of change in technology was regarded as both an opportunity and a challenge, adding to the complexity of forward planning for governments in both digital and non-digital contexts. Respondents noted that rapid technological change had entailed rapid evolution in the digital business ecosystem, including the growth of global data corporations.
7. A number of more specific challenges were identified as having become more substantial during the period since WSIS, with a substantial number of respondents emphasising the following issues:
  - a. the growing need to achieve meaningful and fully inclusive connectivity;
  - b. the need for more financial resources for investment in infrastructure and developmental applications;
  - c. the affordability of digital equipment and data for users of online services;
  - d. cybersecurity;
  - e. data governance and data privacy/protection;
  - f. inadequate digital skills and digital literacy;
  - g. misinformation, disinformation and abusive behaviour online (including child protection);
  - h. environmental impacts including climate change; and
  - i. the need for greater international cooperation, including the relationship between digitalisation and national sovereignty.
8. Some government and other respondents provided valuable insights into the approaches adopted to these challenges in their own countries, with examples of investment in infrastructure and services, including public-private partnerships, policy development and practical interventions, and capacity-building.
9. The importance of developing human capital and promoting innovation through digital skills and digital literacy was stressed in many contributions. Respondents identified limited digital capability within the workforce as a barrier to maximising potential benefits of the Information Society, for both individuals and societies, and described efforts to build digital skills and digital literacy as fundamental to achieving WSIS goals. Some respondents commented on



the importance of cultural diversity, the inclusion of minority communities, and the desirability of more local and multilingual content online.

10. Concern was expressed by a substantial number of respondents about risks to human rights arising from current and future technological developments and applications, particularly freedom of expression and rights to privacy, and about the risk that technological innovation could increase structural inequalities between and within societies. There was also widespread concern about cybersecurity and the potential for this to become more challenging as new technologies such as AI become more prominent.
11. A number of actual and potential approaches to facilitating WSIS outcomes were identified by all groups of stakeholders. These ranged from affordable handsets, community networks and other infrastructure initiatives in remote and rural areas, through public access facilities and targeted support to address the gender digital divide, to capacity building initiatives, multistakeholder and public-private partnerships, support for innovation ecosystems and regulatory frameworks for data protection, digital services and the digital economy. Some respondents emphasised the importance of community engagement in designing and implementing programmes.
12. The most cited priorities for achieving future progress identified through the consultation included:
  - a) continued efforts to close digital divides, particularly the gender digital divide, through infrastructure investment and maximising the use of infrastructure resources, targeted efforts to improve access and affordability for marginalised communities, and initiatives to build digital capabilities and literacy;
  - b) the need to foster a safe and secure digital environment, including improved cybersecurity and work to improve trust and confidence in the value and integrity of digital resources;
  - c) the development of regulatory frameworks to address challenges of data governance and privacy, AI ethics, and the responsibilities and accountability of digital stakeholders in contexts such as mis/disinformation, technological inequalities and biases, environmental sustainability and human rights;
  - d) efforts to accelerate the deployment of new technologies, including AI, to achieve the SDGs, with particular reference to the digital economy, financial inclusion, health, education, environmental monitoring and disaster preparedness, and what some respondents identified as digital public goods;
  - e) greater policy coherence at national level, developing holistic strategies for the achievement of WSIS goals and SDGs that bring together digital and non-digital stakeholders within and beyond government; and
  - f) greater collaboration at international level, emphasising the need for greater inclusion of developing countries in decision-making, monitoring trends and sharing best practices, and addressing the needs for regulatory harmonisation and financial investment.
13. The dynamic nature of digital development, and its continual evolution, were stressed by many respondents. The advent of artificial intelligence was widely seen as an opportunity, but one that carried significant risks that need to be addressed by the international

community. Fears were expressed that the rapid adoption of these advanced technologies could increase inequality between and within countries, and make the Information Society less 'people-' or 'human-centred'. Many respondents referred to the importance of international collaboration in addressing the opportunities and challenges involved, emphasising the inclusion of all countries in dialogue towards a shared vision for the future Information Society that would build on that established by WSIS.

14. A significant number of respondents emphasised the need for ethical frameworks and expressed a desire for regulatory harmonisation of current and future technological developments, to reduce competition for resources, maximise their value across diverse developmental contexts, facilitate cybersecurity and data management, and minimise or mitigate other risks that might arise, including the potential for new technologies to exacerbate economic and social inequalities. Some, mostly private sector, respondents were concerned that regulation should be unintrusive and foster rather than constrain innovation.
15. Particular concern was expressed by some respondents about the environmental impact of extensive digitalisation and, notably by youth organisations, about the potential impact of new technologies on employment. It was thought important to monitor developments in these and other areas in order to identify emerging problems early enough for these to be effectively addressed.
16. The importance of financial resources was stressed in a substantial number of contributions, including finance for infrastructure, the development of services and the deployment of applications concerned with economic development and social welfare.
17. There was widespread support for the multistakeholder approach to policy development and to the design of regulatory and other governance frameworks. Strong support was expressed for the WSIS Forum and the IGF, including the latter's evolution to include intersessional activities and National and Regional IGFs. Some respondents focused particularly on the role and value of the IGF, its contribution to WSIS and digital development since 2005, and requirements for its future including renewal of its mandate (which will form part of the WSIS+20 review). The importance of avoiding fragmentation of the digital ecosystem was stressed, particularly by respondents from the technical community, as was the need to extend the reach of participation in discussions on Internet and digital governance.
18. Some civil society and technical community respondents expressed concerns that geopolitical tensions and new governance modalities could undermine the multistakeholder model. Concerns were also expressed that the multiplicity of international fora now concerned with digital issues posed problems for stakeholders with more limited resources.
19. Some respondents expressed concern about the quantity and quality of data available for measuring and monitoring progress towards achievement of WSIS outcomes, including the impact of the Information Society on economic and social sectors such as health and education. The need was raised for more effective data-gathering and monitoring practices for the next phase of Information Society development.
20. The WSIS+20 process was described by respondents as an opportunity to update WSIS goals and enhance the contribution of ICTs to human development, reflecting the changed digital landscape since 2005, in particular the much greater role which digital networks and resources now play in all areas covered by the SDGs. A number of responses called for more

systematic alignment between WSIS Action Lines and the SDGs, including potential revision to both sets of goals in response to changing circumstances. A number of respondents stressed the importance of consistency and harmony between the outcomes of WSIS+20 and the GDC.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ecosoc.un.org/sites/default/files/documents/2023/resolution-2006-46.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The 2022 report is at [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/a78d62\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/a78d62_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The 2023 resolution is at [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ecosoc\\_res\\_2023d3\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ecosoc_res_2023d3_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/dtlstict2011d3\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/dtlstict2011d3_en.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://unctad.org/publication/implementing-wsis-outcomes-ten-year-review>

<sup>6</sup> [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ares70d125\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ares70d125_en.pdf)

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[https://www.un.org/techenvoy/sites/www.un.org.techenvoy/files/Global\\_Digital\\_Compact\\_Zero\\_Draft.pdf](https://www.un.org/techenvoy/sites/www.un.org.techenvoy/files/Global_Digital_Compact_Zero_Draft.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> ECOSOC 2023 resolution, para. 102

<sup>9</sup> [https://forms.office.com/pages/responsepage.aspx?id=2zWeD09UYE-9zF6kFubccJBkWcxFirNJnYRppt\\_fKqNUMTdQRzg5VjdVN0lZWEJDNIVCQkNWSTY2VCQlQCN0PWcu](https://forms.office.com/pages/responsepage.aspx?id=2zWeD09UYE-9zF6kFubccJBkWcxFirNJnYRppt_fKqNUMTdQRzg5VjdVN0lZWEJDNIVCQkNWSTY2VCQlQCN0PWcu)

<sup>10</sup> [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ecn162015\\_DraftRes\\_WSIS\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ecn162015_DraftRes_WSIS_en.pdf)