

# **Report on CSTD’s first open consultation on WSIS+20**

## **“WSIS at 20: successes, failures and future expectations”**

Held during the 18th Internet Governance Forum, 10 October 2023, Kyoto, Japan.

**Prepared by the UNCTAD Secretariat<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> This report summarizes the Hybrid Open Forum Event's discussions; it does not necessarily reflect the views of the UNCTAD Secretariat or the member States of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development.

## **I. Introduction**

1. The General Assembly resolution A/70/12, adopted on 16 December 2015, called for a high-level meeting in 2025 to review the implementation of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), known as WSIS+20 Review. In June 2023, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) adopted a resolution (E/RES/2023/3) requesting the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) to collect inputs from member states and stakeholders and organize discussions during its sessions in 2024 and 2025. These discussions will assess the progress made in implementing WSIS outcomes over the past 20 years, with the results reported to the General Assembly. At its twenty-sixth session in March 2023, the CSTD adopted a roadmap to guide its work on WSIS+20 review.

2. The roadmap outlines a series of activities, including open consultations at both regional and global levels, conducted by the CSTD independently or in collaboration with other UN agencies and regional commissions. This hybrid open forum event is the first open consultation carried out within this framework. Its aim is to facilitate an open and candid dialogue, leveraging the collective insights, perspectives, and experiences of stakeholders. The resulting insights and recommendations will significantly contribute to the synthesis report prepared by the CSTD secretariat, shaping substantive discussions during the WSIS+20 review sessions as directed by the ECOSOC.

## **II. Organization of work**

3. The meeting was attended by representatives from governments, private sector, international organizations, civil society, the technical community and academia. There were near 120 in-person participants and 60 online participants.

## **III. Opening**

4. The Chair of the CSTD<sup>2</sup> moderated the event and gave welcome remarks. After explaining the format of the meeting, the Chair highlighted the importance of the event, which marks the launch of the open consultations of the WSIS+20 Review. She outlined the guiding questions of the event related to the evolution of the WSIS vision of a "people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society:"

- a. To what extent and how has the vision of a "people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society" evolved over the past 20 years since WSIS?
- b. How will ongoing trends and emerging technologies, particularly AI, impact progress towards human development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?
- c. What measures should be taken to advance international cooperation, including in terms of governance, to leverage emerging technologies for sustainable development in economic, social, environmental, and cultural dimensions?

5. The Chair underlined that the WSIS+20 Review will adopt a progressive and forward-looking approach, focusing not only at the present but, more importantly, on the future. Finally, she emphasized the vital role played by the CSTD in reviewing the WSIS outcomes. She highlighted the significance of the roadmap designed for the WSIS+20 Review, outlining a clear path for assessing progress made over the past two decades. Furthermore, she stressed the critical importance of engaging various stakeholders in this process, underscoring the need for their collective wisdom and input to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive evaluation of the WSIS vision and its future prospects.

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<sup>2</sup> Ms. Ana Cristina das Neves, Portugal.

6. The Head of the CSTD Secretariat<sup>3</sup> welcomed the participants and expressed gratitude to the keynote speaker for his attendance on behalf of the host country. Acknowledging the enduring relevance of the WSIS vision for a "people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society," she highlighted the digital divides that persist, particularly in Africa, where only 40% of the population is online. She also noted the gender disparities in digital access, and stressed the need for international responses to the complexities brought by technological advancements, such as data and artificial intelligence (AI). The CSTD initiated the consultation to gather input on lessons from 20 years of WSIS implementation, new challenges and opportunities, and ways to enhance multilateral cooperation in the digital realm. She emphasized the role of all stakeholders, including the IGF, in shaping this multistakeholder WSIS+20 consultation process. Lastly, the speaker underscored the partnership with key WSIS players like ITU, UNESCO, and UNDP in this review process, and she invited all stakeholders to answer the [joint questionnaire](#) on the WSIS+20 Review released by CSTD in collaboration with them.

7. The keynote speaker<sup>4</sup> delivered a keynote speech on behalf of the Deputy Director General for G7/G20 Relations, Government of Japan. He highlighted the importance of the multi-stakeholder approach in internet governance, emphasizing the enduring idea of a "people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented information society." The speaker stressed the significance of a free, open, and global Internet for socioeconomic development, addressing issues like misinformation, cybersecurity, digital infrastructure, and the digital divide. Japan, as the G7 Presidency, is leading discussions on AI governance through the "Hiroshima AI Process" in collaboration with the United Nations. He underscored the significance of IGF Kyoto in the context of the upcoming WSIS+20 review, offering a platform for sharing and exchanging ideas among various stakeholders.

#### IV. Open discussion

8. The first speaker<sup>5</sup> reflected on the two decades that have passed since the first WSIS and acknowledged the significant progress that has been achieved in inclusive, transparent, multistakeholder processes in digital governance. She emphasized the importance of trust-building, countering prejudices, and empowering individuals in the digital world. Looking ahead to the WSIS+20 review, the focus will have to be on strengthening governance for emerging technologies and ensuring sustainable development across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The speaker highlighted the value of listening to and collaborating with various stakeholders, such as civil society, the private sector, technical communities, academia, and more. She underscored the inclusivity of the WSIS process and the need to maintain consistent and representative participation. While acknowledging progress, the speaker pointed out the remaining challenges, including connecting the 2.6 billion people still without internet access. She stressed the importance of adopting a gender perspective in AI governance and promoting women's voices in internet governance. Switzerland advocated for inclusive multi-stakeholder cooperation and cross-silo collaboration to create a human-centred, free, and secure digital world accessible to all.

9. The second speaker<sup>6</sup> highlighted the ongoing relevance of WSIS recommendations in promoting an open, resilient, and inclusive Internet, despite significant technological changes since its inception. He also acknowledged the advancements made by ICANN and ITU. However, he pointed out that current challenges extend beyond mere technical aspects, encompassing implications of AI, privacy concerns, and the difficulties faced by developing countries dealing with major platform providers, such as taxation and data privacy issues. The speaker recommended revisiting enhanced cooperation frameworks within a multistakeholder approach to address these concerns, emphasizing the need for equal footing

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<sup>3</sup> Ms. Shamika N. Sirimanne, Director, Division on Technology and Logistics (DTL) and Head of the CSTD Secretariat, UNCTAD.

<sup>4</sup> Mr. Yasunari Ueno, Deputy Director, International Economic Affairs Division, Global ICT Strategy Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan.

<sup>5</sup> Ms. Isabelle Lois, Senior Policy Advisor, Swiss Federal Office of Communications.

<sup>6</sup> Mr. Kamel Saadaoui, Chief of Minister's office, Ministry of Communication Technologies, Tunisia.

and meaningful participation. He stressed the involvement of ICANN and ITU for maintaining internet stability, and the role of IGF in sharing outcomes from internet-related forums and securing necessary financing. Furthermore, he highlighted the potential for enhanced cooperation led by CSTD to address emerging issues. The speaker also encouraged international institutions like WIPO, WTO, UNESCO, and others to adopt a multistakeholder approach within their areas of expertise, while urging countries to address local geographical and social disparities in digital access and participation.

10. The third speaker<sup>7</sup> emphasized that digital public policy issues have expanded exponentially. Referencing the WSIS Geneva principle, she initially quoted a strong belief in collectively entering an era of enormous potential. However, the speaker argued that the promise of this collective potential is currently broken, drawing parallels between AI and the transformative impact of the Gutenberg moment when the printing press revolutionized knowledge and information. Unlike Gutenberg's technology, today's algorithms are inscrutable to the public, leading to a shift of knowledge control to private corporations, which trade data and information for user servitude. While connections have grown, the "algorithm society" has led to fragmentation, with geopolitical risks of AI for war looming. The speaker called for a recognition of the neocolonial dynamics in the data and AI economy and proposed a four-pronged strategy for digital cooperation: establishing global digital human rights constitutionalism, governing global data as public goods, mobilizing public digital financing for innovation ecosystems, and internationalizing internet governance for democratic oversight.

11. The fourth speaker<sup>8</sup> praised the powerful role of WSIS in facilitating civil society participation. She highlighted the uniqueness of the WSIS outcome documents, which result from a dynamic interplay between member states and non-state actors. Additionally, the speaker praised WSIS for its granular approach, encapsulated in the broad-based and people-centric Geneva principles. These principles emphasize social justice, equity, human rights, open innovation, open source, and vital areas like education and food security. She emphasized that the WSIS outcome documents were about information and communication technologies in general, rather than just about the Internet. The speaker urged continued support for civil society's active participation in shaping crucial debates, such as those concerning public financing for digital public infrastructure. She also stressed the importance of grassroots involvement and the need to strengthen the IGF and foster civil society collaboration within the UN system.

12. The fifth speaker<sup>9</sup> highlighted the importance of advocating for a more youth-based and inclusive approach, particularly in Africa where 70% of the population is under 30. The African youth seek a greater presence and more seats at the table within the WSIS process, focusing on education and economic opportunities. AI was recognized as holding immense potential in achieving the WSIS vision by providing essential services and reducing poverty, but it also posed threats, including new forms of discrimination and potential job loss. Therefore, establishing standards and rules for responsible action and policy implementation was deemed crucial.

13. A participant<sup>10</sup> stated that the multi-stakeholder principles have accomplished significant milestones, successfully aligning various UN processes and notably emphasizing the role of technology in the context of the SDGs. As we move forward, it is imperative to remain attentive to the specific targets and their integration into the broader framework of sustainable development.

14. Another participant<sup>11</sup> said that, as countries increasingly rely on ICTs, global internet shutdowns pose significant obstacles on the path to sustainable development. To address this challenge, it is essential to enhance the application of the multi-stakeholder approach and

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<sup>7</sup> Ms. Anita Gurumurthy, Founding Member and Executive Director, IT for Change, India.

<sup>8</sup> Ms. Anriette Esterhuysen, Senior Advisor on Global and Regional Internet Governance, Association for Progressive Communications, South Africa.

<sup>9</sup> Ms. Temilade Adelakun, Youth Ambassador of the Internet Society & Associate Product Marketing Manager, Google Sub-Saharan Africa.

<sup>10</sup> Ms. Gitanjali Sah, Strategy and Policy Coordinator, International Telecommunications Union.

<sup>11</sup> Mr. Prateek Sibal, Programme Specialist, UNESCO.

leverage advocacy. UNESCO, for its part, is dedicated to bolstering media literacy, recognizing its widespread impact on many nations. Additionally, it is actively implementing various standards aimed at advancing global communication recommendations related to open education resources.

15. A participant<sup>12</sup> stated that there is no denying that ICTs have emerged as a mega trend, second in significance only to climate change. Consequently, the sense of urgency is substantial, particularly as the rate of change continues to accelerate. This underscores the growing imperative for collaborative efforts.

16. Another participant<sup>13</sup> mentioned that the WSIS+20 review has shifted its focus, losing some of its emphasis on the digital divide and digital transformation into the information society. In doing so, he suggested that how there has been “technology success” but “knowledge failure”, which led to the failure in notably in addressing issues like hate speech. He also noted that the lack of key performance indicators (KPIs) in the Tunis agenda of WSIS, particularly regarding media, is a source of concern for the effective review of WSIS. Additionally, he emphasized the importance of focusing on best practices in ICT-related content. The speaker discussed how businesses often operate within the framework of the pre-SDGs (Millennium Development Goals) world, lacking the KPIs that the SDGs provide. He also noted the changing media landscape with a significant portion of advertising revenue going to five American companies, contributing to the erosion of media diversity. In conclusion, the call for enhanced cooperation in the use of ICTs was underscored, given these evolving challenges and opportunities.

17. A participant from Bangladesh<sup>14</sup> noted that the Bangladesh government has taken a multistakeholder approach by establishing a working group on WSIS and organizing the Bangladesh Internet Governance Forum. They are actively preparing for a smart and digital future and working on national initiatives, including elements related to smart cities and a smart society. Bangladesh's expectations from the WSIS include the publication of a handbook and the opportunity for the Bangladeshi government to learn from the WSIS's multistakeholder approach to governance.

18. A delegate from Cuba<sup>15</sup> highlighted the significant disparity in the beneficial impact of technology between developed and developing countries, emphasizing the absence of effective financial mechanisms to address ICT challenges in the latter. He noted the advocacy by the G77 and China for a closer alignment between WSIS and Agenda 2030, the Summit of the Future, and GDC, underscoring the importance of WSIS+20. The speaker also addressed the international community's recognition of the technological divide as a concern, essential for development, yet with less visible benefits in developing nations. He emphasized the need for established mechanisms to finance and bridge this technological gap, calling for increased cooperation. The primary goal, as he stressed, should revolve around the development of a robust vision centred on addressing the needs of the people.

19. A delegate from the European Union<sup>16</sup> advocated for the multistakeholder model as the most effective approach for internet governance, emphasizing that it should never be replaced. He stressed the need to strengthen and keep the multistakeholder framework open and free as we approach WSIS+20, highlighting its crucial role in achieving swift progress with the SDGs and promoting an inclusive digital world. The IGF was also recognized for strengthening this role. On the other hand, the EU welcomed the lessons learned and expressed its commitment to supporting the Geneva Action Plan and the Tunis Agenda. He emphasized the importance of maintaining an ambitious and bold multistakeholder approach to effective internet governance. Additionally, the EU highlighted the EU AI Act as a means to reinforce their commitment to openness and freedom within ICTs. To accelerate progress

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<sup>12</sup> Mr. Robert Opp, Chief Digital Officer, UNDP.

<sup>13</sup> Mr. Peter A. Bruck, Chairman, World Summit Award.

<sup>14</sup> Mr. AHM Bazlur Rahman, Chief Executive Officer Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication, Bangladesh.

<sup>15</sup> Mr. Juan Alfonso Fernández González, Advisor, Ministry of Communications, Cuba.

<sup>16</sup> Mr. Pearse O'Donohue, Director, Future Networks, Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, European Commission.

on the SDGs and bridge the digital divide in creating a digital future, the WSIS was urged to transition to a more impactful model.

20. A participant<sup>17</sup> reflected on how fundamental questions asked 20 years ago have remained the same, leading to a realization that more effort should have been made to create a difference. He highlighted the past perception of digital technologies and ICT for development as a passing trend, questioning how to bring about meaningful change this time. Failing to do so would result in a repetition of the "dark age of digital development" experienced between 2002 and 2007. The speaker emphasized that digital technologies and ICT have the potential to benefit everyone.

21. A participant from The Gambia acknowledged effective cooperation between international organizations at the top level but expressed concern about the lack of such collaboration on a national scale. While UN agencies exhibit considerable engagement with ICTs, their regional and national offices often display limited interest and fail to offer necessary support. The speaker emphasized the need to address disparities in cooperation, highlighting the apparent divide between UN agencies' claims of working together at the highest level and the absence of such collaboration at the country level. To address this issue, the speaker stressed the importance of working with NRIs and emphasized the necessity for enhanced information-sharing and cooperation among UN agencies.

22. A participant<sup>18</sup> questioned whether the necessary groundwork had been laid for addressing digital development. He highlighted the issue of low participation from developing countries. The speaker drew attention to specific cases, such as Israel and Russia, where ICT played a crucial role. He also pointed out the deteriorating status of women in certain countries and underscored the potential of ICT to help improve their situation. The speech emphasized the importance of a multistakeholder approach and cautioned against relying solely on optimism or AI for solutions.

23. A delegate from Hungary<sup>19</sup> expressed pride in CSTD being one of the first to introduce the multistakeholder approach, representing the CSTD in this accomplishment. The focus then shifted to bridging the existing gap, with the CSTD mandated to conduct a review. Regarding the implementation of the multi-stakeholder approach to ICTs, the speaker acknowledged its positive aspects while also emphasizing the need for further considerations. The approach is guided by outcomes rather than resolutions, and the speaker pointed out the significance of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in this context. To enhance the process, there is a call to emphasize recommendations and their subsequent follow-up, making them more accessible to all stakeholders. Failure to do so might result in the project becoming an "echo chamber."

24. A participant<sup>20</sup> raised the issue of including people with low or limited literacy in the digital world, stating that approximately 3 billion people fall into this category. He questioned how the focus is directed towards these individuals, especially those who lack basic reading and writing skills, and how the Internet can be made accessible to them. The speaker advocated for conducting research on first-generation low-literate internet users, highlighting that this area has been largely overlooked by major organizations. He stressed the necessity for technical support and research to understand how individuals with low literacy skills can navigate the digital world effectively.

25. A delegate from the United Kingdom<sup>21</sup> expressed satisfaction with the debate and the raised points, emphasizing the importance of having discussions within the WSIS forum. He acknowledged that progress has been made over time, despite occasional challenges, and

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<sup>17</sup> Mr. Atsushi Yamanaka, Senior Advisor for Digital Transformation, Japan International Cooperation Agency.

<sup>18</sup> Mr. Izumi Aizu, Senior Research Fellow & Professor at the Institute for InfoSociomics, Tama University, Japan.

<sup>19</sup> Mr. Peter Major, Special Advisor to the Permanent Mission of Hungary in Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>20</sup> The speaker did not introduce himself.

<sup>21</sup> Mr. Nigel Hickson, Head, Internet Governance, International Directorate, Department of Science, Innovation and Technology, UK.

emphasized the need for ongoing reviews of the process, suggesting that a new review should be conducted.