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COP-26 and WSIS

I was struck this month, watching the Climate Change Conference, COP-26, by some of the similarities and differences between that conference and WSIS.

Both were dealing with important global issues, which were recognised by the international community as of real and growing significance.

Both were highly complex, with many different interests from different countries and different stakeholders.

Both followed years of detailed negotiations.

And both almost broke down towards the end when agreement seemed elusive – in the case of COP-26 over the role of coal; in the case of WSIS's first phase over financial support for ICT development, and of its second over the governance of the internet.

There's one big difference, though, between them. The Climate Change Conference was concerned with existential risk: a growing crisis for the planet that we know is going to be very difficult to resolve. That's the normal focus for a global summit, as Nitin Desai, the Secretary-General's Special Adviser, pointed out at WSIS.

WSIS, by contrast, was a summit built round optimism: about the opportunities that were presented to the world by information technologies, the ways in which those opportunities might be exploited to shape society and support development, and the challenges that needed to be overcome *en route*.

The years since WSIS

In the years since then, that optimism's been redoubled in some ways, but been put in doubt in others.

The capabilities of ICTs have grown enormously, transforming the nature of the digital environment, social relationships, commercial businesses and public services. Huge opportunities have been created, and advantage has been taken of them by individuals, by businesses, by civil society, by governments.

But, as we know, that growth has been accompanied by developments that are less positive – by inequality and digital divides, by cybercrime and insecurity, by new challenges to human rights, by disinformation and abuse.

WSIS, COP and COVID

The COP reminded me as well of one more thing: that this rapidly changing information or digital society is evolving in a context made by other developments in world society, and at this moment in a time of crisis.

The immediate crisis has been COVID, which has demonstrated the fragility of human life – and the capacity of ICTs to help us cope with that fragility. Digital technology has helped deliver vaccines and manage public health. The ability to work from home and trade online has made economies more resilient than they'd otherwise have been. And many families, too, have been able to make use of ICTs – to work, to shop, to socialise – in ways that have made them more resilient as well.

There's an optimistic message in that, but a warning, too, because not all families, not all workers, not all communities have been able to take full advantage. That's a warning about the relationship between digital inequality and wider social and economic inequality.

And we should remember that, in spite of all that ICTs have done to help, the road to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals has been set back by the pandemic.

In the early days of COVID, there was much talk that we might 'build back better', by building on the experience of using digital technologies to change the way we work and live into the future. There are, surely, ways in which some of the changes that have resulted from the crisis will be

lasting – though I'd note that much of the rhetoric we hear these days is more about 'getting back to normal' than 'building back better'.

WSIS outcomes in context

The profounder crisis that we face is climate change. COP-26 moved things ahead a little here, but (almost) everyone agrees that there's far more to do. And however much we succeed in mitigating climate change, we will still face environmental changes in the next decades that will threaten much of how we live today.

Sometimes when I read predictions of digital development, it seems as if we think the information society is going to evolve in isolation. The truth is, of course, that it will evolve in a world that is also profoundly affected by climate change, by the changes that will result from it in where we live and what we eat and access to resources, and by the political upheavals that are likely to be triggered by the changing climate.

And that's only one aspect of the changing context in which the information society is going to evolve. It will also be affected by other externalities, in politics and economics, the threat of more pandemics, the risks associated with conflict and geopolitical instability.

This will of course be iterative: it will work in both directions. Those externalities will be affected by digital transformation too.

But as we look ahead into a future that is increasingly distant from WSIS, in time and context, I'd argue that we need to think about the future of the information society in terms of how it's going to interact with those other changes on our planet, rather than thinking of it and its outcomes as if it stands alone. It's those other changes that will set the context for the digital society.

Reporting on the digital society

I've been reviewing recently the reports that have been published within the UN system and other international organisations that are relevant to that society's development. It's something I do every year, and in the years since WSIS I've seen the breadth and depth of relevant reports expand and change.

In the first years after the Summit those reports were mostly exploratory. They were concerned with what *could* be envisaged, with what could and should be done right then, as first steps, to build infrastructure, stimulate access, promote usage, offer services and enhance governance.

Today we have a great deal better understanding of what is happening – in infrastructure and innovation, in access and usage, as the internet has reached more than half the global population. Much of that usage has occurred on services and platforms that weren't envisaged when the Summit happened.

Our understanding of the opportunities that the information society affords is more substantial but also more realistic. So is our attention to the granularity of access – to the gender digital divide, for instance; to the implications of the way technology's developed for equality, development and rights; to risks as well as opportunities.

This year's crop of international reports has been rich, in spite of the pandemic. I'll pick out five areas of interest.

COVID

First, unsurprisingly, there's been an emphasis on COVID.

- On how this crisis has demonstrated the importance of connectivity that is reliable and affordable, and the ways that connectivity's been used to build resilience and maintain businesses and public services.
- On the potential of e-commerce and the importance of countering disinformation.
- Stress on the value of data-gathering and analysis in crisis management.
- On the value of strategic plans that place ICTs at the forefront of response both now and in the future.

Climate and the environment

There's been a good deal of focus too on that other crisis that I mentioned, of climate and environment.

- On the value of data-gathering and analysis to build understanding of what's happening and to support mitigation and adaptation.
- On the environmental challenges posed by ICTs' fast-growing energy consumption and e-waste.
- On the need for sustainability strategies to maximise the benefits of digitalisation … and for governments and businesses to incorporate environmental principles, energy efficiency and waste reduction into the design of their products and services.

Data for development

UNCTAD's *Technology and Innovation Report* this year focused on innovation with equity; the World Bank's *World Development Report* on 'data for better lives'. These represent a third theme of the year, the relationship between technology, data and development; including the potential of frontier technologies such as AI, robotics and VR.

Part of that theme concerns the way technology affects rights and behaviour. In its report, the World Bank called for 'a new social contract that enables the use and reuse of data to create economic and social value, ensures equitable access to that value, and fosters trust that data will not be misused in harmful ways.'

The digital economy

Not surprisingly, a fourth area of the information society that's received attention is the digital economy. Indeed, it's one that sees growing attention year on year. There's been particular interest this time in e-commerce, which has surged during the pandemic. Attention too to digital and mobile money, cross-border payments and digital identity that's used for validation.

Cross-border data flows have been discussed a good deal, not just for their economic value but also because of their implications for national sovereignty and data protection. The governance of data, and different approaches to this by different governments, are the focus of UNCTAD's *Digital Economy Report*.

As digitalisation proceeds, its governance becomes more complex, requires more balancing of different interests, and it intersects more with other areas of public policy that might previously have been thought separate.

Digital cooperation

This governance involves governments and international fora, standards-setting bodies, businesses and other stakeholders. It's central to the last theme that I'll cite from this year's reading of reports – the theme of digital cooperation, and progress along the Secretary-General's *Roadmap* which was launched in 2020 and seeks to bring nations and stakeholders together in ways that seek out consensus on ways forward.

Consensus, of course, that is consistent with the UN's other goals in human rights, conflict prevention and sustainable development.

A pervasive information/digital society

I've tried in that short summary to give a brief account of some important themes that are being discussed at present in the wake of WSIS and the time of COVID.

But this is just a snapshot, for a simple reason: digitalisation is increasingly pervasive; it affects *every* aspect of development, the work of every UN agency. It is no longer an addition to the way we think of other things – e-health, e-government, e-agriculture and so on – but a core component of how we have to think of those aspects of our lives.

There is an important role within this for CSTD. The Commission has, of course, responsibilities to review and report on the outcomes of the Summit.

This session's part of those responsibilities. But CSTD also has a unique role in the UN system through its wider mandate, to consider the implications and potential of science and technology for development. Not just digital technology, but the whole range of frontier technologies that are advancing rapidly today and that we think will change the nature of tomorrow.

WSIS then and WSIS now

I find it instructive, from time to time, to look back at the WSIS outcome documents and reflect on the nature of the information society that was anticipated. There were high ambitions then, and some of those have been exceeded during the last two decades.

As I said earlier, technology itself has made tremendous strides, enabling innovations that weren't even dreamed of at the Summit. The five- and ten- year reviews of WSIS that were published by CSTD each identified a wave of innovations that had changed the nature of the information society we then experienced.

There's been a third wave since and much bigger waves can now be seen ahead of us, approaching rapidly. On the horizon, maybe, lies the 'metaverse' ('promised' or 'threatened' depending how we feel about the good and bad of merging real and virtual realities).

While technology has surged ahead, though, there are other aspects of the aspirations held at WSIS that have not been fulfilled.

Advances in digital technology have not been matched by advances in digital equality.

New power structures have emerged in the digital environment as societies and economies have changed, but our governance institutions have not adapted quickly enough to take account of them. Including those for digital governance.

There is growing concern that international competition in technology and wider geopolitical tensions will pose risks to both digital development and international security.

The context for the twenty-year review

As participants in this Commission know, the UN system's to review outcomes from WSIS twenty years after the Summit's end, which is four years from now.

There's a temptation, always, to review by looking back. WSIS expressed aspirations, set targets, and established frameworks for assessing progress. The temptation is to see those as the starting point.

But things have changed since then.

To reiterate, technology and digitalisation have moved on faster than WSIS envisaged. Its aspirations, targets and assessment frameworks aren't sufficient to explain or understand the progress that's been made. The information society we have today is more pervasive and commercial, has more complex impacts and more diverse implications for society.

It has enabled governments, businesses and individuals to do more things, and do them differently, but it's worth remembering that the underlying motivations of those governments, businesses and individuals haven't changed. More people have more access to more digital devices but that hasn't diminished digital divides or inequalities in access to resources, or the ways in which people pursue power and prosperity.

If motivations haven't changed, the world surrounding digital development certainly has.

- The international community's adopted new core goals in the sustainable development agenda.
- We have experienced two global crises: one financial, in 2008/9, the other medical, today.
- We are much more aware of the impending crisis for the climate and the transformative effects which that will have if urgent action isn't taken.

In conclusion

As I mentioned at the outset, the information society does not evolve in isolation, but through interaction with what else is happening around us – from geopolitics to the environment.

That interaction will be crucial to the review of WSIS that's required in 2025.

If that review's to be of value for the future, it's essential it does more than just look back and measure progress.

It needs to draw lessons from what's happened during the past twenty years;

to focus on the information society that we have today;

to reflect on the changes that technology is set to bring about;

to consider how those changes might be shaped to build a people-centred, inclusive, development-oriented, safer and more equitable future;

and to do so in the context of sustainable development and the Secretary-General's *Roadmap* for digital cooperation.

A review like that, which looks forward to the challenges of the next twenty years, will require insight and foresight. CSTD has already contributed a deal of both, and will no doubt contribute more during the next four years.