

DRAFT SPEECH TO CSTD INTERSESSIONAL, OCTOBER 2023

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Thank you, chair, and good morning to those of you in the room; good morning, good afternoon or good evening to those of you online.

It's always a pleasure to talk to this Commission; and it's always interesting to reflect on the ways in which the Information Society's developed since the World Summit almost twenty years ago.

I've been asked to say something today about recent developments

- around the themes of that Summit;
- about progress and challenges over the last few years;
- and about issues for the forthcoming review of Summit outcomes.

I'll do that in four brief sections.

I'll say something first about WSIS in the wider context of international policy development.

I'll then say something about the long-term changes that have happened since the Summit, before I focus on the last three years. And I'll end with some thoughts about the implications of those changes for assessing the impact of the Summit and its subject, which is the growing digitalisation of our world.

PART ONE

When I write about WSIS today, I tend to emphasise three things.

I stress the *ethos* of WSIS, which is encapsulated in the opening words of the *Geneva Declaration of Principles*: that the Information Society should be 'people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented.'

I talk about the *trajectory* of digitalisation: the way information and communication technologies have changed in nature and capabilities; how they have become pervasive in our societies; the impacts they are having; and the acceleration of those impacts into the future.

And I suggest we should consider that trajectory – past, present and anticipated – in terms of our *aspirations* for the future – for the economy, for the environment, for peaceful development, for human rights; in words I often use, what we want to preserve, what we want to promote and what we want to prevent.

I don't talk much, though, about the targets that were set at WSIS. Those formal targets covered the period up to 2015, and they reflected the very different context for communications then. I talk more about the institutions that were created by WSIS – the IGF and the WSIS Forum – and about the underlying importance of international cooperation in achieving what WSIS entailed.

The Summit's outcome documents were, after all, products of international consensus – both multilateral and multistakeholder. They were agreed after very tense debate, but they've stood the test of time and are now seen as foundation documents for every international agreement in this area.

As the information society – or as many now call it, the digital society – evolves, and the international community addresses ever more complex issues arising from its evolution, the principles set out in those documents are still seen as starting points for the way we should look forward.

Starting points for a context and a future that are in constant flux, which means they need to be interpreted in the light of at least three types of change:

- Change, first, in the underlying challenges that face the international community, including those addressed by the Sustainable Development Goals, poverty and inequality, climate change and human rights;
- change in international relations, in geopolitics, the changing state of the world economy, the risk and the reality of conflict, the degree to which there's scope for international agreement;
- and change in technology itself, which is becoming increasingly powerful, sophisticated and disruptive in ways that many feel alarming and many feel require increasing regulation.

PART TWO

I've been looking back lately at the distance that we've come from WSIS, in little more than a generation, and reviewing my own involvement in ICT development which goes back to the late 1980s.

Back to a time when some countries had just one telephone per thousand people; when one country had a universal service obligation of a payphone within a day's walk for every citizen.

It's worth reminding ourselves how transformed the communications environment now is from then: that, in just over a generation, mobile phones have become pervasive; that we now rely on them to check facts, conduct transactions and access government services; that half the world makes use of internet; that Facebook, YouTube, WeChat and TikTok, only one of which existed at the time of WSIS, have become the leading platforms for interpersonal communications.

The difference that matters most here's not technology itself but impact. The ICT devices and the services we use are not just different from those we had at WSIS. They have very different, and far, far more substantial, impacts on how we live our lives.

WSIS adopted eighteen 'action lines' for WSIS stakeholders to explore those impacts, and they still form the basis for the review of WSIS outcomes that the Secretary-General publishes each year.

We're much more conscious now of the complexities and nuanced impacts that have arisen from these than we were at WSIS – the risks as well as opportunities; the different impacts on different people in different circumstances with different resources and capabilities.

And we have other frameworks, too, through which to assess the impact of technology on human development today:

- the relationship, for instance, between ICTs and the Sustainable Development Goals;
- that between ICTs and the environment, with growing awareness of the cost of climate change and of e-waste;
- the impact access and use of ICTs have on equality, inclusion, power structures;

- impacts on governance and human rights; on the relationship between the state and citizens – from improvements in public services to the surveillance of behaviour;
- the relationship with geopolitics, including the way conflicts are now conducted through cyberattacks, disinformation and the use of drones;
- the changes in the way we live our lives, from electronic shopping to entertainment, gaming to online dating.

All these changes are important aspects of how the Information Society's evolved since WSIS, which need to be included in our assessment of what's happened since the summit.

Not forgetting the implications of future innovations such as machine learning and artificial intelligence and perhaps of new modalities of living such as what Meta calls the 'metaverse'.

Looking back at WSIS, and thinking about that trajectory of digitalisation, we've also learnt important lessons.

- We've learnt that things may turn out rather differently than we expected. The WSIS outcome documents, for instance, had much smaller expectations of mobile networks than we have experienced. Experience has taught us, too, that digitalisation can increase inequality rather than reducing it as we had hoped.
- We've learnt about the pace of change that's possible in these technologies and services, not least from the ways that social media and cloud computing have transformed behaviour, and about how that pace of change can leave policy frameworks languishing behind; how they can shape our lives before we realise it or have the chance to shape them for the common good.
- We've become much more aware of risks. Online fraud's now one of the most common crimes in my country, and perhaps in yours. The internet's become the most effective channel ever not just for information but also for disinformation.
- And we're clearer every year that long-term changes are arising in society as everything becomes more digital. Some of these changes delight us but others cause anxiety and uncertainty. That pace of change for many seems threatening, risking the trust and confidence that innovations require for success.

When we review developments towards an Information Society, therefore, we need to look beyond what was anticipated at the time of WSIS at these wider impacts; beyond what we hoped would happen to what has happened and what might come in future; beyond mere statistics to our lived experience.

PART THREE

As UN DESA's recent *E-Government Survey* puts it, it's more and more difficult today to separate digital and non-digital aspects of governance and life. Several new and growing challenges have demonstrated this in recent years. I'll pick out three.

The pandemic is, of course, the one that is most obvious. The fact that many of us could do so much more online than would have been possible beforehand, enabled us and digital societies to be far more resilient during COVID-19. The more digital our lives were in any country, the more we could take greater public health precautions, protect our economies and support the vulnerable.

Surviving the pandemic's impact was much easier for those of us who were more digitised – both individuals and countries. So the crisis we've just lived through has made the impact of inequalities much clearer, including that of digital divides. It's shown how inequalities must be addressed holistically: social, cultural and economic inequalities alongside inequalities in access to digital communications and resources.

A second rising challenge. Geopolitics today are tenser than they were at the time of WSIS. There are dangerous conflicts taking place around the world, not least here in Europe. Digitalisation has enabled these to be conducted differently, both on the battlefield and off. We don't have international agreements to govern these new types of conflict.

And, indeed, agreements in many areas are proving hard to reach. Data governance is one example. The last few years have seen data analysis become significantly more sophisticated and all-encompassing. Its capabilities, for good or ill, have increased greatly through the growing scale of data-gathering and the sophistication of machine learning.

This is accelerating, which raises many questions – about the relationship between government, business and the citizen; about privacy and national sovereignty, cybersecurity and cyberconflict; about the power that data management and new technology give to governments and corporations; about the scope and limits of regulation, national and international.

PART FOUR

The all-embracing nature of digitalisation today is, of course, important to the United Nations and its aspirations for a better world.

Its importance is reflected in initiatives the Secretary-General has taken in the past three years or so:

- through his High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation;
- his Roadmap on that theme;
- the proposal that's now underway for a Global Digital Compact to be presented to a Summit for the Future that's to take place in 2024;
- the appointment of the Technology Envoy in the Secretary-General's office from whom we've already heard this morning;
- the establishment of a Leadership Panel to drive forward the Internet Governance Forum, which is one of WSIS' major outcomes.

These initiatives are taking place as we approach the twenty-year review of WSIS which the General Assembly will complete in 2025, and they form an essential part of the context for it. Modalities for the review aren't yet determined, but it's going to be important. How can it add value to the WSIS principles and these other international goals?

Well, measuring how the Information Society's developed since the Summit won't be easy. The goals and targets set then aren't sufficient. Statistics aren't always reliable. And the world has changed enormously.

I worked with this Commission and with DESA during the ten-year review which took place in 2014 and 2015. Many of the issues that preoccupied us then were innovations that post-dated WSIS, such as mass mobile markets, social media and cloud computing. Further step changes have followed in the past ten years, and we're aware of more to come.

A review of WSIS' themes or goals or values now can't just look back at those the Summit set two decades back. It has to consider the impact of digital development over those two decades, including how it's changed society and how it has affected other international goals such as those for development, environment and human rights.

Understanding the digital divides we have today will be essential. The digital divides that matter now aren't just in access but also in usage, and in impact.

Statistics on connectivity and usage, and on services like e-commerce and e-government, are important but they're only part of a picture that's increasingly complex. To understand it properly requires us to understand and reflect on what's happening in different places, different sectors and to different groups of people; and of the impact that digitalisation's having on government and business, inclusion and equality, health and education, security and welfare, and so on.

The challenge of reviewing twenty years of progress since the Summit, therefore, is concerned with changing contexts.

The WSIS outcomes need to be contextualised within the world of 5G and 6G rather than of 2G. And to be contextualised within the other UN frameworks that have been agreed since then – the SDGs most obviously, but also those concerned with climate change and the environment, conflict management, human rights and gender equity.

The Summit for the Future is due to take place before the Summit's outcomes are reviewed. That too will provide an important lens here. How, looking to the future, will ICTs contribute to that Summit's outcomes, as well as those of WSIS? What goals – digital and otherwise – should ICTs be serving in the next decade? How should the success or otherwise of the Information Society be monitored and measured in their light and in the light of ever-changing digital technology?

CSTD is, of course, well-placed to play its part in this. It made a major contribution to the ten-year review of WSIS, and it has systematically reviewed developments since then not just in ICTs but other new technologies.

There's a wealth of knowledge in the Commission and in the reports it's published. I look forward very much to seeing the contribution it will make to international community thinking about WSIS outcomes and the wider digital agenda in the next few years.