

Report on CSTD second open consultation on WSIS+20
“WSIS at 20: successes, failures and future expectations”

Held during the UNCTAD eWeek, 8 December 2023, Geneva, Switzerland.

Prepared by the UNCTAD Secretariat¹

¹ This report summarizes the second open consultation; 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 (GA) resolution A/70/125, adopted on 16 December 2015, called for a high-level meeting in 2025 to review the overall implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), known as the WSIS+20 Review.
2. Since 2006, the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) has been carrying out the mandate given to it by ECOSOC and the General Assembly to conduct the system-wide follow up to the implementation of the WSIS outcomes, including through annual reports of the UNSG. The Commission also contributed to the WSIS+10 review in the General Assembly in 2015. For the WSIS+20 Review, the Economic and Social Council adopted resolution E/RES/2023/3 in June 2023, requesting the CSTD to collect inputs from member States, all facilitators and other stakeholders and to organize, during its twenty-seventh session, in 2024, and its twenty-eighth session, in 2025, substantive discussions on the progress made in the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit during the past 20 years, and to report thereon, through the Economic and Social Council, to the General Assembly. As part of its implementation of this mandate, an open multistakeholder consultation was organized in Geneva on 8 December 2023, as part of UNCTAD's eWeek.

II. Organization of work

3. The consultation was held as a session of the UNCTAD eWeek 2023, which brought together stakeholders concerned with e-commerce and the digital economy. It was attended by representatives from governments, private sectors, international organizations, civil society, the technical community, and academia. There were 120 in-person participants and 105 online participants.

III. Opening

4. The Chair of the CSTD² moderated the event and gave welcome remarks. She outlined the guiding questions of the event related to the evolution of the WSIS vision of a "people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society":
 - a) To what extent and how has the vision of a "people-centered, 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)? Moreover, how can these trends enable or hinder the realization of the WSIS vision?
 - 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 presented the roadmap that 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 event was the second open consultation carried out within this framework, aiming to facilitate an open and candid dialogue, leveraging the collective insights,

² Ms. Ana Cristina das Neves, Portugal.

perspectives, and experiences of stakeholders. The resulting insights and recommendations would 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.

6. In her remarks, the Head of the CSTD Secretariat³ shared that approximately one-third of the global population lacks access to the internet, with least-developed countries experiencing a connectivity rate of only 36%. This underscores the urgency of global initiatives to ensure universal internet access for fostering socioeconomic development and bridging the digital divide. The WSIS emerged as a crucial platform for addressing these challenges, with the recent CSTD consultation at the Internet Governance Forum in Kyoto indicating strong stakeholder confidence in the continued relevance and usefulness of the WSIS process beyond 2025. The multi-stakeholder approach of the WSIS process received widespread support as a means to promote collaboration and ensure inclusiveness. The CSTD is working in the WSIS +20 review in close collaboration and partnership with other key players of the WSIS process such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), UNESCO, and the UNDP.

IV. Open discussion

7. The first speaker⁴ presented critical aspects of the significance of ICT infrastructure for sustainable development, particularly in rural Africa. He underscored the pivotal role of stable internet connectivity, secure electricity access, and affordable communication devices in fostering the growth of ICT infrastructure, essential for economic and social progress in these regions. He emphasized the necessity of education and training programs to equip individuals with the skills needed to benefit from technology. He also highlighted the importance of supporting innovation and entrepreneurship through incubators, accelerators, and funding to contribute to economic growth. Digitization of public services is deemed crucial, enhancing efficiency and accessibility while contributing to sustainable city and community development. He underscored the role of ICTs in health and agriculture, emphasizing telemedicine for remote healthcare access and technology's role in facilitating market access for farmers. He referred to the adoption of digital financial services, like mobile banking, to promote financial inclusion, and economic growth, and reduce inequalities by providing formal financial access. Lastly, the need for robust cybersecurity measures was underscored, emphasizing the increasing importance of protecting against cybercrime and ensuring data confidentiality as ICT infrastructure continues to expand, allowing individuals and organizations to safeguard the integrity of their digital systems.

8. The second speaker⁵ highlighted the transformative impact of global digitalization in our lives and work, emphasizing its pivotal role in economic development. With five billion individuals worldwide using the Internet, he underscored digitalization's ability to boost labour productivity, generate demand for goods and services, and elevate overall economic quality. Shifting the focus to Indonesia, he commended the country's commitment to accelerating inclusive and sustainable digital transformation, citing a substantial growth in its digital economy from US\$41 billion in 2019 to US\$77 billion in 2022. This commitment is further evidenced by Indonesia's strategic investments in ICT, particularly in digital infrastructure and cloud computing, highlighting a dedication to fostering digital inclusivity. In addition, he introduced a nuanced perspective when discussing AI, acknowledging its potential to significantly improve decision-making and service

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

⁴ H.E. Mr. Sabri Bachtobji, Permanent Representative of Tunisia to the United Nations Office at Geneva

⁵ Mr. Ichwan Makmur Nasution, Head of International Affairs, Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, Republic of Indonesia

delivery. He drew attention to the challenges posed by AI, such as misinformation and data breaches, emphasizing the need for effective regulation. Despite its streamlining benefits, the malicious outputs and scams associated with AI were noted as potential threats to business conduct and confidence.

9. The third speaker⁶ emphasized the pivotal role of inclusion and empowerment in building a digital society, drawing on the vision of a people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented information society from WSIS 2003. Acknowledging the integral nature of digital technologies, he underscored the risks of societal divides when inclusion is lacking, emphasizing the need to address digital divides for comprehensive societal development. The importance of aligning WSIS with UN SDGs was highlighted, citing digital technologies as valuable tools to address major issues identified by the SDGs and stressing the need for universal accessibility in an increasingly digital society. On the topic of AI and related technologies, the speaker cautioned about inherent risks, including biased programming, impacts on the job market, and opaque decision mechanisms. The discrepancy between the speed of technological advancements and the pace of rule-making was noted as a critical concern. Additionally, the speaker advocated for updating the WSIS architecture to address emerging technologies, pointing to the WSIS + 20 review as an opportune moment to make the architecture more current.

10. The fourth speaker⁷ reflected on the remarkable journey of the WSIS over the past two decades, celebrating its significant contributions to the realm of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Notably, the exponential growth of global internet users, soaring from 12.4% in 2003 to an impressive 67% in 2023, exemplifies the increasing connectivity and access to digital technologies on a global scale. This progress underscores WSIS's role as a beacon of global digital cooperation, evolving into a multi-stakeholder global community. While WSIS has provided a robust framework for digital progress, the speaker emphasized the need to address risks and challenges associated with evolving technologies, stressing the shared responsibility for their responsible and ethical use. Affordability emerged as a significant hurdle to universal connectivity. The persistent digital divide, affecting approximately 2.6 billion people without internet access, underscored the urgency to connect the offline population for global social and economic development. Focusing on the future, the speaker highlighted the pivotal role of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in fostering an inclusive digital future. The upcoming WSIS+20 Forum, co-hosted by ITU in May 2024, was presented as a crucial opportunity to build on WSIS's momentum, discussing innovative strategies, sharing best practices, and forging partnerships to overcome challenges and ensure an equitable digital future.

11. The fifth speaker⁸ highlighted the positive impact of digital developments on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and entrepreneurship in Africa, noting the entrepreneurial endeavours providing digital services, online work, and e-commerce transformations. The increase in digital payments across Africa, attributed to technological advancements and innovation, was emphasized, with mobile payments and startup-developed payment solutions playing a pivotal role. However, despite these strides, significant challenges persist in creating a sustainable digital economy in Africa. The absence of infrastructure to support e-commerce, expensive shipping costs, trust issues with online transactions, and inadequate government support for startups and businesses were outlined as major hurdles. The impediments extend to low internet penetration and high costs, hindering the growth of the digital economy. Many African countries still face low internet penetration, and where available, the internet remains expensive. Acknowledging the importance of government support,

⁶ Mr. Jorge Cancio Melia, Deputy Director of the International Relations Team, Federal Office of Communications, Switzerland

⁷ Ms. Sulyna Nur Abdulla, Chief, Strategic Planning and Membership Department, ITU

⁸ Ms. Pauline Kariuki, Co-Founder & CTO, Mawu Africa, Nairobi

the speaker stressed the need for regulations favouring startups and highlighted the expensive nature of intellectual property protection, particularly in the early stages.

12. The sixth speaker⁹ provided a detailed analysis underscoring the pivotal role of information technology (IT) in shaping the digital economy, particularly within the context of the WSIS. The continuous progress in IT has significantly impacted various sectors, including education, healthcare, and economic development, aligning with the SDGs of good health and well-being, quality education, and decent work and economic growth. The analysis stressed the positive influence of ICT and data in advancing these goals and emphasizes the importance of responsible AI systems characterized by transparency, equity, and freedom from biases. Furthermore, the speaker advocated for the active participation of developing countries in data production processes to ensure inclusive representation and a more accurate understanding of global challenges. Balancing open data initiatives with robust data protection frameworks was highlighted as crucial for addressing privacy concerns and maintaining trust in the digital sphere. The significance of bridging the digital divide for marginalized communities was underscored, promoting inclusivity in ICT access to reduce inequalities and foster equitable development opportunities.

13. A participant from IT for Change stressed the critical importance of evaluating the fulfilment of WSIS principles ahead of the WSIS+20 review. She expressed concern about the concentration of the information society in the U.S. and China. The speaker also referred to challenges such as online violence, poor labour policies, loss of privacy, and discrimination, all of which impact on digital rights, social justice, and equity. Looking forward, she stressed the urgency of robust data governance, extending beyond privacy to regulate and enhance public welfare systems. Essential reforms to intellectual property regulations, competition law, labour law, trade taxation, investment regimes, and data governance were highlighted, with a central emphasis on the role of public financing systems.

14. A delegate from the European Union (EU) reiterated the EU's support for the multi-stakeholder Internet governance model. Emphasizing the pivotal role of the WSIS and the IGF in the success of the Internet, she reaffirmed the EU's commitment to upholding human rights as the cornerstone of an open, free, and secure online space.

15. A participant from the Global Digital Justice Forum envisaged the WSIS+20 review playing a pivotal role in establishing a binding global governance framework for digital human rights. Central to this argument is the proposal to include the right to freedom from commercial surveillance and personal profiling within the broader right to privacy. He advocated for communities to exercise control over their data resources, linking it to their economic, social, and cultural rights. To fund this vision, a digital development tax is proposed, creating a digital solidarity fund aimed at constructing public digital infrastructure in developing countries. Emphasizing the need for interoperability in digital platforms and plural digital media, the participant highlighted common protocols, data structures, and AI as essential components. Lastly, promoting alternative platforms, data models, and AI rooted in local accountability, women's participation, and ecological sustainability was stressed, with a call for public investment in these models that align with local needs and ecological sustainability.

16. A delegate from Austria advocated for a forward-thinking stance on digital and tech governance, particularly in light of advancements in AI and emerging technologies. She emphasized the importance of not neglecting traditional goals in the pursuit of new technological agendas. She highlighted the crucial elements of accountability and a human rights-based approach in navigating digital transformation. Evidence of risks to human rights, democracy, and the rule of law necessitates a human-centric approach to mitigate these challenges.

⁹ Ms. Silvana Fumega, Director, Global Data Barometer, Buenos Aires

17. A representative of the UN Economic Commission for Africa acknowledged the progress spurred by the WSIS in Africa, as evidenced by the substantial increase in internet access and mobile penetration. However, challenges persist, with 63% of the African population offline and 500 million lacking any legal form of identity. He expressed that the upcoming WSIS+20 review must pivot toward integrating with emerging technologies, particularly AI and generative blockchain technology. The call is to enhance the WSIS process, focusing on effective implementation and measurement of targets, while aligning the initiative more cohesively with the SDGs.

18. A delegate from Bulgaria reconfirmed the country's support for the multi-stakeholder approach and the integrity of the Internet. Highlighting substantial progress since 2003 in Internet Governance, he acknowledged the positive updates brought by the WSIS+10 outcome documents to the Tunis agenda. Additionally, the delegate expressed support for extending the mandate of the IGF for another 10 years.

19. A delegate from the United Kingdom addressed the transformative impact of the Internet and digital technologies. Acknowledging the sweeping changes that have taken place, she emphasized the upcoming WSIS outcomes review in 2025 as a crucial opportunity to assess its effectiveness. The WSIS action lines were commended for guiding actions that ensure universal internet accessibility, prompting reflection on the internet's role in societal and economic transformations. Highlighting the importance of connectivity and infrastructure, she contended that bridging the digital divide requires reducing gaps in affordable and reliable connectivity. Global internet reliability necessitates reinforced infrastructure. Advocating for universal participation, the delegate stressed the need for discussions on universal acceptance and internationalized domain names to ensure a truly inclusive digital future.

20. A delegate from Indonesia emphasized Indonesia's perception of the WSIS as a pivotal catalyst in leveraging ICT for SDGs. Underlining the significance of the annual WSIS prizes, he highlighted their integral role in propelling digital transformation within Indonesia. The country backs the Tunis agenda and the IGF as crucial components of digital governance. Expressing a desire for increased participation in dynamic negotiations, Indonesia aims to contribute substantively to the Global Digital Compact (GDC), emphasizing its commitment to inclusive discussions that prioritize the perspectives and needs of the global south.

21. A delegate from Hungary and vice chair of the CSTD¹⁰ emphasized the alignment of the WSIS with the SDGs, citing a widely shared understanding of their interconnectedness. He underscored the need for establishing indicators to measure connectivity and address gender inequality within this context. Furthermore, the mandates of the IGF and WSIS forums should be extended, as well as the mandate for CSTD in relation to WSIS. He proposed that the IGF review the emerging issues and make recommendations that will be forwarded to the CSTD. As a follow up the CSTD should discuss them and include the emerging issues in its annual resolutions that are submitted to the ECOSOC for consideration. Finally, in his view, the GDC outcomes or the possible outcomes should be considered as an input or hopefully guidelines to the review of the WSIS + 20.

¹⁰ Mr. Peter Major, Special Advisor to the Permanent Mission of Hungary in Geneva, Switzerland.