

Report on CSTD consultation in European region on WSIS at 20: Successes, failures and future expectations

Held as a pre-event during the EuroDig Forum 2024

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Vilnius, Lithuania

Prepared by the Secretariat of the Commission on Science and Technology for
Development¹

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 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 Development (CSTD) to collect inputs from member states and stakeholders and organize discussions 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 GA.
2. An integral part of the WSIS+20 Review is the engagement of multi-stakeholders in open consultations conducted by the CSTD secretariat at regional and global levels from late 2023 until late 2024. These stakeholders include governments, the private sector, civil society, the technical and academic communities involved in ICT development, and international organizations. The launch of these consultations took place during the 18th Internet Governance Forum in Kyoto, Japan in October 2023, with subsequent sessions during UNCTAD's eWeek in December 2023 in Geneva and the first regional consultation during the "Arab Consultative Conference on WSIS+20 Review and GDC Processes" in Dubai on 22 May 2024, which focused on the Economic Commission of West Asia region. This event marks the fourth consultation held by the CSTD, aiming to foster detailed discussions among diverse stakeholders, ultimately contributing to the General Assembly's review in 2025 following discussions at the CSTD as requested by ECOSOC.

II. Organization of work

3. The consultation was held as a pre-event during the EuroDig Forum 2024 in partnership with the International Telecommunication Union, United Nations Educational, Scientific

¹ This report summarizes the discussion at the open consultation. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the Secretariat.

and Cultural Organization and United Nations Development Programme. There were about 60 participants in the room and remotely.

III. Opening

4. The Vice Chair of CSTD² moderated the event and gave welcome remarks, highlighting the crucial role of CSTD in the WSIS+20 review. She presented a roadmap adopted by the CSTD that guides the WSIS+20 review process, which includes holding open multistakeholder consultations at regional and global levels and the preparation by the CSTD Secretariat of a synthesis report incorporating inputs from these consultations. Two global consultations took place last October and last December in Kyoto, Japan and Geneva, Switzerland respectively. The first regional consultation was held on 22 May in Dubai, UAE in collaboration with ESCWA. Today's consultation marks the second among a series of regional consultation that the CSTD has planned to conduct on different continents. The vice chair outlined the guiding questions for the review, which are also the focus of this session
 - To what extent and how has the WSIS vision in its Declaration of Principles of 2003 of a "people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society" evolved over the past 20 years since WSIS, both at the Global and European levels?
 - 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? Globally and at the regional level? How did the WSIS framework and process managed to adapt to technologies that emerged during the last two decades?
 - 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?

The chair concluded by emphasizing the objective of the consultation, which was to facilitate an open dialogue and gather insights and recommendations that would contribute to the CSTD's report.

5. Mr. Mr. Karolis Žemaitis, Vice Minister of Economy and Innovation, Lithuania emphasized the shared vision of creating a human-centered, inclusive, resilient, innovative, and development-oriented Information Society. Highlighting the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach, he described a "magical triangle" involving government, private enterprises, and society, including NGOs and academia, to foster innovation. He cited the success of Lithuania's innovation lab, which addresses public sector challenges through collaboration with startups and academia. The speaker also noted the significance of the new EU Framework Convention on AI Human Rights, Democracy, and the rule of law, which would be signed by the EU member states in September in Vilnius, Lithuania.

² Ms. Ana Neves, Vic-Chair, the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD)

Acknowledging current global crises, he stressed the need for international cooperation to build a resilient and safe digital environment. He compared Lithuania to a start-up and emphasized Lithuania's competitive strategy of flexibility and innovation to make the country more resilient in a complex world. Lithuania is participating actively in the negotiations on the Global Digital Compact (GDC) and on the outcome of the Summit of the Future.

6. Mr. Tomas Lamanuskas, Deputy Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union highlighted the achievement of the WSIS since its inception, i.e. an increase of Internet connection from less than 1/3 of the world population in 2003 to 5.4 billion people today. Its legacies are the multi-stakeholder approach and WSIS framework, including the WSIS Forum, the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), WSIS action lines in all areas, numerous WSIS projects, database to measure ICT for development and UNGIS that gathers over 40 UN agencies. In 2015, the WSIS matrix was adapted to be aligned with the sustainable goals under the 2030 agenda. He underscored the need for government, private sector, academia, and civil society collaboration. and noted ongoing challenges, including the digital divide, regulatory gaps especially AI governance, social and ethical issues, online disinformation and misinformation.

IV. Open Discussion

7. The moderator opened the floor to the audience, inviting participants to discuss the progress made towards the vision of a people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society, challenges that remain, and how ongoing trends and emerging technologies might impact human development in the future. Questions and comments posed by the participants, including those to the moderator, demonstrated a high level of interest in and expectations for the WSIS+20 review.
8. The first speaker ³ expressed gratitude for the CSTD to organize such a consultation, emphasizing its role in amplifying stakeholder voices to influence the UN General Assembly. He stressed the significance of the multistakeholder process of the WSIS which benefits the end users of ICT. He questioned the use of number of connected people as an indicator of WSIS achievement, acknowledging that some may choose not to be connected. In his view, the goal should be to let everyone that wants to be connected to be connected with the Internet. In addition, he highlighted the significant evolution of the information society over the past 20 years. He noted the shift from getting the first billion people online to now focusing on the last billion. However, digital divide exists everywhere in the world. Youth do not know Internet as much as they are expected to. As public services are increasingly becoming digital, people not used to digital services are having difficulties in accessing these services. Emphasizing that the Internet has become a crucial global infrastructure, he argued for prioritizing meaningful connectivity, education, and capacity building over governance issues. He stressed that the Internet's

³ Mr. Sébastien Bachollet, Chair of Euralo at Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN)

effectiveness, particularly evident during the pandemic, should guide future efforts to ensure widespread, impactful connectivity.

9. The second speaker ⁴ asked the moderator to briefly describe the main outcomes of the regional consultation in Dubai. The moderator responded that during that consultation, the multi-stakeholder approach was well supported, with participants appreciating the landscape established by WSIS since 2005. Additionally, there were proposals for a guiding institution to provide leadership and policy-making support. Recognizing that the multistakeholder approach is not an issue, the participant then raised a question regarding the continued validity of the WSIS action lines after 20 years. He acknowledged that while the action lines themselves might still be valid, the context around them has changed significantly, particularly in the last 5 to 10 years. As 2030 approaches, he sees it as a converging year to revisit the foundational principles of the WSIS and consider how the digital development agenda overlaps with the broader development agenda. He suggested that a thorough review and potential update may be needed concerning the current action lines and the Tunis agenda to ensure their relevance and effectiveness.
10. The moderator emphasized the relevance of the Geneva Action Lines and the Tunis Agenda, highlighting the new elements introduced by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 and the Global Digital Compact being negotiated. She stressed the need to consider how these SDGs and the new inputs from the GDC influence the process when preparing for the WSIS+ 20 review. She mentioned the debate over the "human-centered Internet," viewed by some as promoting individuality and by others as rooted in the Human Rights Declaration. The moderator concluded by discussing the Internet's impact on society and the economy, urging reflection on how these factors should shape WSIS+20.
11. The third speaker ⁵ sought clarification on whether there is a viewpoint that considers "people-centered" or "human-centered" approaches to be selfish, self-interested, or self-serving. The moderator answered that some governments argue against a human-centric Internet because it promotes individuality, serving only private interests rather than human beings. This contrasts with the European view, which sees a human-centric Internet as valuing individuals as people, not just numbers. This debate impacts digital public policies and is being discussed in negotiating the Global Digital Compact, focusing on human rights.
12. The fourth speaker ⁶ emphasized the importance of regional consultations by the UN CSTD and looked forward to their contributions to final reports and resolutions. Reflecting on 20 years of progress, he noted that there might be over-optimism about what Internet could do at the time when WSIS was negotiated, and some problems were not envisaged.

⁴ Mr. David Fairchild, first Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva

⁵ Ms. Bernadette Lewis, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organization

⁶ Mr. Nigel Hickson, Head, Internet Governance, International Directorate, Department of Science, Innovation and Technology, UK.

However, he acknowledged significant advancements brought by the Internet, such as increased freedom, opportunities for work, education, and medical research and treatments. Also recognizing issues like disinformation, cybersecurity threats, and surveillance, the speaker highlighted the Internet's positive impact on societies, enabling a deeper understanding of world events and fostering national frameworks. In addition, at the time of the WSIS, not many governments officials knew well about the Internet, which was in sharp contrast to today as even high-level officials are aware of the Internet's significance. Looking ahead, emerging technologies like AI will bring both challenges and opportunities, making the Internet more complex but also improving lives. The speaker concluded by stressing the need to maintain the people-centered and development-oriented approach in the WSIS review process to ensure technology benefits societal development.

13. The fifth speaker ⁷ thanked the Vice Minister for his insightful keynote and appreciated the analogy of Lithuania to a startup, noting that many developing and low-income countries might see themselves similarly. She enquired if Lithuania feels pressured to compete with major players or if they focus on innovation based on their developmental needs and means. She asked how Lithuania balances technological development with a human rights-centered approach, questioning whether they follow global trends or prioritize their tech requirements.
14. In the absence of reply by a representative from Lithuania, the moderator emphasized the significance of discussing the roles of small, medium, and large countries, along with various stakeholders in the context of the Internet and digital or cyber worlds. She stressed the importance for stakeholders to understand the impacts of these concepts, acknowledging that terms like "digital world" and "cyber world" are integral to ongoing discussions about our evolving global landscape.
15. The fifth speaker also emphasized the importance of a people-centered approach but questioned its success, citing South Africa as an example. She highlighted a significant disparity between general connectivity (over 90%) and meaningful connectivity (13%) in South Africa. This disparity reveals a widening digital divide, with urban areas having advanced connectivity by using 4G/5G while rural areas lag by using 2G/3G. She referenced the National Development Plan's 10-year review, which showed persistent inequality, poverty, and high unemployment, undermining inclusive development. She stressed that high connectivity costs and language barriers further hinder building an inclusive information society. She concluded by urging the WSIS+20 to include strategies for developing and low-income countries to achieve a genuinely inclusive and people-centered society, beyond mere rhetoric.
16. The moderator reflected that the concept of a digital divide has evolved into multiple "digital divides," with the gap widening. She highlighted various aspects of this issue, including gender disparities, lack of access to infrastructure, and limited access to

⁷ Ms. Lufuno T. Tshikalange, Executive Director GRC, Orizur Consulting Enterprise

devices beyond mobile phones, such as computers and laptops. The rapid evolution of digital technology has exacerbated these divides, leaving many behind. The moderator emphasized the seriousness of these issues and the need to address them comprehensively.

17. The sixth speaker ⁸ reflected on questions originally posed during the negotiations of the 2005 Tunis Agenda, such as the role of the State enhanced cooperation among stakeholders, and respective roles of stakeholders amidst power asymmetry. He noted that these questions have gained renewed relevance today, with States becoming increasingly assertive in regulation and sovereignty discourse intensifying globally, regardless of a country's system. There is growing frustration over the current approach to addressing crucial public policy issues such as AI governance and data flow, prompting calls for multistakeholder and multilateral processes to collaboratively develop in parallel effective solutions. He highlighted past challenges, such as the Working Group on Enhanced Cooperation in the CSTD, which failed to produce recommendations due to complexity and disagreement among States and other stakeholders. He concluded by advocating for a reexamination and concerted effort to tackle longstanding discussions that have become increasingly urgent in the present context.
18. Following the moderator's question about his view of enhanced cooperation, the participant highlighted that the current status quo fails to adequately protect human rights in the digital society. He pointed to the emergence of new digital rights and stressed that public policy functions increasingly rely on private corporations to shape frameworks for rights protection. This trend is exemplified by regulatory developments worldwide. He concluded that enhanced cooperation means harmonizing diverse regulatory initiatives from various States and regional bodies, emphasizing the urgent need for collaborative efforts to address key human rights issues in the digital era.
19. The moderator then briefed the audience about the CSTD's Working Group on Enhanced Cooperation, highlighting its focus on governmental powers over digital policies like freedom of expression and privacy. She noted challenges in consensus due to differing views on Internet regulation solely by governments. The evolving role of the private sector since 2003 was emphasized, particularly its influence on technical policies and societal norms globally. The discussion touched on then US government efforts to regulate online platforms. The moderator underscored the critical question of Internet governance and its impact on society, including emerging technologies such as blockchain and AI. She stressed integrating these developments since 2005 with SDGs, emphasizing digital's widespread influence across economic, social, and cultural dimensions. The importance of international cooperation in digital governance, using a multistakeholder approach, was highlighted, with ongoing debates over terminology like "people-centered" versus "human-centric" Internet governance. The moderator concluded by acknowledging broad

⁸ Mr. Neelesh Maheshwari, PhD Candidate at South Asian University, New Delhi

agreement on evolving Internet governance encompassing infrastructure, digital policies, and processes, as well as discussions such as NetMundial+10.

20. The seventh speaker⁹ raised the question of whether the outcomes of the GDC might limit options considered for the WSIS Forum, suggesting a review of the GDC within a year to align with the WSIS Forum and address their overlapping concerns, especially regarding the IGF.
21. The moderator clarified that the WSIS Forum, organized by UN specialized agencies like UNESCO, UNDP, ITU, and UNCTAD assess the implementation of action lines from the 2003 Geneva Agenda but does not address the challenges and opportunities specified in the Tunis agenda. She explained that IGF responds to immediate developments in the digital world without a specific agenda. She also highlighted the uncertainty about how the GDC will impact the WSIS+20 review, noting that its role is still unclear. She suggested that next year's outcomes of the GDC could significantly influence the WSIS+20 review, especially if different governance processes for AI and data are agreed upon within the GDC.
22. The ninth speaker¹⁰ acknowledged the enormous evolutionary progress of the Internet since 2005, stressing the need to make Internet meaningful by focusing less on its governance and more on its use. He emphasized that the Internet works and has become indispensable for the world, as exemplified during the Covid-19. Recognizing the growing issue of digital vulnerabilities, particularly among specific and vulnerable groups, he highlighted the importance of addressing these vulnerabilities through measures such as promoting multilingualism, creating local content, and ensuring access to content in users' native languages.
23. There was an emphasis during the open discussion that the Internet is still under construction so that multilingual services could be offered.

⁹ Mr. David McAuley, Policy Director, Verisign, Inc.

¹⁰ Mr. Adam Peek, Civil Society Engagement Sr. Manager, Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN)