Report on CSTD consultation in West Asia: Arab consultative conference and expert meetings on the WSIS+20 Review and Global Digital Compact processes

Held during the "Arab Consultative Conference on WSIS+20 Review and GDC Processes

22 May, 2024

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Prepared by the Secretariat of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development[1]

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 for 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. This event was an integral part of open consultations conducted by the CSTD secretariat as part of the WSIS+20 Review process. It aims to gather the views from multiple stakeholders, including Arab bodies and international organizations, Arab countries, government representatives, the business sector, multinational companies, academic institutions, funding agencies, and other relevant and interested parties. The outcome is expected to be the first edition of a negotiated document consolidating the views of the Arab region regarding the WSIS + 20 Review, the Global Digital Compact, and the Summit of the Future 2024, which will be presented at the WSIS + 20 High-Level event in Geneva on 29 May 2024. The discussions are expected to contribute to the GA's review in 2025, after being discussed at the CSTD as requested by the ECOSOC.

II. Organization of work

3. The consultation was organized by CSTD in collaboration with ESCWA and the League of Arab States. It was hosted by the Telecommunications and Digital Government

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Regulatory Authority of the United Arab Emirates. There were 65 in-person participants and 50 online participants.

III. Opening

4. The Vice-Chair of the CSTD[2] moderated the event and gave welcome remarks. She outlined the session's purpose: to get inputs from UN regional Commissions as part of the WSIS +20 Review. She described the review process, stating that the results would be submitted to UNGA via ECOSOC for their deliberation. She explained how the CSTD adopted a roadmap for the WSIS +20 Review. Additionally, she mentioned that the CSTD has commenced preparation for the WSIS + 20 Synthesis Report, which will inform the review. She emphasized that this session marks the beginning of a series of regional consultations.

5. The chair outlined the guiding questions for the review, which were also the guiding questions of this session

   a. 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 Arab regional levels.

   b. On the other hand, looking at the impact, how has the WSIS facilitation process helped the Arab region achieve the said vision? In other words, to what extent has WSIS helped the Arab region achieve progress in implementing specific WSIS outcomes (Tunis agenda)?

   c. 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 manage to positively adapt to technologies that emerged during the last two decades?

   d. 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?

IV. Panel speakers initial comments

6. The first speaker[3] reviewed WSIS from an historical perspective, highlighting the substantial support it has garnered since its inception. He outlined the proactive involvement of the UAE, including the formation of a national committee that collaborates

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[2] Ms. Ana Cristina das Neves, Portugal.
[3] Mr. Humaid Al-Basti, Senior Officer, Government Relations and International Cooperation, Strategy and Future Department, TDRA-Dubai, UAE.

with the government and private organizations to implement WSIS action items. He emphasized that the UAE has diligently worked towards achieving WSIS objectives, becoming a strategic partner of the WSIS Forum and significantly contributing to its success. This partnership has enabled the UAE to showcase best practices and share experiences, benefiting many countries, including Least Developed Countries. He mentioned that despite initial exclusions of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), WSIS has adapted to these advancements, maintaining its relevance. He highlighted that numerous outcomes presented at the WSIS forum over the years have addressed human-centered development, demonstrating the forum's commitment to advancing the ICT sector for the benefit of humanity as a whole.

7. The second speaker[4] emphasized the significant progress made in increasing access to ICT, focusing on both the accessibility and affordability of Internet services. He highlighted that technology advances have transformed how information is created, accessed, and utilized, leading to new opportunities alongside privacy, security, and inequality challenges. He presented several initiatives in Egypt aimed at improving internet access in the poorest villages and for people with disabilities. Additionally, he informed participants of Egypt's new ICT strategy, based on three pillars: developing infrastructure, enhancing the regulatory environment and promoting innovation. Various advanced tools and centers have been established to support entrepreneurs, reflecting the country's commitment to fostering a robust and inclusive ICT ecosystem.

8. The third speaker[5] emphasized the crucial role of the WSIS community in providing developing nations with a platform to express their needs and promote cooperation. The WSIS framework has helped these countries build capacities by addressing system shortages. The speaker noted that states with established telecom infrastructures have found it easier to access data and establish an information society. Furthermore, the development of ICT services has been essential for boosting productivity and creating jobs. He concluded by highlighting a significant challenge: many Arab countries remain consumers rather than producers of these technologies, indicating the need for further development in technology production and innovation within the region.

9. The fourth speaker[6] viewed the WSIS+ 20 review and the GDC as crucial platforms for discussing the evolution of ICT. Emphasizing the necessity for a comprehensive approach, she underscored the importance of considering diverse dimensions such as a policy framework and sustainable development roles. They noted a substantial rise in global internet accessibility, with 75% of the population now having broadband subscriptions. However, she pointed out that 2.6 billion people, particularly in developing nations, still lack connectivity, emphasizing the ongoing imperative for universal access efforts. In addition, she observed an evolution in the concept of digital inclusion. Initially centered on internet access, it now encompasses broader aspects including digital

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[4] Mr. Ahmad Said, Advisor to the Minister, Ministry of Communications and information technology, Egypt.
[5] Mr. Belaid Nouar, Head of Telecom Department, Ministry of Digital Transition and Administrative Reform, Morocco.
[6] Ms. Sihem Trabelsi, Chief Executive Officer, Tunisie Internet, Tunisia.

literacy, multilingual support, and ensuring marginalized groups, notably women and people with disabilities, are not excluded. Despite progress, she acknowledged persisting challenges in achieving true digital inclusion. She concluded by stressing the importance of advancing ICT accessibility and digital inclusion, emphasizing the necessity of ensuring that all people benefit from technological advancements and the imperative of not leaving anyone behind in the digital era.

10. The fifth speaker[7] highlighted several positive aspects of WSIS, emphasizing that the consistently positive elements identified in assessments are evident in WSIS initiatives. She noted that WSIS has effectively prioritized technology and raised awareness about its impact on economic and social development. A key achievement of WSIS has been the establishment of an international framework that has facilitated significant progress in both the telecommunications and technology sectors. WSIS has also accelerated technological advancements and their adoption by launching initiatives that promote rapid development. The speaker also pointed to the impending fifth industrial revolution, driven by AI, and highlighted that WSIS is poised to play a pivotal role in this revolution by laying a foundational platform that brings together key stakeholders from the private sector, government, civil society and academics. She also noted that the WSIS commitment to inclusivity has created a hub that allows marginalized individuals to express their concerns. This inclusive approach has empowered people on the margins of society, providing them with opportunities to participate in global discussions on technology. The speaker concluded by praising WSIS for its success in prioritizing technology, fostering international cooperation and promoting rapid technological development. Its ability to adapt to emerging technologies like AI and its commitment to inclusivity are significant achievements that have contributed to its ongoing success.

11. The sixth speaker[8] addressed question two on the impact of the WSIS facilitation process on the Arab region. He highlighted the significant benefits that Arab countries have gained from participating in WSIS, noting that numerous best practices and experiences by Arab nations aligned with WSIS action items were shared during the summit. These countries have taken the facilitation process seriously and diligently implemented the WSIS action lines, resulting in substantial achievements, such as increasing internet access from 50% to 98% in several countries and subsidizing access in remote areas to ensure inclusivity. The speaker also mentioned the successful launch of the Arab IGF and the North African IGF, which have played a crucial role in fostering dialogue and cooperation among stakeholders. Additionally, he noted that the adoption of a multi-stakeholder process, which is a product of WSIS, has promoted collaboration and inclusiveness. The speaker concluded by noting that the achievements of WSIS have significantly advanced ICT and socioeconomic development in the Arab region.

V. Interventions from the floor

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[7] Mr. Mohamed Ben Amor, Director General, Arab ICT Organization (AICTO).
[8] Mr. Qusai Al-Shatty, Expert in Internet and Information technology, ECO, Automated Systems Company, Kuwait.

12. The first speaker from the floor[9] highlighted the significant impact of the 2015 Sustainable Development process and the 2030 Agenda in creating a people-centric, development-oriented framework. He noted that while this framework initially saw considerable growth, it has now plateaued, indicating a need to assess its success since 2015. He emphasized the importance of evaluating how well this people-centric focus has been achieved to continue advancing the goals of the 2030 Agenda.

13. The second speaker from the floor[10] highlighted Lebanon's resilience in maintaining its internet governance forum despite ongoing challenges. The speaker noted that Lebanon has a community that believes in the multistakeholder process, and the importance of inclusion in policymaking has been instrumental in sustaining the forum. Additionally, Lebanon has launched initiatives on cybersecurity and digital transformation and is currently formulating a gender digital strategy in collaboration with the ITU. The speaker stressed that, despite these efforts, some challenges still need to be addressed.

14. The third speaker from the floor[11] emphasized the need to bridge the technological gap between developed and less developed nations. He suggested a concerted effort to enhance the technological capabilities of less developed nations, noting that such progress is crucial for advances in other sectors reliant on technology.

15. The fourth speaker from the floor[12] presented several challenges facing WSIS implementation in the Arab Region. Firstly, marginalized groups are excluded from the benefits of digital and technological resources, hindering their participation and development. Secondly, there is a lack of awareness or understanding of the potential for multi-stakeholder governance, which could enhance inclusivity. Lastly, the focus of discussions has shifted from being centralized to becoming decentralized, with the UN taking a leading role. This shift has indicated insufficient collaboration among stakeholders, hindering progress in bridging the digital gap in the region.

VI.   Responses by panel speakers

16. One speaker[13] posed the question of whether the action lines of WSIS have been fully achieved or if the process is still ongoing. He emphasized that for the UAE, the journey is ongoing, inviting others to share their perspectives on the matter.

17. The next speaker[14] emphasized the issue of inequality in internet usage and emerging technologies, underlining its global significance beyond the Arab region. He noted that while emerging technologies like AI hold the potential to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs, they also pose risks such as job displacement and exacerbating inequality

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[9] Mr. Ayman El-Sherbiny, Chief of ICT Policies and Digital Development, UN-ESCWA.
[10] Zeina Bou Harb, Coordinator of the Lebanese IGF, Lebanon.
[11] Mohamad Firas Bakour, Chairman of the Arab Internet & Telecom Union- ARISPA, Syria.
[12] Chafic Chaya, Regional Manager, Public Policy and Government Affairs, Lebanon.
[13] Mr. Humaid Al-Basti.
[14] Mr. Ahmad Said.

among nations. The speaker stressed the urgent need to address these disparities through capacity building at both the national and international levels.

18. The third speaker[15] focused on the discrepancies in ICT technology, particularly regarding energy consumption and infrastructure development. He highlighted the challenges faced in establishing a sustainable system and stressed the importance of addressing financial constraints. He called for a reform of financial governance to ensure equitable development and prevent wealth transfers taking place from poor to wealthy nations.

19. The fourth speaker[16] underscored the vital role played by IGF initiatives in promoting effective governance through a multistakeholder approach. She emphasized the importance of addressing the unique challenges faced by different regions and ensuring the inclusive participation of all segments of society in these initiatives.

20. The fifth speaker[17] highlighted the target of WSIS for developing Arab countries, emphasizing a shift towards digitalization. However, he noted certain discrepancies and widening gaps in digital access. He stressed the importance of concentrating efforts on developing digital markets in these countries through cooperative programs.

21. The sixth speaker[18] acknowledged the existence of gaps among Arab countries despite their common Arab identity. They emphasized the need for practical steps to bridge these gaps, particularly in rates of internet penetration. The speaker also noted the importance of open data legislation and collaboration between the public and private sectors in policy-making processes. They called for increased efforts to intensify and expand such collaborations for further progress.

VII. Final comments from the floor

22. One participant[19] highlighted the close relationship between the technology and ICT sectors in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, suggesting that these relatively advanced nations have effectively utilized technology to benefit their communities. Less advanced countries in the region have been less able to harness the potential benefits.

23. Another participant[20] redirected the discussion to the importance of people-centered services, highlighting multilingual access as a central aspect. He noted the receptiveness to this concept in the Arab region, emphasizing that countries are now implementing their own national strategies for multilingual access, highlighting the need for more effort in this area.

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[15] Mr. Belaid Nouar.
[16] Ms. Sihem Trabelsi.
[17] Mr. Mohamed Ben Amor.
[18] Mr.Qusai Al-Shatty.
[19] Chafic Chaya.
[20] Baher Esmat, Managing Director, Middle East and Africa, ICANN, Egypt.

24. A third participant[21] highlighted the efforts made by Libya to pursue digital transformation, as well as the challenges they faced, particularly in bridging the gap between the southern and northern regions of the country. They stressed the need for increased funding to build capacity at the local level, especially in digital skills and infrastructure development.

VIII. Final remarks from panel speakers

25. The moderator invited the speakers to provide an overview of the WSIS process, including any negative aspects, as this will be useful for the upcoming WSIS+20 consultations. She acknowledged that funding is a significant challenge for the WSIS process itself and emphasized the need for improvement in this area. Additionally, she highlighted the importance of international cooperation in the governance of digital policies, stressing that building trust among all stakeholders is crucial for effective collaboration.

26. The first speaker[22] outlined the approach used in the UAE of using the SDG framework and aligning it with WSIS to assess the state of digital transformation and identify areas for improvement.

27. The second speaker[23] identified challenges with WSIS, including resource constraints, policy and regulatory issues (with regulatory frameworks being disrupted by new technologies), suggesting that these challenges need to be prioritized. He also emphasized the need for support from international and regional organizations to sustain WSIS implementation efforts in the region.

28. The third speaker[24] noted that countries are doing a lot on WSIS implementation to make information accessible to all, citing the launch in Morocco of Agenda Morocco 2010. He noted positive impacts on telecoms development in cities like Casablanca but stressed the need to revise policies and invest in research, education, and governance. He commented that poor countries face major challenges in entering the IT industry and needed help from donors and other countries through north-south collaboration.

29. The fourth speaker[25] emphasized the importance of a multistakeholder approach in Internet governance to ensure meaningful participation. She highlighted the relevance of the IGF in sharing outcomes from various funds and discussion platforms, stressing the need to secure finances for greater impact. She also noted that cooperation led by the CSTD could be beneficial in addressing issues in Arabic nations. Additionally, she called for other international institutions to adopt multi-stakeholder practices, including open consultations and transparent reporting. She commented that enhanced cooperation was useful in addressing cyber threats, including from new technologies such as AI.

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[21] Abdurraouf Elbibas, Digital transformation consultant, General Information Authority, Libya.
[22] Mr. Humaid Al-Basti.
[23] Mr. Ahmad Said.
[24] Mr. Belaid Nouar.
[25] Ms. Sihem Trabelsi.

30. The fifth speaker[26]commented that the information society benefits wealthy countries more than poor ones, and that inequalities in wealth across countries is a problem. Similarly, digital governance (for example, data governance) favours rich countries over poor ones. He emphasized the urgency of helping developing countries to address the issues of digital governance and data protection, particularly Arab countries, half of which lack data protection policies.

31. The sixth speaker[27] acknowledged the progress made in bridging the gap between the North and South through WSIS outcomes, noting that the gap has not increased and has even been bridged in many areas with the adoption across countries of best practices. However, the speaker also highlighted ongoing funding challenges and emphasized the need for increased funding and new funding mechanisms at both national and international levels.

32. It was mentioned that there had been discussion of new funds for IT in the region but reportedly there were no tangible results yet on financing. It was also mentioned that a socio-economic fund for SMEs was established in 2014, but there was limited success in allocating funds, with only a few profitable projects having been identified.

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[26] Mr. Mohamed Ben Amor.
[27] Mr. Qusai Al-Shatty.