COMMISSION ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT (CSTD)

Twenty-fifth session
Geneva, 28 March to 1 April 2022

Submissions from entities in the United Nations system, international organizations and other stakeholders on their efforts in 2021 to implement the outcomes of the WSIS

Submission by

Association for Progressive Communications

This submission was prepared as an input to the report of the UN Secretary-General on "Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels" (to the 25th session of the CSTD), in response to the request by the Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 2006/46, to the UN Secretary-General to inform the Commission on Science and Technology for Development on the implementation of the outcomes of the WSIS as part of his annual reporting to the Commission.

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Flow of information for the follow-up to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

Report to CSTD October 31 2021

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1. Executive summary

The past 12 months has seen APC's activities focus on three areas relating to the achievement of WSIS goals: a) addressing digital exclusion, b) responding to increased digitally mediated threats to human rights and c) building awareness of the role of the internet in the environmental crisis.

The extended impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to even greater urgency to address vital needs for affordable, safe and reliable connectivity as means of working, learning, communicating and transacting. Similarly, online responses to the pandemic have highlighted the need to limit internet blackouts and the spread of online misinformation, along with addressing more abuse and discrimination facilitated by social media. In addition, growing awareness of the potential impacts of the internet on climate change, both negative and positive, has resulted in renewed efforts to identify and promote carbon neutrality in the use of the internet, while leveraging connectivity for reducing global energy consumption and improved monitoring of environmental degradation.

In this context, the impact of the pandemic on the diverse local conditions in which progress is being made towards the WSIS goals more generally has prompted wide-spread reconsideration of traditional approaches. While the longer term outcomes of the pandemic are not yet fully apparent, it is clear that a 'reset' is taking place, along with increased innovation, collaboration and acceleration of strategies which could all have lasting positive benefits that potentially extend beyond immediate needs to deal with Covid-19.

In summary, while the digital exclusion highlighted by the pandemic is another layer of injustice to both human and environmental systems, the structural divides and concentration of power and resources continue to be at the heart of the crisis. Covid-19 has underlined both the potential and the frailty of an open, free Internet, and never in human history has the need for access to a safe digital environment been more evident and as critical as it is now. Similarly without more meaningful connectivity, many of the WSIS goals, especially relating to use of ICT applications, risk falling behind aspirations for their adoption. Hopefully, the inspiring individual and collective responses around the world supporting the pandemic-induced call to 'build back better' will be accompanied by action from governments and international organizations which have shown that extensive policy changes and action campaigns can be mounted globally and nationally in record time, including major efforts to bring service provision online. Nevertheless this trend should accelerate if it is to fully address the multiple inequalities and slow progress exposed by the pandemic in many of the key WSIS outcomes, in particular in relation to meaningful internet access, countering human rights abuses, and responding to climate change and environmental degradation.

2. Trends and Experiences in the Implementation of WSIS outcomes

The acceleration of digital transformation due to the pandemic has exposed the profound vulnerabilities of those who suffer most – those who have been historically discriminated and excluded because of intersecting and multiple forms of systemic and structural inequality and injustice. The UN Secretary General Roadmap on Digital Cooperation acknowledges that "Digital technology does not exist in a vacuum – it has enormous potential for positive change, but can also reinforce and magnify existing fault lines and worsen economic and other inequalities."

With regard to the WSIS action lines relating to connectivity infrastructure, Covid has highlighted the need for increased investment in networks to address the divides between those who have access and those who are digitally excluded. According to ITU, close to 87 per cent of individuals in developed countries used the Internet in 2019, compared with only 19 per cent in the least developed countries. While 93 per cent of the world's population live within coverage of mobile broadband, only about 54 per cent use the internet, which means over three and a half billion people are still being left behind. In addition many of those that are connected can only afford limited use of metered mobile broadband, while many more cannot even afford the smart devices that can now provide access to multimedia learning and even to verify identity in return for access, such as with vaccine certification and Covid tests.

To help address these gaps the ITU has estimated the infrastructure cost of achieving universal, affordable and quality Internet access ('meaningful access') by 2030 across Africa alone, may be as much as $100 billion. Achieving connectivity for all those currently unconnected globally will clearly cost significantly more[1].

Some of the required investments are already being made, such as in the recently announced submarine cable projects which are due to provide additional high capacity international links for many developing countries, with direct connections to the tech platforms and global telecom operators. Similarly some of the prospective Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite operators have now begun beta service in the northern latitudes, with tropical zones expected to be covered by next year. These developments are expected to lower the cost of broadband internet access, especially in monopoly or duopoly markets, and in uncovered rural areas, although the ultimate capacity of the LEOs to support the potential demand is as yet untested.

Digital exclusion is one side of the coin, but power over digitalisation, and by extension, over our digital lives, is evidently becoming more pervasive and concentrated in the hands of big tech corporates and more authoritarian governments, raising concerns over threats to democracy. While many such threats are not exactly new, the intensity of their use and their ability to pervade people's lives has reached unprecedented levels as a result of increasingly ubiquitous connectivity which allows totalitarian regimes to ensure that virtually everything and everyone are observed. While avoidance of effective oversight by tech platforms' implicated in promoting the spread of misinformation and hate speech has come increasingly under the spotlight, the pandemic has further encouraged the emergence of surveillance states and big business surveillance capitalism.

In this respect the internet is increasingly being run for profit rather than in the public interest or for the public good. The tech giants – Amazon, Alphabet (Google), Facebook and Microsoft - had a combined revenue of almost $900 billion in 2019, greater than the GDP of four of the G20 nations. Across the board, greater technological adoption is the biggest driver of increased revenues[2] - during the pandemic, the first four companies combined reported a quarterly net profit of $38 billion.[3]

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1 https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/assets/pdf/Roadmap_for_Digital_Cooperation_EN.pdf

2 https://www.visualcapitalist.com/how-big-tech-makes-their-billions-2020/

3 https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/technology/apple-alphabet-facebook-amazon-google-earnings.html

The spread of Covid-19 related misinformation and other 'fake news' over the internet this year has also underscored that WSIS goals which aim to extend the internet to the unconnected will need to be accompanied by sufficient measures from governments and the private sector to ensure that the internet is free from exploitation and abuses to privacy, online gender based violence, discrimination and other human rights abuses, reinforcing WSIS Action line C10 relating to the Ethical dimensions of the Information Society.

The pandemic's coincidence with unprecedented levels of climate change related environmental emergencies has helped to cement the growing realization that drastic action needs to be taken immediately to avoid further lasting damage to the natural environment. At the same time increasing use of digital technology hardware and applications which aim to leverage cloud computing, big data and artificial intelligence, along with the expanding roll-out of 5G means the production, deployment and waste of such technologies are having ever greater environmental impacts. On the other hand, ICTs are also now demonstrating an increasing array of solutions for cutting domestic and organisational energy-use, and also to support climate adaptation and mitigation at the local, national and regional levels, as well as ways to monitor and predict environmental disasters, and address systemic threats such as pollution and deforestation. The internet has also continued to be a powerful mobilisation tool for environmental activists, for raising public awareness on the climate crisis and environmental threats, and for pushing for policy and institutional change.

3. Outlook

3.1 Innovative policies, programmes and projects

The IGF dynamic coalitions on community connectivity and the best practice forums on gender and access and on local content have made significant progress in identifying approaches and practices to help move forward in enabling complementary models of connectivity that address digital exclusion. Community networks and other community based solutions for access are now demonstrating advantages over traditional large-scale national commercial networks, including morel local control over how the network is used, greater potential for attention to the particular needs of the communities, lower costs and increased potential to foster a sense of agency and empowerment among users and those involved in the network. In the context of the pandemic, community networks have shown their ability to contribute to providing agile, contextual, adequate, effective responses, including public health related ones, and they are proving to be spaces for self and collective care.

Fortunately this area has recently gained more attention as APC and its network of members and partners have continued to engage globally, regionally and nationally with policy makers and regulators to inform them of the potential for community networks to address national universal access and related WSIS objectives. In some cases this has resulted in the development of new policies and regulations, such as the work APC has supported with the Communications Authority (CA) of Kenya to develop a new licensing and shared spectrum framework for community networks with support from the from the UK Government's Digital Access Programme[4]. Parallel work is being conducted in Brazil, Nigeria and Indonesia.

Similarly the awareness-raising work of APC and partners such as ISOC in global forums have resulted reports from the ITU Study Groups for the cycles 2017 to 2021 which contain several sections about community networks[5], one of which concludes; "Community networks are an important part of connectivity ecosystems, and they help bridge the digital divide".

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4 *https://www.apc.org/en/project/supporting-community-led-approaches-addressing-digital-divide*

5 See https://www.itu.int/en/myitu/Publications/2021/07/22/13/20/Telecommunications-ICTs--for-rural-and-remote-area and https://www.itu.int/en/myitu/Publications/2021/07/22/15/17/Strategies-and-policies-for-the-deployment-of-broadband-in-developing-countries

APC is therefore committed to continuing to build the capacities of communities, especially women and ethnic minorities, to connect themselves in ways that respond to their lived realities and experiences; while supporting public officials to reform their regulatory frameworks so community networks are enabled.

In relation to environmental protection, few actors are working at the intersection of environmental sustainability and digital transformation. From a global south perspective, APC has produced research-based evidence on the environmental impact of new technologies, providing recommendations and proposing strategies around suitable policy/regulatory, governance, technical/technological, economic, cultural and social responses that benefit people and the environment. This work is encapsulated in APC's annual GISWatch publication in 2020, which focused on environmental sustainability[6].

One of the key strategies in mitigating the environmental impact of digital devices is to treat the devices as part of circular economies which promote repair, reduced use, reuse and recycling. To help support these strategies, APC has published a guide to circular digital economies, along with a set of case studies[7]. Similarly, in the area of environmental monitoring, APC is leveraging its member network to support the spread of knowledge on the use of low-cost air and water quality measurement devices (see for example the CivicSense[8] project of APC member OCF).

APC is also developing a series of 'deep dive' issue briefs based on the work and priorities of APC network in the intersection of digital transformation and environmental sustainability supported by Mozilla Foundation[9]. The four issue briefs will cover the following topics:

1. Mapping research and the APC approach to digital rights and environmental justice

2. Environmental and digital rights: Mutual reinforcement for better governance

3. The dark side of digitalisation for environmental movements: critical perspectives on algorithmic decision-making, artificial intelligence, and the so-called 'smart economy'

4. Extractivism in the Digital Age: Perspectives from the global South

In the area of digital rights, APC has been executing a project based on challenging hate narratives and violations of freedom of religion and expression online in Asia (Challenge), funded by the European Instrument For Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which focuses on freedom of expression and religion in South and Southeast Asia, and on understanding and countering hate speech online by generating narratives and discourses that defend diverse opinions.

As part of the project APC has been hosting a series of lectures titled "Decolonising media, communication and technology studies: An (anti)caste perspective", as part of the Challenge project. These lectures explore the concept and practice of caste and how it reinforces discriminatory social hierarchies that affect more than one-fifth of the world's population. While caste originated in South Asia, it manifests itself in digital cultures in various forms, including caste-based hate speech, casteism in public data initiatives, and discriminatory practices in online platforms[10]. The three-year project focuses on five countries in South and Southeast Asia: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar and Pakistan, characterised by the presence of majority religious communities and challenges for secularists and minorities.

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6 https://giswatch.org/2020-technology-environment-and-sustainable-world-responses-global-south

7 *https://www.apc.org/en/publications/circular-guide*

8 https://ocf.tw/en/p/civicsense/

9 https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/blog/upcoming-research-how-digital-rights-and-climate-justice-intersect/

10 https://www.apc.org/en/news/challenging-hate-lecture-series-will-focus-decolonising-media-communication-and-technology

APC has also been participating in the recent deliberations of the 48th Human Rights Council (HRC)[11]. APC's priorities at the HRC session included the implications of COVID-19 for human rights online, the impact of digital technologies on freedom of assembly and association online, racial discrimination and inequality and new information technologies, and online gender-based violence[12]. This has also involved developing a policy explainer on artificial intelligence[13] and a joint policy statement on cyber peace and human security[14]. APC and other civil society organisations also called on HRC member states to take urgent action at the HRC session to denounce the unfolding and unprecedented scale of human rights violations by states facilitated by the use of the NSO Group's Pegasus spyware[15].

3.2 Recommendations

Communications Infrastructure: Despite decades of communications infrastructure deployment, in the last five years, mobile phone penetration growth has slowed, showing that current strategies to extending affordable connectivity are reaching their limit. To address this two key strategies are necessary:

• Support the realisation of the right of people to meaningfully shape and use the internet and digital technologies to meet their specific needs and realities, which includes supporting unconnected communities and groups to build technical infrastructure of communications that is not entirely dependent on service provision by government and corporations.

• Reform policy and regulatory environments so they are more favourable to the co-existence of different models for connectivity provision, including community networks and medium and small cooperative service providers or operators. Currently, access to radio spectrum is insufficient, and operator licensing, interconnection requirements and fees are not adjusted for small networks. Therefore we call on states to adopt policies and regulation that enable and support community connectivity. Similarly the development community needs to provide support for this process while ensuring that strategies to overcome digital exclusion focus on the groups that been traditionally excluded and marginalised. In relation to this APC continues commit to increasing the awareness of the potential of innovative technology and institutional models for helping the unconnected connect themselves, and to build the capacity of those working to support these initiatives.

Environmental sustainability and digital transformation. In responding to the twin challenges of the environmental crisis and digital transformation, there is a need to challenge the dominant techno-solutionist approaches that overlook the negative environmental and socioeconomic impacts of digital technologies. At the same time it is necessary to understand the constructive role ICTs can play in confronting the crises by disrupting the normative understanding of technology being an easy panacea to the planet's environmental challenges and proposing that a nuanced and contextual use of technology is necessary for real sustainability to be achieved.

In this respect APC is committed to continue to support awareness raising these issues and on the importance and practicalities of a circular economy approach to reducing the environmental impact of digital devices. At the same time it is necessary to employ innovative approaches to monitoring environmental degradation and APC will continue to promote innovation in the use of low-cost devices for air and water quality monitoring.

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11 https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/notes-48th-session-human-rights-council

12 https://www.apc.org/en/apc-wide-activities/human-rights-council

13 https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/apc-policy-explainer-artificial-intelligence

14 https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/joint-civil-society-statement-cyber-peace-and-human-security

15 https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/urgent-call-action-hrc-48-joint-ngo-letter-pegasus

Internet Governance and Digital Rights: The IGF has been a unique space and process to place global digital cooperation issues at the top of the political agenda and a more empowered IGF should be at the center of digital cooperation in the UN system and more widely. The IGF is well positioned as a platform for identifying viable ways to shape, sustain and strengthen global digital cooperation not only for universalising digital inclusion, but to mobilise collective intelligence to respond to the persistent and emerging challenges in the digital age, including the environmental crisis.

APC is committed to defending the digital commons and counteracting securitisation of the digital space by facilitating engagement and visibilisation of civil society voices and actors from the global South in policy processes at all levels, particularly the ones oriented to crystallise truly effective, accountable, inclusive, transparent, participatory global digital cooperation.

Finally, APC aims to expand its human rights work by reinforcing the use of the internet for empowering and increasing capacities in civil society actors to monitor, analyse and advocate towards holding governments and companies accountable for their commitments. Similarly, APC is committed to continuing to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations and activists to effectively use human rights mechanisms and instruments to advance human rights online.

General: A concluding recommendation is that the connection between WSIS outcomes, digital transformation and sustainable development needs to recognise that in framing inequality and interventions to overcome it, equality needs to be understood as the non-perpetuation of structural disadvantages. The pandemic has affected people in different ways, but the marginalised – women, migrants, transgender people, indigenous and working class people, as well as those with disabilities - are finding that their lives are shifting for worse. Therefore, differential contexts and impacts require specific responses, and public policy interventions which reflect the nature of local conditions.