Let me start with some chronology.

We talk about the WSIS+20 review taking place in two years' time, which is when the UN General Assembly will discuss what has happened since WSIS and how the themes that it addressed should now proceed.

But WSIS wasn't one single event. Its actually 25 years, almost to the day, today, since the ITU's Plenipotentiary Conference proposed that there should be a summit.

Next month it will be twenty years since the Geneva phase of WSIS, at which most of the Summit's outcomes were agreed – the Declaration of Principles, the Action Plan, the Action Lines.

And WSIS has in practice been a process since then: one that's involved wide-ranging institutions in the UN and beyond; that's been sustained by annual meetings of the WSIS Forum and the IGF, as well as the CSTD; that's set much of the tone of discussions about what we used to call the Information Society and now tend to call the digital society.

I've spent much of the last quarter-century working on WSIS and its implications. I wasn't at the Plenipot but I was at most of the planning meetings for both WSIS sessions and both sessions of the Summit; I've been at many WSIS Forums and all but one meeting of the IGF; and I've worked on WSIS outcomes with CSTD, UNCTAD, UNESCO, ITU, DESA and on the GA process for the ten-year review.

What have I seen in that time and what does that imply for the review that we're about to discuss?

The first thing is that I think that the imminent review's led to a revival of interest in the Summit. CSTD held its first consultation on its review at the recent IGF, and there were well over a hundred people at that meeting - more than almost any other workshop session – plus another sixty people online. It was a lively discussion. It raised many issues. There were different viewpoints. It had more vitality than the meetings I recall during the ten-year review.

I was surprised by this in some ways because, for many younger delegates WSIS is more of a legend than current reality.

I think the level of interest at that consultation reflects the fact that we're at another inflection point in the development of the Information or the Digital Society. And I'd suggest that three things lie behind this.

First – and this is hardly an original perception – digitalisation has become the norm in most of our societies: in the way they're governed, the way that business works, how people interact with one another; how we live and work, read the news and make relationships. This is uneven and unequal still, of course, but the scope and scale of digitalisation are far greater than they were, and that direction of travel is continuous.

When WSIS met in Geneva twenty years ago, the Information Society was an **aspiration**. Today it's an **observable reality**. Back then we could talk about ICTs' potential **if they became more prevalent**; now we talk about what's possible **because they are pervasive**.

The second underlying factor for renewed interest in WSIS is, I think, the cause of the inflection point itself: the advances being made in technological development, particularly artificial intelligence and

large language models. This looks and feels to many people like a moment of transition between the world we've known and the world our children will inherit.

Uncertainty surrounding what this transition means and anxiety about the speed with which it's taking place are increasingly significant. WSIS was overwhelmingly an optimistic summit. Since then we've become much more aware of risks as well as opportunities – of the use of ICTs for surveillance and criminality, the role of online media in spreading not just knowledge but also propaganda, the impact of exponential data growth on the environment.

For far more people now, the balance in the latest new technologies between potential benefit and potential harm is far from clear. Some are enthused, as their predecessors were at WSIS. Others are anxious about long-term existential risks or the disruptive impacts that AI will have on societies, economies and governance in the short term, for instance on employment. The underlying question here, which has become more pertinent, concerns how AI might be shaped to promote the common good.

The third factor that I see driving interest in WSIS follows from these underlying shifts, and it's that WSIS+20 will take place in the context of much broader international discussion about the role of ICTs within society and how it intersects with other global concerns and priorities.

At WSIS, ICTs were seen as a new factor in international public policy and especially development. Now they're inextricable from every aspect of international public policy: with profound impacts on geopolitics, including conflict, on sustainability and climate change, inequality and poverty. They must be central to thinking about these and about the risk of recurrent crisis such as that which hit economies in 2008 or the COVID pandemic.

This is also a time when many SDGs are running behind schedule and when we're seeing greater international disharmony. Hence the importance of the Summit of the Future and what may be in the Global Digital Compact. Hence the plethora of international fora concerned with cybersecurity and the upsurge in initiatives about the regulation of AI such as the G7's Hiroshima Plan and the conference the British government hosted last week.

So what are the implications of this for the review that's coming soon, in which CSTD will play an important part?

When I worked with CSTD on the ten-year review a decade ago, one thing that was very clear was that it needed to focus on three timescales.

It was, of course, important to look at **what had happened since the Summit**. The ten-year review coincided with the end date for the WSIS targets, which were mostly concerned with connectivity. And it was an opportunity to show how far things had moved forward in each of the Action Lines agreed ten years before.

But it was important too to look at how the **_nature_** of the Information Society had changed in those ten years, at **what the Information Society had become**.

Broadband deployment and improvements in the capabilities of mobile devices had transformed infrastructure and usage patterns, at least for the better-off in richer countries. Cloud computing had altered the structure of data management and enabled more sophisticated data analysis. Social media platforms had become powerful agents of interpersonal communications. The Internet of Things and smart systems were no longer mere ideas.

And it was important to consider what this meant **for the future**: the opportunities and policy challenges arising not just for digitalisation but for public policy in general; not just for silos like health and education, agriculture and employment but for the underlying structure of societies and economies.

A review is valuable because of what it reveals about the direction of travel:

- **how far we have come**, and how far that resembles what we had expected or desired;
- **where we are today** and what is needed to build on the successes there have been, achieve the goals that have not been reached, address the problems we had not anticipated;
- **where we want to go tomorrow** if we are to achieve both past and present goals, and aspirations for the future, and avoid those future problems that we can anticipate.

It shouldn't be an academic exercise, in other words, but a practical assessment concerned with learning from experience and identifying priorities for the future.

This might be described as asking how to optimise the Information Society (which is not, of course, the same as maximising digitalisation). And of ensuring that goals associated with it are integrated with other global goals – such as the SDGs and the need to reduce climate change, conflict prevention and poverty alleviation, equality and inclusion for all countries and all peoples.

In previous meetings of CSTD, I've related this to the core WSIS goal of enabling 'a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society,' and the objectives of **preserving what we value, promoting what we want and preventing what we fear**. These themes are clearly central to the relationship between the WSIS review, the Global Digital Compact and the Summit of the Future.

In my remaining time I'll suggest six areas in which it will be important to think about the changes that have taken place since WSIS, the direction of travel and the options that the international community can consider for the future. These are not meant to be comprehensive but to raise some themes that should be part of the review.

The first's **inclusion**. The goal of universal participation in the digital society remains a long way off: people in many developing countries generally and LDCs in particular, women in many countries, rural dwellers, minorities, the elderly, those with disabilities, those on lower incomes are often least connected.

This isn't just a matter of quantity but also quality: how far people are able to use services in ways that would add value for them, or can afford to use those services. These digital inequalities, it should be understood, are inseparable from underlying social and economic inequalities, and have to be considered in their context.

International inequalities are also important – for instance the way that opportunities to develop digital businesses are spread unequally between developed and developing countries, or the ways in which data derived from developing countries are used more by global businesses than by local enterprise and local governments.

There's a challenge here for monitoring and measurement – not just of connectivity and usage but also the development of electronic commerce; not just of incidence, but also impact, including that in areas like health and education that are covered by the Action Lines.

There are a lot of efforts to measure aspects of this at the moment but they aren't especially consistent. Improving ways to measure things in future is one challenge for review.

The second area's **environment**. Climate change is one of the two or three potentially existential challenges facing humanity. There are ways in which digital technologies and data analysis can help to mitigate its impacts, but the carbon emissions due to digital technologies are growing and will grow faster as a result of AI, the Internet of Things and the resulting growth in date exploitation.

Climate's not the only environmental challenge facing digitalisation. Digital devices depend on scarce resources. And there's a growing crisis of e-waste, with little recycling helping either problem. **Digital development that isn't environmentally sustainable won't be sustainable in its own terms either.** A review needs to reflect on this and the potential for a more circular digital economy.

The third area is the **integration** of digital development with other world priorities. It's no longer possible to consider digital development in isolation from other international goals. Assessment of its impact – past, present and future; positive and negative – needs to be intersectoral: "what is the relationship between digitalisation and the environment, or health, or employment?", say, rather than "what can digitalisation do for" each of those areas.

If we're to understand the impact and potential of digitalisation we need not just to hear from digital insiders, but to learn from the experience of other communities of expertise and practice, from those on the demand side of the digital economy as well as those on the supply side. This will be important for the consultation process.

My fourth theme is related to this but concerned with **governance**. The institutional framework for digital governance today is much more complex than it was at the time of WSIS.

Most governments were represented at the Summit by telecommunications ministries and regulators, even when Action Lines concerned with non-digital outcomes were discussed. Debates on Internet governance in the Tunis phase of the Summit focused more on governance of the Internet's critical resources than its impact.

The context's now much more about that impact. There are far more institutions and fora concerned with digitalisation now, with many different mandates. It's difficult for national governments and other stakeholders – especially from developing countries – to participate fully in them. The power dynamics of digital governance have also been transformed by the rise of very powerful data corporations.

One challenge for the review will be to consider how digital governance has changed as a result, and where it hasn't. How have international governance frameworks that were established in the early years of digitalisation evolved to meet the very different circumstances of today and tomorrow? How far are digital strategies at national level integrated with strategies for other areas of society and the economy?

My fifth observation concerns the scope for building international norms and standards.

The WSIS outcome documents were clear that the Information Society should evolve in ways consistent with overarching frameworks such as international rights agreements and the UN Charter. But the digital world is different in many respects from that in which those standards were agreed: it is much less constrained by national borders, and ICTs have evolved more rapidly than previous generations of technology.

This has posed important challenges in many areas – for instance, concerning data governance and data sovereignty. The role of regulation and its relationship with innovation has become central to discussions about the development of AI and will be central to future innovations like quantum

computing. What can be learnt from experience to date – and how relevant is that experience to the much more rapid change that AI seems poised to bring about?

My final theme is what is often seen as the success story of the Summit: multistakeholder engagement. This was an innovation in the UN at the time of WSIS but has since become mainstreamed in international discourse on the future of the Information Society.

However, the nature of the multistakeholder community and the power dynamics amongst stakeholders have changed enormously since WSIS. The scope of government engagement has diversified. So has the involvement of international organisations, reaching beyond more technical agencies to include those on the demand side, particularly those concerned with the economy. Data corporations that barely existed at the time of WSIS are now among the world's most powerful companies and very influential in the development of a digital society.

The UN Secretary-General has called for a new dynamic between **multilateral, multistakeholder and multisectoral engagement** in the development of the Information Society that responds to these changes. What we've learnt about multistakeholder participation and how it has developed will also be important parts of the debate around both WSIS+20 and the Global Digital Compact.

To summarise. I've tried to suggest some of the issues that arise from the forthcoming WSIS+20 review. In fifteen minutes, I could mention just a few, but I've tried to do so in a way that might stimulate discussion. I look forward very much to seeing how these issues will be addressed by CSTD, by other UN agencies and by all stakeholders in the coming year, and to hearing from other speakers and delegates during the remainder of today.