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# Opening plenary

Special Address by

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Secretary-General, International Telecommunication Union (ITU)
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Distinguished Chair of the CSTD (Commission on Science and Technology for Development),

Madam Secretary-General of UNCTAD (UN Trade and Development),

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I have had the honor of addressing this Commission many times over the years.

But it is hard to overstate the significance of this one.

2025 marks the 20-year review of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

160 years since the founding of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations agency for digital technologies

And the 80th anniversary of the United Nations (UN) itself.

These milestones remind us how far we've come, and they challenge us to think critically about what comes next.

Especially at a time of unprecedented, accelerated change.

2025 is also the year a million users joined ChatGPT in the span of an hour.

It is the year large language models began passing the Turing test.

But the real story here isn't technology itself. It's the potential digital holds to transform communities, empower the marginalized and deliver sustainable development for all.

For twenty years, the WSIS Process has helped turn this potential into action, not by creating something new, but by strengthening what works: digital transformation that is human-centered, inclusive, and development-driven.

That's why the first theme of this year's CSTD — “diversifying economies in a world of accelerated digitalization" — could not be timelier.

The digital economy now accounts for over 6 trillion dollars.

That's 6% of global GDP and it's growing two and a half times faster than the physical economy.

But that growth is far from equal.

Today, 2.6 billion people remain offline one-third of humanity is disconnected from digital opportunities.

In high-income countries, 84% of people have access to 5G, compared to 4% in low-income countries.

Two countries alone account for 94% of AI startup funding and half of the world's hyperscale data centres.

Africa, by contrast, has between 1 and 2% of global data centre capacity.

These disparities make clear that sustainable digital transformation and universal, meaningful connectivity must be top priorities across every sector.

Because nearly everything we do has a digital dimension.

And every country deserves an opportunity to participate in the AI revolution.

Let me add that I've just returned from the Africa AI Summit in Kigali.

I had the chance to see some amazing African AI start-ups focusing on health, education, agriculture, and more — affirming Africa's commitment to lead and shape the AI revolution.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is clear that without strong international cooperation and inclusive investment, we cannot fulfill the WSIS vision of a “people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented information society."

This brings me to the second theme: “Technology foresight and technology assessment for sustainable development."

Smartphones, social media, and now artificial intelligence (AI) have transformed our societies in ways few imagined just two decades ago.

Yet, too often, we are reacting to innovation instead of shaping it.

Proper assessment can help us ensure that technology does not: Exacerbate inequality and reinforce bias; accelerate environmental degradation; undermine human dignity through opaque algorithmic decisions; and expose critical infrastructure to new vulnerabilities.

These risks are clearly outlined in the Pact for the Future and the Global Digital Compact adopted by UN Member States last year.

International technical standards can help mitigate these risks by ensuring digital technologies are safe, reliable, and interoperable.

They provide a foundation for trust, and a practical framework for foresight — while levelling the innovation playing field and creating economies of scale.

The WSIS process — and its multistakeholder community — show us what's possible when we get it right.

When we assess both the risks and opportunities of emerging technologies through the lens of sustainable development.

That is why ITU, as co-lead of the UN Working Group on Digital Technologies, places foresight at the core of our efforts to implement the Pact and the Global Digital Compact, with the WSIS as our guide.

The multistakeholder model at the heart of WSIS remains one of our strongest tools for shaping the digital future.

It allows us to design inclusive digital solutions that reflect the diversity of our global community.

But we must keep evolving.

Just like the platforms WSIS helped create — including the WSIS Forum and Internet Governance Forum, which continue to offer vital spaces for collaboration.

As we prepare for the WSIS+20 High-Level Event in July, as well as the AI for Good Global Summit, we have both an opportunity and a responsibility to reflect on what's been achieved and explore what comes next.

This Commission has a critical role to play.

Your insights on foresight, technology assessment, and implementation are essential to charting the next two decades of the Information Society.

At the same time, 2025 gives us a strategic window to elevate digital transformation within broader development frameworks.

The Joint SDG Fund, led by the UN Deputy Secretary-General, is aligning the UN system around key transitions — including digital.

And major global meetings — including the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, the Second World Summit for Social Development and the ITU world telecom development conference — will be essential to mobilize new resources and partnerships.

Digital infrastructure must be front and centre in these discussions.

That's why ITU launched the Digital Infrastructure Investment Initiative — with the support of G20 presidencies, development banks, and private partners — to scale investment, close gaps, and deliver universal meaningful connectivity by 2030.

Colleagues,

Our work here is about people.

Whether it is the ten-year-old girl in a farming community of Honduras, experiencing online learning for the first time through the Giga school connectivity initiative.

Or the taxi driver on Indonesia's remotest islands who can now support his family through a ride-hailing service made possible by satellite connectivity.

Or the single mother in South Sudan who now has new income opportunities, along with access to healthcare and education, because of her digital skills training.

Their stories remind us why our work matters.

They are the “people" in the people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society envisioned two decades ago.

As we navigate this pivotal year, let's remember that technology is not inevitable.

It is the result of the choices we make, and the standards we set.

So, let's choose to put technology at the service of sustainable development – with diversified digital economies guided by foresight and including all voices.

Let's build on the strong foundation set in Geneva and Tunis with renewed purpose as we undertake this 20-year review of the WSIS process.

And together — across sectors, borders, and generations — let's keep collaborating as we shape a digital future that uplifts, empowers, and connects us all.