

Introduction of the annual Report of the Secretary General and the secretariat's Report on WSIS+20

Presentation by the Secretariat of the CSTD

Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to present the annual Secretary General's report on WSIS implementation for 2024 and the secretariat's report on WSIS+20. I will cover the former briefly and the latter in a little more detail given that the focus of this session will be on the review of progress made in the follow up implementation of the WSIS outcomes in the past 20 years.

Annual report.

The year 2024 was marked the Summit of the Future and the adoption of the Global Digital Compact. In the Pact, the international community reaffirms its support for the role of the United Nations and other multilateral institutions in advancing sustainable development, peace and security, and human rights. The GDC emphasizes the importance of a multilateral platform for global digital cooperation, building on frameworks established at WSIS, including the IGF and the WSIS Forum, and the need for agile and flexible governance that responds to rapid changes in the technological environment. In this context, the report stresses two aspects relating to the WSIS:

- Affordable and meaningful connectivity
- Digital and environmental governance

On the first point, in recent years, increasing attention is being given to affordable and meaningful connectivity – connectivity that allows users not only to have occasional access to the Internet, but also to benefit from reliable, high-quality access that enables them to improve their lives.

On the second aspect, the need for robust digital governance has grown significantly—particularly in response to the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and its growing impact on daily life. Furthermore, the international community is increasingly recognizing the interlinkages between digital development and environmental sustainability. As noted by UNCTAD in its *Digital Economy Report 2024: Shaping an Environmentally Sustainable and Inclusive Digital Future*, greater attention must be paid to digital and environmental governance—particularly in promoting sustainable consumption and production that aims to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation.

The report concludes by calling for closing digital divides and ensuring inclusive access; strengthening digital governance frameworks; and aligning even more closely digital development with the Sustainable Development Goals. These could be taken up at the General Assembly's review on WSIS+20.

WSIS+20 Review.

Distinguished delegates, this report commission by the secretariat is intended as a background document to support today's discussion. It will be finalized under the responsibility of the secretariat following the conclusion of this annual session on 11 April.

I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of the Secretariat, to express our deepest appreciation for the generous financial support provided by the Government of the United Kingdom, which has been indispensable for the preparation of this comprehensive report, incorporating inputs from all stakeholders through different means of consultation that the secretariat has undertaken between September 2023 and February 2025.

As you may have noticed, the report is of considerable length, as it aims to provide both the following:

- An assessment of the changes that have taken place since WSIS, particularly since WSIS+10, in critical aspects of the Information Society.

And

- A review of stakeholders' perceptions of both the successes and ongoing challenges since WSIS, along with progress in implementing its outcomes. This is structured through six sub-chapters dealing with:
 - digital inclusion;
 - the digital ecosystem;
 - the digital economy;
 - sustainable development;
 - human rights and ethical dimensions of the Information Society; and
 - digital governance

The Report adopts a forward-looking approach, focusing not only on the past or the present but, more importantly, on the future. It also takes into account the outcomes of the Summit of the Future held in September 2024, in particular the Global Digital Compact.

There are some key findings that we could draw from the report, including the following:

First, the pace and scale of technological innovation in information and communication technologies (ICTs) since WSIS are unprecedented in human history. Even before the Summit, the world was experiencing the first wave of innovation associated with computerization. This was followed by a second wave driven by the rapid development of the Internet around the time of the Summit. Today, we are witnessing a third wave, marked by the emergence of artificial intelligence, advanced robotics, and other frontier technologies.

To illustrate this evolution, the computing power of a modern smartphone is said to exceed that of the most sophisticated computer available at the time WSIS was first proposed, in 1998.

Second, access to digital infrastructure has expanded significantly, especially through mobile networks. Global mobile broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants have increased from around 4 percent in 2005 to more than 90 percent in 2024.

However, digital access remains uneven. These gaps are particularly evident in the least-developed countries and rural areas, where people may be connected in theory but are still unable to fully participate in digital society due to challenges related to affordability, digital skills, relevant content, and online safety.

Vulnerable groups, including the aged, the disabled, women, and the rural population, remain disproportionately affected by these challenges.

Third, digital technologies are increasingly integrated into public services, education, business, and governance. However, this growing reliance also brings important concerns. Data governance and digital security issues can undermine trust in digital systems and expose individuals and institutions to risks such as privacy violations, cyberattacks, and the misuse of personal data.

Moreover, the environmental impact of digital infrastructure—including high energy consumption and electronic waste—presents sustainability challenges that must be addressed alongside efforts to expand digital access and innovation.

Fourth, while the digital economy has expanded rapidly, its benefits remain unevenly distributed. This imbalance risks deepening existing socioeconomic inequalities.

Although global internet usage has grown significantly since WSIS, least developed countries and lower-income populations continue to fall behind. The report highlights the need for inclusive policy frameworks and enhanced international cooperation to ensure that all countries and communities can fully participate in—and benefit from—the opportunities of the digital economy.

Summary of key challenges

The report summarized eleven policy challenges identified by contributors to the consultation and in the wider literature on digital development as having remained or become substantial during the period since WSIS, particularly:

1. The growing need to achieve meaningful and fully inclusive connectivity;
2. The need for more financial resources for investment in infrastructure and developmental applications;
3. The affordability of digital equipment and data for users of online services;
4. The persistence of inadequate digital skills and digital literacy;
5. Cybersecurity;
6. Data governance, data protection, and data privacy;
7. Issues of information integrity, including misinformation, disinformation, and abusive behaviour online;
8. Environmental impacts, including climate change;
9. The growing concentration of economic and decision-making power;
10. The relationship between digitalization and national sovereignty; and
11. The need for greater international cooperation, including stronger participation by developing countries.

Key Priorities for the Future of WSIS

Looking ahead, the WSIS+20 report identifies a set of six strategic priorities to guide the future development of the Information Society, that also emerged from the consultation and the wider literature on digital development.

- Central among these is the need to close digital divides, including the gender digital divide—not only in terms of connectivity, but also in access to devices, affordability, and the skills needed for meaningful participation. Infrastructure investment, greater use of existing networks, targeted efforts to improve access and affordability for marginalized communities, and initiatives to build digital capabilities and literacy are identified as relevant instruments to address these need.
- A second priority is to foster a safe and secure digital environment, including enhanced cybersecurity and efforts to build trust and confidence in the integrity and value of digital resources.
- Another key area is the development of robust governance frameworks to manage the growing complexity of digital ecosystems. The report highlights the importance of improved data governance, privacy protection, and inclusive governance of emerging technologies—particularly artificial intelligence. It also stresses the need to protect human rights online, address issues of information integrity, and ensure greater accountability from technology companies and digital platforms.
- In parallel, it is noted that there is a need to align digital transformation efforts with national sustainable development goals, ensuring that digital solutions directly contribute to progress in sectors such as education, health, financial inclusion, and environmental sustainability. Accelerated deployment of new technologies, including AI, is needed to support the SDGs—especially in areas such as digital economy, health, education, environmental protection, and disaster preparedness.
- The Report also identifies the need for greater policy coherence at the national level, promoting holistic strategies that integrate digital and non-digital stakeholders across and beyond government. This includes the development of digital public infrastructure and the promotion of digital public goods.
- Finally, the report emphasizes the importance of enhanced international cooperation and policy coherence, inclusive multilateralism and greater participation by developing countries in global digital policymaking. Aligning WSIS implementation not only with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, but also with the Pact for the Future and the Global Digital Compact, will be essential to building a more equitable, inclusive, and people-centred digital future.

To that end, the institutional arrangements established in the WSIS outcome documents—particularly the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and the WSIS Forum—

can be leveraged to avoid duplication and resource inefficiencies, especially within broader UN processes.

Moreover, since the WSIS outcomes are living processes, the WSIS framework and Action Lines could be updated to reflect recent developments in the Information Society since 2005 and build integration between WSIS outcomes, the SDGs, and the GDC.

Closing

To conclude my statement, I wish to express our sincere gratitude to all stakeholders who have worked tirelessly to implement the WSIS outcomes at the national, regional, and international levels.

As the United Nations' focal point for science and technology for development, the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) has a responsibility to provide an inclusive platform for addressing both current and future digital challenges and opportunities, and for building consensus around our shared goals.

In this regard, the WSIS+20 discussions today are expected to be reflected in the WSIS resolutions to be negotiated this week, serving as valuable inputs to the General Assembly's review on WSIS+20 later this year.

Thank you for your attention!
