

Summary Record

WSIS+20: Successes, Failures, and Expectations

**WSIS+20 joint open consultation, by ESCAP, CSTD, and ITU in the Asia-Pacific region: a side-event
at the 2024 Asia-Pacific Conference on Digital Inclusion and Transformation**

4 September 2024, 12:00 – 13:15

Congress Centre Astana, Turkistan Side Event Room

Astana, Kazakhstan

Introduction

The WSIS+20 joint open consultation was convened in Astana, Kazakhstan, on 4 September 2024. This session aimed to foster in-depth dialogue among high-level representatives and stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific region on the implementation of WSIS priorities and outcomes. Discussions focused on how the vision of a "people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society" has evolved over the past 20 years since WSIS, and how ongoing trends and emerging technologies, especially AI, impacted progress towards achieving the SDGs and the WSIS vision. The discussions also provided inputs to the CSTD secretariat's synthesis report to inform the substantive discussion on the WSIS+20 Review, as requested by ECOSOC. The session was co-organised by ESCAP, CSTD and ITU, and was moderated by Ms. Gitanjali Sah, Strategy and Policy Coordinator, International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

Opening Remarks

Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Executive Secretary, The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), delivered the welcome address. She expressed appreciation to partners and Member States for their support in advancing the WSIS process, particularly ITU and UNCTAD for promoting digital inclusion through the global multistakeholder WSIS platform. Scaling up innovation through private sector investment and fostering enhanced digital cooperation were highlighted as critical for accelerating progress. The Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Platform was recognized as a regional mechanism to support WSIS action lines. The Executive Secretary highlighted the upcoming 8th session of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Steering Committee and the WSIS Regional Review, which will be held on 25-26 September 2024, in Jeju Island, Republic of Korea. She reaffirmed commitment to working closely with ITU, UNCTAD, and Member States in building an inclusive digital society, in alignment with WSIS+20 priorities.

Keynote Speeches

H.E. Mr. Toelupe Poumulinuku Onesemo, Minister, Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, Samoa, highlighted advancements in connectivity and satellite control technologies in Samoa and other small island states. Significant progress has been made in expanding internet access and digital inclusion, thanks to support from lateral and bilateral partners, as well as UN agencies. Capacity-building initiatives and digital literacy programs have helped create a more informed workforce. However, challenges remain, particularly the digital divide in both infrastructure and capacity, especially for underserved communities. Cybersecurity is also a concern, with small island states facing difficulties in protecting digital infrastructure. There is a strong call for future initiatives

to focus on bridging the digital divide, strengthening cybersecurity, and fostering international cooperation.

Amb. Prof. Muhammadou M. O. Kah, Chair, The United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD), The Gambia, highlighted the five planned regional consultations across different continents, which will provide regional inputs for the WSIS+20 report to be discussed at the CSTD's 28th session in 2025. He noted previous consultations held in the Arab and European regions and expressed appreciation to the Government of Kazakhstan for hosting the current session. Despite progress in ICT access, challenges remain, especially in developing countries, with the gender-based digital divide persisting. He stressed the need for continued efforts to improve connectivity, affordability, and digital literacy. The outcomes of the upcoming Global Digital Compact are expected to align with the WSIS vision of a people-centered, inclusive information society and be incorporated into the WSIS+20 review. He invited all to participate in the CSTD's intersessional panel in October 2024 to further discuss GDC follow-up.

Ms Cynthia Lesufi, Chair, Council Working Group on WSIS&SDG, ITU and Minister Counsellor, South Africa, emphasized the importance of WSIS as a platform for advancing digital inclusion and transformation over the past 20 years. She highlighted the upcoming WSIS+20 review in 2025 as a crucial opportunity to assess progress and shape the future of digital transformation. Ms. Lesufi appreciated the ongoing collaboration among UN agencies and stakeholders to ensure a unified approach towards the WSIS+20 review process. Further, she highlighted the crucial role ITU has played in coordinating and implementing the WSIS Process, ensuring its alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. She reaffirmed South Africa's commitment to the WSIS process, noting national strategies such as the National Development Plan and the Digital Economy Masterplan that prioritize digital literacy, infrastructure, and innovation. She urged stakeholders to ensure coordinated efforts for a people-centered and inclusive digital transformation, translating the WSIS process into tangible actions for all. She also highlighted the ITU's call for members and stakeholders to provide input on the ITU's role in the WSIS+20 review, including sharing perspectives and proposals related to the review of WSIS action lines. The deadline for contributions is 31 January 2025.

Panel Discussion: successes and future expectations

Ms. Nur Sulyna Abdullah, Chief, Strategic Planning and Membership, and Special Advisor to the Secretary-General, ITU, demystified the WSIS process through a detailed PowerPoint presentation, which is available [here](#). She provided a historical overview of WSIS, explained its governance structure, and highlighted key achievements over the past 20 years. She emphasized ITU's role in implementing WSIS outcomes and discussed the importance of various WSIS activities, including the WSIS Forum, WSIS Stocktaking, WSIS Prizes, and UNGIS. Contributions from the Asia-Pacific region were also emphasized. She shared key statistics from the WSIS Stocktaking Database, noting that over 30% of the total project submissions and contributions over the past 20 years have come from Asia and the Pacific. This substantial participation underscores the region's active engagement and commitment to the WSIS process. She announced that the WSIS+20 High-Level Event 2025 will take place from July 7-11, 2025, alongside the AI for Good Global Summit. Calls for contributions will be launched soon, and everyone is encouraged to participate. She underlined that the WSIS process, mandated by the UN, is a well-functioning, multi-stakeholder framework for digital governance. It should be leveraged to avoid duplication and resource wastage, particularly in the context of other UN processes. She reiterated the need to reinforce the leading UN agency's role in implementing WSIS outcomes and the twenty-year review process. It is also essential to build upon the WSIS outcomes from this year and next, and to actively participate in the WSIS review.

Mr. Angel Gonzalez Sanz, Chief, Technology, Innovation and Knowledge Development Branch, UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), addressed key themes and challenges for multistakeholder collaboration in the WSIS+20 review process. He highlighted the need to address the evolving global context, including past crises and current geopolitical tensions, which have shifted the initial optimism surrounding digital technologies. He emphasized the importance of maintaining inclusivity in digital development, noting persistent digital divides and emerging concerns related to artificial intelligence and data governance. Mr. Gonzalez Sanz also raised environmental concerns linked to digitalization and called for a circular digital economy. He encouraged active participation from stakeholders in upcoming consultations, including the final round in Africa and the CSTD session in April 2025, to contribute to shaping effective solutions and advancing WSIS outcomes.

Mr. Ibrayev Serik — Chairman of the Supervisory Board of «1cert» LLP, President of the National Association of Technical Regulation and Metrology, President of the Agricultural Insurance Association, Kazakhstan, WSIS Prizes Winner, Digital AgroInsurance, presented his winning project in the WSIS Prizes 2023 in the e-Agriculture category. His project, Digital AgroInsurance, addresses the challenges of extreme agricultural conditions in Kazakhstan by offering remote insurance coverage. The platform provides insurance with an 80% government subsidy, uses machine learning and satellite data to monitor environmental conditions, and allows farmers to manage their insurance and resources online, enhancing efficiency and accessibility. The presentation is available [here](#).

Mr. Ardabayev Azamat — Executive Director of «1cert» LLP, Vice President of the National Association of Technical Regulation and Metrology, Vice President of the Association of Veterinarians of Kazakhstan, WSIS Prizes Champion, Electronic Conformity Assessment, was recognized as a WSIS Champion in 2023 for the projects of Electronic Conformity (e-Certification). The initiative aims to eliminate paper processes by digitizing certification procedures for products and services. The digital system improves efficiency, transparency, and compliance, significantly reducing processing times from 6-12 months to 1-3 months. The system, which integrates with over 20 databases, is designed to be adaptable for use in various countries and ensures adherence to international standards. The presentation is available [here](#).

The moderator proceeded to open the floor for an open discussion. Participants provided their remarks, including:

- **Bocar Ba, Chief Executive Officer, Samena Telecommunications Council**, who acknowledged the pivotal role of the ITU in guiding the WSIS process, emphasizing that WSIS remains a cornerstone for digital development and collaboration on ICT-related issues. He highlighted that the WSIS event is more than a must-attend occasion; it serves as a platform for high-level discussions with policymakers, regulators, academia, and the private sector, making it a truly global, multistakeholder forum. Reflecting on the long-standing relationship with ITU, Mr. Ba noted their advocacy on several issues, particularly financing broadband and ensuring universal online access by 2030. As a UN Broadband Commissioner, he stressed their involvement in advocating for new financing models to support access to capital, especially for the Global South. Mr. Ba invited participants to engage in the implementation process with ITU next year and congratulated the teams for their efforts.
- **Mr. Tomoyoshi Koume, Industrial Development Officer, Division of Digital Transformation and Artificial Intelligence (DAI), Directorate of Technical Cooperation and Sustainable Industrial Development (TCS), UNIDO**, who underscored UNIDO's commitment to advancing SDG 9, which focuses on building resilient infrastructure and promoting sustainable industrialization. He highlighted UNIDO's efforts in fostering inclusive and sustainable

industrial development, particularly in developing countries. He expressed enthusiasm for examples like the agro-insurance project, which align with UNIDO's objectives. He emphasized the potential for further cooperation and expressed excitement about WSIS achievements, indicating a positive outlook on future collaborations.

- **Dr. Salma Abbasi, Founder, Chairperson and CEO of the eWorldwide Group**, who congratulated the ITU and WSIS process, emphasizing the importance of multilateral collaboration. She commended the ITU Secretary-General for prioritizing women in digital inclusion and stressed the need for continued efforts on gender equity. She also addressed the increasing challenges in child online protection due to AI advancements, urging member countries to adopt ITU's guidelines and engage more actively in these efforts.
- **Ms. Noelle Francesca de Guzman, Director, Policy and External Engagement**, who acknowledged the drastic changes in the digital landscape over the past 20 years. She emphasized that this shift has led to a broader set of stakeholders, particularly mentioning the Domain Name System (DNS) industry and country code top-level domains, which have now become widely established. Noella raised the question of how to ensure that new and merging stakeholders are adequately engaged in both national and global processes like WSIS.

The moderator thanked all speakers and participants for their contributions and closed the session.