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Submissions from entities in the United Nations system, international organizations and other stakeholders on their efforts in 2023 to implement the outcomes of the WSIS

Submission by

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

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 27th 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.

Progress made by African countries in the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the Regional and International Levels

UNECA Contribution 2023

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ECA is committed to tirelessly working towards achieving universal and meaningful connectivity in Africa. It is at the forefront of implementing the 11 WSIS Action lines, which are critical for the realization of the African Union 2063 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa. In this context, the ECA is dedicated to bridging global digital divides and supporting African countries in harnessing the potential of digital and green technologies, as well as Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) for the achievement of the SDGs and Agenda 2063.

To this end, ECA is conducting a report on the Review of the Implementation and Follow-up of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Africa in 2023, as well as the WSIS+20 review process and alignment with the UN Secretary-General's Global Digital Compact (GDC). The Annual WSIS Regional Review Meeting for Africa will take place in December.

Regarding ICT policy development, ECA will continue to support numerous African countries, including Ethiopia, The Gambia, Nigeria, Guinea, Botswana, Benin, Togo, Senegal, Rwanda, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Botswana, Tanzania, Mozambique, Mauritius, Comoros, and more, in developing their digital transformation agendas and implementing foundational ID systems based on open-source platforms aimed at addressing SDG16.9.

Africa faces challenges such as limited digital capacity, infrastructure deficiencies, inadequate cybersecurity strategies and legislation, a growing digital divide, a lack of cybersecurity culture and implementation mechanisms, insufficient cooperation and intelligence sharing frameworks, limited prioritization and leadership commitment, and inadequate participation in global cybersecurity activities and cyber diplomacy. These challenges emphasize the urgency of accelerating digital transformation in Africa, in line with the African Digital Transformation Strategy, which seeks to leverage ICT for social and economic development while preventing digital technologies from exacerbating inequalities.

Despite these challenges, in 2022, there were notable advancements in various areas supporting the WSIS action lines and the SDGs in African countries:

- Policy Advances: African countries made significant policy advances in the digital space, including the Africa Digital Transformation Strategy 2020-2023, the Lome Declaration on Cybersecurity and Fight Against Cybercrime 2022, and the AU Data Policy Framework. The AU Digital Transformation Strategy 2020-2030 continued to be implemented, and the development of continental frameworks such as the Continental Data Policy Framework, Interoperability Framework for Digital ID, AU Digital Single Market, and Continental Strategy for Artificial Intelligence progressed.

- Cybersecurity: The African Union Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection (Malabo Convention) entered into force with strong support from African countries. There was increased participation in global cybersecurity activities.

- Telecom Growth: Africa witnessed growth in its telecom sector, with improved network coverage and early adoption of 5G technology in countries like South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria. The transition to 4G networks was also underway.

- Connectivity: Access to affordable, high-quality connectivity improved, with nearly 100% network coverage in some countries and increased access to broadband.

- Digital Trade and Finance: The growing penetration of the Internet and smartphones in Africa boosted digital trade and finance services, including e-commerce platforms, social media, and payment solutions, contributing to the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

- E-Government: African governments continued to prioritize e-government, with the release of the eleventh edition of the e-government survey. However, digital transformation in Africa lags behind other regions globally.

The challenges and opportunities presented in this overview emphasize the importance of accelerating digital transformation in Africa to leverage ICTs for social and economic development while addressing inequalities.

II. OVERVIEW OF ECA'S KEY ACTIVITIES

The WSIS action lines for the Regional Commissions, where the ECA is a co-facilitator are categorized under the three categories: C1, C6, and C11, each with associated targets. The following sections will highlight the significant developments and activities undertaken by UNECA and its collaborators in 2023. This focus will be on showcasing good practices, lessons learned, as well as outlining the actions, initiatives, and important measures required for the continued implementation of the WSIS Action Line through various regional-level initiatives.

- ECA has been actively supporting the ongoing consultation process for the Global Digital Compact, set to launch during the Forum of the Future in September 2024. A regional review meeting was organized by ECA in Cape Town on July 4-5 to incorporate Africa's perspective into the United Nations Global Digital Compact (GDC) and advance a more inclusive and equitable digital future. This meeting focused on key themes including Africa's infrastructure development, digital public goods, digital trust, data protection, human rights, and the regulation of emerging technologies like AI. The event brought together experts, policymakers, and stakeholders from 32 member states representing government, private sector, civil society, and academia.

- Development of regional digital policies and strategies in the areas of digital governance, data protection and cyber security, emerging technologies and digital trade. Some notable examples include the ongoing work on the Single Digital Market Framework and Single African AI strategy in collaboration with the AU.

- Strengthening of ECA member states' digital capacity to harness emerging technologies, including AI, robotics, IoT, 5G, and blockchain, while ensuring these technologies are properly regulated. Notable examples include the validation of the strategic plans for the establishment of the African STEAM Center in Rwanda and the development of guiding principles to inform the National Fintech Strategy for the Government of Mauritius.

- Support for the implementation of Good Digital ID Framework Principles as enabling factors for digital transformation, inclusive growth, and regional integration. Currently, the ECA is providing technical support to the governments of the Gambia, Botswana, Nigeria and Ethiopia. The ECA through the Digital Centre of Excellence, is supporting the development of the Gambia's strategy to create a National Digital ID System & Services (DIDS) as well as the development of the country's Digital Transformation Strategy. In Nigeria, the ECA is working with Kaduna State to implement a digital ID use case with the state's Pension Bureau which will allow retirees to validate their eligibility for s pension payment online. In Botswana, the ECA is supporting the rollout and implementation of the country's digital transformation strategy - SmartBots. In Ethiopia, the ECA has been supporting the Ethiopian National ID Programme Office since inception. So far, by end of 2022 the program has completed the registration and Digital ID generation for about 1.5 million residents with a small-scale implementation of the Fayda platform.

- On 22 May 2023, on the margins of ID4Africa in Nairob, ECA convened a Stakeholders Dialogue on Digital ID and Disruptive Technologies in Africa, to establish a roadmap for African governments to implement policy guidelines for digital ID systems aligned with the continental Digital Transformation Strategy.

- The ECA organized the 2nd African Regional Workshop on Digital ID and Interoperability in Africa, in Banjul Gambia 6-8th June 2023.

- ECA launched the Africa Science Technology and Innovation Forum. The fifth forum was held from 26 to 27 February 2023, in a hybrid format, in Niamey, Niger and was co-organized with UNESCO and the African Union Commission and the Department of Science and Innovation of South Africa. With a key focus on youths the theme of the ASTI Forum was "Accelerating development and diffusion of emerging technologies for a green, inclusive and resilient Africa" with a special focus on the selected Goals (6, 7, 9, 11 and 17).

- Accelerating climate innovation and net-zero solutions. The ECA is helping the Government of Botswana build its climate resilience and adaptation capacity, by transforming Lobu small stock Farm (LSF) into a center of excellence for small stock development. ECA also held a climate adaptation hackathon in Niamey which featured over 80 innovators from different African countries.

- Advancing digital skills and closing digital divides. The ECA is joining the Giga initiative[1] and Smart Africa in an effort to connect every African school to the Internet by leveraging innovative financing models and supporting governments' contracting for connectivity. Through the Connected African Girls Initiative, the ECA is helping member states close the gender digital divide, by training young women and girls in basic coding and digital literacy skills. To date, the program has trained close to 40,000 girls in a hybrid format in 8 African countries. In the year 2023, the ECA organized camps in Mozambique and Niger, in collaboration with the Ministries of ICT and Education, in each country alongside our partners from UN Women and ITU.

- Advancing Entrepreneurship in Higher Education is a partnership which seeks to create 1 million start-ups and $100 billion in revenue in the next ten years to address Africa's unemployment, poverty and industrialization challenges through innovation and entrepreneurship.

- ECA has been a key stakeholder and funder of the African Internet Governance Forum (AIGF) including for the support of participants from various stakeholder groups and communities including government, civil society, private sector and academia. The commission was a key facilitator of the African Internet Governance Forum in Nigeria 2023.

III. CONCLUSION

- There is clear progress across the continent in implementing the WSIS Action lines. For instance, African countries have made significant improvements in their telecommunications infrastructure, laying the foundation for the transition to digital services and e-government. However, this progress is hampered by the fact that the cost of mobile broadband, as a percentage of per capita gross national income, remains considerably higher in Africa compared to other parts of the world.
- To foster the development and utilization of new and emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, we must establish robust regulations and cultivate broad partnerships with the private sector, academia, civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), public organizations, and international bodies. These efforts aim to enhance education, promote gender equality, create decent job opportunities, reduce inequalities, and encourage responsible consumption and production.
- The digital divide and cybersecurity are significant threats in the continent. It is imperative to implement effective measures against cyber threats and promote Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) to support Africa's endeavors to leverage digital transformation for accelerated sustainable development.
- Harnessing digital technologies to accelerate SDGs while leveraging on digital opportunities is critical to ensure a strategic alignment of the WSIS progress and the Global Digital Compact.

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[1] https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Giga+initiative&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8