COMMISSION ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT (CSTD)

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Submissions from entities in the United Nations system, international organizations and other stakeholders on the progress made in the implementation of the outcomes of the WSIS during the past 20 years

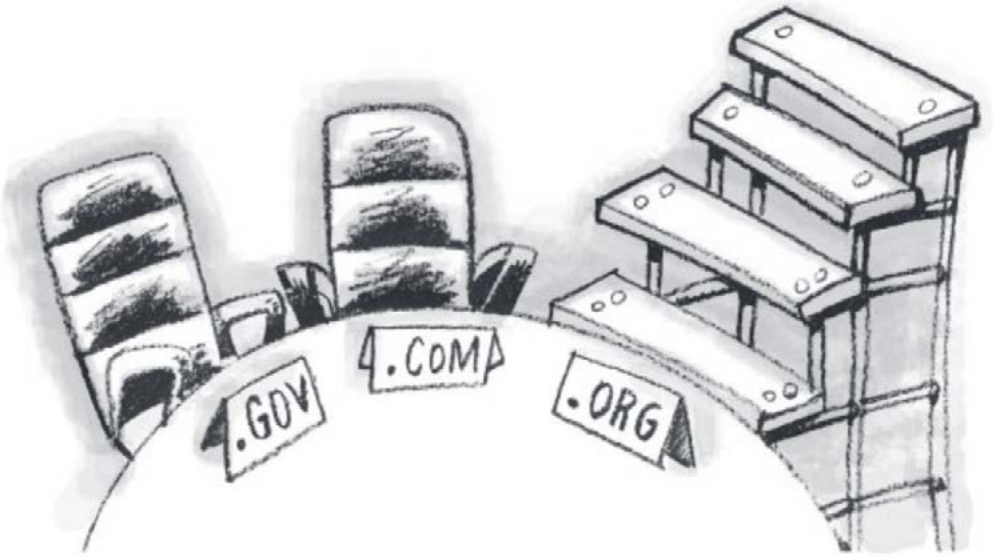
Submission by

Association for Progressive Communications

This submission was prepared as an input to the report of the CSTD secretariat that will inform the substantive discussion at the CSTD on the progress made in the implementation of the outcomes of the WSIS during the past 20 years during its 28th annual session in April 2025, in response to the request by the Economic and Social Council, in its resolution E/RES/2023/3, to the CSTD to conduct such substantive discussions and to report thereon, through the Economic and Social Council, to the General Assembly.

United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development

Twenty years in the implementation of outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS): Report from the Association for Progressive Communications



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APC
ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS

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I. What is your organization's formal role and responsibilities concerning WSIS implementation?

a. Mandates of your organization relevant to WSIS implementation

APC was originally identified as a co-facilitator, with the ITU, of Action Line C6: Enabling environment, which is focused on the creation of trustworthy, transparent and non-discriminatory legal, regulatory and policy environment by governments, in cooperation with others, in order to maximise the social, economic and environmental benefits of a people-centred information society.

This was an important and not sufficiently acknowledged recognition of the principle of multistakeholder collaboration that was part of WSIS. Sadly, after a few years, APC stepped down from its role as a co-facilitator as it did not have sufficient financial resources to participate consistently in action line facilitator meetings nor the human resources required to coordinate the activities of other entities beyond those of the APC network. In retrospect, and if virtual participation had been available, APC probably would have retained this role, as so much of its work continues to focus on creating enabling policy and regulatory environments for achieving digital inclusion and social and economic justice.

In spite of not having an official mandate, APC and its members have taken WSIS follow-up and implementation very seriously and contributed through integrating WSIS into its own programming, and in participating consistently in UN-based WSIS processes.

How the WSIS review process frames and defines its future, including the Geneva Plan of Action action lines, will be crucial for the integration of different processes – including the Global Digital Compact (GDC) – aimed at responding to challenges that persist and others that have emerged over the last two decades. APC remains committed to contributing to the ongoing implementation of the WSIS action lines in a manner that integrates with other initiatives, such as the GDC, in collaboration with UN agencies and all other relevant actors.

b. Brief history of your organization's contribution to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

APC has contributed to the WSIS process consistently since its inception. This has taken the form of:

Participation in the preparatory process

APC actively participated in regional Preparatory Conferences and meetings of WSIS Preparatory Committees (PrepComs). These meetings were crucial for regional input into negotiating and drafting key documents like the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action. APC contributed by advocating for inclusive, equitable and rights-based approaches to information and communication technologies (ICTs), ensuring civil society voices were heard. At regional level, APC facilitated the participation of is members in these meetings, thereby contributing to strengthening understanding, and where possible, collaboration with governments in the region. In the case of Africa, a multistakeholder regional "caucus" continued to meet throughout the process with the result that inputs submitted by African governments did, to a significant extent, reflect civil society priorities.

Member of the Civil Society Bureau (CS Bureau)

As a member of the Civil Society Bureau, APC played a central role in coordinating and representing the views of diverse civil society stakeholders in the WSIS process. The CS Bureau was responsible for organising civil society input into the negotiations and ensuring balanced representation across sectors.

Member of several caucuses: African, LAC, Gender, Civil Society Gender, Internet Governance and Human Rights Caucuses as well as the CRIS Campaign

APC's involvement in caucuses such as the regional African and Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) Caucuses, the multistakeholder Gender Caucus and the breakaway Civil Society Gender Caucus, the Human Rights Caucus and the Internet Governance Caucus, reflected its commitment to regional and thematic advocacy. Some of these caucuses were established during the first phase of WSIS, some, such as the Internet Governance Caucus, were established at the conclusion of the first phase and operated during and beyond the second phase. These groups worked to highlight region-specific or issue-specific challenges such as gender equality concerns within the global ICT landscape, aiming for fair representation in WSIS outcomes.

APC was also part of the Communications Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) Campaign.

The APC Internet Rights Charter and the "new rights" vs. "old rights" debate

APC helped resolve the intense debate within civil society between those advocating for new "communications" rights and those who believed it was risky to ask for new rights and who argued that WSIS should rather affirm existing human rights by developing the APC "Internet Rights Charter",[1] which interpreted how existing human rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights apply to the internet. APC worked with the "new rights" communications rights movement through its membership in the CRIS Campaign, as well as with the WSIS Human Rights Caucus, which argued for consolidating "old" or existing rights. Through the APC Internet Rights Charter, APC helped achieve a compromise between these two approaches, which resulted in strong human rights content in the WSIS outcome documents.

Member of the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG)

APC was an active member of the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG), which was formed after the first phase of WSIS to address contentious issues surrounding internet governance. APC was represented on the WGIG by a staff member and an APC member representative. APC contributed expertise to discussions about multistakeholder governance, equitable internet resource management, the participation of the global South, the internationalisation of ICANN and the human rights implications of internet governance. In collaboration with other members of the WGIG from the academic community, APC helped conceptualise the idea of the "Internet Governance Forum", which became one of the most lasting outcomes of the second phase of WSIS.

Member of the Task Force on Financing Mechanisms (TFFM)

In its role as a member of the Task Force on Financing Mechanisms (TFFM), APC provided critical input on sustainable funding models to bridge the digital divide, particularly in under-resourced regions. APC registered a number of concerns about how the Task Force's compressed process was impacting on the content of its findings and conclusions. This led to an exchange of open letters between APC and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the convenors of the Task Force.[2] In spite of APC's concerns, we felt that the TFFM was able to produce findings and conclusions that could take forward

1. https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/apc-internet-rights-charter
2. First open letter from APC to the chair of the TFFM – 7 December 2004, UNDP response to APC's letter – 10 December 2004 and Second open letter from APC to the UNDP and TFFM – 12 December 2004.

the issue of financing for ICT for development (ICTD) and which are still relevant today in the context of WSIS+20.[3] Some of these findings are included below in response to the future-oriented questions.

Member of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) Working Group on IGF Improvements

APC participated in the CSTD working group tasked with evaluating and recommending improvements to the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in 2012. The organisation emphasised the need for inclusivity, transparency, and more actionable outcomes in the IGF's multistakeholder discussions.

Member of the CSTD Working Groups on Enhanced Cooperation

As a civil society representative in two rounds of this multistakeholder working group, APC engaged in discussions on the role of governments in internet governance, referred to in the Tunis Agenda as "enhanced cooperation". APC proposed that the IGF establish a mechanism for direct liaison with governments to enable more systematic participation by governments – particularly from developing countries – in IGF agenda setting and discussions. This mechanism would also serve to communicate IGF messages to governments and involve them in IGF intersessional work. This proposal was not accepted and sadly, neither the first nor the second WGEC managed to achieve consensus.

Members of the IGF Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG)

On multiple occasions, APC representatives served on the IGF MAG, contributing to the organisation and agenda setting of the annual IGF meetings. They ensured that civil society concerns were integrated into the content and process of the IGF, including in IGF intersessional work.

MAG Chair

A past APC executive director served as chair of the IGF MAG, a leadership role that involves guiding the group's activities, facilitating discussions, and fostering collaboration across stakeholder groups. This role underscores APC's influence and commitment to shaping the global internet governance dialogue.

3. WSIS Task Force on Financial Mechanisms (including the Report of the TFFM and its Executive Summary and Conclusions)

Publications during and post-WSIS

APC has been prolific in publishing reports, analyses and position papers throughout the WSIS process and beyond. These publications document their advocacy efforts, propose policy recommendations, and reflect on WSIS outcomes. They include:

- Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch), one of APC's flagship publications. It is an annual report that monitors the state of ICTs globally, with a focus on civil society participation. GISWatch has been instrumental in documenting progress and challenges post-WSIS, reinforcing APC's thought leadership in internet governance, ICT for development, gender justice, digital rights and digital development spaces. GISWatch special editions focused on specific aspects of WSIS follow-up.
- GenderIT.org is a project of the APC Women's Rights Programme. The site is a think tank OF and FOR women's rights, sexuality, sexual rights and internet rights activists, academics, journalists and advocates. It carries articles, news, podcasts, videos, comics and blogs on internet policy and cultures from a feminist and intersectional perspective, privileging voices and expressions from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Arabic-speaking countries and Eastern Europe. GenderIT.org provides a space for reflection, influence and advocacy on internet policy in relation to the rights and demands of women, gender-diverse people and issues related to sexuality.
- GISWatch WSIS+20: Re-imagining horizons of dignity, equity and justice for our digital future (2024)
- WSIS ten-year review - The way forward: Harnessing information and communications technologies for development: APC statement at the WSIS+10 High Level meeting (2015)
- APC's Comments on the WSIS+10 Zero Draft (2015)
- The Working Group on Internet Governance: 10th anniversary reflections: APC and ICANN's joint edited collection to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the WGIG (2015)
- Communications rights 10 years after the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS): Civil society perceptions: A special edition of GISWatch produced in partnership with WACC for the 10-year review (2013)
- Involving Civil Society in ICT Policy: The World Summit on the Information Society: Regional perspectives and priorities from APC and CRIS members prepared for the first phase of WSIS (2003)

Participation in the CSTD, WSIS Forum and IGF as well as its intersessional processes.

APC and its members are regular contributors to and participants in the WSIS Forum, global and regional IGFs and CSTD's annual review of WSIS follow-up and implementation. APC was instrumental in creating the regional IGFs in Africa and Latin America and also in bringing online gender-based violence to the attention of the IGF community through its work on the Gender Best Practice Forum in 2015 and 2016. APC's participation in the Dynamic Coalition on Schools of Internet Governance and the Dynamic Coalition on Community Connectivity have been instrumental in building partnerships and promoting the idea that access markets need to be diversified to accommodate locally driven solutions.

c. Implementation processes and initiatives within your organization and/or in partnership with other organisations

Almost all of APC's strategic priorities, as well as project and programme activity, have contributed to the WSIS vision and one or more action lines, and most of these are implemented in partnership with others. Examples are listed under the action lines below.

II. What have been your organization's main contributions to the direct implementation of the WSIS outcomes and related areas of digital development since the Summit, particularly since 2015?

a. WSIS Action Lines (as lead, co-facilitator or supporting participant)

C1. The role of governments and all stakeholders in the promotion of ICTs for development

- African School on Internet Governance (AfriSIG): AfriSIG trains African stakeholders in internet governance principles to empower them for informed participation in global and regional policy processes.

C2. Information and communication infrastructure: an essential foundation for the Information Society

- Broadband for Africa: This initiative aimed to enhance affordable and widespread broadband access across Africa through collaborating with

governments, civil society and local private sector associations developing national broadband strategies and policy.

- Open Spectrum for Development: This project advocated for dynamic spectrum regulation to enable the equitable use of radio spectrum to enable affordable and accessible wireless communication, especially in under-served areas.
- Community Wi-Fi: APC supported the establishment of community-managed Wi-Fi networks to provide affordable and locally controlled internet access.
- TRICALCAR (ICTs for the Caribbean and Latin America): This project focused on capacity building and ICT infrastructure development for under-served communities in the Caribbean and Latin America.
- Local Networks (LocNet): The LocNet initiative promotes the development and sustainability of community-owned networks to expand internet access in marginalised regions. LocNet activity is implemented in close partnership with community networks and, at international level, with the ITU, regional and national telecoms regulators, and the Internet Society.

C3. Access to information and knowledge

- Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch): This annual publication monitors global ICT developments, providing insights into the societal impacts of technology and fostering informed advocacy.
- Advocacy for an approach to human rights that highlights the right to information

C4. Capacity building

- AfriSIG (already mentioned)
- ICT Policy for Civil Society Curriculum: This curriculum provided civil society organisations with the knowledge and tools to engage in ICT policy advocacy effectively.
- ItrainOnline: A collaborative platform offering resources and training for development practitioners to enhance ICT skills and capacity building.
- Gender and Internet Governance eXchange: This increases capacity of women to discuss, analyse, respond to and influence policy on gender and internet governance more effectively. It allows women's rights and sexual rights activists and organisations in Asia, Africa and LAC to advocate strategically for internet-related laws, policies and regulations that improve women's lives and that contribute to women's social, economic and cultural empowerment.

C5. Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs

- Connect Your Rights – Internet Rights are Human Rights: An APC campaign highlighting the intersection of digital rights and human rights, advocating for policies and practices that protect freedom of expression, privacy and access to information in the digital age. Through this campaign, working in partnership with the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the then Special Rapporteur to the Human Rights Council (HRC) on Freedom of Expression and Opinion, APC contributed to the landmark 2012 HRC resolution that established that rights that apply offline also apply online.
- Combatting Online Gender-Based Violence: APC has worked to address online gender-based violence through advocacy, research, capacity building and policy engagement, aiming to create safer digital spaces and promote accountability for technology-facilitated abuse.
- Take Back the Tech!: A global campaign initiated by APC to mobilise women and gender-diverse individuals to reclaim technology as a tool for activism and combating gender-based violence, especially in online spaces.
- A framework for developing gender-responsive cybersecurity policy: This three-part framework developed by the Association for Progressive Communications seeks to support policy makers and civil society organisations by providing practical guidance for developing gender-responsive cybersecurity policies, laws and strategies. Thus, it is expected to contribute to the various stakeholders interested in the contributions of a gender approach to cybersecurity to find a theoretical background that can support their policies and actions.

C6. Enabling environment

Several of the activities listed under other action lines contribute to an enabling environment by analysis of policy and regulatory environments and building capacity of governments and regulators. This includes AfriSIG, LocNet, APC's participation in the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) and GISWatch.

C7. ICT applications: benefits in all aspects of life

ICT applications can support sustainable development, in the fields of public administration, business, education and training, health, employment, environment, agriculture and science within the framework of national e-strategies.

- GenARDIS: The Gender, Agriculture and Rural Development in the Information Society (GenARDIS) small grants fund was developed in 2002

to support work at the grassroots level on gender-related issues in ICTs for agricultural and rural development in the African, Caribbean and Pacific regions. It continued until 2009 and was a partnership of APC with the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos), International Development Research Centre (IDRC), International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), and Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA).

- E-waste and other environmental projects: APC led initiatives addressing the environmental impact of ICTs, including e-waste management and sustainable technology practices. A key output is Reduce, reuse, recycle: A guide to circular economies of digital devices. This guide follows the publication of the Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) 2020 report and explores many of the same topics on environmental sustainability, digital rights and circularity. GISWatch's country, regional and thematic reports offer a critical lens on digital economies and how they relate to the goals of sustainable development, with case studies from countries across the global South. Both the guide and GISWatch 2020 aim to contribute to the goal of mobilising collective action for environmental justice and sustainability that APC and its partners promote.

C9. Media

- Gendered disinformation: From 2022 onwards, APC has prioritised the safety of women journalists, working with UNESCO and others. Specifically it has conduced research on gendered disinformation, a manifestation of harmful content which disproportionately affects women in the media, in partnership with the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan. Regional consultations and a series of seminars and workshops were organised to discuss freedom of expression and gender justice, with a focus on the different types of censorship, threats and attacks faced by women and gender non-conforming individuals in their interactions with technology.

C10. Ethical dimensions of the Information Society

- EROTICS (Exploratory Research on Sexuality and the Internet): A global research and advocacy initiative by APC that examines how marginalised communities, particularly those focused on sexual rights, navigate, use and are affected by online spaces, emphasising the intersection of sexuality, expression, and digital rights.

Addressing the gender divide – a priority emerging from WSIS+10

- GEM (Gender Evaluation Methodology): GEM provided a toolkit for evaluating the impact of ICT initiatives from a gender perspective, promoting equitable and inclusive development outcomes.

b. WSIS-related projects

Almost all of APC's strategic priorities, as well as project and programme activity, have contributed to the WSIS vision and one or more action lines and most of these are implemented in partnership with others. If by WSIS projects reference is made to projects such as the ITU's GIGA, Partner2Connect, UNESCO's Broadband Commission and Internet Universality Indicators, or the WSIS Prizes, APC has participated in all of these and has on three occasions been a winner of a WSIS Prize (for TakeBackTheTech!, AfriSIG and GISWatch).

c. Indicators used to measure the impact of ICT in the achievement of the SDGs in your organization's area of work

APC is committed to evidence-based policy and regulation and to building "bottom-up" participation in ICT policy processes. A priority for APC has been reaching out to and including civil society voices that are not already inside the "ICT bubble". It has used projects such as those mentioned below to connect with the women's rights movement and rights advocates working on "offline" rights.

- Feminist Principles of the Internet: A framework developed by feminist activists and organisations, including APC, to advocate for a gender-inclusive, rights-based internet that empowers women and marginalised groups through principles of access, expression, consent and participation in digital spaces.
- African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms: A landmark initiative co-developed by APC and other stakeholders to promote a human rights-based framework for internet governance and use in Africa, addressing issues such as access, freedom of expression, privacy, and gender equality online.
- UNESCO Internet Universality Indicators (IUI): A framework developed by UNESCO, with support from APC, to assess how well national policies align with human rights standards, including access, openness, security and privacy, to ensure the internet serves the public good and upholds universal principles.

d. What assessment has your organization made of its engagement in WSIS-related work and digital development in its areas of responsibility?

Activities in the last 10 years include the WSIS+10 survey of civil society perceptions on the state of communications rights mentioned above. Communication rights ten years after the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS): Civil society perceptions is a GISWatch special report that collated civil society perceptions of the changes that took place in the information and knowledge-sharing society during the first decade of the WSIS. Using the both the WSIS Declaration of Principles (2003) as well as the Civil Society Declaration to the World Summit on the Information Society (2003) as a starting point, it captured the kinds of shifts that have been experienced by communications activists and stakeholders in a rich and nuanced way.

APC has also conducted a review of African members' and partners perspectives on WSIS+20 from an Action Line perspective.

APC published an edition of GISWatch for the 20-year review: "Global Information Society Watch 2024 special edition: WSIS+20: Reimagining horizons of dignity, equity and justice for our digital future". APC is also currently (late 2024, early 2025) conducting a survey of its members and partners together with IT for Change and the Global Digital Justice Forum.

III. What does your organization see as the main achievements, problems and emerging issues arising from WSIS and from digital development in its areas of responsibility since the Summit, particularly since 2015?

a. What have been the main achievements of WSIS and digital development?

Awareness

WSIS came at a critical time. A relatively small number of countries/governments and entities from other stakeholder groups were aware of, and engaged in, the potential of communications technologies to support development. Few predicted that a digitally (we used the term "electronic" at the time) interconnected world would have profound impact on social,

economic and political processes. Even though digital equality between and within countries has not been achieved, if not for WSIS, chances are that these gaps would be even wider, and the economic power that has accompanied digital development would be even more concentrated and unevenly distributed.

Increased connectivity

Significant progress has been made in expanding global connectivity. The number of internet users worldwide has surged, with broadband infrastructure expanding into more remote and under-served areas; however, more than half the world's population still does not have access and in Africa penetration is currently below 40%. Since 2015, a key achievement is the rise of community networks. The rise of community-driven networks and availability of licenses for community networks and other local access providers have helped bridge the gap in places where traditional market-based solutions have failed to reach, especially in rural and low-income areas. This is also mentioned below in post-WSIS opportunities.

Engagement

Public participation in digital policy development has definitely increased, even if unevenly, through the multistakeholder approach. That does not mean that participation is sufficient and that there are not affected communities that are not still excluded. WSIS legitimised collaboration between different stakeholders. It broadened the focus on "public-private partnerships" which emerged so strongly from the telecoms sector and strengthened civil society's claim on being a decision maker and implementer. However, the multistakeholder approach has also contributed, even if only partially, to big tech companies' capture of the WSIS narrative. This is particularly evident through how mobile operators convinced policy makers that their services provide the ultimate solution to bridging access gaps. The multistakeholder approach also legitimated the misguided notion that self-regulation by global internet companies is sufficient to protect the public interest.

Linked to awareness, engagement and increased connectivity are:

- Locally led innovation and content creation: While it has challenged mainstream media sustainability, convergence of dissemination platforms and use of social media invigorated local media in many instances. In spite of very limited public sector support, local content, including in languages other than English, has grown substantially. In many parts of the world,

media such as radio was made more sustainable by being able to stream over the internet. The down side of this is in places where poor communities cannot afford data and transition away from free-to-air broadcasting resulted in less rather than more access to content.[4]

- Mobile apps: These range from problematic to not very useful to very useful such as, for example, mobile money apps in contexts characterised by financial exclusion. Not enough apps are developed specifically for and by users in the global South, but enough are to have made it easier for people who rely on smartphones to access the internet to gain value from it.
- Digital rights analysis and the digital rights movement: Since 2015, what started as a small group of mainly global North civil society organisations has grown into a massive global movement working for digital rights. Sadly, the growth of this movement is also a response to authoritarian responses by governments to increased connectivity in the form of internet shutdowns (partial or full), blocking, censorship and legislation that claims to address cybercrime and other online harms but that impedes or even criminalises free expression and association and access to information.
- E-government services: A growing number of governments have adopted digital platforms for public service delivery, improving transparency, reducing corruption, and enhancing service efficiency, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many don't work well, and digital inequality impacts on access to these services, but where they do work well and where people can access them, they have brought significant benefits.

b. What problems, obstacles and constraints have been encountered?

Lack of vision and awareness from governments

Many governments, particularly from developing countries, were either unaware of the importance of ICT for development or were hesitant to embrace it due to concerns about its broader implications for social and political change. As a result, there was a delay in the adoption of policies and initiatives that would expand access to ICTs, limiting the progress of digital development and resulting in only elites gaining access and benefit.

Market fundamentalist and supply-driven approaches

Efforts were often focused primarily on the physical roll-out of infrastructure, such as internet access and telecommunications networks. This approach

4. Olayiwola, Ibikunle, Dada, Doyinsola, & Ajisafe, Ibikunle. (2023). Radio broadcasting in the digital age: Adapting to the challenges of the 21st century. *International Journal of Advanced Mass Communication and Journalism, 4*(2), 36-44

was consolidated by the market-driven telecoms liberalisation and the resulting "capture" of the narrative discussed below. This approach did not address the essential human and institutional capacity needed to integrate and utilise these technologies effectively, nor did it prioritise the creation of useful content and services that could benefit local communities. It underestimated the need for public sector investment and oversight and partnerships with local community, assuming that private sector investment was adequate to bridge the digital "divides". One of the many harmful consequences of this is that the public sector did not have the capacity or resources to play its vital role in ensuring that ICT for development meets local needs, and supports national economic development strategy.

In other words, approaches that have relied on the market to implement WSIS goals have had a doubly negative effect: they have minimised the role of the public sector, thereby leading to (1) insufficient investment in digital equality and (2) insufficient investment in stronger public sector institutions that have a key role to play in WSIS implementation.

Regulatory ambivalence and ambiguity

Whether to regulate and if so how, and by whom. Regulating the development and roll-out of digital products and services in a manner that protects and strengthens human rights has been and will continue to be a challenge.[5] There has been a shift from no regulation to fragmented regulation without clear principles such as, for example, applying the precautionary principle to digital products and services, as has been the case in other sectors such as the pharmaceutical industry.

Neglect of digital inequality and increased inequality resulting from the "digital equality paradox"

Digital inequality, both within and between countries, was not sufficiently addressed. The assumption was that it would disappear with increased mobile telephony and internet penetration. International and national development agencies as well as governments underestimated (in spite of warnings from APC and others in civil society) the relationship between pre-existing social and economic inequality and the so-called "digital divide". As a result, many under-served and vulnerable populations were left without the means to access and benefit from ICTs. But, even more concerning, as integration of

5. https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/regulating-use-digital-technology-public-administration-protect-and-strengthen-human-rights

ICTs into parts of public sector service (e.g. e-government programmes) and the digital economy increased, those who were not effectively digitally included became even more marginalised than they were before.

Simultaneously, as applications became more sophisticated, requiring more data and higher-end devices (such as smartphones), the gap impacting on those who could not afford data costs, or who did not have the needed devices and skills, grew as well, resulting in what Research ICT Africa has described as the "digital equality paradox". The more roll-out of ICTs in contexts characterised by basic digital inequality, the greater the gap between the ICT haves and have-nots.

Insufficient investment in financial mechanisms/support

The implementation of the WSIS vision often faced budgetary constraints, with inadequate funding for necessary infrastructure, capacity-building initiatives, and the creation of sustainable digital ecosystems, including access to electricity. This lack of resources has multiple causes including: the fact that WSIS outcomes did not include adequate financial mechanisms, mainly as a result of donor countries not wanting to make additional financial commitments; the lingering impact of structural adjustment, a trend in development aid which discouraged global South governments reliant on aid from investing in public sector infrastructure and services; the debt burden, which, after the period of debt forgiveness early in the century, grew into its current "crisis" proportions. Note that financial mechanisms are not just needed to address infrastructure but broadly, including to invest in human capacity and digital public services.

Persistent digital skills gap between the global North and South

Weak implementation and conceptualisation of digital literacy and capacity building is a major problem. A holistic approach to building human capacity is vital to demand-side strengthening. However, in spite of a large amount of rhetoric on digital literacy, few governments have rolled out integrated approaches to building the digital, media, information and financial literacy that people need to benefit from ICTs in ways that are safe and secure and that empower them in the face of emerging challenges such as misinformation and disinformation. Evidence gathered by researchers suggests that the digital skills gap between the global North and global South is growing. The private sector has rolled out large-scale efforts, for example Microsoft's Global Skills Initiative. Uptake appears to be massive, particularly in parts of Asia and in North America, but less so in Africa. Moreover, virtually

none of these initiatives have been independently evaluated. An academic study by the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA)[6] into the digital skills gap and efforts to bridge it concludes the following:

- The demand for digital skills is heterogeneous, ranging from basic digital literacy to enable people to effectively use basic digital tools to advanced digital skills that facilitate participation in the digital economy. Few policy makers are approaching the challenge to build these skills systematically or in an evidence- based manner.
- Empirical knowledge on the context, needs and challenges related to digital skills is very limited outside the OECD.
- Low-income countries have extremely low levels of digital literacy. Gaps between middle-income and high-income countries are also significant. OECD studies on the use of digital technologies in schools suggests that most middle-income countries lag far behind (particularly in disadvantaged schools). This can cause these gaps to persist or even grow.
- Digital skills training as an active labour market policy will not be able to compensate for failings in earlier-stage digital education.
- Digital training programmes are proliferating but without having proven their effectiveness in enhancing digital skills and improving employment prospects.[7]

Insufficient alignment between WSIS and the SDGs

The SDGs, launched in 2015, recognise ICTs as critical enablers of sustainable development, but failed to dovetail with existing implementation and monitoring that emerged from the earlier WSIS process. The lack of requirements for country-based reporting on WSIS implementation has also been a constraint to more effective follow-up.

c. What new opportunities and challenges have emerged over the years since WSIS which need to be addressed?

Opportunities

- Expansion of digital connectivity: New technologies such as more robust Wi-Fi, mobile broadband and satellite internet (e.g. Starlink) are making high-speed internet more accessible, even in remote or rural locations.

6. Digital Skills in the Global South: Gaps, Needs, and Progress. GIGA Focus Global, Number 2, 2023
7. Adapted from the conclusion of the GIGA study cited above.

Improved infrastructure not only boosts internet connectivity but also enables more reliable communication, which is essential for everything from education and healthcare to business and governance.

- Awareness of the gender digital divide: This was mentioned during WSIS, prioritised during the 2015 10-year review, and continues to be a challenge. The opportunity is that there is more awareness of this challenge and a better understanding of how it relates to existing inequalities between men and women related to income, levels of education and social norms. There is also a larger body of individuals and organisations with expertise in addressing this challenge.
- Growth in local and regional digital economies: Improved infrastructure is also enabling more businesses and services to move online.
- Cheaper technology: Over the years, technology costs have dropped significantly, especially in the case of smartphones and computing devices. However, affordability remains challenging for at least half the world's population. Nevertheless, more people in low-income countries can access digital tools and services that were previously out of reach. Additionally, open-source software and low-cost hardware solutions have empowered local innovation, enabling more affordable digital access and services in under-served communities. Chinese producers have led the way in innovating for low-income markets and the emerging digital "Cold War" may compromise some of these gains.
- Solar energy and the green transition: Solar energy, combined with more affordable solar-powered devices, is revolutionising access to ICTs in areas with unreliable or no access to the electric grid. Solar-powered internet hubs, mobile phones, and e-learning platforms are allowing people in remote locations to access education, healthcare and financial services, all powered by renewable energy. This shift not only promotes digital inclusion but also contributes to environmental sustainability by reducing reliance on fossil fuels.
- Empowering local communities: A key opportunity since WSIS has been the rise of community-led initiatives to build digital infrastructure and services. Rather than relying solely on large multinational companies, many local communities have taken charge of building their own networks, creating community wireless networks, and running digital platforms that address local needs. For example, community networks in rural areas often provide affordable internet and mobile services, helping bridge the digital divide. These approaches have been supported by non-governmental organisations, development agencies and local governments.
- Participatory (digital) development: Community-driven approaches allow for more inclusive, context-specific solutions. These initiatives empower local populations to actively shape their digital environments, fostering

more sustainable, culturally appropriate and responsive systems. They also create greater social cohesion and local ownership over technology, improving the effectiveness of digital programmes.

- European "experiments" in regulating digital markets: It remains to be seen if the European Digital Services and Markets Acts will achieve their intended objectives in making big global tech companies more accountable. Even if these efforts do work, the next challenges will be how to replicate them around the world. Nevertheless, this is an important opportunity
- Efforts to introduce fairer taxation of big tech companies: These efforts, within the UN and through the OECD, are absolutely vital and should be a key discussion point in WSIS and GDC follow-up and implementation.

Challenges

- Climate change and environmental sustainability: As the ICT sector grows, so does its environmental footprint, particularly concerning e-waste and energy consumption. The need for sustainable digital solutions, such as green data centres and eco-friendly devices, is becoming a critical issue.
- Dominance by big tech: The global digital landscape has been increasingly dominated by a few large companies like Google, Amazon, Facebook (Meta), Apple and Microsoft. Also important are Chinese social media and e-commerce platforms. These companies hold massive market power, controlling critical sectors of the internet economy, from cloud services to social media platforms and digital advertising. This results in stifling innovation and competition: the monopolistic tendencies of big tech firms can suppress smaller start-ups and local initiatives. Their dominance creates barriers to entry for new competitors, which stifles innovation and leads to higher costs for consumers. Additionally, their influence on digital policy and governance can undermine fair competition and consumer rights while their practices also frequently violate international human rights.
- Concentration of power in the telecom industry: Over the years, large telecommunications companies (telcos) have increasingly dominated the narrative around digital development. While they have played a role in expanding connectivity, their influence often results in prioritising profit-driven agendas over social and development goals. For instance, telcos may focus more on profitable urban areas and neglect rural and marginalised communities. In some cases, large companies have monopolised access to essential digital infrastructure, which can limit competition and increase costs for users. The challenge is that they capture the narrative on, for example, access to spectrum and e.g. the myths surrounding the opportunity presented by 5G. Policy makers and regulators become

preoccupied with these narratives at the expense of the interests of those who are digitally excluded. For instance, rather than more high-end spectrum auctions, they could require operators to make 2G access available to users on a cost-free basis. Telcos often have significant lobbying power, which can lead to regulations that favour their interests rather than the public good. This creates challenges for ensuring universal access and equitable digital development.

- The failure of universal service/access funds: There are positive examples, but overall these funds have failed to address inequalities. They are not flexible enough, and they present opportunities for corruption. They need to be redefined and deployed to diversify access markets e.g. for supporting solutions that are not overly dependent on mobile operators.
- Insufficient regional and international cooperation between governments: Even in instances where regional strategies exist, as for example in Africa, governments are not collaborating effectively in establishing regional backbone and building regional supply chains (e.g. in the extraction and refining of critical minerals).
- Surveillance capitalism: Business models integral to the growth of big tech (a term that can be used to describe the few huge platforms and companies that dominate the digital sector) rest on practices involve harmful practices that are almost impossible to curtail at the level of actions by individual governments, particularly in the global South. Aspects of surveillance capitalism that are particularly challenging include:
    - Exploitation of personal data: As digital platforms have become integral to everyday life, companies collect massive amounts of personal data from users through online activities, often without full transparency or consent. This data is then used to target users with personalised ads or sold to third parties. While this has driven the digital economy, it has raised serious privacy concerns.
    - Loss of autonomy and privacy: The pervasive nature of data collection and surveillance erodes individual privacy rights and autonomy. It also undermines trust in digital platforms, particularly as users are often unaware of the extent to which their data is being mined. This trend has led to growing concerns about the control of personal information and the potential for misuse by corporations and governments alike.
    - Amplification of "problematic" content: In spite of claims that their self-regulatory mechanisms address harmful content, platforms fail to effective address misinformation and disinformation, including during elections, and content that can lead to harms in the real world e.g. through inciting hatred and violence.
    - Lack of global action to address technology-facilitated gender-based violence: APC is part of the Global Call to Action to Address

Technology-facilitated Gender-based Violence (TFGBV), which outlines specific and actionable interventions to address TFGBV in the short term (one year), medium term (three years), and long term (five years). This is a call to all stakeholders across governments, the private sector, the United Nations, civil society, philanthropic organisations and academia to proactively engage in the effort. The call acknowledges that solutions to address TFGBV must be multilayered and intersectional and promote systemic change.

- Increase in authoritarian government responses: In many countries, digital technologies have been harnessed to increase state control and surveillance. Governments in authoritarian regimes often use digital platforms to monitor citizens, stifle dissent and limit freedom of expression. For example, social media censorship, internet shutdowns and content manipulation are commonly used to control the flow of information and suppress opposition.
- Digital authoritarianism: The rise of social credit systems in some countries, the restriction of VPNs, and the surveillance of online activity have raised alarms about the potential for digital technologies to be used as tools of repression. This creates a delicate balance between maintaining security and respecting fundamental human rights such as free speech and privacy.
- New "digital Cold War" which undermines international cooperation
    - Geopolitical rivalries: A new form of digital "Cold War" is emerging between major global powers, particularly the United States and China, around control of emerging technologies like 5G, AI, and quantum computing. This geopolitical rivalry has led to significant tensions, particularly around issues like data sovereignty, intellectual property and global governance of the internet.
    - Digital sovereignty: Countries are increasingly asserting their digital sovereignty, with governments taking steps to protect national interests, such as by controlling digital infrastructure and setting regulatory frameworks around data. In some cases, nations are decoupling their digital ecosystems from others, which can lead to fragmented global markets and challenges to cross-border cooperation in areas like cybersecurity, data flows and international trade. However, if exercised as part of progressive strategies to grow national and sub-regional digital economies, more sovereignty can also have positive consequences for developing countries.
    - Tech export controls: National security concerns, particularly with respect to technologies like 5G, have led to trade restrictions and bans on tech exports, as seen in the case of the United States and China. This "tech Cold War" creates divisions in global digital systems and increases the risks of cyber conflicts and economic disruptions.

IV. Lessons learned in the implementation of the Summit outcomes in your organization's specific areas of responsibility

The multistakeholder (MS) approach contains its own challenges

WSIS "mainstreamed" the multistakeholder approach and defined it explicitly as involving governments, civil society the private sector. Over time, the technical community came to be seen as a key stakeholder in its own right and many practitioners of the MS approach learned that to have value, it also needed to be more granular, involving specific interest groups or communities affected not just in general, but by particular decisions being made in the course of "internet governance" and WSIS follow-up and implementation.

Identifying applications of the MS approach is challenging. The Brazilian "Marco Civil" stood out as a best-practice example, but it too is facing challenges. In my parts of the world the MS approach is treated as synonymous with its predecessor, PPP: public-private partnership. This latter approach, which excludes communities and civil society, is very much in the comfort zone of most governments and private sector entities. Challenging it if you don't have power is difficult, but a WSIS lesson is that it can be done, using the WSIS principles as an entry point.

UN agencies and the UN system, which should be a leader in applying the MS approach effectively, have, with some exceptions, failed to do so systematically. A standout example is the process that led to the Pact for the Future and the Global Digital Compact. A "best effort" approach by the Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology resulted in multiple inputs by non-state actors, but presented in linear and non-interactive fashion with virtually no opportunities for dynamic interaction between governments and non-state actors.

As outlined in the NETmundial+10's Sao Paulo Multistakeholder Guidelines, there is a need for continuous improvement in the application of the MS approach. Moreover, this is needed both in multilateral and multistakeholder forums.

Digital inequality has to be prioritised

This is the greatest challenge and even in the recent Global Digital Compact, it is mentioned but not prioritised – a privilege given to AI. Unless there is basic

digital equality in developing countries in particular, any investment in any other from of emerging tech, including AI, will just result in increasing the gap between digital haves and have-nots.

Financing mechanisms needed more attention

We believe that some of the findings of the WSIS Task Force on Financing Mechanisms remain relevant. We elaborate on this below under question V. It is a prerequisite to the future of WSIS and digital development and implementation of the Global Digital Compact. Financing is also addressed in the Pact for the Future.

The question of whether there should be a new form of global fund for ICTD was not adequately addressed by the TFFM, nor was the case for a new form of fund in line with the global public good argument taken seriously. In this regard, the refusal of the Task Force to discuss the concept of a mandatory global fund, or even to review the success or failure of other global funds for the environment and HIV/AIDS, was disappointing. The view, held by some in the Task Force, that existing financial mechanisms[8] were not being fully exploited by developing countries prevailed, but the underlying reasons for this were not adequately explored. Contributing factors could be fundamental information asymmetries regarding how these financial mechanisms worked as well as a lack of coordination in the utilisation of the financial mechanisms for ICTD. In addition, it was clear that there were also policy information gaps between agencies like the World Bank and developing country governments about the purpose of ICT policy and how to implement it.

It was in this context that in its submissions to the TFFM in 2005, APC argued for a combined, neutral policy/financial mechanism that would address the financial mechanism knowledge gaps, the ICT policy information gaps as well as create a space for a new form of fund to mobilise additional resources. APC argued that many developing countries had experienced mixed results from the telecom reform policy process, as well as from national ICT strategies, which had become so broad and complex as to be unimplementable in any meaningful way.

Policy and financial advice is often provided by investment and development banks, aid agencies and other international institutions in a context where these institutions have an interest in the outcome of the policy decisions of

8. https://dev-d9.apc.org/en/news/wsis-update-apc-involvement-task-force-financial-mechanisms

the governments. The governments are often unable to access independent advice on how to evaluate the information they are bombarded with and cannot negotiate as equals. A new policy/financial mechanism could provide this kind of information service as well as assist governments to access existing sources of finance more effectively.

In addition, it is not only governments that need better access to information on financing mechanisms. Such information is relevant to all stakeholder groups as well as to multistakeholder community-based initiatives and partnerships (e.g. for community-driven connectivity).

Task Force conclusions which we believe should still be considered include:

- Most developing countries are not yet able to leverage the full benefits of these existing (financial) mechanisms. (Conclusion 1)
- There remains a question of whether the existing array of financial mechanisms is "adequate" to "meet the challenges of ICT for development". (Conclusion 2)
- Greater cross-sectoral and cross-institutional coordination of financing programmes and ICT for development initiatives would improve effectiveness and make better use of resources. (Conclusion 3)

The Task Force found that there is both a strong development rationale as well as incentives for governments, private companies, civil society and international and other development organisations to work together on multiple levels to ensure the rapid and efficient mobilisation of resources across the spectrum of existing and innovative financial mechanisms.

Among these coordination proposals in Conclusion 3 are three that may provide a productive way forward along the policy/finance nexus:

- Establishment of a "virtual" financing facility to leverage multiple sources in support of identified investment objectives in key locations (notably broadband, rural and regional projects, and capacity building).
- Creation of a mechanism for coordinating research and analysis into enabling policy environments, to identify best practices and priority needs for shared action by financial actors. Today there are more such mechanisms, e.g. the D4D hub in the EU, but they are still not effectively used by enough people/regions.
- Development of a "rapid response" policy and regulatory support mechanism to intervene in support of short-term sector policy initiatives. A clear example of where this would be useful would be in the case of Africa,

where the African Union generates strong policy strategies and guidelines, but does not have sufficient capacity to support their roll-out at country or Regional Economic Community level.

Putting "digital" and "tech" before "people" and their institutions does not work

A lesson that is there for the taking, but not being "learned" effectively, is that a "next big thing" approach to digital inclusion does not work. For the past 20 years, UN and other international agencies have shifted from one symptomatic challenge, or one emerging trend, to another. From ICT for development to the internet of things, big data and AI, governments are perpetually asked to come up with new strategies and collaborations when the one priority that will empower them to respond effectively to new developments would be stronger human and institutional capacity at national level and increased basic digital equality.

V. Observations or recommendations concerning the future of WSIS and digital development, taking into account the outcomes of the Summit of the Future in September 2024

Prioritise digital equality and adopt a "people-first tech-second" approach

No need to elaborate on this, as this topic is well-covered above. It simply is the greatest priority and unless it is addressed it will continue to distort digital development. Investing in human capacity will generate the enabling environment needed for people to benefit from digitalisation and to ensure it happens on their own terms in a manner that maximises local interests and creativity and meets local needs.

Apply long-term thinking

A fundamental problem in democratic systems is that they prioritise short-term over long-term outcomes: promises to make people's lives better in the short term (e.g. within electoral cycles), such as tax cuts, inevitably take priority over those that will do so (or protect them) in the long term, such as tackling climate change or addressing social care needs for an ageing population. The only way to achieve longer-term goals within this system is to find ways of achieving consensus at national level across political parties

and at global level across borders and ideological divides. Focusing on environmental sustainability and climate change would be an example of long-term thinking.

Invest in financial mechanisms and information about how to use them

Several of the findings of the TFFM presented to the second phase of WSIS remain relevant. The TFFM uses the concepts ICT and ICTD (as information and communications technologies for development), but if one substitutes "digital", these conclusions are as applicable today as they were in 2005.[9]

- Attracting investment in ICT depends crucially upon a supportive environment and a level playing field for business as a whole, and on an enabling ICT policy and regulatory environment that encompasses open entry, and market-oriented regulation that supports fair competition. (Finding 3)
- Broad-based deployment of ICT also depends on a supportive policy environment for ICTD, particularly the establishment of national e-strategies and the integration of ICT into poverty reduction and/or other national development strategies and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) process. (Finding 4)
- Policy and regulatory incentives and more open access policies are also needed for private investment, civil society organisations (CSOs) and community networks to contribute to expanding ICT access to rural and low-income populations to address the "bottom of the pyramid" populations. (Finding 5)
- National universal service/access funds and other mechanisms to lower costs of delivery to under-served markets and promote community access can play an important role in helping to address ICT access gaps, but may require substantial institutional and implementation capacity to succeed. (Finding 10)
- Regional cooperation, multistakeholder partnerships and seed financing appear to be critical elements for addressing critical infrastructure gaps and can in turn help promote further development of national backbones and last-mile solutions in countries where gaps persist. (Finding 11)
- Building human resource capacity (knowledge) at every level is a central requirement for achieving information society objectives. (Finding 16)

9. https://dev-d9.apc.org/en/news/wsis-update-apc-involvement-task-force-financial-mechanisms

Harmonise digital development and digital governance discourse

International organisations, intergovernmental forums and development agencies like to tell national governments and regulators that they need to harmonise policy and regulation. They also need to direct the call to "harmonise" strategies and discourse to themselves.

Concepts such as digital public infrastructure, digital public goods, public interest, accountability, data governance and AI for good, to mention a few, are not used or understood consistently. Creating common understandings and prioritisation would make implementation and collaboration among all stakeholder groups much easier and more effective.

Global Digital Compact and WSIS harmonisation is the obvious starting point.

Integrate Global Digital Compact and WSIS follow-up and implementation at the level of monitoring and participation

This has been stated but its importance should not be underestimated. The loss in time and complementarity that resulted from the SDG process failing to integrate WSIS outcomes must not be repeated. The burden on developing country governments to comply with and support global processes is already immense. Increasing it through duplication of effort might serve the interests of international digital bureaucrats, but it will not help bridge global digital, social and economic divides. Creating a new centre of activity around digital in New York away from the current Geneva-based hubs could also serve to politicise processes that should be informed by results-oriented collaboration between countries and stakeholders. This is not, however, to say that current coordination within the UN system is adequate. It definitely needs to improve and existing mechanisms need to be challenged to take this on and deliver concrete results. The WSIS+20 resolution should address this. The CSTD's role should be expanded to include GDC follow-up and implementation and integrated with the WSIS process, and its capacity to gather the information needed to conduct this review should be expanded.

The current duplication of reporting by different WSIS agencies should be minimised.

Grant the IGF a long-term or permanent mandate and strengthen its institutional capacity

The IGF and the WSIS Forum have both proven to play key and different roles in facilitating knowledge sharing and collaboration. The WSIS Forum through

its institutional home, the International Telecommunication Union, and its partnership with other WSIS agencies should continue and consider periodically convening in other locations such as for example UN HQ in New York.

The IGF, on the other hand, needs to be granted a long-term or permanent mandate. UNDESA should be instructed to increase its capacity, starting with appointing an executive coordinator – a role that existed during the IGF's formative phase. The IGF's evolution needs to be shaped by a strategic vision rather than by ad hoc partnerships or initiatives to establish new "tracks" or themes (such as a proposed private sector and judiciary track). These are valuable, but unless the IGF has the institutional capacity to interact effectively and consistently with governments and key institutions from non-state actors, expanding its range will just dilute its impact. This includes the means to communicate IGF outcomes to policy-makers and to respond more effectively to their needs through the IGF agenda and intersessional modalities. The IGF MAG Working Group on Strategy's vision document provides essential insight into how to achieve an increasingly impactful IGF beyond 2025.

VI. Please identify publications, reports and other documents by your organisation which you consider can contribute to the work of the review

- GISWatch Special Edition - WSIS+20: Reimagining horizons of dignity, equity and justice for our digital future
- Cornerstone, Achilles heel or "fake news"? WSIS and the role of the multistakeholder approach in empowering civil society's participation in internet governance
- Civil Society Statement from the Global Digital Justice Forum to the Chair Person and Organisers of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)+20 Forum
- APC Annual Report 2023
- Principles for community-centred connectivity initiatives
- Communal internet infrastructure
- APC submission on "The developmental aspects to strengthen the internet"
- A basic guide to back haul for community-centred connectivity providers
- Innovative financing mechanisms to bridge the digital divide
- Community-centred connectivity: A new paradigm