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

GSM Association

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.

Name of organization: GSMA

Name of respondent: Luca Elmosi

Role of respondent: Director of International Relations

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

a. Mandates of your organization relevant to the WSIS implementation: The GSMA work withs its members and partners to addressing the digital divide and mobile gender gap, which are at the heart of the WSIS outcomes C-1, C-3, C-4, C-5 and C-6.

b. Brief History of your organization's contribution to the World Summit on the information Society (WSIS): The GSMA attends and provides speakers to the annual WSIS Forum, contributing to discussions on internet governance, digital inclusion, women's access to and use of mobile internet and capacity building.

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

The GSMA engages with key stakeholders and platforms at a global and regional level to drive increased awareness, prioritisation and action around addressing the digital divide and the mobile gender gap. In 2024, the GSMA's data and messaging have been shared at various high-level platforms including the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the G20, and others. The GSMA's data, insights and calls to action are already informing the work of many other key stakeholders, such as the Broadband Commission, the World Bank, and the W20.

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)

The GSMA and the wider mobile industry have witnessed substantial progress in implementing Action Line 2 – Information and Communication Infrastructure. Sustained investment in ICT infrastructure by mobile operators has built a solid foundation for an inclusive information society, with 95 per cent of the world's population now living within the footprint of a mobile broadband network.

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

The GSMA has developed a methodology to measure and track annually the impact of the mobile industry across all 17 SDGs. Indicators used to measure this impact include mobile internet adoption rates among the global population and among the world's poorest 40 per cent, global levels of mobile broadband coverage, the number of mobile users who have access to financial services via mobile, and the number of mobile subscribers who have access to education via mobile.

Using this index, the GSMA has recorded significant improvements in the industry's contribution to SDG 4: Quality Education, SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation, and SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy. This is due to the increasing proportion of people using mobile for activities such as obtaining educational information for themselves or their children, accessing government services and paying bills.

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

The mobile sector – the first industry to commit to the UN Sustainable Development Goals – has made a significant contribution to advancing "the people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society" envisaged in the opening paragraph of the WSIS Geneva Declaration of Principles.

While more needs to be done to fully realise our shared ambition, two decades of sustained investment by mobile operators mean that 95 per cent of the world's population now lives within the footprint of a mobile network – a breadth of coverage which led the ITU to single out mobile internet in its 2022 Global Connectivity Report as "particularly important in achieving universal connectivity". The rapid expansion of connectivity is improving individual well-being and driving economic growth, while at the same time advancing progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

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?

We have witnessed substantial progress in implementing Action Line 2 – Information and Communication Infrastructure. Sustained investment in ICT infrastructure by mobile operators has built a solid foundation for an inclusive information society, with 95 per

cent of the world's population now living within the footprint of a mobile broadband network.

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

Despite the universal ideals of the Information Society, the divide between the connected and unconnected mirrors real-life socioeconomic disparities, with women, persons with disabilities, older people, people in rural areas, and people with lower levels of educational attainment disproportionally excluded from the benefits of mobile internet.

GSMA data and research show that people face several barriers to mobile internet adoption and use. Among those who are aware of mobile internet but don't use it, the top reported barriers are affordability, particularly of handsets; literacy and digital skills and safety and security concerns (e.g. harassment, disinformation, privacy, or fraud). Other important barriers include a lack of access to networks and enablers such as formal proof of identity, sales agents or electricity, as well a lack of relevant content and services that meet users' needs. Women tend to experience these barriers more acutely than men due to structural inequalities and underlying social norms, including disparities in education and income. It is key for all stakeholders to better understand these barriers and put in place approaches and policies to tackle them.

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

A resilient investment model is essential to ensure the continued improvements in capacity, coverage and speed required for the implementation of the WSIS outcomes. However, since the first WSIS Forum, a model has emerged in the digital economy which sees the benefits and returns flow principally to players in the online services segment – those which most palpably touch the consumer – and not to the operators who build and run the connectivity infrastructure which underpins these services. This is economically unsustainable; recent assessments from Barclays and Ofcom have noted that several European operators have Returns on Invested Capital which are below their cost of capital, putting at risk the pace of investment and the achievement of connectivity goals.

As the WSIS+20 review takes place, policymakers must consider the interdependence of the many services making up the Internet to ensure that market distortions, regulatory requirements or other factors do not limit the ability of participants across the Internet ecosystem to make sufficient returns and that the right incentives are in place to promote the long-term growth of the value chain and to realise the full potential of technology and science innovation.

IV. 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

Of the 3.45 billion people who remain unconnected to mobile internet, 90% live in an area already covered by mobile broadband but are not using it. With mobile internet adoption outpacing network expansion, this usage gap has continued to shrink and was 39% by the end of 2023. However, the usage gap is now nine times the size of the coverage gap. This represents a significant proportion of the population – 3.1 billion people – who are facing other barriers to adoption of mobile internet, beyond coverage. Following the Summit of the Future, we believe that digital development efforts in 2025 and beyond must redouble their focus on closing this usage gap. Efforts to expand coverage alone cannot achieve universal, meaningful connectivity unless they come hand-in-hand with efforts to address the barriers to the adoption of digital technologies.

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

- GSMA, The State of Mobile Internet Connectivity 2024
- GSMA, The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2024

Useful reference links:

Contributions should be submitted by **15 November 2024** to the CSTD Secretariat at cstd-wsis20@unctad.org. They will be made available on the CSTD website for consideration by the Commission unless contributors specifically request that their submissions should not be published.