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

United Nations Children's Fund

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.

WSIS+20 Reporting Template

Name of organization: UNICEF
Name of respondent: Steven Vosloo
Role of respondent: Digital Foresight and Policy Specialist
Date of response: 14 November 2024

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

a. **Mandates of your organization relevant to the WSIS implementation**

b. **Brief History of your organization's contribution to the World Summit on the information Society (WSIS)**

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

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)**

b. **WSIS-related projects**

C1. The role of public governance authorities and all stakeholders in the promotion of ICTs for development

UNICEF and UNESCO launched the Gateways to Public Digital Learning Initiative at the Transforming Education Summit (TES) during UNGA 2022. This initiative aids countries in establishing public digital learning as a public good through high-quality, inclusive national digital learning platforms and content. It promotes knowledge exchange among countries and enhances global digital learning to ensure all children have access to quality digital education. Currently, 16 countries have joined as members, including Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Chile, China, Egypt, Finland, Indonesia, Jordan, Latvia, Liberia, Lebanon, Malawi, Malta, Mongolia, Singapore, and Uruguay.

C2. Information and communication infrastructure / C7. ICT Applications: e-Learning / WSIS Target 2: To connect universities, colleges, secondary schools and primary schools with ICTs, To connect all secondary schools and primary schools with ICTs

Giga for school connectivity: Giga is a partnership between UNICEF and the ITU that aims to connect every school in the world to the internet. To achieve this mission, Giga supports governments by providing open-source connectivity solutions and technical support in the areas of mapping, planning, procurement, and financing. Connecting schools starts with mapping where they are, and so far, Giga has mapped 2.1 million schools in more than 140 countries. Giga has also helped unlock

funding to connect schools to the internet. Coming from various sources such as grants, loans, Universal Service Funds, and proceeds from government auctions, these funds are critical to connecting schools in the world's most remote and underserved areas. Giga has recently expanded its footprint from 29 to more than 50 countries and is on track to support governments in connecting more than 500,000 schools and 240 million students to the internet in the next 6 years.

C3. Access to Information and Knowledge

U-Report, UNICEF's digital community for youth has continued to deliver meaningful youth engagement by growing to 37 million U-Reporters worldwide. U-Reporters participate in a range of activities by UNICEF and partners, such as taking polls and quizzes, and engaging in 1-to-1 chat counselling and volunteering in their communities, including in response to emergencies. U-Report continues to inform policy and dialogues at local, national and multilateral levels. U-Reporter feedback has informed multilateral forums, such as a recent global poll on artificial intelligence, where the views of 400,000 U-Reporters were gathered for the 2024 Summit of the Futures and State of the World's Children Report. U-Report further delivers meaningful youth engagement with the establishment of physical 'U-Communities', whereby UNICEF builds the capacity of youth to mobilize and lead voluntary activities in their communities and in response to emergencies – such as the current Mpox outbreak.

C4. Capacity building

UNICEF partners with governments through two global programs aimed at improving education system capacity. The Technology for Education Technical Assistance Initiative (Tech4Ed) collaborates with Ministries of Education to enhance their ability to coordinate the digital transformation of education systems, including EMIS, evidence generation and use, and the design and implementation of digital education strategies to improve quality and equity. Tech4Ed is delivered in partnership with the Global Partnership for Education, the EdTech Hub, and the governments of El Salvador, Ghana, Laos, Malawi, Maldives, and Tajikistan. The second program, Learning Pioneers, connects education authorities with innovators to address country-specific challenges. Using a human-centered design approach, Learning Pioneers works with the innovation ecosystem to visualize possible futures and develop key steps to achieve them, leveraging technology to catalyze education system transformation. Learning Pioneers is active in Egypt, Ghana, Malaysia, Rwanda, Uzbekistan, and Zimbabwe.

C5. Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs

UNICEF continues to provide technical assistance and advice to global, regional and national bodies in their development of legislation and policies relating to digital that impact children's rights and protection. A key priority is ensuring comprehensive legislation to protect children from online child sexual abuse and exploitation. UNICEF published a policy brief with key recommendations to protect children from violence and exploitation in relation to the digital environment. The policy brief is intended for government ministries and departments focusing on children, gender, social services, justice, and technology/digitalisation. UNICEF is carrying out research into models of service provision for children who have experienced online or technology-facilitated sexual abuse and exploitation. This will inform the work of UNICEF child protection programmes in low- and middle-income countries.

The Disrupting Harm project, conducted in partnership with ECPAT International and INTERPOL, provides the most comprehensive evidence-based overview to date on how technology facilitates

the sexual exploitation and abuse of children, both online and offline, and how national protection systems are addressing online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA). The success of the first round of Disrupting Harm studies (2019 – 2022) in 13 countries across Eastern and Southern Africa, and Southeast Asia has led to its expansion in 12 countries across four new regions: Europe and Central Asia, Latin and Central America, Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia. Between 2023 and 2025, UNICEF will collect data from various research participants, including children, to identify priority areas and provide national assessment reports with evidence-based recommendations for interventions to key stakeholders.

UNICEF has supported the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) to develop a comprehensive framework for online safety though the Declaration 2019 and implementing Regional Plan of Action for the Protection of Children from All Forms of Online Exploitation and Abuse in ASEAN 2021-2025. The annual ASEAN ICT Forum on Child Online Protection brokers dialogue between Government and global, regional and national industry, as well as children and young people, academia, UN and NGOs, and facilitates implementation of the Plan. And the ASEAN Industry Working Group on Child Online Protection provides an opportunity for collaborative action of the private sector in the region. This resulted in region specific industry recommendations for legislative and regulatory reform. Further guidance has been adopted by ASEAN on minimum legal standards for online protection and on support for victims of OCSEA.

C7. ICT Applications: E-learning

UNICEF's Learning Passport is a digital learning program and supporting ecosystem adaptable to the specific needs of learners and educators—from foundational learning to skills development—across various contexts. Its implementation aims to increase access to quality content through a flexible and portable digital education platform, enabling children and young people to continue learning anywhere, anytime. Launched in 2018, the Learning Passport is live in 45 countries with over 9 million users.

The UNICEF–Akelius Digital Learning Initiative is one of the longest-standing digital learning programs supported by UNICEF. Its primary aim is to enhance educational outcomes through digital learning, focusing particularly on second- and foreign-language acquisition for marginalized children and adolescents—often refugees and migrants—aged 6 to 18 years. Launched in 2018, this initiative operates across various educational settings in 13 countries.

UNICEF's Accessible Digital Textbooks (ADT) initiative aims to facilitate inclusive education by using Universal Design for Learning and accessible technologies to provide learning materials for students with disabilities, thereby enabling the improvement of learning outcomes for all children. It is active in 11 countries.

C7. ICT Applications: E-health

UNICEF contributes to the action line c7 on eHealth through the WHO coordinated Global Initiative on Digital Health (GIDH) as a core supporting participant. Under GIDH, UNICEF – working with partners including WHO and ITU – are establishing reference architectures for digital transformation that specifically link to multi-sectoral digital public infrastructure. (DPI) Given the maturity of the digital health sector, it is suggested that health DPI related use-cases – including digital identity, unified payment platforms, critical infrastructure registries, and data exchanges – are prioritized to accelerate multi-sectoral eGovernment planning which are expected to directly translate into improved health outcomes.

C10. Ethical dimensions of the Information Society

Children and youth are at the forefront of AI use, yet AI systems and policies are not designed for them. As today's children will disproportionately face the opportunities – and risks that emergent technologies present, this must change. Most national AI strategies and major ethical guidelines make only cursory mention of children and their specific needs. For country policies, references to children are most often in the context of preparing them to work in an AI-centric economy. But as children increasingly use or are affected by AI systems, the lack of attention on the opportunities and risks that AI systems hold for children is becoming more problematic.

UNICEF has been advocating for child-centred AI and produced the first UN Policy guidance on AI for Children (2021). It describes the importance of promoting children's development in AI strategies and practices and offers practical recommendations for governments and industry to build AI policies and systems that uphold child rights.

Further, UNICEF is:

- Actively working on international guidance for responsible business conduct, developing methodologies to help companies assess their impact on children's rights during the development, deployment, and use of digital technologies, including generative AI (for example, child rights impact assessments in relation to the digital environment).
- Developing guidelines on how to ethically use AI in research and evidence generation, both within UNICEF and for other organizations
- Researching children's perception and use of AI through the Disrupting Harm project: Providing insights into how children and their parents/caregivers use and how they perceive AI in countries which do not typically have the resources to gather AI data: Armenia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco.
- Investing in and/or leading the development of AI systems that advance the sustainable development goals and align with UNICEF's mission: Through the Venture Fund, we have invested in over 60 projects involving data science and/or AI, spanning 30 countries. These investments cover thematic areas including water and sanitation, climate resilience, community health, child protection, social protection, education, accessibility, emergency response, and youth engagement.

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

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

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?**

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

Even though children and youth are the largest online cohort, a significant challenge is that children's rights, well-being and safety are not sufficiently and systematically considered in global, regional and national governance and ethics frameworks. Further, safety and well-being by design is not the standard approach. With such rapid internet penetration and rapid development of technology, this is a major failing, leaving children at heightened risk or missing out on opportunities to develop.

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

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

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

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