

WSIS+20 STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS: APC INPUTS TO THE ELEMENTS PAPER



POINTS FROM THE ELEMENTS PAPER:

- **Information and communications technologies for development (ICT4D):** Feedback is sought on ways to strengthen digital capacity, foster inclusion, and ensure equitable digital development for all.
- **Digital economy:** Feedback is invited on how to close structural gaps, support small enterprises, and ensure fair access to digital opportunities for sustainable development.
- **Social and cultural development:** Feedback is invited on how to expand inclusive access to digital services, address data protection risks, and strengthen national strategies for equitable digital transformation.
- **Environmental impacts:** Feedback is encouraged on ways to reduce the sector's environmental impact, including advancing circular economy approaches, improving recycling and setting sustainability standards for digital technologies.
- **Bridging digital divides:** Bridging digital divides across and within countries will remain a central priority of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process. We invite reflections on how the WSIS+20 review can contribute towards achieving this.
- **The enabling environment:** Feedback is welcomed on how to strengthen integrated digital policies, ensure legal coherence across sectors, and promote innovation while safeguarding rights and public interests.
- **Financial mechanisms:** Feedback is invited on enhancing international support, increasing targeted financing, and ensuring equitable access to resources for inclusive digital transformation.
- **Human rights and ethical dimensions of the information society:** Stakeholders should promote information integrity, tolerance and respect in the digital space, protect the integrity of democratic processes, strengthen international cooperation concerning misinformation, disinformation and hate speech online, and mitigate the risks of information manipulation in a manner consistent with international law. Governments should promote diverse and resilient information ecosystems and strengthen independent and public media.

- **Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs:** We invite proposals in this section on augmenting confidence and security in the use of ICTs in line with existing processes and platforms.
- **Internet governance:** Proposals on how to work towards the improvement of enhanced cooperation as envisaged in the Tunis Agenda.
- **Data governance:** Proposals on data governance will be presented in the zero draft, taking into consideration the ongoing process working group on data governance for development established by the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) that will report to the General Assembly in 2026.
- **Artificial intelligence:** Proposals on artificial intelligence (AI) will be presented in the zero draft, taking into consideration implementation of the Global Digital Compact (GDC) and the need to ascertain a relationship between GDC implementation and WSIS.
- **Capacity building:** The zero draft will explore how to improve capacity building, including by strengthening coherence and coordination between existing mechanisms, establishing new capacity building programmes, and other options. We invite ideas and reflections on how to strengthen capacity building in the WSIS +20 review.
- **Monitoring and measurement:** Proposals concerning monitoring and measurement will be included in the zero draft following consideration of responses to the consultation on this Elements Paper.
- **Follow-up and review:** Proposals concerning follow-up to the 2025 review will be included in the zero draft following consideration of responses to the consultation on this Elements Paper.

1. WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ACHIEVEMENTS ARISING FROM WSIS THAT SHOULD BE HIGHLIGHTED IN THE ZERO DRAFT?

1.1 Increased awareness of and response to the potential of ICT for development, social and economic justice and human rights: At the start of WSIS, very few governments and entities from other stakeholder groups recognised the potential of communications technologies to support social and economic development and the realisation of human rights. WSIS changed this. It raised awareness and initiated – or amplified – processes to harness ICTs in support of development and human rights. Even though digital inequality gaps between and within countries persist, and the internet’s ability to uphold human rights remains constantly at risk, without WSIS, these gaps and risks would be far greater.

1.2 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, a significant percentage of the world’s population still does not have access, and according to the ITU’s April 2025 report on “Measuring digital development in Africa”, only 38% of Africans are online, far below the global average of 68%. Africa is the region with the lowest internet use penetration in the world. Since 2015, a key achievement has been the rise of community-driven internet service providers who help bridge the gap in places where traditional market-based solutions are failing, especially in rural and low-income areas.

1.3 The application of the WSIS principles of participation has led to increased participation in digital governance and policy development globally, regionally and nationally: Public participation in digital policy development has increased – albeit unevenly – through the multistakeholder approach. While participation remains insufficient and affected by power imbalances, WSIS legitimised collaboration among diverse stakeholders, shifting the focus beyond the 1990s-era “public-private partnerships” (limited to governments and businesses) to include civil society and the technical community.

1.4 Formalisation of the principle that the human rights that apply offline also apply online: The 2012 resolution by the Human Rights Council, subsequently also adopted by the UN General Assembly, marked a fundamental shift in how, firstly, internet/digital people and institutions understood human rights, and how human rights institutions and defenders and duty bearers (states) understood the internet. This has given rise to a growing movement of human rights defenders who actively use and defend the internet to further civil and political and economic, social and cultural rights, as well as a deepening body of analysis, interpretation and jurisprudence that is central to the future evolution of digital governance.

2. WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT CHALLENGES TO THE ACHIEVEMENT OF WSIS OUTCOMES TO DATE AND IN THE FUTURE THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED IN THE ZERO DRAFT?

2.1 Persisting and growing digital inequality: This is the most profound WSIS challenge. It must be prioritised and its underlying causes must be acknowledged, including:

- Over-reliance on “open” market approaches: A dominant post-WSIS narrative assumed that public-private partnerships and competitive ICT markets would automatically drive the rollout of infrastructure, devices and services. While this approach worked for many, it has also left billions behind and entrenched digital inequality, thereby undermining the “levelling” potential of ICTs that inspired many during the early WSIS years.
- Lack of serious attention to financing mechanisms in the final WSIS outcome documents, despite a dedicated UN Secretary-General-appointed task force providing recommendations between the two Summits.

2.2 Erosion of the “public” as a concept and concern: The Geneva documents emphasised the public value of ICTs, referencing notions like “public interest”, “public resource” and “public domain”. Today, this perspective has faded in digital governance discussions. Instead, power has concentrated in a few mega-corporations, undermining the WSIS vision of inclusive digital progress. A prevailing myth suggests that innovation thrives only without regulation, yet this has stifled sectoral diversity, entrenched surveillance capitalism, and enabled systemic human rights violations with lasting social, political and environmental harms.

2.3 Gaps in human rights integration: While the WSIS vision emphasises human rights, its Action Lines fail to systematically incorporate a human rights-based approach. This disconnect has hindered alignment between WSIS implementation and broader UN and national efforts to apply offline rights in the digital sphere. Framing rights under “ethics” in the Geneva Plan of Action has diluted the imperative to uphold international human rights law in digital governance. This applies to women’s rights and other “group rights” and in particular to economic, social and cultural rights.

3. WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT PRIORITIES FOR ACTION TO ACHIEVE THE WSIS VISION OF A “PEOPLE-CENTRED, INCLUSIVE AND DEVELOPMENT-ORIENTED INFORMATION SOCIETY” IN THE FUTURE, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT EMERGING TRENDS?

3.1 Advancing digital equality: Digital equality is the foundation for a just digital economy and a prerequisite for harnessing digital transformation to achieve people-centred development. WSIS+20 must prioritise collaborative efforts to reduce digital disparities between and within countries through a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. This requires updating Action Line 6 of the Geneva Plan of Action, reaffirming its call for “a supportive, transparent,

pro-competitive and predictable policy, legal and regulatory framework” to incentivise equitable investment and community development and counteract market dominance by a few digital transnational corporations.

Key structural gaps to address in the Zero Draft include:

- Fair tax payment by digital transnational corporations.
- Public financing for Global South digital infrastructure and capabilities.
- Accountability for human rights violations and data harms in digital transnational corporations’ value chains.
- Equitable development as core principles for data/AI governance.
- Promotion of circular economy models, renewable energy, and resource optimisation for a sustainable digital transition.
- Market dominance by a few digital transnational corporations.
- Trade, tax and intellectual property regimes that undermine digital self-determination.
- Strengthening ICT policies to boost entrepreneurship, innovation and gender-inclusive participation.
- Supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by simplifying regulations, improving funding access, and enabling ICT project involvement.

3.2 Prioritise meaningful connectivity as fundamental – requiring diversified internet markets that prioritise local, small-scale and community-led initiatives. By connecting the unconnected, one community at a time, we empower local economies, advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and blend infrastructure access with skills, content and opportunities for SMEs and grassroots efforts. Despite the Tunis Agenda’s call for local financing, progress remains stagnant. A paradigm shift is urgent: combining innovative financing and enabling regulation to scale community-centred connectivity initiatives (CCCI), as the GDC pledged. States must acknowledge the worsening digital inequality and commit to tangible actions. We recommend the following to connect the unconnected:

- Deepen insight into the value of a diversified ecosystem.
- Reduce regulatory requirements for CCCI.
- Establish innovative financing and investment models.
- Adopt mechanisms to share spectrum.

- Ensure affordable access to backhaul networks.
- Raise awareness and build capacity.

3.3 Financing mechanisms: Financing of WSIS follow-up and implementation is unfinished business. To universalise meaningful access, market mechanisms will not be enough. Public financing is needed for long-term digital capabilities, including human capacity in the Global South. The WSIS+20 review must respond adequately to this challenge by mandating the establishment of a Global Taskforce on Financing for Inclusive Digital Transformation to explore, aggregate and propose financing mechanisms. It should include states and other stakeholders, including experts in public finance and fiscal justice. The Taskforce should incorporate but also complement the outcomes of the 2025 UN Financing for Development Conference.

3.4 Environmental sustainability

Digitalisation worsens the climate crisis, pollution and biodiversity loss to an extent not anticipated at the WSIS summits. Governments and all other stakeholders must conduct regular environmental and human rights impact assessments throughout the full life cycle of digital innovations, with meaningful input from affected communities. Sustainable practices, like environmental impact assessments, the right to repair, green energy and better recycling, must be asserted as an overarching priority and integrated into the implementation of all the WSIS Action Lines.

4. WHAT ADDITIONAL THEMES/ISSUES, IF ANY, SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE ELEMENTS PAPER?

Gender equality: Without a strong foundation for gender equality, we risk reinforcing existing inequalities in the digital systems shaping our future. The following challenges have to be addressed:

- Mainstreaming gender in the WSIS Action Lines: Without a dedicated Action Line for gender equality, each line must include gender-specific goals, targets and indicators. Integrating gender perspectives into WSIS implementation and aligning with data and AI governance in the Global Digital Compact is essential.
- Corporate accountability: There is a major gap in holding transnational digital corporations accountable for violations of women's rights in online spaces and data/AI value chains, particularly in the Global South.
- Public financing for access: Ensuring meaningful, affordable internet access for all women and girls requires gender-responsive public access, digital literacy, broadband subsidies, support for women-led MSMEs, and targeted STEM scholarships. Tracking gender budgeting and fund use, especially via universal service funds, remains a challenge.
- Gender-responsive infrastructure and standards: Gender impact assessments must be applied across infrastructure and standards setting, integrating feminist digital principles and collaborating with gender equality organisations to promote inclusive digital governance.

5. DO YOU WISH TO COMMENT ON PARTICULAR THEMES/ISSUES/PARAGRAPHS IN THE ELEMENTS PAPER?

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF): We believe that the scope of the evolution of the IGF ecosystem was not reflected in the paper. We also believe it would be good to mention the WSIS Forum, which has become an important gathering to follow up on Action Line implementation.

6. WHAT SUGGESTIONS DO YOU HAVE TO SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WSIS FRAMEWORK (WSIS ACTION LINES, IGF, WSIS FORUM, UNGIS, ETC.)?

6.1 Strengthening human rights integration in WSIS Action Lines and using the human rights-based approach to development: The WSIS framework must explicitly incorporate human rights into Action Line C10 “Ethical dimensions of the Information Society”. Since 2003, extensive work by civil society, Human Rights Council member states, UN special rapporteurs, treaty bodies and the OHCHR has established comprehensive digital human rights standards, covering:

- The full spectrum of rights (civil, political, economic, social cultural).
- Rights of specific groups (women, Indigenous peoples, children, persons with disabilities).
- Obligations of both states and corporations.
- The GDC’s stronger human rights language should inform this update. Current WSIS references to “ethics” are too vague and must be replaced with specific recognition of these established frameworks and obligations.

6.2 A strengthened, permanent “IGF Plus”: This should include a mandate that recognises the evolving IGF ecosystem, including national and regional IGFs, and that the scope of issues addressed by the IGF includes broader digital governance as well as internet governance.

6.3 Integrate Global Digital Compact (GDC) commitments as appropriate into the WSIS framework: Integrated WSIS-GDC implementation, linking GDC objectives to existing WSIS frameworks at national/regional levels, using both IGF and WSIS Forum for AI dialogues.

6.4 Enhanced cooperation: The zero draft should affirm the description of enhanced cooperation in paragraph 69 of the Tunis Agenda as a process that is necessary to enable governments, on an equal footing, to carry out their roles and responsibilities regarding international public policy issues pertaining to the

internet, excluding day-to-day technical and operational matters that do not impact on international public policy issues. Going forward, it should be recognised as a continuous and evolving process that, while progress has been made, needs to be strengthened and adapted to address the growing range and scope of internet-related public policy issues. It should be addressed in association with the multistakeholder approach, acknowledging that they are mutually reinforcing. We recommend that coordination of enhanced cooperation efforts be streamlined through the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD), in line with Paragraph 37 of the Tunis Agenda. Specifically, we suggest that the chair of the CSTD be requested to establish a standing agenda item at the Commission's annual session dedicated to enabling inter-governmental discussion on internet-related public policy issues relevant to enhanced cooperation. The CSTD can request that all relevant international and intergovernmental organisations that deal with internet-related public policy issues submit annual reports on actions taken to enable enhanced cooperation. This information can contribute to the Secretary-General's regular reporting on the implementation of WSIS outcomes.

6.5 Consistent application of WSIS principles of participation in a manner that addresses power asymmetries between and within countries, regions and stakeholder groups: The multistakeholder approach should be seen not as an alternative to democratic governance at multilateral, national or multistakeholder levels, but as a powerful means to make all governance more accountable and inclusive.

