

Informal Multistakeholder Sounding Board (IMSB)

Reflections on the WSIS+20 Elements Paper

25 July 2025

This document has been developed by the Informal Multistakeholder Sounding Board (IMSB). It is intended to highlight what we have understood to be the priorities, issues, concerns, and suggestions of a broad range of non-governmental stakeholders in discussions and publications over the past months. It is not intended to be comprehensive, nor does it attempt to reconcile conflicting points where we have felt that those positions merit further consideration. Nor is it intended to replace respective stakeholder submissions on the Elements Paper, and we take this opportunity to recognize the many thoughtful, multistakeholder discussions that have taken place in recent months. We have endeavoured in this submission to highlight concrete proposals and ideas to facilitate the next step of the WSIS+20 review process, namely the development of a Zero Draft of the UNGA WSIS+20 Outcome Document.

1. What are the most important achievements arising from WSIS that should be highlighted in the Zero Draft?

Connectivity

Over the past 20 years, the WSIS process and its Action Lines and Targets have supported the growth of the Information Society. Global Internet use has surged, with wireless and broadband fiber reaching ever further into remote and underserved areas. Key to this progress has been technologically neutral Action Lines, recognition of the Information Society's broad societal value, and a framework that can adapt to new and emerging technologies. Multistakeholder collaboration played a central role, along with the rise of community-driven networks and licensing for local access providers, helping connect rural and low-income areas beyond the reach of market-based solutions. There is still a need for a strong focus on connectivity going forward both in relation to emerging technologies and societal impact.

Multistakeholder engagement and collaboration as a basis for inclusiveness

The WSIS established the multistakeholder model, exemplified by the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and its global network of National, Regional, Sub-regional, and Youth Initiatives (NRIs), fostering inclusive dialogue, local innovation, and global digital policy coherence. The expansion of the global use of the Internet, including Internet connectivity, reflects the success of this collaborative approach, which built on public-private partnerships and strengthened stakeholder participation by all sectors.

While public participation in digital policy has grown, it remains uneven and some communities are still inadequately represented. As paragraph 5 of the Elements Paper notes,

multistakeholder cooperation—across governments, international organizations, private sector, civil society, technical community, academia, and youth—is essential for building an inclusive Information Society. This is true not only in the IGF, but across all WSIS Action Lines and related activities.

Awareness

The WSIS emerged at a pivotal moment, when few governments and stakeholders recognized the potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for development, social and economic benefits, and human rights. While digital equality remains elusive, without the WSIS, global digital divides would likely be even wider and economic power more concentrated asymmetrically. The WSIS framework has enabled transformative digital services across all sectors—for example, education, health, finance, and public services—advancing progress toward the SDGs.

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF)

The IGF has been a vital space for stakeholders to engage on issues impacting the WSIS Action Lines and as a unique platform for multistakeholder dialogue and an incubator for policy discussions. It is a key achievement, including the benefits at the national, regional, and local (community) level through NRIs, that must evolve to meet the needs of the next phase of the Information Society. We join the voices calling for making the mandate of the IGF permanent.

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?

Persisting and growing digital inequality

Achieving universal, meaningful, and affordable connectivity remains a core challenge of the WSIS vision. The causes are multifaceted, requiring coordinated action across stakeholders.

Barriers include:

- Financial barriers, including limited incentives or insufficient return on investment for deploying and maintaining infrastructure, particularly in underserved or remote regions.
- Technological barriers, such as constraints on the deployment of new technologies or insufficient local capacity for innovation.
- Regulatory barriers, including regulatory asymmetries that may have unintentional negative consequences on investment decisions and competition, particularly for smaller or emerging market players.
- Additional user-side challenges, such as affordability, low digital literacy, lack of local content, safety and security concerns, and foundational gaps like electricity or formal ID systems, also limit participation.

A collaborative, context-aware approach is needed to overcome these inter-related challenges and ensure that connectivity initiatives unlock equitable access and long-term development benefits.

Fragmentation of the global Internet

Increasingly fragmented digital policies and regulatory approaches threaten the open, interoperable Internet, undermining innovation, trade, and the global benefits of a unified digital ecosystem.

Inconsistent application of the multistakeholder approach

Though widely endorsed, the multistakeholder approach is unevenly applied across countries and institutions, limiting inclusive and effective digital governance. WSIS+20 should reaffirm this approach as a practical tool for sustainable digital development. Stakeholders highlighted the São Paulo Multistakeholder Guidelines as a significant aid to ensuring meaningful participation and addressing tokenism.

Gender inequality

Stakeholders have stressed the importance of placing gender justice at the heart of the WSIS process through clear commitments, measurable goals, and dedicated resources, and note that without structural change, gender equality remains a side-lined issue lacking accountability. Democratising digital development means ensuring women's representation in WSIS decision-making and funding gender-inclusive ICT programmes. Stakeholders have highlighted initiatives including:

- Mainstreaming gender in the WSIS Action Lines, ensuring that each line includes gender-specific goals, targets, and indicators.
- Ensuring corporate accountability for violations of women's rights in online spaces and data/ Artificial Intelligence (AI) value chains, particularly in the Global South.
- Ensuring meaningful, affordable Internet access for all women and girls, employing gender-responsive public access, digital literacy, and broadband subsidies, support for women-led Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), and targeted STEM scholarships; however, tracking gender-budgeting and fund use remains a challenge.
- Fostering gender-responsive policy, infrastructure, and standards via gender impact assessments, ensuring integration of feminist digital principles, and collaborating with gender equality organizations to promote inclusive digital governance.

Meaningful youth participation

For youth participation to move beyond symbolic consultation, meaningful integration into all aspects of the WSIS framework is essential. Youth inclusion and participation should be integrated into all areas, especially where inclusive policy frameworks and multistakeholder engagement are discussed and crucially at decision-making stages that shape and impact digital transformation.

Uneven digital progress

While the WSIS provided a broad framework for digital development, implementation has varied, with developed countries advancing faster than many in the Global South due to resource, infrastructure and institutional capacity gaps. Uneven progress across Action Lines underscores the need for targeted support and flexible timelines. Rapid technological change has outpaced existing policies, creating regulatory gaps and making it hard to balance innovation, access, and regulation. Currently, only Action Line facilitators and the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) submit annual reports. Member states should also report on their WSIS activities to enable better tracking. The WSIS+20 report should highlight the need for national follow-up and regular documentation.

Reinforcing the importance to the rights-based approach

A key challenge is the gap between WSIS commitments to a rights-based approach and how new and emerging technologies (e.g. facial recognition and generative AI) have evolved, at times without adequate safeguards for privacy, transparency, and accountability. Privacy-enhancing technologies, encryption, and algorithmic transparency mechanisms are actively being developed and deployed to safeguard rights in the digital age. The push for innovation and the dual nature of technological development reinforces the need to ensure inclusive, rights-respecting, and context-sensitive digital development.

Regulatory gaps arising from new technologies

There is a growing challenge of rapid technological advancements outpacing current policy frameworks and creating regulatory gaps that challenge the balance between fostering innovation, ensuring equitable access, and implementing effective regulation amid a focus on digital development over long-term planning. Smarter and more collaborative governance approaches that address emerging tech challenges require coherence, adaptability, and multistakeholder solutions, not a proliferation of divergent national rules.

Growing cybersecurity concerns

Addressing the rising threats of cyberattacks, cybercrime, and cyberterrorism requires urgent, coordinated efforts among member states and stakeholders to prioritize cybersecurity through ongoing assessment, threat intelligence sharing, collaboration, and capacity building at international and regional levels.

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?

Accelerate meaningful connectivity and digital inclusion

Prioritize not just access, but meaningful use, by investing in infrastructure and services, digital literacy, locally relevant content, in local language/s, and fully-resourced impactful capacity building at all levels to ensure everyone can benefit from digital transformation and emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and quantum computing. Digitalization of government

services should be accelerated to enable benefit to all populations. There is a strong need to maintain technology neutral Action Lines due to emerging technologies.

Promote enabling, innovation-friendly policy and financing environments

Develop open, investment-friendly, diverse connectivity markets, and future-ready regulatory frameworks that support competition, cross-border digital trade, and legal certainty, avoiding overly prescriptive or fragmented approaches. At the same time, safeguarding rights in tech, and ensuring ethical governance of AI and emerging technology is essential.

Reinforce multistakeholder governance and global cooperation

It is essential that this review re-commit to inclusive, multistakeholder engagement, especially in emerging areas like AI and data governance, to ensure that digital policies are rights-based, interoperable, and globally coordinated, avoiding fragmentation and fostering trust. Technology and the information society is evolving rapidly, impacting the Action Lines in key areas. To address issues efficiently and effectively, and to develop timely and sustainable solutions, deliberations need to be inclusive of all stakeholders.

4. What additional themes/issues, if any, should be included in the Elements Paper?

Broadening the scope of Internet governance

Reaffirming paragraphs 34 to 82 of the Tunis Agenda and paragraphs 55 to 63 of the WSIS+10 Outcome document, we note the continuous evolution of the ramifications of Internet Governance to include broader digital technology governance issues pertaining to Artificial Intelligence (AI), Blockchain Technologies, Internet of Things, Big Data analytics, Cloud/Quantum Computing, etc. As new technologies evolve due to research, development and innovation, the scope of Internet Governance is expected to expand and be all encompassing. A broadened scope of Internet governance in the framework of the WSIS architecture implies integrating human rights protections into digital governance frameworks.

Acknowledgement of the Netmundial+10 Statement

We note as a follow-up to Netmundial 2014, the convening of Netmundial+10 in 2024, and the Outcome document - the São Paulo Multistakeholder Guidelines (SPMG), for meaning multistakeholder engagement and urge all stakeholders to adapt the recommendation for a more meaningful multistakeholder participation in Internet Governance and digital policy processes.

Fostering inclusive multistakeholder engagement at the sub-national level

Considering the benefits of multistakeholder engagement in the Internet Governance and digital policy processes at the national, regional and international levels, all stakeholders including governments, the private sector, the civil society, the technical and academic communities should encourage deeper engagement of stakeholders including the indigenous and marginalised communities at the sub-national and local level for collective ownership of

multistakeholder engagement outcomes for accelerated achievement of the sustainable development goals.

Sustainable Development Goals

The 2030 target for the achievement of the sustainable development goals is five years away, emphasising the need to harness the WSIS Action Lines and Targets and the Global Digital Compact objectives to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs through, inter alia:

- Annual in-country reviews of the WSIS progress to measure progress and energise all relevant stakeholders for the ownership of the challenge to achieve the Goals
- Appropriate budget funding at the regional, national, and local levels in addition to the efficient use of the Universal Service Funds to deepen connectivity either by terrestrial or satellite technologies to the rural and underserved communities.
- Promote financial inclusion strategies and policies using technology to deliver social intervention reliefs to the poor. The deployment of digital public infrastructure such as interoperable digital identity systems with cross-border capabilities would be beneficial.
- Improvement in mass digital literacy campaigns to farmers, artisans and SMEs over affordable virtual platforms.
- Multistakeholder oversight of local programs and projects for collective ownership and sustainability.
- The promotion of public, private and people partnerships to deliver projects where they are most needed.

5. Do you wish to comment on particular themes/issues/paragraphs in the Elements Paper?

ICT for development

Information Communication Technology (ICT) also referred to as the Internet remains the indispensable platform for innovation, social and economic development contributing more than US \$15 trillion dollars to the global economy. Studies have affirmed its correlation with development in all ramifications. It therefore serves as the key catalyst for development as was so recognised in the Geneva Plan of Action, the WSIS Action Lines and Targets, WSIS+10 outcome document and the Global Digital Compact.

The digital economy

The digital economy constitutes the ramifications of the effect of the application of Information and Communication Technologies to economics activities. It was worth US\$10 trillion in 2020 (Oxford) and today it is worth more than US\$15 trillion. The impact of emerging and new digital technologies is expected to accelerate the digital economy in the years ahead. To benefit from the dividend of the digital economy, member states and all stakeholders are encouraged to prioritize the digitization and digitalization of public facing services and processes. Relevant and appropriate strategies and policy frameworks developed through multistakeholder approach are strongly encouraged to foster progress in this regard.

Social and cultural development

Over the past decades, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have significantly impacted the social and cultural development of all nations. Areas significantly affected include communication, education, social interaction, entertainment, and culture representation. Notwithstanding the benefits, challenges exist in the area of digital divide within and between countries, inadequate representation of language, indigenous and marginalised people, misinformation, disinformation, and cybercrime. Proactive steps should be taken by all stakeholders through multistakeholder processes to address the current and emerging challenges.

Environmental impacts

To reduce the environmental impacts there is a need to transition to a circular and inclusive digital economy by adopting sustainable practices throughout the lifecycle of digitalisation. Additionally, there needs to be concerted international efforts to reduce environmental impacts and address the widening digital ecological inequalities between nations by promoting fairer practices such as sustainable mining, enhancing digital infrastructure, curbing illegal digital waste exports. Research to increase efficiency of computing systems and preferential use of environmentally friendly electrical power should be encouraged.

Bridging digital divides

Digital divides continue to feature as new technologies emerge. These divides are within and between countries. It cuts across lop-sidedness in basic and quality of Internet access, affordability, digital literacy, local content and in local language products and services. Bridging the divides affecting different age groups, women, girls and people in rural and underserved areas require multi-faceted efforts. Member states and stakeholders should be urged to review their existing intervention strategies and policies emphasizing multistakeholder collaboration to overcome barriers in the areas of education, access to healthcare, provision of economic opportunities and expansion of digital infrastructure, and services. Innovative multistakeholder driven local funding mechanisms that enable programme sustainability should be explored.

The enabling environment

Noting that an "enabling environment" is a constantly evolving concept, stakeholders have highlighted the need to clarify what constitutes an enabling environment, stressing the importance of stable legal frameworks, open markets, cross-border data flows, and whole-of-government coordination. It should also recognize the critical role of private sector investment and the need for inclusive, stakeholder-driven policy development.

Stakeholders have also focused attention on the value of the São Paulo Multistakeholder Guidelines (SPMG) to an inclusive policy-making approach. Member States are urged to work with these guidelines to develop and implement the strategies and policy frameworks essential to an enabling environment; other stakeholders, in their respective roles and responsibilities, should adopt the same principles to foster transparency and accountability in their operations, and in the delivery of products and services.

Financial mechanisms

The need for sustainable funding mechanisms cannot be overemphasized. Funding mechanisms facilitating the roll out of national and cross border digital benefits require a new level of collaboration at the international, national, and local (community) level. National budgeting efforts, Universal Services Funding mechanisms, and public-private-people partnerships that prioritize digital projects and programmes should be undertaken at the national, subnational and local levels. Funding for the acceleration of the digitalization process of government services, especially to rural and underserved peoples, should be pursued to ensure that no one is left behind. International financial and development institutions should come together and evolve specialized intervention programmes for cross-border connectivity, interoperable digital ID system, and financial inclusion.

Human rights and ethical dimensions

Stakeholders have emphasized that the WSIS+20 Outcome Document should underscore the human rights-enabling role of the Internet as well as the risks of human rights abuses and violations. It should note the potential of digital technologies to both advance and hinder the 17 Sustainable Development Goals across economic, social, and environmental dimensions, and it should reference the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, emphasizing the duties of states and responsibilities of businesses to conduct human rights due diligence and impact assessments throughout the lifecycle of digital technologies as essential to achieving the WSIS vision.

Confidence and security

Studies indicate that the growing information society powered by the ICTs has generated value and prosperity, indicating a high degree of confidence in the use of the Internet. Nevertheless, challenges exist in the face of security risks, including increases in cybercrime, cyberterrorism, and the number of cyberattacks. There is an urgent need for member states and all stakeholders, especially the technical community, to address cybersecurity concerns and prioritize cybersecurity maturity through continuous assessment, threat intelligence sharing, collaboration, international and regional cooperation, and capacity development.

Internet governance

Stakeholders have consistently urged that the WSIS+20 Outcome Document align with language from the WSIS+10 Outcome Document and the Global Digital Compact, affirming that the governance of the Internet must be multistakeholder.

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) was a key outcome of the original WSIS agreements, re-affirmed in the WSIS+10 review, and recognised in the Global Digital Compact as the “primary multi-stakeholder platform for discussion of Internet governance issues”. The IGF comprises an ecosystem including the annual event, a global network of National, Regional, Sub-regional, and youth Internet governance initiatives (NRIs), and a range of intersessional work streams. There has been strong and consistent input from stakeholders for the WSIS+20 review to affirm and strengthen the IGF, including making its mandate permanent, ensuring that its work is

adequately funded, and recognising the diverse range of multistakeholder activities that it facilitates.

On Enhanced Cooperation, we have heard a variety of opinions, some of which are radically opposed. Among the most prominent positions:

- That the WSIS+20 Outcome Document 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.
- That, while there has been progress, enhanced cooperation should be recognized as a continuous and evolving process that needs to be strengthened and adapted to address the growing range and scope of Internet-related public policy issues.
- That an up-to-date and granular understanding is needed of the challenges that governments face to participate on an equal footing within the UN system, and that this should be the basis for developing new language to address the need for more equality and fairness in Internet-related intergovernmental negotiations and for more equal participation of non-state actors from the Global South in multistakeholder processes.
- That the WSIS+20 Outcome Document should not reopen debate on this topic, but should recognize the work of the two working groups on enhanced cooperation under the CSTD and the achievements of the IANA transition.

Further discussion on this issue across stakeholder group lines will be essential as we move forward in this process.

Data governance

Underscore the need for ongoing international cooperation on data development. The UNCSTD Working Group on Data Governance will present its report to the 81st General Assembly, addressing the GDC's call for equitable, responsible, and interoperable data governance. Advancing this mandate through global collaboration is key to ensuring privacy, security, ethical AI use, and equitable cross-border data flows.

Artificial Intelligence

We have heard strong support for the development of coordinated, cohesive global AI governance to avoid fragmentation and ensure coordinated regulation that promotes fair competition and prevents market distortions; enables equitable access to AI development and benefits for all countries, with support for low- and middle-income nations; fosters innovation while serving the public interest; prevents barriers for smaller players and developing economies through inclusive standards development; and respect for international law and fair data use to prevent exploitation and protect privacy.

Capacity building

Towards the achievement of the SDGs with WSIS and GDC, attention should be paid to increased awareness for policy makers in developing economies. At the same time, capacity building should be stepped up for decision makers at all levels of governance to enable timelier implementation of digital projects and programmes. In this regard, efforts should be made to encourage established media representatives to be part of the multistakeholder project implementation and oversight board.

Monitoring and measurement

Monitoring and measurement at all levels are necessary to record progress, learn from experience, and understand where gaps remain. The process of monitoring should be developed and implemented according to multistakeholder principles, and particularly drawing on the experience, expertise, and insights gathered via National, Regional, Sub-regional, and youth Internet governance initiatives (NRIs).

6. What suggestions do you have to support the development of the WSIS framework (WSIS Action Lines, IGF, WSIS Forum, UNGIS etc.)?

Retain and refine the WSIS Targets and Action Lines

While the digital landscape has changed considerably in 20 years, the WSIS Action Lines and Targets continue to provide an effective framework for advancing an inclusive, people-centred, and development-oriented Information Society, even as new technologies and digital governance challenges emerge. The WSIS review should retain and re-commit to these Action Lines, while clarifying how those Action Lines map to new and emerging issues, including AI (which cuts across multiple Action Lines, impacting a broad spectrum of digital areas and activities), global data flows, digital sustainability, and ethical use of technologies. This updated mapping will help to ensure that the WSIS framework continues to foster practical, concrete solutions via inclusive, multistakeholder engagement and cooperation.

Develop and strengthen the WSIS implementation framework

There is a need to strengthen implementation mechanisms for the WSIS Targets and Action Lines, particularly in light of commitments agreed in the Global Digital Compact (GDC). At the same time, there is growing concern about overlap and duplication linked to the proliferation of digital governance processes.

It is essential that the WSIS+20 Outcome Document focus on effective integration and efficiency across WSIS-related initiatives. This includes mapping complementarities, promoting interoperability of digital policy platforms, and also leveraging lessons learned to inform future work.

There is significant support for a joint WSIS-GDC implementation plan, anchored within the United Nations system, with a clear and expanded role for the United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) in coordination and delivery. The WSIS Forum should serve as a key platform for monitoring and showcasing advancements under this joint plan, while the

Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) can complement this by formally reporting on progress and identifying gaps or opportunities for improvement within its overall WSIS follow-up mandate. The Internet Governance Forum and its broader ecosystem should also be recognised as a key enabler of implementation work under the joint plan.

Strengthen and institutionalize the IGF

There is broad consensus from stakeholders on the need to strengthen and institutionalize the Internet Governance Forum. This includes:

- Making the IGF mandate permanent;
- Ensuring that the IGF is supported with adequate long-term, predictable funding, and;
- Recognising and supporting the diverse ecosystem of National, Regional, Sub-regional, and youth Internet governance initiatives (NRIs) and intersessional work streams that complement the annual IGF event.

The IGF has evolved considerably over the past decades, launching innovative formats such as Dynamic Coalitions, Policy Networks, and Best Practice Fora, issuing IGF Messages from each annual IGF event, and incorporating new structures such as the Leadership Panel. The rapidly evolving digital policy landscape demands that this evolution continue, and numerous stakeholders have provided input on direction and priorities for the IGF. We note also that the IGF institutional bodies (the Leadership Panel and the Multistakeholder Advisory Group) are currently developing recommendations for ongoing improvement of the IGF, and that the input and expertise of the multistakeholder IGF community should guide the WSIS review's approach to IGF renewal and improvement.

Integrate and foster WSIS Engagement at the Local Level

With the widespread embrace of regional, sub-regional, and national Internet governance initiatives (currently ~175 initiatives worldwide), the value in distributed, inclusive engagement has been well demonstrated in recent years. The WSIS implementation should include a structured mechanism for more granular engagement; stakeholders have highlighted the need to encourage national- and regional-level implementation and reporting, and to leverage the convening power of multistakeholder NRIs to develop local community expertise and insight, drawing on the São Paulo Multistakeholder Guidelines (SPMG) as a best practice model.