From Margins to Mainstream: Comments on the WSIS+20 Elements Paper
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On 20 June 2025, the WSIS+20 Elements Paper was published as part of the WSIS+20 review process, outlining thematic priorities intended to guide negotiations ahead of the WSIS+20 High-Level Meeting in December 2025 and to inform the drafting of the forthcoming Zero Draft, which will consolidate stakeholder input into actionable proposals.

The position of IGF-DCAD (Internet Governance Forum – Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disability) on the paper is that despite decades of advocacy, the persistent digital divide facing persons with disabilities is only mentioned tangentially throughout the WSIS+20 Elements Paper. Given that over 1.5 billion people globally live with disabilities, there must be a stronger, explicit commitment to digital accessibility woven into every thematic area, in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, inclusion must be explicitly defined to encompass accessibility for persons with disabilities as a non-negotiable component of people-centred development, recognizing that people with lived experience of disability bring essential insights and expertise to digital governance.

In this context, outlined below are a set of specific comments from the IGF-DCAD, highlighting key areas where the Elements Paper must better address the needs and inclusion of persons with disabilities.

1. Participation & Capacity Building (paras 4–5, 77–81)

While the document emphasizes capacity building for developing countries, it overlooks targeted programs for persons with disabilities, who often face compounded barriers due to inaccessible education, training, and digital tools. It is essential to:
   A. Fund and develop accessible training materials co-created with people with lived experience of disability.
   B. Support organizations of persons with disabilities to deliver digital skills programs.
   C. Set diversity targets for disability representation in leadership, including in the IGF Multistakeholder Advisory Group.
   D. Create mentorship pathways for persons with disabilities, leveraging the lived experience of disability to inform leadership development and participation in Internet governance.
   E. Integrate disability indicators into capacity-building monitoring frameworks.

2. Digital Divides (paras 28–35)

Persistent digital divides cannot be effectively bridged without addressing accessibility barriers as a core cause of exclusion for persons with disabilities. The Elements Paper should call for:
   A. Adoption of international accessibility standards (e.g., WCAG 2.1/2.2).
   B. Requirements for public and private digital service providers to implement accessibility by design, informed by the perspectives of people with lived experience of disability.
   C. Expand the enabling environment section to include critical elements of an enabling environment issues, such as regulations, competition, affordable access, especially for persons with disabilities

3. Human Rights & Ethical Dimensions (paras 43–50)

The strong emphasis on protecting human rights online is commendable but must recognize the intersectionality of digital rights for persons with disabilities, including:
  A. The right to accessible information and communication as foundational to freedom of expression.
  B. The heightened risks posed by emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, which can exclude persons with disabilities through biased datasets or inaccessible design.
  C. The prevalence of technology-enabled abuse specifically targeting persons with disabilities, including cyberbullying and exploitation.
  D. The necessity of involving people with lived experience of disability in designing ethical safeguards to ensure new technologies respect and promote human rights.

4. Building Confidence and Security in the Use of ICT (Paras 51-56)

In the sections on Cybersecurity there are increased challenges posed to cybersecurity and by cybercrime have become substantially more complex and serious since WSIS because of the growing pervasiveness of ICTs, the range of services and transactions now undertaken online, and the extent of data held on individuals and organisations. We need to do more work at promoting cyber resilience with all communities, but with particular focus on persons with disabilities and to better integrate it into the WSIS development agenda.

As it says in Paragraph 53 there is increased concern since WSIS about the use of digital technologies and services for harassment and abuse, including hate speech directed at women and persons with disabilities and at racial and social minorities ….. Here again we should be referencing Persons with disabilities since like all marginalized communities they are often subject to harassment, abuse, and bullying, especially women with disabilities

5. Internet Governance & IGF (paras 57–64)

The IGF has long been an essential platform for advancing accessibility, including the work of the IGF Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disability. The IGF has demonstrated its key role within WSIS and the digital governance space. The governance of the Internet must continue to be global and multistakeholder in nature, transparent and democratic

The IGF Mandate should be permanently extended and formally recognise the role of local and regional IGFs and the Dynamic Coalitions which play such an important part in promoting inclusion. The IGF must be enabled to fulfil its full mandate. This can only be done if the IGF is backed by a secure and stable funding, combining a mix of core UN funding and voluntary contributions.

The renewed IGF mandate must:
  A. Explicitly include the promotion of accessibility and participation of persons with disabilities as a core objective.
  B. Prioritize practical measures such as travel fellowships, online accessibility features, and hybrid meeting accommodations to enable active participation of persons with disabilities.
  C. Embed accessibility requirements into all IGF processes and structures, ensuring disability-inclusive leadership across national and regional Internet governance initiatives.

D. Encourage the appointment of people with lived experience of disability to leadership positions within the IGF's governance structures, including NRIs, such as the Multistakeholder Advisory Group(s), to ensure their authentic representation.

6. Artificial Intelligence (paras 70–76)

Artificial intelligence presents both opportunities and serious risks for persons with disabilities. It is vital to:

A. Embed accessibility guidelines in artificial intelligence development standards.
B. Include organizations of persons with disabilities and individuals with lived experience of disability in governance discussions around artificial intelligence to ensure inclusive design.
C. Support capacity building for persons with disabilities to engage in artificial intelligence policy and technical development.

7. Monitoring and Measurement (paras 82–84)

Digital policy monitoring often omits disability-disaggregated data. The WSIS+20 review must:

A. Incorporate indicators tracking accessibility progress—such as the percentage of websites and apps meeting international accessibility standards and the proportion of persons with disabilities with meaningful internet access—into WSIS+20 monitoring frameworks, designed in consultation with people with lived experience of disability.

8. Recommendations for the Zero Draft

A. Establish a cross-cutting principle that accessibility is integral to all WSIS+20 objectives.
B. Require disability-disaggregated data collection in connectivity, skills, and digital literacy indicators.
C. Strengthen international cooperation frameworks to support accessible ICT development, especially in the Global South.
D. Allocate financial resources to specifically bridge the digital accessibility gap.
E. Ensure proposals on artificial intelligence and data governance explicitly address inclusive design for persons with disabilities.
F. Include organizations of persons with disabilities and people with lived experience of disability in all multistakeholder consultations, from capacity building to artificial intelligence governance.
G. Set measurable diversity targets for persons with disabilities in Internet governance bodies and create mentorship pathways to build sustainable leadership rooted in lived experience.

9. Conclusion

The WSIS+20 review presents a historic opportunity to move beyond tokenism and enshrine digital accessibility at the heart of a truly inclusive Information Society. Without explicit commitments and concrete actions for persons with disabilities, and without the active leadership of people with lived experience of disability, the vision of universal, meaningful, and affordable access cannot be realized.

As the Coordinators of the IGF Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disability, We urge co-facilitators and all stakeholders to ensure that accessibility and the inclusion of people with lived experience of disability are not afterthoughts, but core priorities reflected throughout the WSIS+20

outcome documents and in the future mandate of the IGF. Only by doing so can we build a multistakeholder, inclusive governance model that serves the needs of all people and sets a precedent for equitable global digital policymaking.

About the Authors:

Dr. Muhammad Shabbir is a Pakistani researcher, accessibility advocate, and policy expert focusing on digital inclusion and international relations. He is the Coordinator of the IGF Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disability (DCAD) and a member of the IAAP Global Leadership Council. A former trustee of the Internet Society, he led its only board resolution on making the organization accessible for persons with disabilities. He has also engaged with ICANN, APRIGF, APSIG, MEAC-SIG, and PKSIG. Blind since childhood, he brings lived experience to global accessibility efforts.

Judith Hellerstein is a globally recognized expert in ICT policy, regulation, and digital transformation. As the Founder and CEO of Hellerstein & Associates, she leads a consultancy dedicated to unlocking digital economy opportunities worldwide. Judith is a passionate advocate for helping to bring connectivity and empower communities. She has designed policies and regulations that create the enabling environment for digital economies including gap analysis, innovation, trade, and e-commerce and creation of frameworks for digital government and digital economy policies and strategies..

Judith is the Co-Coordinator of the IGF Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disability (DCAD). She has a long history of strong advocacy on disability and accessibility both within the ITU, the UN, ICANN, ISOC and others.