

EU Non-Paper on Digital Transformation and Human Rights for WSIS+20

Rationale

As digitalization accelerates, threats to human rights and fundamental freedoms online continue to intensify. Challenges and threats such as violations against the right to freedom of expression and assembly, right to privacy and right to non-discrimination, brought about by Internet shutdowns, mass surveillance, censorship, algorithmic bias, abusive data exploitation, and attacks on journalists, media workers and human rights defenders urgently require a reinforced response, notably through a human rights-based approach. The EU and its Member States consistently uphold the principle that human rights apply equally online and offline, a principle embedded in the WSIS process and reinforced by the Global Digital Compact (GDC).

The WSIS+20 review offers an essential opportunity to reaffirm human rights as fundamental for sustainable development, explicitly rejecting any framing of human rights as obstacles to progress – to the contrary, sustainable development and human rights are mutually reinforcing. It also presents a moment to explicitly counter digital authoritarianism, which threatens democratic norms and fundamental freedoms globally.

Anchoring Digital Governance in Human Rights

The EU strongly advocates for a human-centric, human rights-based approach to digital transformation, emphasizing the protection and promotion of human rights, including the right to privacy, freedom of opinion and expression, and rule of law, while safeguarding information integrity. Robust data protection frameworks, human rights safeguards, and global standards for privacy protection are key EU priorities, promoting trusted data flows essential for innovation and sustainable development. This is anchored in the EU Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles.

Sustainable digital progress demands a human-centric and human rights-based approach, underlining the mutually reinforcing relationship between digital inclusion, human rights protection, economic growth, and social cohesion. The EU also underscores the environmental dimension of digitalization, promoting sustainable and green technology solutions, alongside secure and resilient digital infrastructures.

Enhanced Human Rights Safeguards and OHCHR's Role

Given the rise of digital repression and network restrictions, the EU insists on stronger and unprecedented safeguards for human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly freedom of opinion and expression, the right to privacy, and other rights that guarantee protection against

disinformation. The EU recognizes the crucial role of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) within WSIS processes to actively respond to systemic human rights risks arising from the use of digital technologies in ways that undermine democratic principles and civic space, such as mass surveillance, censorship, or repression.

Risks and Opportunities of Emerging Technologies

Emerging technologies hold immense potential for strengthening human rights and digital inclusion, providing tailored experiences for diverse and marginalized populations and enabling new forms of democratic participation. Yet, these new and emerging technologies also introduce significant risks, including hyper-targeted manipulation, intensified surveillance, biometric and behavioral profiling, and exacerbated harm to women, children and vulnerable groups.

To effectively leverage these opportunities and mitigate risks, robust governance frameworks anchored in transparency, accountability, and user autonomy are essential. Embedding universal human rights principles, with special attention to protecting women and children, throughout the technological lifecycle is a key EU priority.

Draft Language Proposal for WSIS+20 Outcome Document

To reflect these positions within the WSIS+20 outcome document, the EU suggests the following language:

Reaffirming the fundamental principle that human rights apply equally online and offline, we commit to respect, protect and promote human rights in the digital space. We recognize that human rights considerations are not an obstacle to innovation, but a guiding compass that ensures that sustainable development, social cohesion and human security can be achieved.

We recognize the role of Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights within the WSIS process to respond to human rights violations linked to the use of digital technologies, protect human rights in the digital space, and address systemic risks to human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law related to digital technologies – in particular by ensuring the application of human rights throughout the entire lifecycle of technologies, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

We express grave concern about the growing use of digital technologies in ways that violate international human rights law, including through indiscriminate surveillance, Internet shutdowns, biometric and algorithmic profiling, censorship, and other measures that restrict access to information and suppress dissent. Such practices undermine democratic institutions, corrode public trust, and threaten the openness and integrity of the digital environment. We reaffirm that

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digital transformation must serve to uphold and advance, not restrict, fundamental rights and freedoms.

We emphasise the crucial importance of protecting journalists, media workers, whistleblowers, human rights defenders, and other civil society actors who are increasingly targeted through digital means. We call on all stakeholders to prevent and respond to online and offline threats, including harassment, mass surveillance, and arbitrary detention linked to their legitimate activities. The WSIS+20 outcome should reaffirm strong commitments to safeguard these actors and ensure their full, free, and safe participation in the digital sphere.