

## **RESEARCH ICT AFRICA (RIA) SUBMISSION TO THE WSIS+20 ZERO DRAFT OCTOBER 2025**

### **Introduction**

RIA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the WSIS+20 review process and thanks the co-facilitators for producing a comprehensive Zero Draft that provides a strong foundation for advancing the Information Society. We appreciate the draft's recognition of both the achievements and persistent challenges facing digital development globally, and the inclusive consultation process that has enabled meaningful stakeholder participation.

Our submission draws on our research and on a national multistakeholder engagement we convened in South Africa in May. It addresses several cross-cutting themes that we believe require articulation to ensure WSIS remains relevant and effective beyond the next decade. We stress the urgent need to address geopolitical tensions that increasingly fragment digital ecosystems and disadvantage developing countries in global technology governance, limiting not only their participation in international partnerships but also their ability to benefit equitably from digital value chains. A recurring concern across our comments is the power concentration among dominant digital platforms and technology corporations, which fundamentally alters democratic participation, public discourse, and the exercise of human rights online.

We particularly welcome the decision to establish the Internet Governance Forum as a permanent UN forum. The IGF's multistakeholder model has proven uniquely capable of facilitating meaningful participation from developing countries, civil society and the youth who are often marginalised in traditional intergovernmental processes. However, we emphasise that the IGF's permanence must be accompanied by strategic strengthening of National and Regional IGF initiatives (NRIS), as well as Youth IGFs. These grassroots and bottom-up mechanisms are critical to ensuring that global digital governance remains grounded in diverse local realities and empowers the next generation of digital policy leaders.

While we appreciate the draft's efforts to avoid duplication between WSIS processes and emerging UN frameworks on AI and data governance, WSIS needs to remain relevant in the next decades. We encourage WSIS to adopt a more strategic approach of complementarity. Rather than simply acknowledging these parallel processes on AI and Data Governance, WSIS should leverage its distinctive strengths, particularly its Action Line frameworks, its proven track record in digital access, and multistakeholder engagement mechanisms. For example, WSIS can work together with these UN processes to enhance access to information and data as a public good.

Critically, we call for the development of differentiated metrics and measurement frameworks that capture the multidimensional nature of digital inclusion beyond mere connectivity. Current measurement approaches often fail to capture the cyclical nature of digital exclusion, where inadequate access reinforces broader socio-economic disadvantages. Without evolved metrics that measure meaningful participation rather than simple access, WSIS will lack the evidence base to assess genuine progress or adapt strategies effectively.

We emphasise the need to empower diverse stakeholders, particularly civil society, community networks, youth organisations, and local initiatives, in addressing meaningful access challenges. Twenty years of WSIS implementation demonstrate that market-driven approaches alone cannot achieve universal inclusion. Community-led initiatives require greater support, proper financing through mechanisms like universal service funds, and enabling regulatory frameworks that recognise non-profit connectivity providers as essential complements to private sector efforts. This multistakeholder empowerment is not merely procedural; it is fundamental to realising the substantive outcomes WSIS envisions.

Finally, we emphasise the importance of intergenerational equity in digital development. The choices made today will shape the digital landscape that future generations inherit. The WSIS and IGF structures must actively empower youth, especially in developing countries where young people constitute the largest demographic group, ensuring they have not only access to digital technologies but also meaningful participation in the digital economy, and they have the capacity to innovate and influence policies affecting their digital futures. This involves targeted and advanced capacity building, democratising research and development capabilities, protection from emerging forms of digital exploitation in platform economies, and effectively integrating youth perspectives into decision-making processes.

Our detailed comments below reflect these themes while providing specific textual suggestions to enhance the Zero Draft's ability to realise a truly people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society that remains responsive.

## Inputs to the text

Suggested changes in the paragraphs	Rationale
<p>1. We reaffirm our common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive, <b>environmentally responsible</b> and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilise and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.</p>	<p>Although people-centred requires environmental responsibility because of the negative impact of people's environmental irresponsibility, this should be made explicit.</p>
<p>5. We recognise that many developing nations face barriers to <del>participating fully in</del> <b>meaningful and equitable participation in global</b> digital governance and policy-making processes due to financial, technical, <b>geopolitical tensions</b> and institutional constraints. We encourage governments and other stakeholders to ensure that decision-making processes concerned with the Information Society enable full and effective participation by developing countries.</p>	<p>The current global technology race, especially as it relates to new emerging data-reliant technologies, leaves developing countries disadvantaged not only in participating in international partnerships and cooperation but also in the distribution of technology value chain benefits. Growing geopolitical tensions further compound these challenges by creating fragmented digital ecosystems, restricting technology transfers, and forcing developing nations to navigate competing spheres of influence when making digital infrastructure choices. Additionally, inadequate capacity-building support limits their ability to develop local expertise and regulatory frameworks needed for effective digital governance.</p>
<p>7. We note that the widespread availability of the Internet has transformed traditional structures of public discourse. This has had significant impacts on societal behaviour, policy-making processes, <b>democratic participation, human rights</b>, and the dynamics of information reliability and public trust.</p>	<p>The Internet's transformation of public discourse has fundamentally altered power dynamics in society, concentrating influence among dominant digital platforms and tech corporations while simultaneously expanding access to information. This concentration has created new forms of digital inequality where a few powerful actors control information flows, algorithmic curation, and online spaces for public debate. Such centralisation directly impacts democratic participation by influencing how citizens access information,</p>

	<p>engage in political discourse, and make voting decisions, often through opaque algorithmic processes. Civil society organisations and individual citizens find themselves with diminished influence compared to these digital intermediaries, undermining traditional democratic checks and balances. This power imbalance threatens fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression, access to information, and meaningful participation in democratic processes. This is critical, especially for an empowered youth. WSIS must therefore address these infrastructural power imbalances to ensure that digital transformation strengthens and opens up spaces for expression and innovation rather than weakens democratic governance and human rights protection.</p>
<p>12. We are concerned that there remain critical digital divides between and within countries in access to and use of digital technologies. <b>These divides both result from and perpetuate existing inequalities based on gender, geography, income, and other socio-economic factors, creating a cyclical pattern where digital exclusion reinforces broader disadvantages.</b> These constrain the achievement of WSIS goals, restrict the achievement of economic and social development, threaten to increase social and economic inequalities and may be exacerbated by new technological developments. Bridging them requires measures concerned not just with connectivity but with the affordability of networks and devices, the availability of relevant content and services in local languages, and the development of digital skills, literacy and capabilities.</p>	<p>Digital divides are not merely technical gaps but reflect and amplify existing structural inequalities. Women, rural populations, and economically disadvantaged groups face compounded barriers that create self-reinforcing cycles of exclusion. Recognizing this cyclical nature is essential for developing comprehensive solutions that address both the symptoms and root causes of digital inequality.</p>
<p>13. We reaffirm that gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and their full, equal and meaningful participation in the digital space, are essential to close the gender digital divide and advance sustainable development. Our cooperation will empower all women and girls, encourage leadership of women, mainstream a gender perspective and counter and eliminate all forms of violence, including sexual</p>	<p>While the section acknowledges the importance of gender equality, it lacks specific mechanisms for how this will be achieved. Adding commitments like gender-disaggregated data and gender-responsive policy frameworks makes the statement more actionable. Emphasising digital literacy and economic participation recognises the</p>

<p>and gender-based violence that occurs through or is amplified by the use of technology. <b>Ensuring gender-responsive digital policies, collecting gender-disaggregated data to inform evidence-based decision-making, supporting inclusive digital education and digital literacy initiatives for women and girls are necessary to address the structural barriers to equal participation for women and girls in the digital economy.</b></p>	<p>full spectrum of the digital gender divide, not just access, but also usage, skills, and leadership.</p>
<p>14. We are committed to addressing the access and specific information and technology challenges facing children, adolescents and young people, the elderly, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples and marginalised communities, and to the needs of future generations. <b>Adopting targeted, participatory approaches that reflect the diverse needs of these groups.</b></p>	<p>This section could be strengthened by moving beyond general acknowledgement toward specific, inclusive strategies. Concepts like universal design, multilingual support, and co-creation are key principles in making ICTs truly inclusive. Emphasising participatory approaches ensures the communities themselves are active agents in shaping digital solutions, aligning with human rights-based approaches to development.</p>
<p>16. We also recognise that building confidence and security in ICTs is critical to ensuring the implementation of WSIS goals, and that advancing digital inclusion requires a predictable and transparent enabling environment that encompasses policy, legal and regulatory frameworks that support innovation, protect consumer rights, nurture digital talent and skills, promote fair competition and digital entrepreneurship, and enhance consumer confidence and trust in the digital economy. <b>Further emphasis is required for strong cybersecurity capacities, data protection standards aligned with human rights, safeguards against misinformation and disinformation, and international cooperation to address cross-border digital threats.</b></p>	<p>The section appropriately stresses confidence and security, but can be made stronger by referencing cybersecurity, data protection, and the fight against disinformation, all of which are pressing global concerns. Including international cooperation recognises that many digital threats are transnational, requiring collaborative frameworks (especially in areas like cybercrime, data flows, and misinformation). Aligning data protection with human rights standards ensures the digital ecosystem protects individual dignity and freedoms.</p>
<p>18. We are deeply concerned, however, that the capacity of these technologies to support development remains constrained by digital divides and inequalities between and within countries, regions and communities. A third of the world's population still does not make use of the Internet, while many people with access make little use of it for reasons that include lack</p>	<p>Twenty years of WSIS goals demonstrate that market-based connectivity models alone cannot achieve universal access. Community networks and civil society have proven effective in reaching underserved populations where profit incentives fail. Proper financing through universal service funds, combined with policies that enable</p>

<p>of affordability, limited content, including content in locally relevant languages, and limited digital skills. Strengthened international cooperation, <b>proper financing, expanding stakeholder roles in connectivity and access</b>, and enabling policy environments are required to address gaps in access and affordability, digital skills, financing and technological resources. <b>Recognising that while market-driven approaches have improved connectivity, community-led initiatives and universal service mechanisms require greater support and regulatory enablement.</b></p>	<p>non-profit connectivity providers, offers a necessary complement to private sector efforts. This multi-stakeholder approach addresses the fundamental limitation of relying solely on profit-driven models for what is increasingly recognised as a public good.</p>
<p><i>Paragraph to add under provisions on Information and communications technologies for development:</i></p> <p><b>We recognise that digital technologies play a crucial role in facilitating information access as a public good. WSIS advocates for the free flow of information, access to information, and data as a public good. We therefore encourage the development of policies and initiatives that promote such access.</b></p>	<p>Framing information and data as a public good aligns with current global discussions on media freedom, access to information, and the dangers of disinformation. Proposing an SDG on information integrity elevates the issue from a technical or policy matter to a core global development priority, potentially catalysing political will and resource mobilisation.</p>
<p>38. We are encouraged that the growing use of digital services has created opportunities for enterprises in all countries, including micro, small and medium enterprises, to provide digital services to serve both domestic and export markets. We welcome the work of United Nations agencies and development partners to support small businesses in developing countries, including businesses led by women, to take advantage of these opportunities, and urge all stakeholders to foster an open, fair, inclusive and non-discriminatory digital environment that enables micro, small and medium enterprises to thrive, including appropriate financial support and access to capital. <b>We encourage the redistribution of digital value through fair taxation and benefit-sharing.</b></p>	<p>Digital technologies built on African data often generate wealth elsewhere, entrenching extractive digital economies. Tax digital platforms operating in Africa implement mandatory benefit-sharing frameworks and promote community-based data stewardship that recognises data as a collective asset. TRedirects digital rents into public value creation and supports local economic empowerment.</p>

<p><i>New paragraph suggestion under provisions on bridging the digital divides:</i></p> <p>We are concerned about emerging patterns of labour exploitation in digital platforms and gig work that circumvent human rights protections and fair labour practices.</p>	<p>Digital labour platforms present both opportunities and risks for African youth employment. While they offer access to global markets and flexible work arrangements, weak regulatory frameworks in developing countries enable exploitative practices, including algorithmic wage manipulation, a lack of social protections, and the circumvention of labour rights. WSIS must address these emerging forms of digital labour exploitation by promoting fair work standards, strengthening institutional capacity for worker protection, and ensuring that digital employment truly empowers rather than exploits vulnerable populations, particularly youth in developing countries who represent the largest user base of these platforms.</p>
<p>45. We recognise that digitalisation has enabled new ways of providing education and training in schools, higher and adult education, including innovative educational approaches such as distance learning, open educational resources and online courses. We are concerned, however, that the benefits of digitalisation are still not available to many children and young people as a result of digital divides in connectivity and educational facilities, cultural barriers. We reaffirm our commitment to connecting every school to the Internet by 2030.</p>	<p>Educational digitisation in rural Africa is critical for developing a generation of digitally empowered youth who can participate competitively in the global digital economy. However, this requires addressing compounded challenges, including environmental vulnerabilities, food insecurity, and climate disruptions that create unstable learning environments. Additionally, building relevant digital skills demands culturally appropriate content that incorporates African indigenous knowledge systems while preparing youth for digital economy opportunities. A coordinated approach between WSIS, development partners, and governments is essential to ensure that digital education initiatives genuinely empower African youth for economic participation rather than perpetuating digital exclusion and dependency.</p>
<p>52. We are also concerned about the sustainability of and equitable access to critical resources, particularly scarce minerals required in the manufacture of digital equipment, the extraction of which has also been associated in some cases with human rights abuses, dangerous employment practices and civil conflicts. We are also concerned about the reliance of the global digital economy supply chain on this form of extraction and adverse human conditions.</p>	<p>The global digital economy's dependence on critical minerals creates a concerning dynamic where technological progress in nations relies on extraction practices that thrive under undemocratic governance in the resource-rich communities. This dependency inadvertently incentivises the maintenance of weak governance structures and human rights violations, as stable democratic institutions might demand fairer resource agreements and stronger environmental</p>

	<p>protections. WSIS must address this systemic issue by promoting responsible sourcing standards, supporting democratic governance in resource-rich communities, and ensuring that the benefits of digital technologies throughout their life cycles enhance all of humanity.</p>
<p>57. We recognise that science, technology and innovation are integral to digital development, and that rapidly growing capabilities of digital technologies have contributed greatly to research and development across all scientific fields, enabling researchers to explore complex problems using methods that were unavailable before the Summit. We recognise the importance of ensuring that these new capabilities of research and development are democratised for access and use to all stakeholders in their diversity, including the youth, civil society and the global majority. of ensuring that stakeholders in all countries are able to play a part in digital innovation.</p>	<p>Research and development capabilities powered by digital technologies should not remain concentrated among elite institutions and developed countries, but must be democratised to enable all stakeholders (including youth, civil society, and the global majority) to participate in knowledge creation and innovation. The true measure of digital development lies not just in access to information, but in the ability to process, analyse, and generate knowledge according to diverse needs and contexts. This democratisation of R&amp;D capabilities is essential for human development, as it allows communities to solve their own problems, build local expertise, and contribute meaningfully to global knowledge production.</p>
<p>63. We reaffirm that strengthening confidence and security in the use of information and communications technologies is a crucial driver for innovation and sustainable development. We reaffirm that building confidence and security in the use of information and communications technologies should be consistent with international human rights standards.</p>	<p>International human rights standards provide universally agreed norms that transcend national boundaries and political systems, offering essential protection against the misuse of ICT security measures to suppress fundamental freedoms. There can be cases where domestic laws vary significantly across countries, with some explicitly contradicting internationally recognised human rights principles, particularly regarding freedom of expression, privacy, and due process. This universal framework is also vital in our interconnected digital world, where security measures in one jurisdiction can affect users globally.</p>
<p>66. We recognise the challenges that States, in particular developing countries, face in building confidence and security in the use of information and</p>	<p>Regional cybersecurity cooperation in Africa faces significant barriers due to vast disparities in technological infrastructure and institutional</p>



<p>communications Technologies, especially challenges in regional international cooperation due to uneven infrastructural and institutional capacities. We reiterate the call made by the General Assembly in its resolution 70/125 of 16 December 2015 for renewed focus on capacity-building, education, knowledge-sharing and regulatory practice, as well as promoting multistakeholder cooperation at all levels and raising awareness among users of information and communications technologies, particularly among the poorest and most vulnerable. Targeted support for capacity building is needed to enable all countries, particularly developing countries, to improve cybersecurity governance, align regulatory frameworks with international norms and ensure effective cooperation between Computer Emergency and Computer Security Incident Response Teams (CERTs/CSIRTs).</p>	<p>capacity between countries, preventing the development of harmonised policies essential for digital trust. These uneven capacities create vulnerabilities that undermine joint cybersecurity efforts and hinder the establishment of effective cross-border incident response mechanisms. Building regional digital trust is particularly critical for the expansion of African digital trade through the African Continental Free Trade Area (ACFTA).</p>
<p>70. We recognise the need to build digital, data and media literacy in order to empower individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to identify reliable information that will help them to access opportunities and improve their quality of life, and to protect themselves against misinformation and abuse. We call on all stakeholders to promote digital literacy and awareness-raising efforts to empower individuals, especially those in vulnerable situations, to understand and exercise their data protection and privacy rights, make informed choices about their personal data and take appropriate steps to safeguard their online security and privacy.</p>	<p>Traditional digital literacy focused on basic computer skills, but the current technological landscape, dominated by AI, big data, and algorithmic decision-making, requires a more sophisticated understanding that includes data interpretation, algorithmic awareness, and media literacy as interconnected competencies. The absence of a universal definition and measurable levels of digital literacy prevents effective assessment of progress and creates inconsistent educational approaches globally. Advanced digital literacy should empower individuals not just to consume information safely, but to actively use data analytics, understand algorithmic bias, and leverage digital tools for personal and community development. Without standardised literacy frameworks, vulnerable populations remain excluded from the data-driven opportunities that could improve their quality of life. WSIS must establish universal digital literacy standards with clear progression levels to ensure measurable, inclusive digital empowerment rather than perpetuating digital divides through outdated literacy concepts.</p>

<p>76. We recognise the critical importance of private sector investment in information and communications technology infrastructure, content and services, and we encourage Governments to create legal and regulatory frameworks conducive to increased investment and innovation, <b>especially for small and medium-sized businesses.</b></p>	<p>An emphasis on SMEs who are more vulnerable to policy, geopolitical, competition and limited resources.</p>
<p><i>New paragraph suggestion under the provisions on Human rights and ethical dimensions of the Information Society:</i></p> <p><b>We recognise that developing countries experience disproportionate exposure to digital harms due to structural vulnerabilities in their digital ecosystems. There is a need to ensure that international cooperation and capacity building programs prioritise preventing and protecting vulnerable populations in developing countries from digital harms while strengthening their resilience against emerging technological threats.</b></p>	<p>Developing countries face disproportionate exposure to digital harms due to weaker institutional frameworks, limited cybersecurity capacity, and inadequate regulatory safeguards that make them vulnerable targets for cybercrime, misinformation, and digital exploitation. This disparity undermines the universal application of human rights in digital spaces.</p>
<p>105. We recognise the need to promote greater participation and engagement in Internet governance discussions of Governments, the private sector, civil society, international organisations, the technical <del>and</del> academic communities, <b>the youth</b> and all other relevant stakeholders from all countries. Measures are needed to ensure more effective participation by stakeholders from developing countries and underrepresented groups, particularly African countries, least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing states.</p>	<p>For emphasis on the inclusion of young people.</p>
<p><i>New paragraph suggestion under the provisions on Internet Governance:</i></p> <p><b>We encourage enhanced coordination and cooperation between the Internet Governance Forum intersessional work and other multilateral processes to ensure</b></p>	<p>The current digital governance landscape suffers from institutional fragmentation, with multiple UN agencies, multilateral forums, and specialised bodies working on overlapping issues without adequate coordination. This fragmentation leads to</p>

complementarity maximise synergies in addressing cross-cutting issues such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and data governance. We call for the development of systematic coordination mechanisms that facilitate information sharing, joint initiatives, and aligned policy recommendations across these diverse governance processes.

duplicated efforts, inconsistent policy recommendations, and reduced effectiveness in addressing complex, interconnected digital challenges. Enhanced coordination between IGF and non-IGF processes would create more coherent global governance, reduce institutional competition, and ensure that limited resources are used efficiently to address pressing digital policy issues requiring unified international responses.