

A Youth Declaration for a People-Centered, Inclusive, and Rights-Based Digital Future: From WSIS+20 to 2030 and Beyond

To the Ministers, heads of delegations, and all esteemed stakeholders participating in the twenty-year review of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS):

We, the youth of the world, come before this high-level meeting not merely as beneficiaries of the Information Society, but as its primary architects and principal inheritors. We represent the generation that has grown up parallel to the tremendous growth in connectivity this Summit celebrates. We are, **as this review process acknowledges**, among the most active users of the Internet and online services, yet we are also the generation most acutely exposed to the new risks for humanity that this digital transformation has unleashed.

We reaffirm our shared commitment to the foundational vision of WSIS: to build a people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society. We welcome the many constructive inputs from... youth that have been acknowledged in this review process. We further align ourselves with the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Global Digital Compact, recognizing that digital inclusion is a critical instrument for achieving all Sustainable Development Goals.

However, as we take stock of progress, we must be unequivocally honest about the profound gaps that persist. The Information Society is not yet built for all. For hundreds of millions of our peers, the digital world is a distant promise, not a present reality. The challenges identified in the foundational documents of this review—the gaping digital divides, the critical capacity gaps, and the systemic assaults on human rights—are barriers that disproportionately obstruct the potential of young people.

We refuse to accept a future defined by these divides. We refuse to be passive subjects in an era of rapid technological change. We are determined to ensure the achievement of universal meaningful and affordable access. Therefore, we put forward this declaration, structured around three non-negotiable pillars for the next decade of WSIS implementation, demanding a future that is not just connected, but also just, equitable, and respectful of our rights.

Pillar I. Bridging Digital Divides: From Access to Meaningful Empowerment

We applaud the monumental achievements in global connectivity since the Geneva and Tunis summits. Reaching a point where over 95 % of the world's population is covered by broadband networks is a historic milestone. Yet, we are deeply concerned that this coverage masks a stark reality. A third of the world's population remains offline, and for youth, this divide is a

chasm separating us from education, employment, and civic participation.

This is not a simple binary of connected versus unconnected. The Zero Draft rightly identifies that critical digital divides between and within countries persist. It is an injustice that a young person in a high-income country is more than three times as likely to be online (93 %) as their peer in a low-income country (26.5 %). It is an injustice that our peers in rural areas (less than 50 % access) are left behind by their urban counterparts (83 % access). For youth, the greatest barrier is no longer just coverage; it is affordability of access, data and devices. This is compounded by a lack of relevant content and services in local languages and a deficit in the necessary skills to navigate this environment. The divide is multidimensional, and our solutions must be too.

We are particularly concerned by persistent gender digital divides. The fact that young women and girls are less likely to be online, less likely to own a mobile phone, and severely under-represented in education, employment and other areas of digital activity is an untenable failure that hobbles progress for all. Furthermore, the needs of young persons with disabilities, Indigenous youth, and those in marginalized communities are consistently deprioritized.

Therefore, we, the youth, call for a radical shift from measuring mere connectivity to enabling meaningful empowerment.

We demand:

1. **Universal, Meaningful, and Affordable Access:** A commitment to universal meaningful and affordable access must be the central priority. This includes achieving entry-level broadband subscription costs that are accessible to the widest section of the population. We call for innovative financing mechanisms and public-private partnerships to ensure that devices and data are financially accessible to the poorest youth and their families.
2. **Connecting Every Learner and Every School:** The commitment to connecting every school to the Internet by 2030 is the single most critical investment in our generation. The digital transformation of education is a key focus for UNESCO, yet the benefits... are still not available to many children and young people. This is unacceptable. We must prioritize connecting every educational institution, from rural primary schools to vocational training centers, with high-quality, reliable, and affordable broadband.
3. **Content and Services for and by Youth:** Meaningful access requires content

that is relevant. We call for the full implementation of WSIS Action Line C8 (Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content). We urge all stakeholders to invest in the development of local content and services in a variety of languages and formats. This must include content by and for young people, reflecting our cultures, addressing our health needs—including information on reproductive rights —and supporting our entrepreneurial ambitions. We celebrate the forthcoming International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) led by UNESCO and demand resources for digital content in these languages.

4. **Inclusive Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI):** We acknowledge that developing digital public goods and digital public infrastructure are critical drivers of inclusive digital transformation. We, the youth, must be co-designers of this infrastructure, not just end-users. We demand that DPI be resilient, safe, inclusive and interoperable and developed with a gender perspective and accessibility for persons with disabilities at its core.

Pillar II. Capacity Development: Forging the Next Generation of Digital Citizens

Access alone is insufficient. We, the youth, are committed to addressing the access and specific information and technology challenges we face, but we cannot do it alone. The assertion that a lack of capacity is a major barrier to closing digital divides is a profound understatement. Being a digital native does not automatically bestow digital literacy.

We are entering a world defined by artificial intelligence, automation, and a transformed digital economy. The skills of today will not be the skills of tomorrow. Capacity development is not a one-time training; it is the foundation for lifelong access to digital learning opportunities and the only way to empower local experts and local communities. It is the key to ensuring that young people are not just passive consumers of technology, but active creators, innovators, and shapers of it. This is central to UNESCO's mandate for WSIS, focusing on e-learning (C7) and the evolution toward the development of knowledge societies. Yet, the current educational and training systems are failing to keep pace. We are being prepared for a world that no longer exists. The new forms of manufacturing and services require a new social contract for digital education.

Therefore, we, the youth, demand a comprehensive, lifelong approach to capacity development. We demand:

1. **Digital and Media Literacy as a Fundamental Right:** We call on all Member

States to fully and immediately integrate media, information and digital literacy skills into all levels of formal education. This is not an optional extra; it is as fundamental as reading and writing. These skills are our primary defense, enabling us to identify reliable information and protect ourselves against misinformation and abuse. This is a core component of building resilience against the infodemic.

2. **Skills for the Future of Work:** We urge governments and the private sector to develop financing mechanisms for technical training, vocational programs (TVET), and reskilling initiatives. These must be agile enough to respond to a labor market being transformed by AI and automation. We must enhance the capacity of developing countries to innovate and participate fully.
3. **Empowering Youth Innovators and Entrepreneurs:** We are not just jobseekers; we are job-creators. We call for dedicated financial support and access to capital for youth-led micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Young entrepreneurs are uniquely positioned to solve local challenges. We must foster an open, fair, inclusive and non-discriminatory digital environment that enables micro, small and medium enterprises to thrive.
4. **Building Capacity for Governance:** We, the youth, are the next generation of policymakers. We need the capacity to govern these new technologies. We welcome the proposal for an AI capacity building fellowship and urge that it prioritizes young government officials, civil society leaders, and academics from the Global South to enable meaningful participation in global AI governance initiatives.

Pillar III. Human Rights: Securing a Safe, Inclusive, and Free Digital World

Human rights are central to the vision of the World Summit on the Information Society. We stand unequivocally by the principle, affirmed and reaffirmed by the General Assembly, that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online.

As the most active users of the Internet, youth are disproportionately exposed to the erosion of these rights. The digital space, which holds such immense promise, has also become a frontier of harm. Our generation bears the brunt of misinformation and hates speech, cyberbullying and child sexual exploitation and abuse. For young women and girls, the digital world is rife with sexual and gender-based violence that occurs through or is amplified using technology.

We are alarmed by the serious threats to freedom of expression and plurality of information. We see our peers, young journalists, human rights defenders and other civil society actors, being targeted, silenced, and imprisoned for exercising their rights online. We condemn the

use of Internet shutdowns, arbitrary or unlawful surveillance or online censorship as tools of repression. We express deep concern over surveillance technologies that may jeopardize the right to privacy.

We refuse to accept a digital future where our safety is the price of connection, where our privacy is the currency for services, and where our freedom of expression is contingent on political whim. We demand a digital environment built on a foundation of safety, trust, and freedom, consistent with WSIS Action Line C10 (Ethical dimensions of the Information Society).

Therefore, we, the youth, demand that human rights be placed at the absolute center of all digital development and governance. We demand:

1. **The Unassailable Rights of the Child:** We commit to strengthen legal and policy frameworks to protect the rights of the child in the digital space, in line with... the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is non-negotiable. We call for robust age-appropriate design, default safety and privacy settings, and effective redress mechanisms.
2. **Zero Tolerance for Online Harms:** We demand robust risk mitigation and redress measures to counter and address all forms of violence online. This includes specific, well-resourced strategies to combat gender-based violence, hate speech, disinformation, and all forms of child exploitation.
3. **An End to the Gender Digital Divide and Online Violence:** We commit to enhance and protect women's and girls' rights online and address the problems caused by inequality, discrimination and gender-based violence. We call for the full implementation of a gender perspective and the meaningful participation of UN-Women in all WSIS Action Lines.
4. **Unyielding Defense of Freedom of Expression and Privacy:** We reaffirm Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We call on all stakeholders to prevent and respond to online and offline threats and to refrain from undue restrictions. We call on Member States to ensure surveillance is only used in accordance with the human rights principles of legality, necessity and proportionality.
5. **Mandatory Corporate Accountability:** We recognize the responsibilities of all stakeholders. We call on the private sector... to ensure that respect for human rights is incorporated into the conception, design, development, deployment, and operation of all digital technologies. This is not optional. We demand the mandatory application of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the establishment of redress and effective remedy for human

rights abuses caused by technology platforms.

The Way Forward: A Pact with the Future Generation

The successful implementation of the WSIS outcomes, their alignment with the 2030 Agenda, and the future success of the Global Digital Compact hinge on one simple, unavoidable truth: you cannot build a future for us, without us.

We are not a vulnerable group to be managed; we are the constructive inputs that will drive innovation, ensure accountability, and build the knowledge societies of the future. We applaud the success of the multi-stakeholder model, particularly the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and the annual WSIS Forum, which have provided platforms for many young voices. But consultation is not enough. We demand full and effective participation, partnership and cooperation.

We call for a permanent, funded, and meaningful seat at the table. We demand the integration of youth representatives and youth-led bodies into all digital governance and WSIS implementation structures, from the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) to the United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) and the facilitation of all Action Lines.

We are ready to work. We are ready to co-lead. We bring the energy, the innovative spirit, and the lived experience necessary to achieve our common vision. Let this twenty-year review be remembered not as an echo of the past, but as a genuine pact with the future generation. Let us work together to build the inclusive, open, sustainable, fair, safe, and secure digital future that our generation, and all generations to come, deserve.

Jin Tada

UNISC International