WSIS+20 Follow-Up Consultation (29 July 2025)

29 July 2025 - UNHQ VIRTUAL

Introduction

On 29 July 2025, a virtual follow-up consultation gathered Member States, civil society, the private sector, and technical community to reflect and add to written submissions received on the zero draft of the WSIS+20 review. Unlike prior preparatory sessions, this meeting provided a platform for oral inputs relating to the Elements Paper, intended as elaborations on written inputs to the process. Participants were invited to offer three-minute interventions on topics spanning thematic areas of the Paper. The consultation was facilitated by the Co-facilitators: H. E. Ambassador Ekitela Lokaale of Kenya and H. E. Ambassador Suela Janina of Albania, who reiterated that oral contributions would complement written submissions and inform the forthcoming zero draft.

Thematic Inputs

The consultation was organised around a series of thematic clusters drawn from the Elements Paper. The inputs are summarised below.

ICT for Development

Participants highlighted that ICT remains foundational for inclusive development, but stressed that strategies must be rooted in local contexts and empower communities to solve their own problems. Many emphasised the need for local and community driven models that empower people to solve their own problems and create content in their own languages. Community leaders called for more investment in digital skills and programmes that broaden the definition of connectivity – not just network rollout, but also affordable access, relevant content and reliable information. Youth and educators described experimenting with generative and agentic AI to personalise lessons and reduce teachers' workloads; they warned, however, that misinformation remains a major challenge and that learners need tools to verify AI generated content. Overall, interventions in this category called for capacity-building, open educational resources and digital public goods that empower learners rather than exacerbate inequalities.

Digital Economy

Speakers noted that the digital economy is expanding rapidly but remains uneven and fragile. Business associations welcomed references to the digital economy in the elements paper and urged policies that promote innovation, enable cross-border data flows and protect the multi-stakeholder model. Several warned that inconsistent adoption governance frameworks threaten to exacerbate structural imbalances in data and market power, especially for developing countries. Others observed that persistent digital divides, asymmetric data flows and uneven capacity development threaten to leave 2.6 billion people offline; they advocated

regulatory frameworks that support investment, interoperability, open source and inclusive participation. Civil-society organisations criticised market-led paradigms for entrenching digital colonialism and proposed levying taxes on dominant platforms to create a global fund, mandating interoperability to curb big-tech lock-in and institutionalising rights-based access. Women's and youth-focused groups emphasised that the digital economy must prioritise gender-equality and environmental sustainability, with dedicated resources, capacity-building and gender-responsive funding. In short, speakers called for a people-centred digital economy anchored in inclusion, fair competition, human rights and accountability.

Social and Cultural Development

Participants underscored the importance of meaningful access to information, languages and knowledge. Several speakers urged programmes that offer services in community languages and make e-government, education and health tools accessible and affordable for indigenous and remote communities. They cautioned that even where signals exist, people may not subscribe if connectivity is too costly or content is irrelevant. Several speakers observed that laissez-faire digital economies have allowed social, economic and cultural rights violations to proliferate and called on states to adopt binding frameworks that hold technology companies liable for cross-border harms, safeguard future generations' rights, and improve the implementation of the WSIS Action Line C3 (Access to information and knowledge). They urged stronger links between WSIS, the Global Digital Compact and the Sustainable Development Goals and argued that breaking down institutional silos is essential for fair cultural and social development. Speakers celebrated WSIS's recognition of open educational resources and open licensing, noting that public money should produce public goods, but observed that volunteers and indigenous creators still face barriers to participation. Many interventions called for reinforcing the multi-stakeholder model, expanding multilingual digital commons, improving e-government and digital services for underserved and vulnerable populations, and embedding cultural rights, information integrity and corporate accountability in the WSIS+20 outcome.

Environmental Impacts

Environmental sustainability emerged as a pressing concern. Participants highlighted that generative AI models consume far more energy than standard web searches and rely on water-intensive cooling systems; they urged measures to promote energy-efficient servers and algorithms, shift AI infrastructure to renewable energy and measure progress by energy saved and emissions reduced. Several speakers challenged the narrative that digital technologies are inherently green and noted that global supply chains impose severe material, environmental and social costs on the global South. They proposed binding standards for right-to-repair and regulation of data-center expansion with prior informed consent of local communities, and mainstreaming environmental sustainability across all WSIS action lines. Youth voices stressed that reducing the sector's footprint is a moral imperative for their generation and advocated for circular-economy strategies, responsible e-waste management, greener ICT and digital literacy on sustainable consumption. Overall, speakers encouraged WSIS+20 to recognize environmental justice, the full lifecycle impacts of ICTs and circularity, adopt green-by-design approaches and make environmental consciousness a core element of digital development.

Bridging Digital Divides

The inputs relating to the bridging digital divides underscored that gaps in connectivity, skills and governance threaten to widen inequalities. Some described the divide as a “chasm” that risks leaving entire nations and generations behind and called for universal access to affordable, reliable and secure infrastructure plus investments in digital literacy and inclusive governance models. Speakers emphasised that digital inclusion should be embedded across all WSIS action lines and that divides are multidimensional: they persist not only between countries but within societies, where rural and tribal communities, women, persons with disabilities and linguistic minorities face systemic barriers to meaningful participation. Speakers noted that broadband networks now cover much of the world, yet usage gaps outpace coverage gaps: only about half of the population uses mobile Internet because many cannot afford devices or lack digital skills and feel unsafe online. They also stressed that advanced technological capabilities such as high-performance computing, semiconductor manufacturing and AI development are concentrated in a few countries, deepening the technological gap between countries. Civil society and youth participants called for a gender responsive approach to bridging divides, with dedicated programmes for rural and remote areas, persons with disabilities and speakers of regional languages, as well as internships, fellowships and rights based digital literacy programmes. They supported the use of community networks, satellites, digital public infrastructure and open-source software to extend connectivity, and called for stable policy environments, national strategies, and more proactive government and multi-stakeholder participation—including women, youth, minorities and indigenous people—in bridging digital divides across infrastructure, skills, data and AI capacity.

Enabling Environment

Participants discussed the policy and regulatory ecosystems required for sustainable digital development. Member-state representatives welcomed the elements paper’s focus on enabling environments and called for effective use of universal service funds, affordability, competition, spectrum management and public-private partnerships to promote meaningful connectivity. They stressed that the zero draft should clearly define what an enabling environment entails—stable policy frameworks, open and interoperable markets, collaborative governments, regulatory stability and transparent cross-border data flows—and should build on the Global Digital Compact rather than reopen past debates about “enhanced co-operation”. Speakers also emphasised the importance of protecting journalists and supporting local connectivity initiatives such as community networks and women-led projects to close the gender gap. Business groups argued that enabling environments must provide legal stability and regulatory clarity, facilitate cross-border data flows, adopt a whole-of-government approach and involve genuine multi-stakeholder engagement rather than tokenistic consultations. Academic and civil-society participants cautioned against technology-neutral language that erases human rights; they urged the UN system to fully embrace shared decision-making and to back digital public infrastructures with legal and human rights frameworks, including explicit references to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Feminist organisations pressed for a standalone action line on gender and for mainstreaming gender across all action lines,

recommending mandatory gender impact assessments for technology and AI systems. Overall, speakers agreed that enabling environments must be grounded in human rights, support independent media, provide regulatory and fiscal clarity, strengthen the IGF's permanent mandate and enable meaningful participation by all stakeholders.

Financial Mechanisms

Speakers repeatedly noted that insufficient financing hampers WSIS implementation and deepens digital inequalities. Indigenous connectivity advocates observed that rural and underserved communities often build their own solutions but are excluded from national digitalisation strategies and lack mechanisms to receive funding and manage resources; they urged direct, flexible and culturally grounded financing that supports community-led initiatives and content production. Several participants argued that digital inequality persists because public financing mechanisms and tax regimes have failed to evolve with the digital economy; they highlighted that the digital divide now extends into AI research and innovation and noted that countries in the global South are denied tax revenue from digital services. Civil-society groups proposed establishing a digital development tax and creating a dedicated task force on financing inclusive digital transformation to explore blended mechanisms, including public finance, universal service funds, development bonds and diversified markets for connectivity. A large network organisation endorsed the idea of a task force and called for strengthening action against tax avoidance and illicit financial flows, while others warned that debt crises and outdated tax systems are deepening digital inequality. Across inputs, there was consensus that market-led approaches are insufficient, corporate accountability must be increased and that public and cooperative financing must be mobilised so that governments and communities—especially in the global South—can participate on equal footing and bridge divides across infrastructure, capacity and emerging technologies.

Human Rights and Ethical Dimensions

The human-rights cluster emphasised that human rights must remain central to the WSIS vision. Private-sector representatives underscored that technology can advance rights when responsibly developed and governed; they called for balanced language that recognises both risks and the transformative potential of digital technologies and urged explicit references to existing instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. A coalition of digital-rights organisations recommended anchoring the zero draft in international human rights law, affirming state obligations to respect, protect and fulfil rights and clarifying that any limitations must comply with legality, necessity and proportionality. They also called for making the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights a co-facilitator of action line 10 on human rights and ethics and for ensuring corporate accountability through human-rights due diligence and impact assessments. Feminist and youth networks urged centring gender, children's rights and intersectional perspectives, asserting that digital gender-based violence, data extraction and algorithmic bias reflect structural inequalities; they advocated a standalone action line on gender, mandatory gender impact assessments and stronger corporate accountability. Others highlighted that persons with disabilities are often

mentioned only tangentially and called for funding and developing accessible technologies and training materials with persons with disabilities involved in design and governance. Participants stressed that human rights protections must extend to future generations, that independent journalists and local media are essential to a healthy information ecosystem and meaningful democratic participation, and that digital technologies should be used to promote peace rather than exacerbate conflict. Overall, submissions and speaking participants providing input under this theme called for rights-respecting governance, explicit human-rights anchoring, intergenerational and disability-inclusive approaches and ethical frameworks that guide digital development while leaving no one behind.

Confidence and Security

Participants agreed that building trust and confidence in ICTs is essential for a resilient information society. Speakers from the technical community emphasised that security must be embedded from design and rely on open standards, interoperability and transparent, multi stakeholder processes. They highlighted that trust also depends on bridging digital divides, respecting cultural and linguistic diversity online and ensuring that the technical community and academia are recognised as key stakeholders. Others urged governments and companies to move from developing norms to implementing them in practice and called for equitable capacity building programmes, such as fellowships that help women and people from developing countries participate in cybersecurity and resilience initiatives. Civil society organisations warned that public private partnerships alone are insufficient and that broader participation from technical and civil society actors is needed; they noted that digital divides persist, particularly for women and girls in remote areas, and called for investment in infrastructure, digital literacy and inclusive governance.

Internet Governance

Speakers reaffirmed that an open, global and people centred Internet is fundamental to development. They stressed that the multi stakeholder model is dynamic, not confined to UN corridors, and cautioned against reopening old debates about “enhanced cooperation.” Many called for strengthening and institutionalising the Internet Governance Forum by granting it a permanent mandate, sustainable funding and a dedicated secretariat, while ensuring that it remains inclusive, transparent and able to evolve. Speakers from governments and civil society proposed integrating WSIS action lines, the Global Digital Compact and the IGF into a unified roadmap, creating multi year thematic tracks and establishing multi stakeholder governance labs within the IGF to prevent fragmentation. They also emphasised the importance of national and regional IGFs in capturing grassroots perspectives, the need for more inclusive participation from developing countries and the role of the IGF in linking Internet governance to broader development objectives. Some delegates suggested defining what is meant by “enhanced cooperation” to avoid misunderstandings and repeated that a new centralised intergovernmental body is neither necessary nor desired. Overall, the Internet governance discussion underscored the importance of preserving the open architecture of the Internet, preventing fragmentation, and investing in capacity so that all communities can meaningfully engage in governance processes.

Data Governance

There was broad agreement that data governance needs a global, rights respecting framework that goes beyond privacy and security. Civil society organisations called for approaching data governance through a data justice lens that balances security with the protection of human rights and breaks down silos between action lines. They recommended establishing global data standards aligned with human rights, involving the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in the CSTD working group on data governance, and investing in ethical statistical data and interoperable systems to support public policy. Participants proposed creating a global data reliability body and harmonising regulatory mechanisms so that data flows are governed transparently and fairly.

Artificial Intelligence

The AI discussion highlighted both excitement and concern. Many agreed that AI is cross cutting and should be addressed across existing action lines rather than through a new one; they warned against duplicating efforts and urged building on existing UN processes. Human rights experts noted that any interference with privacy by AI systems must be necessary and proportionate and that companies should conduct human rights due diligence and impact assessments. Civil society representatives from the global South warned that the concentration of AI development in a few countries and corporations creates new forms of colonial dependence; they advocated decolonial and gender based approaches to AI governance, including community ownership of data and mandatory gender impact assessments. Youth and feminist speakers echoed the need for accountability, transparency and independent auditing of AI systems and called for inclusive governance that reflects diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. They urged the UN to facilitate agile multi stakeholder cooperation on AI while grounding policy in human rights and social justice.

Capacity Building

Participants stressed that capacity building is foundational to all WSIS action lines. Several governments proposed revitalising mechanisms such as an updated UN Group on the Information Society, a strengthened Commission on Science and Technology for Development and a streamlined WSIS Forum, as well as establishing a WSIS help desk to coordinate technical assistance. Representatives from Africa called for scalable programmes to build digital skills among youth, women and underserved communities through public private partnerships, emphasising industry aligned training in emerging technologies, locally relevant content and targeted support for micro , small and medium sized enterprises. Others emphasised that capacity building and digital literacy should be at the heart of the WSIS+20 review, with dedicated programmes for rural and tribal communities, persons with disabilities and speakers of regional languages, and with internships and fellowships to cultivate future leaders. Youth networks urged that capacity building extend beyond technical assistance to include training in digital policy, rights and governance, and called for micro grants, dedicated spaces for youth engagement and recognition of youth as a distinct stakeholder group. Participants also noted that persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or queer remain under represented and that

materials must be accessible, with persons with disabilities involved in the design and delivery of programmes.

Monitoring and Measurement

Speakers noted that existing WSIS targets do not adequately address emerging issues and lack specificity beyond 2025. They called for creating a uniform data collection and reporting mechanism, defining clear targets and indicators for each action line, and adopting participatory and evidence based approaches that enable all countries to measure progress. Representatives emphasised that monitoring should track youth engagement and differentiate between children, youth and young adults, with age disaggregated data for gender and disability. Delegates proposed leveraging the complementarity of the IGF, WSIS Forum and the Commission on Science and Technology for Development and increasing participation by development banks to finance digital inclusion projects. They also recommended that national and regional IGFs be used to gather data on implementation and that independent evaluations be conducted to ensure accountability.

Follow Up and Review

Participants lamented the absence of structured mechanisms to integrate WSIS action lines into national strategies. They called for clear, inclusive and transparent processes to monitor implementation, coordinate across ministries and stakeholders and hold actors accountable. Speakers suggested establishing national annual reviews, mid term five year reviews and global assessments that include indicators reflecting the realities of particular groups and ensure that gender, youth and disability perspectives are measured. They emphasised that hybrid models for consultations should continue and that lessons from the Sao Paulo guidelines on multi stakeholder processes should inform future reviews. Many noted that capacity building is a prerequisite for effective follow up and that more resources are needed to support developing countries and under represented groups.

Conclusion

The July 29 consultation confirmed broad commitment to the WSIS vision while surfacing substantive proposals to modernise the framework. Participants agreed that bridging digital divides, promoting environmental sustainability, ensuring human rights, supporting inclusive digital economies and mobilising adequate financing are urgent priorities. They urged the co-facilitators to produce a zero draft that integrates the Global Digital Compact, aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals and the WSIS+10 outcome document, grants the Internet Governance Forum a permanent mandate and secure funding, and mainstreams gender equality, children’s rights, disability inclusion and human rights across all action lines. Many noted that the building blocks for digital cooperation already exist but require renewed political will, coordination and capacity building at national and regional levels; they called for multi-year thematic tracks at the IGF, strengthened regional forums and national reviews, robust measurement and accountability mechanisms and a people-centred approach that leaves no one behind. Speakers emphasised that the WSIS process must remain multi-stakeholder,

inclusive and forward-looking, drawing on lessons from the past two decades while addressing new challenges such as AI governance, data justice, environmental impacts and intergenerational equity. With clear commitments, meaningful participation by governments and non-governmental stakeholders and robust financing, the WSIS+20 review can chart a path toward a digital future that is equitable, sustainable and rights-respecting.