

Bridging the Digital Divide: Aligning with WSIS Action Lines and the Global Digital Compact presented by Engr. James Kunle Olorundare, SMIEEE (President/CEO, Internet Society, Nigeria Chapter and President, Jacobian-Sam Care Foundation)

Hello everyone, my name is Engr. Kunle Olorundare, President, ISOC Nigeria Chapter and I double as the President of Jacobian-Sam Care Foundation. I am happy to be here and excited to contribute to the WSIS +20 Consultation having submitted a contribution in that light vis-à-vis zero draft. I go straight into the discussion. I will be speaking on: **BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE beyond the traditional meaning.**

The digital divide, encompassing disparities in infrastructure and access to emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and data systems, remains a critical barrier to global digital equity. As previously outlined, the divide between the Global North and South manifests in limited connectivity (e.g., 37% internet penetration in Sub-Saharan Africa vs. 90% in North America, ITU 2024), unequal access to computational resources, and biased AI datasets that marginalize non-Western populations. Platforms like the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), with its 20-year legacy and commitment to multistakeholder dialogue, are pivotal in addressing these challenges. This note aligns these efforts with the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Action Lines and the Global Digital Compact (GDC) to ensure cohesive, inclusive, and sustainable solutions.

Infrastructural Divide: North vs. South

The Global South faces persistent barriers in broadband access, device affordability, and reliable power grids. Rural areas, in particular, suffer from low bandwidth and unstable infrastructure, limiting access to digital services.

Solutions: Establish funds and deploy scalable technologies like low-earth-orbit (LEO) satellite networks (e.g., Starlink, OneWeb) and community-driven mesh networks powered by solar microgrids. Open-source hardware initiatives can reduce device costs, enhancing affordability.

AI and Data Divide

The Global North dominates AI development, holding 80% of AI patents (WIPO, 2024), leaving the South with limited computational resources and data sovereignty. Biased datasets risk cultural exclusion, while data extraction raises privacy concerns.

Solutions:

1. **Decentralized and Decolonised AI:** Establish regional AI research hubs using federated learning to train models locally, preserving data sovereignty. Open-source platforms (e.g., Hugging Face) can democratize access.
2. **Capacity Building:** Develop AI and data science training programs tailored to local contexts and contents, emphasizing multilingual datasets. Partnerships with universities and tech firms can scale these efforts.
3. **Ethical Data Governance:** Implement frameworks aligned with global standards (e.g., GDPR, African Union's Malabo Convention) and leverage blockchain-based data marketplaces to empower communities.

Role of the IGF

The IGF's multistakeholder model, fostering dialogue among governments, civil society, and industry, is critical for sustained progress. Its 20-year legacy demonstrates its ability to share best practices (e.g., community Wi-Fi models) and address emerging issues like AI ethics. Moving forward, the IGF must:

- Strengthen regional forums (e.g., Africa IGF) for localized solutions.
- Dedicate sessions to AI, data governance, and next-generation connectivity (e.g., 6G).
- Amplify underrepresented voices to ensure inclusivity and create more relevant dynamic coalition..

Alignment with WSIS Action Lines

This approach aligns with **WSIS Action Line C2 (Information and Communication Infrastructure)**, which emphasizes universal, affordable, and equitable access to ICTs. It supports infrastructure development through scalable solutions like LEO satellites and community networks. Additionally, it aligns with **Action Line C7 (ICT Applications)**, specifically e-learning and e-science, by promoting AI and data-driven tools for education and innovation in underserved regions. **Action Line C11 (International and Regional Cooperation)** is also relevant, as the IGF's multistakeholder platform fosters global collaboration to address these divides.

Alignment with the Global Digital Compact

The GDC, adopted to advance a shared vision for an inclusive digital future, complements these efforts. It aligns with:

- **Objective 1 (Closing the Digital Divide):** Deploying affordable connectivity and devices directly supports the GDC's goal of universal access by 2030.
- **Objective 3 (Data Governance):** Ethical data frameworks and blockchain-based solutions align with the GDC's emphasis on data sovereignty and privacy.
- **Objective 5 (AI Governance):** Decentralized AI development and capacity building reflect the GDC's call for inclusive, human-centric AI systems. The IGF's role as a platform for ongoing dialogue supports the GDC's commitment to multistakeholder governance, ensuring solutions are sustainable and equitable.

To avoid digital colonialism or environmental harm:

- **Inclusive Policies:** Engage diverse stakeholders to prevent monopolistic control.
- **Sustainable Technologies:** Prioritize green solutions like energy-efficient data centers.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Ensure AI systems use diverse datasets to avoid bias.
- **We must strengthen multi-stakeholder** model at all levels from our community to the global level.

Conclusion

Bridging the digital divide requires addressing infrastructure, AI, and data disparities through platforms like the IGF, which fosters inclusive dialogue. By aligning with WSIS Action Lines C2, C7, and C11, and the GDC's objectives, these efforts can drive equitable digital ecosystems. The IGF's continued evolution, building on its 20-year legacy, ensures it remains a cornerstone for global cooperation, empowering communities without introducing new forms of exclusion.