WSIS+20 REVIEW ELEMENTS PAPER

Introduction

1. This Elements Paper is presented by the WSIS+20 Co-facilitators[1] following the consultation with Member States on May 30 and with other stakeholders on June 9 and 10, 2025. This Elements Paper draws on the 20-year review report prepared by the UN Commission on Science, Technology and Development (CSTD), the Secretary-General's annual reports on WSIS implementation, substantive contributions and reports published by United Nations entities and other organisations.

2. The WSIS vision and commitment 'to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society' in which '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", remain relevant, and were reaffirmed in the General Assembly's WSIS+10 resolution, and in the Global Digital Compact.

3. Contributions have also been made to this review by governments, the private sector, civil society, international organisations, the technical and academic communities and other stakeholders through other written and oral consultation processes.

4. Ensuring the full participation of developing countries is a priority, supported by capacity-building, technology development, and financial resources.

5. The WSIS process has been defined by multi stakeholder cooperation, recognized as essential for building an inclusive Information Society. Governments, intergovernmental and international organisations, the private sector, civil society, the technical, academia and youth, have an indispensable role in achieving WSIS outcomes.

6. The rule of law remains essential for building a people-centred Information Society, which requires a transparent and accountable architecture for digital governance, grounded in human rights and international norms. Human Rights are pivotal to the WSIS vision with emphasis on the need to foster an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space that respects, protects and promotes human rights.

7. Since the Summit, WSIS implementation has adapted to a fast-evolving digital landscape shaped by transformative innovations, which have expanded global connectivity, supported economic growth, and strengthened resilience while generating new and still-emerging risks associated with inequality and digital exclusion, cybersecurity and crime, information integrity, harassment and hate speech, environmental impacts and the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in ways that undermine or limit human rights.

8. While WSIS goals have advanced in many areas, persistent digital divides in access, skills, and affordability continue to limit progress and risk deepening inequalities. Achieving universal, meaningful, and affordable access remains essential to achieving the WSIS vision. Special attention needs to be paid to the needs of women and girls,

[1] **Modalities for the WSIS+20 review were approved in General Assembly resolution 79/277 in March 2025**

young people, the elderly, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and marginalised communities, while drawing attention to the needs of future generations.

9. The empowerment of women and girls, and their participation in the digital space are essential to close the gender digital divide and advance sustainable development.

10. The WSIS+20 review presents a key opportunity to align the implementation of WSIS and the Global Digital Compact by reinforcing existing frameworks for international and multistakeholder cooperation and anchoring them within the WSIS vision of a people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society grounded in the UN Charter, sustainable development, and human rights.

11. The WSIS+20 review should be an input to the 2030 review of the *Agenda for Sustainable Development* as requested by the General Assembly Resolution on WSIS+10.

12. Partnership and cooperation between governments and other stakeholders is needed to build an inclusive Information Society and achieve an inclusive, open, sustainable, fair, safe and secure digital future for all.

Information and communications technologies for development

13. ICTs are critical to achieving the 2030 Agenda and building inclusive, resilient societies. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted both their transformative potential and the urgent need to address inequalities in digital access and use.

14. Since WSIS, progress has been notable. Broadband coverage has expanded, mobile phone ownership has increased, and Internet access has improved. Governments, UN bodies, and partners have prioritized digital strategies, empowering people to access services and participate more actively in public life.

15. Yet, digitalisation remains uneven. One-third of the world is offline, and many connected users still face barriers such as high costs, low digital literacy, and limited content relevance, particularly in rural and low-income communities, deepening existing inequalities.

16. To bridge these divides, enhanced international cooperation, targeted investment, and supportive policy frameworks are needed. Feedback is sought on ways to strengthen digital capacity, foster inclusion, and ensure equitable digital development for all.

Digital economy

17. The digital economy has expanded rapidly since WSIS, transforming trade, finance, and services through e-commerce, digital payments, and online platforms. Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become a key pillar of global economic activity.

18. Mobile finance and digital platforms supporting Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs), women-led businesses, and innovation in sectors such as agriculture and employment have made notable progress.

19. However, benefits remain uneven. Developing countries face limited infrastructure, digital skills, and financing. Automation and AI risk deepening inequalities and displacing jobs where digital capacity is weak.

20. Feedback is invited on how to close structural gaps, support small enterprises, and ensure fair access to digital opportunities for sustainable development.

Social and cultural development

21. Governments have increasingly adopted ICT strategies aligned with WSIS Action Lines to improve public services and drive innovation across sectors such as education, health, culture, and disaster response.

22. Progress includes expanded e-government services, digital learning tools, and identity systems that enhance service delivery. ICTs have supported public health, cultural engagement, and crisis preparedness, with strong backing from UN agencies and partners.

23. Nonetheless, digital divides in access, affordability, and infrastructure persist. Many schools remain offline, digital ID systems raise privacy concerns, and limited resources hinder inclusive implementation in low-income settings.

24. Feedback is invited on how to expand inclusive access to digital services, address data protection risks, and strengthen national strategies for equitable digital transformation

Environmental impacts

25. ICTs play a growing role in supporting environmental sustainability. Progress has been made in the use of ICT tools like remote sensing and emissions monitoring to enforce environmental regulations. Smart systems also improve energy use and public service efficiency, while open data platforms aid transparency and accountability.

26. However, the environmental footprint of ICTs is rising. Energy consumption, GHG emissions, and demand for scarce minerals pose sustainability challenges. Resource extraction and e-waste management remain key concerns.

27. Feedback is encouraged on ways to reduce the sector's environmental impact, including advancing circular economy approaches, improving recycling, and setting sustainability standards for digital technologies.

Bridging digital divides

28. The decades since WSIS have seen very substantial growth in the number of individuals worldwide that have access to and use telephony, the Internet and online services. However, substantial digital divides remain between and within regions, countries and communities. Much still needs to be done in order to achieve the goal of universal meaningful and affordable access to the Internet and other digital resources that is envisaged in the WSIS outcome documents and SDGs.

29. There is growing concern that digital divides between regions and countries and within societies may be exacerbating other economic and social inequalities as the benefits of digital inclusion are more readily accessible to those with higher incomes and higher levels of educational attainment.

30. Significant digital divides persist within societies, with rural populations, women, persons with disabilities, and marginalized groups facing lower levels of Internet access and digital participation. Urban–rural gaps remain wide and are especially pronounced in low-income countries. Despite international commitments, persons with disabilities continue to face barriers to access. These divides often mirror broader social and economic inequalities, raising concerns that digital exclusion may further deepen existing disparities. The principal focus of work to address digital divides has shifted from the provision of basic connectivity to enabling universal meaningful and affordable access to the Internet.

31. Lack of awareness of potential benefits, lack of relevant content and skills, and fear of potential risks associated with Internet use are important barriers to Internet engagement among those who are unconnected or make very limited use of Internet.

32. In its WSIS+10 resolution, the General Assembly underscored the importance of local content and services, in a variety of languages and formats, in enabling access to information and opportunity for all. Experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing scale of online services has increased the importance of ensuring accessibility of online resources to all groups and communities, including language and other minorities.

33. Efforts have been made to make the Internet more multilingual, including the introduction of Internationalized Domain Names by ICANN, while a wider range of languages has become available on search engines and social media platforms. The great majority of Internet content remains, however, in a small number of international languages. Automated translation services are increasingly used to address this.

34. The expansion of the Internet and social media has made digital and media literacy crucial for navigating online spaces, assessing information reliability, and responding to challenges such as cybercrime and disinformation—now a key priority for governments and stakeholders.

35. Bridging digital divides across and within countries will remain a central priority of WSIS. We invite reflections on how the WSIS +20 review can contribute towards achieving this.

The enabling environment

36. A supportive policy and regulatory environment is essential for inclusive digital transformation. To date, progress has been made through national strategies and legal frameworks that have expanded digital infrastructure, supported inclusion, and enabled the growth of ICT services. These efforts have facilitated sustainable development while mitigating potential risks.

37. Challenges persist in aligning digital governance with broader policy areas such as privacy, consumer rights, and intellectual property. Managing radio frequency spectrum and adapting laws to evolving technologies also require coordinated action.

38. Feedback is welcomed on how to strengthen integrated digital policies, ensure legal coherence across sectors, and promote innovation while safeguarding rights and public interests.

Financial mechanisms

39. ICT investment has grown substantially since WSIS, shifting focus toward data centres, AI, and advanced digital infrastructure in response to evolving technologies and services.

40. Private sector funding has driven this growth, complemented by public support and development banks in areas lacking commercial viability. Regulators have enabled investment through supportive policies.

41. However, funding gaps persist in developing countries, especially for digital infrastructure, skills, and AI readiness. High costs and unequal investment have concentrated benefits in a few nations.

42. Feedback is invited on enhancing international support, increasing targeted financing, and ensuring equitable access to resources for inclusive digital transformation.

Human rights and ethical dimensions of the Information Society

43. Human rights are central to the WSIS vision. While ICTs have the potential to strengthen the exercise of human rights, enabling access to information, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and association, and facilitating access to development, they also pose new challenges to enabling and protecting human rights, including concerns related to data gathering and management, surveillance and the right to privacy.

44. The same rights that people have offline must also be protected online.

45. Women and girls are under-represented online and in employment and leadership in the ICT sector, and are disproportionately likely to experience harassment, abuse and technology-enabled gender-based violence.

46. Development of ICT applications and operation of services should respect the rights of children as well as their protection and well-being.

47. Information integrity, platform accountability and the role of content regulation and self-regulation, have gained greater resonance since the emergence of generative AI platforms that have increased the capability and reduced the costs of generating realistic content, including disinformation.

48. International rights agreements permit restrictions on expression to protect the rights or reputations of others, national security, public order, public health or morals, provided that these are relevant, proportionate and established in law.

49. Actions need to be taken against abusive uses of ICTs such as illegal and other acts motivated by racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance, hatred, violence, all forms of child abuse, and trafficking in, and exploitation of, human beings.' Other types of content that have raised concerns since WSIS include gender-based violence, defamation, disinformation and the promotion of terrorism.

50. Stakeholders should promote information integrity, tolerance and respect in the digital space, protect the integrity of democratic processes, strengthen international cooperation concerning misinformation, disinformation and hate speech online, and mitigate the risks of information manipulation in a manner consistent with international

law. Governments should promote diverse and resilient information ecosystems and strengthen independent and public media.

Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs

51. Building confidence and security in information and communications technologies is critical to ensuring the implementation of WSIS goals. The global culture of cybersecurity needs to be promoted, developed and implemented to enhance security and ensure the protection of data and privacy, while also enhancing access and trade.

52. The challenges posed to cybersecurity and by cybercrime have become substantially more complex and serious since WSIS because of the growing pervasiveness of ICTs, the range of services and transactions now undertaken online, and the extent of data held on individuals and organisations.

53. Concern has grown since WSIS about the use of digital technologies and services for harassment and abuse, including hate speech directed at women and at racial and social minorities, sexual and racial harassment and gender-based violence, bullying and disinformation, which affect public trust and confidence in the Internet and digital services.

54. The United Nations and other international organisations have sought to develop international normative frameworks to build trust and confidence in digital services, promote cybersecurity and take action against cybercrime in accordance with human rights, including the UN Framework for Responsible State Behaviour in Cyberspace and the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime. The General Assembly adopted a Convention against Cybercrime in 2024 which addresses a range of issues including the illegal access and exploitation of electronic data, money laundering and child sexual exploitation.

55. Capacity building at all levels is critical to enabling protection against cyber threats.

56. We invite proposals in this section on augmenting confidence and security in the use of ICTs in line with existing processes and platforms.

Internet governance

57. The open, interoperable nature of the Internet has underpinned the development of an extraordinary variety of services and applications, reaching across the range of human society including governance, economy, development and rights. The evolution of digital technology and services and the growing pervasiveness of the Internet have greatly increased the technical and public policy issues impacted by the Internet. This has led to a substantial increase in the number of international fora at which issues concerning the development and governance of the Internet are discussed.

58. International cooperation is important to prevent, identify and address risks of fragmentation of the Internet.

59. The governance of the Internet should be multilateral, transparent and democratic, with the full involvement of governments, the private sector, civil society and international organisations.

60. The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) has become an established forum for discussion and its importance as the primary multi-stakeholder platform for discussion of Internet governance issues has been recognized.

61. Broader participation and engagement in Internet governance discussions by governments and other stakeholders from developing countries is critical. Member states and relevant stakeholders should support the participation of governments and all other stakeholders from developing countries in the Forum itself, as well as in the preparatory meetings.

62. The mandate of IGF is subject to this review and proposals on the renewal of its mandate will be presented in the zero draft.

63. Enhanced cooperation is critical to enabling governments on an equal footing to carry out their roles and responsibilities in international public policy issues pertaining to the Internet.

64. The Zero draft will consider proposals on how to work towards the improvement of enhanced cooperation as envisaged in the Tunis Agenda.

Data governance

65. The volume of data generated, stored and used by digital systems has grown enormously since WSIS. This has enabled much more sophisticated data analysis by governments and commercial businesses, which has facilitated developmental goals but also widened the scope for targeting commercial products and services and posed new challenges in data governance, including data privacy and data protection.

66. While data is vital for achieving the SDGs, many developing countries lack the capacity to use it effectively. Quality and reliability of data are critical to their effective deployment for development.

67. The emergence of AI, enabling much more sophisticated data analysis, has increased and will continue to increase the potential for data to be used to enhance development, but has also intensified potential risks to privacy and other human rights.

68. We need to emphasize the need for responsible, interoperable data governance and stronger national capacities, especially in the Global South. Growing concerns around algorithmic transparency, surveillance, and unequal protection frameworks underscore the need for global standards, trust-based data flows, and inclusive policymaking.

69. Proposals on data governance will be presented in the zero draft, taking into consideration the ongoing process working group on data governance for development established by CSTD that will report to the General Assembly in 2026.

Artificial intelligence

70. The last five years have seen exceptionally rapid growth in the development and exploitation of artificial intelligence, including the emergence of generative AI platforms and large language models that have already seen extensive use by governments, businesses and individuals.

71. AI systems have immense potential to transform aspects of economic and social development but also raise concerns about potential risks including unexpected and unanticipated outcomes.

72. The concentration of artificial intelligence research and development in a small number of countries has raised concerns about the potential for new digital divides in the adoption, impact and governance of AI to emerge between developed and developing countries. International cooperation, including capacity building towards, equitable access to compute resources, high quality-data sets, AI research partnerships, capacity development for public institutions, civil servants, and regulators; and the maintenance of open, inclusive AI ecosystems will be crucial to ensuring the full participation of developing countries in AI development and in AI governance.

73. There is currently a global governance deficit with regard to AI, with a fragmented patchwork of national and multilateral action. The United Nations, as the most inclusive multilateral platform, has an essential role in shaping, enabling, and supporting the governance of AI.

74. We will govern AI in the public interest and ensure that the application of AI fosters diverse cultures and languages and supports locally generated data for the benefit of countries and communities' development. This includes international cooperation to support developing countries in building AI capacities, as well as efforts to address potential negative impacts of emerging digital technologies on labour and employment and on the environment.

75. We take note of the ongoing work to establish a multidisciplinary Independent International Scientific Panel on AI and the Global Dialogue on AI Governance involving governments and other stakeholders. The Secretary General has been requested to develop innovative voluntary financing options for AI capacity building that take into account the recommendations of the High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence on a Global Fund on AI.

76. Proposals on Artificial Intelligence will be presented in the zero draft, taking into consideration implementation of the Global Digital Compact and the need to ascertain a relationship between GDC implementation and WSIS.

Capacity building

77. The rapid evolution of digital technologies has emphasized the importance of capacity building, technology transfer, technical assistance and sharing of experience amongst developed and developing countries in building the Information Society that is envisaged in the WSIS outcome documents.

78. Capacity building remains a foundational pillar for an inclusive, equitable, and development-oriented digital transformation. Many developing countries continue to face significant barriers in harnessing digital technologies due to limited technical expertise, weak institutional frameworks, and constrained fiscal space. Without targeted support to strengthen digital skills, develop policy and regulatory capacity, and upgrade public institutions, the promise of digital technologies—including artificial intelligence—risks deepening inequalities rather than reducing them.

79. Capacity building is critical to efforts to build institutional capacity in order to leverage the opportunities of the Information Society and the digital economy and to mitigate potential risks in support of the goals of WSIS and the SDGs. It is required by organisations, businesses and individuals in the digital sector and in sectors of the economy and public service that are impacted by digitalisation. Targeted and coherent capacity building programmes for civil servants are needed, leveraging existing expertise in the United Nations System on emerging technologies.

80. Increasing emphasis has been placed on the importance of digital literacy in empowering individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to identify reliable information that will help them to access opportunities and improve their quality of life.

81. The zero draft will explore how to improve capacity building, including by strengthening coherence and coordination between existing mechanisms, establishing new capacity building programs, and other options. We invite ideas and reflections on how to strengthen capacity building in the WSIS +20 Review.

Monitoring and measurement

82. Digitalization has led to enormous growth in the range and volume of data available for analysis of the Information Society and its impacts. This includes both data concerned with the digital ecosystem and data concerned with other aspects of human development. Data can help identify challenges, formulate solutions, monitor implementation and make needed course corrections in achieving progress towards the SDGs.

83. The WSIS+10 review did not establish targets for the development of the Information Society beyond 2015. However, subsequent targets for meaningful and affordable connectivity have been adopted by several international agencies.

84. Proposals concerning monitoring and measurement will be included in the zero draft following consideration of responses to the consultation on this Elements Paper.

Follow-up and review

85. Proposals concerning follow-up to the 2025 review will be included in the zero draft following consideration of responses to the consultation on this Elements Paper.