

GNI's intervention at WSIS+20 virtual stakeholder consultation sessions (9-10 June 2025)

The Global Network Initiative (GNI) is the leading multistakeholder forum for accountability, shared learning, and collective advocacy on government and company policies and practices related to technology and human rights. GNI is a membership organization comprising over 100 academics, civil society organizations, investors, and technology companies. We have members on every populated continent, with nearly one-third based in the majority world.

GNI has participated in past WSIS consultations, including the Open Consultation Process held in March 2025. We are a member of the Global Digital Rights Coalition and a signatory to the cross-stakeholder “five point plan” and eight recommendations for an inclusive WSIS+20 review. We thank the Co-Facilitators and the WSIS Secretariat for continuing to provide opportunities to participate in the consultations and anticipate positive and rights-respecting developments in Internet Governance. Our responses to the questions posed in the consultation are outlined below.

To what extent and how has the vision of a "people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society" evolved over the past 20 years since WSIS?

The Geneva Declaration of Principles (“Declaration”) establishes a robust foundation for a people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society. At its core, the Declaration emphasizes the universality, indivisibility, interdependence, and interrelation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. This includes the right to freedom of expression, as stated in Article 19 of the ICCPR. Although the principles and vision outlined in the Declaration remain pertinent today, they face renewed challenges. These include:

Access to knowledge and information: Traditional barriers still hinder access to information such as infrastructure deficiencies, affordability, digital literacy, and availability of content in local languages. Additionally, access to information faces new challenges, such as barriers in access to and the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) systems. AI models can be a resource to address digital divides and expand access to information, but they can also deepen digital inequalities where they lack transparency, cultural adaptability, and appropriate accountability.

Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs: Efforts to weaken encryption, government approaches to cybersecurity and cybercrime that are not grounded in international human rights, insecure digital infrastructure, and capacity challenges within governments, service providers, and communities are trends that persist in undermining the establishment of a robust, rights-respecting culture of cybersecurity across societies.

Enabling environment: The roll-out of digital public infrastructure without appropriate legal authority, transparency, and accountability can leave the rights of individuals vulnerable. Overly broad efforts focused on content regulation that include requirements such as traceability, establishment of local offices, short-time frames for content removal, requirements for proactive content filtering, and

heavy-handed penalties for non-compliance can also undermine the rights of users. Similarly, state actions such as internet shutdowns and other [network disruptions](#) undermine individuals' rights. Finally, [nascent](#) regulatory efforts, government interventions, and government mandates related to AI can impact freedom of expression and privacy.

International and regional cooperation: There are several present-day barriers to international and regional cooperation. This includes the weakening of the multistakeholder model of Internet governance through increased moves for state control over Internet infrastructure, data flows, and content. This can be seen in calls for digital sovereignty and measures such as increased [data localization](#) requirements, content blocking, and censorship. These challenges are underpinned by a lack of meaningful multistakeholder engagement with civil society and the technical community, coupled with a growing trend of closing civic spaces and under-resourced civil society organizations, particularly in the Global Majority.

What are the priorities and challenges to the implementation of WSIS outcomes today?

The implementation of WSIS should advance regional, national, and local priorities. Key focus areas include:

- Ensuring universal, affordable Internet access, especially for rural, remote and underserved populations.
- Supporting the development of rights-respecting digital public infrastructure ecosystems.
- Re-affirming and ensuring the private sector adheres to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.
- Understanding the impact of conflict on human rights and development.
- Understanding the risks that disproportionate surveillance practices pose, including surveillance powers enabled through broad cybercrime regulation and efforts.
- Ensuring a human rights-based approach to the governance of AI, inclusive data governance and understanding the impact of AI on the digital divide, as well as the opportunities and challenges that AI poses for human rights and development.
- Addressing the impact that shrinking civic space has on a free, open, secure, and interoperable internet.

For effective WSIS implementation, commitment to WSIS at the international, regional, national, and local levels is essential. Adequate resourcing, localized metrics, and robust reporting mechanisms are necessary to facilitate this. The WSIS+20 review should:

- Reaffirm commitments to people-centered digital development.
- Reaffirm the Global Digital Compact's (GDC) recognition of the IGF as "the primary multistakeholder platform for discussing Internet governance issues;" renew its mandate; and re-establish and resource it as a permanent mechanism and forum for multistakeholder dialogue on the Internet and digital governance. In doing so, regional and national IGFs should be strengthened and streamlined.
- Ensure multi-stakeholder approaches to Internet governance embody the principles of multistakeholderism as articulated in the [NETMundial+10 São Paulo Guidelines](#).

- Enable robust engagement with non-governmental actors as articulated by civil society and the technical community, including as set out in the five point plan and further set of eight recommendations.
- Streamline digital cooperation efforts, including by integrating the Global Digital Compact, to ensure coherence and focus of a global digital development vision and agenda.

How can cooperation through the WSIS mechanisms, including multistakeholder dialogue and the recently adopted Global Digital Compact, enhance coherence in digital governance?

Aligning the GDC with the WSIS will enhance coherence in digital governance by aligning fragmented efforts, enabling inclusive decision-making, and creating shared norms and principles. In particular, the GDC can bolster and strengthen the work carried out through the WSIS Action Lines in the areas of:

- **Connectivity** with a focus on blended financing mechanisms and accessible and affordable access to data.
- **Data governance** with a focus on ensuring data governance frameworks are grounded in international human rights standards, empower the end-user, and further catalyze the use of data to achieve the SDGs.
- **Digital public goods and digital public infrastructure** with a focus on open data, open standards, and promoting rights-respecting DPI ecosystems
- **Digital inclusion** with a focus on technology transfer and facilitating North-South and South-South triangular cooperation.
- **Information integrity and disinformation** with a focus on promoting fact-based, timely, targeted, clear, accessible, multi-lingual, and science-based information, including during times of crisis.
- **AI** with a focus on leveraging AI to achieve the SDGs and in support of the public interest.

Aligning the GDC and WSIS will enable both frameworks to function cohesively as a mechanism for addressing equity and capacity-building gaps by ensuring that the structures they establish, such as the AI scientific panel, are inclusive, multi-stakeholder, and have robust participation from the Global Majority.

Conclusion

The WSIS process has played a crucial role in connecting digital technologies with development and recognizing the critical importance of multistakeholderism as a defining principle and approach to Internet governance. Realizing the WSIS vision and action lines will require robust multistakeholder engagement, with full participation from the private sector, technical community, and civil society to assist member states in achieving the SDGs and fostering an inclusive digital environment.