# A Pivotal Moment for Global Digital Cooperation

An Internet Society Perspective for WSIS+20

June 2025

2025 marks 20 years since the Tunis phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). In two decades, the Internet and how people use it have evolved faster than we might have imagined.

Advances in computing, updated Internet protocols, new and improved infrastructure, widespread Internet adoption, rapid growth in open-source software, innovative data uses, and creative ideas have transformed our societies; digital technology, services, and information are now ubiquitous.

This rapid digital transformation also brings new challenges. It has exacerbated existing and created new divides, allowed commercial power to concentrate, and raises legitimate concerns about privacy, online safety, the spread of misinformation, and how the Internet is being used.

This 20-year milestone offers a critical point not just for reflection but for decisive action to shape the future of our increasingly digital society. As global dependence on digital services grows, the need for global cooperation becomes more urgent.

The Internet—the vast network of networks that connects us globally—is the foundational infrastructure for our global digital society. We have a common interest in ensuring its sustainability, and a collective responsibility to develop, operate, and steward the Internet for the benefit of everyone.

## The Internet

The Internet has become a mainstream technology, used by governments, businesses, communities, and individuals all over the world. The Internet has demonstrated remarkable flexibility and adaptability. Its widespread use and integration into all aspects of our societies is mainly due to these fundamental characteristics: global reach, open and collaborative governance, general-purpose technology, open and voluntary standards, innovation without prior permission, interoperability, decentralized networks, and confidentiality and integrity.

### Global Reach

Any endpoint of the Internet can address any other endpoint.

### Open and Collaborative Governance

Decisions are made openly by consensus with fairness and equity among participants.

### General-Purpose Technology

The Internet is capable of supporting a wide and evolving range of uses.

### Open and Voluntary Standards

Internet standards processes are open to everyone. Internet standards are voluntarily adopted, and success is determined by use.

### Innovation Without Prior Permission

Anyone can produce new Internet technologies, applications or services, using existing, or by developing, new standards and best practices, without requiring special permission.

### Interoperability

The ability of Internet technologies, applications, or services to work together.

### Decentralized Networks

Networks connecting to the Internet making independent decisions about how to interconnect their networks.

### Confidentiality and Integrity

Ensuring communications are kept private and that information remains reliable and unaltered.

These characteristics are fundamental for ensuring that the Internet continues to evolve to meet the future needs of our digital society.

Yet, the Internet today faces a range of challenges that could impact the open and global nature that users have come to take for granted. Some of those challenges come from countries seeking to impose national sovereignty on the Internet or from laws with extra-territorial reach. Other challenges come from data breaches, surveillance, cybersecurity threats, the spread of misinformation on social media, the impact of AI agents, diminishing trust, or the consolidation of some Internet services into a few, increasingly powerful companies.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

In 2003 and 2005, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), a two-phase United Nations Conference, defined the issues, policies, and frameworks to harness Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to foster global development. Significantly, the WSIS also adopted a working definition of Internet governance based on the participation of stakeholders in their respective roles, which has become known as “the multistakeholder model of Internet governance” and a venue for Internet governance, the Internet Governance Forum.

Despite these challenges, users can do so much more with Internet access today, including engaging in new forms of social interaction, using AI agents to perform online tasks, experiencing augmented reality, accessing remote medicine, participating in citizen data science, and so much more.

With our increased global dependence on interconnected digital services and amidst evolving challenges to the Internet's open and global nature, WSIS+20 is a pivotal moment. It is our collective opportunity to reinforce the foundations of an open, global Internet that continues to empower individuals and foster universal progress.

## Our Vision Is an Internet for Everyone

The Internet Society was founded in 1992 to support an emerging community of Internet experts from civil society, government, business, academia and Internet organizations who shared a common goal—that the Internet would be for everyone.

Our vision has not changed: it is even more relevant today.

In 2025, the Internet is the primary method of communication and is integrated in almost every aspect of daily life, including government services, banking, healthcare, commerce, education, and entertainment. The Internet has the potential to be a powerful equalizer.

Yet, one-third of the world's population still lacks access to the Internet. A lack of affordable, reliable, and resilient Internet access for everyone excludes people, communities, and countries from essential digital services and the social and economic opportunities that the Internet creates. This is why we advocate for enhanced efforts to connect communities and ensure that Internet access is both available and affordable for everyone, everywhere.

Internet *access* is only the start.

For people to be able to benefit from the opportunities of the Internet, they need an Internet that is open, global, secure, and trustworthy. Great improvements have been made in Internet security, but people still express concerns about their privacy, safety, and security online. This is why we believe in empowering people to make safer choices and continuing the work to ensure that the Internet is secure and trustworthy.

## Multistakeholder Governance and Trust

Realizing the vision of an Internet for everyone also hinges on how the Internet is governed. A retreat from global collaboration toward unilateral policymaking threatens to break the open and global Internet, denying its benefits to people everywhere.

"Multistakeholder governance" is a short way of saying that the Internet is developed, operated, managed, and governed openly and collaboratively by multiple stakeholders for the benefit of the public. This open and collaborative model of governance is uniquely suited to the challenges of the Internet, an environment where:

- Decisions impact a wide and distributed range of people and interests
- There are overlapping rights and responsibilities across sectors and borders
- There is interdependence and shared resources
- Different forms of expertise are needed, and
- Legitimacy and acceptance of decisions directly impacts implementation.

The Internet became a global platform for innovation and economic growth through participatory bottom-up processes, prioritizing the stability and integrity of systems, and maintaining the open nature of the underlying technologies. At its core, multistakeholder governance reflects the Internet's origins and embodies transparency, inclusiveness, shared responsibility, embraces accountability, and is effective at solving common Internet issues. In the technical community, we share a sense of collective stewardship towards the Internet and the open standards on which its technologies and networks are based. These characteristics fortify stakeholder trust in the way that the Internet is operated and governed.

The Internet has evolved and expanded across the world because of its multistakeholder governance. Without collaboration across borders to establish Internet access, ccTLDs, IXPs, community networks, and national strategies and policies, many countries would have been left behind. Without collaboration against security threats, businesses and countries would face cyber threats alone. Without global sharing of expertise, capacity building, and support, countries cut off from the Internet due to natural disasters would be disconnected for an extended time, and relief services would be harder to deploy. Without this global cooperation between many stakeholders, in many countries, from many cultures, we would not have the global digital society we have today.

For two decades, the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), an outcome of WSIS, has served as the world's primary multistakeholder platform for dialogue on Internet governance issues. The IGF and more than 180 regional and national IGFs have fostered meaningful information exchange, shared understanding, and opportunities to advance solutions, which have contributed to real-world change. Some examples are set out in the joint Internet Society and ICANN report, *Footprints of 20 Years of the Internet Governance Forum*.

# Attributes of Successful Multistakeholder Governance

A number of attributes contribute to ensuring multistakeholder governance is successful:

**Openness, inclusiveness, and transparency:** Governance processes should be open to all stakeholders. Openness and inclusiveness are the basis of legitimacy in collaborative decision-making. Those significantly affected by a decision should have the chance to be involved in making it. Inclusiveness is not just an admirable goal, but an essential part of an effective process. The less inclusive a process is, the less likely it is to engender the trust and support of those outside of the process. Transparency is an essential condition for inclusiveness, as it brings expert and affected groups into the process. Transparency of inputs, process, and decision-making is fundamental to the Internet.

**Collaboration and shared responsibility:** All stakeholders share collective responsibility for the continued vitality of the Internet and the benefits it brings our societies. This involves having a common understanding of key problems, developing shared solutions, recognizing mutual benefits, and maintaining open communication.

**Effective decision-making and implementation:** The most effective decisions are those based on an open and deliberative process that considers a broad range of information sources and perspectives. This holds for both the quality and implementation of the decision. As the Internet is operated by a variety of public, private, and civil society stakeholders, the successful implementation of decisions requires imaginative and collaborative solutions. It is not as straightforward as passing a national law or an international treaty. Stakeholders who have been part of the process work harder to make its implementation a success.

**Consensus-driven:** Decisions that are made by rough consensus among all stakeholders are more likely to be implemented than decisions that are made by voting. Rough consensus does not mean everyone agrees with the decision. Rather, the decision is the outcome of stakeholders having addressed all issues together and selected the option that makes most sense in the circumstances. Voting tends to lead to decisions that the majority wants, often leaving minority communities to feel their interests have been excluded. Consensus-based decision-making, however, encourages stakeholders to explain their perspectives and positions to other stakeholders to seek their agreement. This helps ensure that problems and solutions are thoroughly discussed. A consensus-based approach also encourages stakeholders to negotiate and compromise, rather than continue to push their own positions. They are also more likely to "own" the outcome.

# Core Abilities That the Internet Must Offer

Our vision of an Internet for everyone is grounded in our belief that it must empower people with fundamental abilities. As we look to the future, these must remain central to the Internet experience for everyone everywhere.

## The Ability to Connect

The Internet was designed to ensure anywhere-to-anywhere connectivity. All Internet users, regardless of where they live, should have the ability to connect to any other point on the Internet, without technical or other impediments. This ability to connect people is essential to the Internet's value as a platform for innovation, creativity, and economic opportunity.

## The Ability to Communicate

The Internet empowers users with the ability to communicate globally and in many new forms. Its value as a medium for expression is dependent on the ability of its users to speak freely. Private, secure, and, when appropriate, anonymous communications ensure that Internet users can express themselves in a safe and secure manner. All Internet users should have the means to communicate and collaborate without restriction.

## The Ability to Innovate

The open nature of the Internet, which has allowed users to use the Internet in new and innovative ways without first seeking permission, has enabled remarkable growth and diversity of applications and services on the Internet and evolution of the Internet itself.

## The Ability to Share

The Internet enables sharing, learning, and collaboration on a global scale. This has led to the creation of public benefit resources such as Wikipedia and the Internet Archive. The ability to share and openly discuss code online has given rise to the open development of key Internet technologies, such as HTTPS. Fundamental to this ability is the freedom to develop and use open-source software and the concept of fair use.

## The Ability to Choose

The Internet empowers users with the ability to make choices from a global marketplace of ideas, goods and services. Ensuring competition, choice and transparency allows users to remain in control of their Internet experience.

### The Ability to Be Safe

Users need to be able to recognize and navigate potential threats on the Internet, including scams, malware, data breaches, ransomware, identity theft, and online abuse. Users who have online privacy, security, and safety digital literacy skills are better able to protect themselves online.

### The Ability to Trust

Users must be able to trust the Internet and the communications, services, and applications it carries. The ability to trust depends on the availability of security tools, including end-to-end encryption, privacy, consumer protection, and transparency.

These fundamental abilities–to connect, communicate, innovate, share, choose, be safe, and trust–are the bedrock of the Internet's value and must be actively preserved and promoted.

## Key Priorities for WSIS+20

WSIS+20 is the time to secure and build our global digital future, together.

We can do this by providing Internet access to everyone, ensuring the Internet is open, global, secure, and trustworthy, and by committing to share responsibility and collaborate in governing the Internet.

The original WSIS Plan of Action was designed to be flexible and technology-neutral, making it uniquely suited to address both existing and emerging challenges through focused, innovative implementation. Looking forward, together we should:

### Foundational Principles

- Ensure the Internet continues to offer people the abilities to connect, communicate, innovate, share, choose, be safe, and trust
- Protect and nurture the characteristics of the Internet that have made it open, global, secure and trustworthy
- Affirm the NETmundial+10 commitment that the Internet is a global resource that should be managed in the public interest, in accordance with international law and international human rights law

### Mechanisms for Cooperation

- Re-commit to multistakeholder governance and find new ways to ensure meaningful participation in decision-making from all sectors of society
- Adhere to the 10 principles for Internet governance processes adopted in 2014 by NETmundial and apply them to address existing and emerging digital policy challenges
- Renew the Internet Governance Forum's mandate with sustainable funding

- Evolve the Internet Governance Forum to more effectively accommodate a newer concept of digital governance that is focused on digital applications and services, while continuing to provide a place for common discussions concerning the operation and management of Internet infrastructure
- Continue to grow national and regional Internet Governance Forums for local capacity-building and collaboration

### Our Core WSIS+20 Objectives

- Affirm and continue to implement the WSIS Action Lines
- Ensure the implementation of the WSIS Action Lines is complemented and not duplicated by the Global Digital Compact
- Commit to and use the Internet to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals

## Our Digital Future

To ensure the benefits of a digital society reach everyone around the world, and that innovation on the Internet continues to thrive, we need to build an open, global, secure, and trustworthy Internet together. We can only do this by ensuring that decisions about the Internet are open, transparent, inclusive and accountable.