ITU CWG WSIS and SDGs

Call for Inputs: WSIS+20 Review

30 January 2025

Implementation of the WSIS Process

1. **What are the main achievements of the implementation of the WSIS process in the past 20 years?**

The last two decades have seen significant efforts by all stakeholders to implement WSIS Action Lines. This collaborative work resulted in tremendous growth in connectivity and facilitated a remarkable evolution of information and communication technologies, especially the Internet, which has become a critical enabler for sustainable development.

In 2005, only 16 percent of people worldwide, about 1 billion, were online. In the last 20 years, Internet use has grown significantly. In 2024, around 68 percent of the global population—5.5 billion people—were online, according to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). This growth means that 4.5 billion more people are now connected, an increase of 52 percentage points.

The Internet has become an indispensable resource for information, communication, and human connection. It has fueled extraordinary economic growth and catalyzed social progress, enabling more and more individuals, communities, and people to achieve their full potential in promoting sustainable development and improving quality of life.

This extraordinary evolution was possible thanks to all stakeholders being involved in making the changes happen. Governments have adopted policies that favor the development of the Internet and Internet applications; the private sector has invested trillions of dollars in the infrastructure required; the technical community has been continually innovating over these years, ensuring our digital lives are mediated by secure, fast, generative, and interoperable Internet technology; civil society has consistently called for better access at global and local levels; academia and research communities have come up with solutions to allow more people to get connected in the last two decades.

The multistakeholder approach, enshrined in the Tunis Agenda and reaffirmed in the WSIS+10 review outcomes, has been vital to making the Internet a success. It opened the Internet governance ecosystem to all stakeholders and facilitated cooperation among governments, businesses, civil society, and the technical community, multiplying multistakeholder partnerships to implement the WSIS Action Lines.

The WSIS Plan of Action, which used the Millennium Development Goals as a foundation, later informed the transition to Sustainable Development Goals. In the same way, the successes and lessons learned from implementing WSIS Action Lines in the past 20 years could be instrumental in reviewing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and serve as a basis for establishing the targets and goals beyond 2030.

2. What are ITU's main contributions towards the implementation of the WSIS process in 20 years?

ITU's main contributions towards the implementation of the WSIS process include various operational and policy tasks, such as roles of the lead facilitator in coordinating the implementation of the Geneva Plan of Action, facilitator of Action Lines C2, C4, C5, and C6, and co-facilitator of other Action Lines, one of the coordinators of the WSIS stocktaking process, and the host and co-organizer of the annual WSIS Forum.

We recognize that the ITU sectors, along with many other stakeholders, have directed their efforts into constructive work on developing connectivity by working on relevant standardization processes within ITU's mandate on ICT/telecommunications, spectrum management and allocation, development, and other issues in the ITU remit. Yet we would like to highlight that more efforts and collaboration are needed to bring connectivity to a third of the world, which remains unconnected. We strongly believe that this is where the next ITU contributions should be directed.

3. The WSIS process stands as a strong example of global digital cooperation in action for over two decades now. How can we ensure that this inclusive multistakeholder model is sustained and further strengthened?

The multistakeholder model is central to the WSIS process because the ambitious aim of building a people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society can never be achieved by any stakeholder alone. This model has grown from the Internet's own DNA and is what allows it to thrive, enabling new stakeholders, previously not involved, to be included and contribute their share to finding solutions to addressing new and evolving challenges.

To sustain and strengthen the multistakeholder model, there is a need to clearly reiterate the commitment to it in the WSIS+20 review. We strongly urge all the stakeholders to make a confirmation of this commitment the main priority in the WSIS+20 review process. The lessons from the WSIS implementation over the last two decades clearly show that no significant progress would have been possible without the joint collaborative efforts of all stakeholders.

Furthermore, the global Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and its network of national and regional IGF initiatives are crucial elements of the open multistakeholder ecosystem. As a multistakeholder platform, the IGF provides a unique opportunity for governments, businesses, civil society, and the technical community to share experiences and best practices. This exchange contributes to informing decision-making in their local communities and serves as the foundation for local and regional projects with

concrete and sustained impact, such as diverse examples of community-centered connectivity solutions. Re-confirming the IGF mandate and extending it permanently, along with securing sustainable funding, should be an integral part of the commitment to the multistakeholder approach to the implementation of the WSIS outcomes.

We strongly urge against any proposals to establish new, alternative processes in addition to the IGF. Very few stakeholders, if any, have the resources and the ability to follow and contribute to multiple duplicative tracks. Thus, any alternative processes will significantly undermine multistakeholder collaboration and participation. Furthermore, the IGF should not become an avenue to sideline non-governmental stakeholders when governments negotiate at other non-inclusive forums. The IGF should be strengthened as an open, inclusive platform, while any other multilateral negotiation processes should become open, transparent, and inclusive.

We recognize that the multistakeholder model itself must evolve to keep pace with the evolution of technology and the changing geopolitical landscape. It also has to address its own challenges, such as improving its decision-making processes, removing barriers to participation, and working on greater transparency and accountability of its own mechanisms. As the model has matured in the last two decades, these issues are well-known to the multistakeholder community, which is making significant efforts to solve them. We want to highlight this work on improvement from within the ecosystem, especially the guidelines and process steps for multistakeholder collaboration, consensus-building, and decision-making, provided in the NetMundial+10 outcome document, as evidence of the health and maturity of the model.

Lastly, we would like to emphasize the importance of the principles and recommendations for strengthening Internet governance and digital policy processes outlined in the NetMundial+10 outcomes, especially those aiming at improvement of multistakeholder participation in multilateral fora. Internet Society suggests that NetMundial+10 guidelines should be used to improve the WSIS implementation and ensure transparency, accountability, and stakeholder inclusion in the WSIS+20 review process.

4. What are the challenges that remain in the implementation of the WSIS process?

Despite the considerable successes in implementing the WSIS outcomes, obstacles still exist in achieving global Internet connectivity. The WSIS target “to ensure that more than half the world’s inhabitants have access to ICTs within their reach” was accomplished, as more than 60% of the world’s population has access to the Internet. Yet this number doesn’t show the high disparities between countries and regions that lie beneath the headline figure and doesn’t reflect how widely the progress in global connectivity varies.

This uneven development creates different digital and economic divides, which have multifaceted impacts. Accelerating technological innovation and the digitization of essential services like healthcare and education broadens inequalities, leaving women, girls, and people in low-income countries at a

disadvantage. The growing divides reduce the potential to support the implementation of WSIS outcomes, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals.

Alongside the challenges of incomplete and uneven connectivity highlighted above, significant new threats exist to the open Internet and to what we call the Internet's 'critical properties'—the foundational pillars underpinning its growth and adaptability (https://www.internetsociety.org/resources/internet-impact-assessment-toolkit/). Some of these threats pose a serious risk to the Internet as we know it today and its future, including but not limited to Internet shutdowns and fragmentation.

Internet shutdowns are a major concern, as they have become an increasingly common tactic for governments to restrict connectivity at national and sub-national levels, often primarily for political reasons. According to the Internet Society's Pulse platform (https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns), there were 136 Internet shutdowns in the past 12 months, with nine incidents ongoing at the time of writing. The Internet Society believes Internet shutdowns harm societies, economies, and the technical infrastructure of the global digital economy. Internet shutdowns constitute a significant risk for many businesses and investors, including those building infrastructure or developing services.

Another challenge is the trend of Internet fragmentation, where the Internet is carved up along political, economic, and technological boundaries in a fundamental contradiction to the original principles of the globally connected Internet, where data flows freely and securely across the world. A growing number of government and corporate decisions around the world have the potential to adversely impact the open and interoperable global Internet, often with unintended consequences. The Internet Society is gravely concerned about this trend and continues to work with its community of stakeholders worldwide to support sustaining the single, globally interoperable, open Internet.

WSIS Action Lines

5. **Which specific Action Lines have had the most significant impact, and why?**

While we believe that all Action Lines are extremely important for achieving the WSIS goals of building an Information Society, several of them are foundational. Firstly, the WSIS Action Line C2 "Information and Communication Infrastructure" provides the basis for growing, developing, and sustaining connectivity and access and empowering communities to create their own solutions.

Building this global connectivity and bridging existing and emerging digital divides would not be possible without stakeholders working together. Therefore, the WSIS Action Line C1—"The role of public governance authorities and all stakeholders in the promotion of ICTs for development"—is crucial for the implementation of Action Line C2 and any other WSIS outcomes, with the multistakeholder model being a key to achieving the WSIS goals. As an indispensable element of this model, the Internet Governance Forum has become the main platform for reinforcing cooperation by reducing barriers

between different stakeholder groups and facilitating dialogue and exchange of information on all levels: global, regional, national, and local.

Additionally, Action Lines C4, "Capacity building," and C5, "Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs," are instrumental to achieving global connectivity that enriches people's lives. The importance of capacity building cannot be overestimated in relation to the Actions Lines C1 and C2 and to the implementation of any other aspects of WSIS outcomes. Similarly, confidence and security in the use of ICTs are essential: it is impossible to reap the benefits of global connectivity without enhancing the security of the networks and systems and providing a safe online experience for users. The latter includes equipping individuals and communities with the necessary skills in online safety.

Ultimately, we would like to highlight that the Actions Lines are interrelated in their ability to encourage the global community to take the WSIS outcome implementation efforts. One of the examples to illustrate the cross-cutting nature of the WSIS Action Lines is the Tanzania Digital Inclusion Project (TADIP) of the Internet Society Tanzania chapter. Initiated in 2020, the TADIP aims to close the digital divide in Tanzania by connecting the unconnected and underserved citizens in rural and urban centers and training women and girls in STEM. While the project won the WSIS Prize 2024 in Action Line C3, "Access to information and knowledge," these efforts clearly pertain to other WSIS Action Lines that concern connectivity, infrastructure, capacity building, and the role of stakeholder cooperation.

6. **Considering that the WSIS outcomes have demonstrated their relevance and applicability to new and emerging areas, how can the implementation of the WSIS principles and corresponding WSIS Action Lines be enhanced to effectively address these topics?**

The question doesn't specify the meaning of "new and emerging areas." As the survey later inquires specifically about the WSIS and emerging processes, such as the GDC, our answer to this question assumes that the wording refers to new and emerging technologies and related challenges and opportunities for WSIS implementation.

Over the years, innovation and technological evolution have enabled and facilitated the work of the multistakeholder community on the implementation of WSIS outcomes. This includes the evolution of wireless mobile technology, the development of fiber cable technology, and the progress made by the device manufacturing industry, all contributing to faster, more affordable connectivity. More recently, developments in satellite industries, such as the evolution of low-earth orbit (LEO) satellites, have brought more opportunities to connect the unconnected.

At the same time, due to uneven progress in growing connectivity, technological developments, especially when essential services such as healthcare and education are becoming digitized, create new and broaden existing digital divides. These divides could be bridged only if we make implementation of WSIS commitments related to connectivity one of the utmost priorities. The technological evolution can facilitate these efforts, as it has already done for the last 20 years. Yet it is our firm belief that technology is a tool. We should examine any particular new and emerging technology through the lens

of the WSIS's main goal and focus on employing the benefits of technological developments to connect those who are not yet connected and move towards universal connectivity.

New and emerging areas also place particular importance on the multistakeholder model. All the successes in the implementation of WSIS represent examples of stakeholder cooperation. The ability of the WSIS Action Lines to address new issues strongly depends on the multistakeholder model of governance, which has already proven effective in solving various technology-related challenges.

As we all work collaboratively towards implementing the WSIS commitments to build global connectivity and connect the unconnected, it is also crucial to understand that the open, globally connected, secure, and trustworthy Internet is the greatest enabler for development and innovation. Therefore, no matter the method of delivering connectivity—wires, wireless, mobile, or satellite—the networks must incorporate and preserve what has made the Internet evolve into an essential global tool and a whole new space for innovation, growth, and transformation.

The Internet Society identified the critical properties that define the Internet Way of Networking and underpin the growth and adaptability of the Internet. Specific technologies and business models may come and go, but the Internet Way of Networking has been a constant foundation for the success of the Internet from the beginning (https://www.internetsociety.org/resources/doc/2020/internet-impact-assessment-toolkit/critical-properties-of-the-internet/). Only by protecting these properties together with the multistakeholder model of Internet governance can we ensure that tomorrow's Internet remains innovative and sustainable and continues enabling economic and technological development around the globe.

7. Have you any suggestions and inputs on the WSIS+20 Review Action Lines, highlighting key milestones, challenges, and emerging trends beyond 2025 prepared by the WSIS Action Line facilitators?
https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2024/Home/About#actionLines

After reviewing the slide decks prepared by the WSIS Action Line facilitators, we note that this work might warrant a more detailed discussion and input from the global multistakeholder community beyond the scope of this questionnaire. In our answer, we will focus on what we consider the most important concerning the Action Lines pertaining to connectivity and development. This contribution does not represent Internet Society's final and comprehensive position on the review of WSIS Action Lines. While providing comments only on the most crucial areas for improvement in this ongoing work in the context of the ITU CWG WSIS & SDGs consultation, we look forward to further contributing to the discussion in a more detailed way.

We have the following suggestions for the slide decks referenced in the question:

- The slide deck for **Action Line C1** mentions the multistakeholder model only in the context of key milestones and achievements but is silent on this model being crucial to the trends and opportunities beyond 2025. We firmly believe that this model is key to addressing the challenges outlined in the presentation and should be highlighted as a central element of

opportunities and the way forward. This would also provide consistency with how the trends and opportunities are reviewed by other Action Line facilitators: for example, the role of the multistakeholder model is already emphasized in the analysis of opportunities in Action Line 4.

As Action Line C1 refers to stakeholder cooperation, we believe that the review of "trends and opportunities," which considers only technological developments or economic shifts, should also focus on the opportunities for improvement of stakeholder coordination. In this context, we strongly suggest including the reference to the NetMundial+10 outcome document, which provides valuable input for the improvement of multilateral processes and multistakeholder mechanisms.

- The review of **Action Line C2** highlights a number of technological developments, such as LEO and 5G/6G networks, and emphasizes the role of security, partnerships, and capacity building. However, one important aspect is not addressed: some populations are currently offline and will continue to be so in the future unless we build new connectivity models, such as community-centered solutions, including community networks. We suggest mentioning these solutions explicitly as a future opportunity to foster connectivity. As the initiatives to build community-centered solutions are also crucial in the context of capacity building, this aspect might also be added to the review of the opportunities in Action Line C4.

- The slide deck on **Action Line C5** highlights in the opportunities section that the "UN remains critical fora for cyber discussions as well as technical collaboration." While we agree that the discussions at the UN are crucial, we would like to highlight the importance of other fora, especially those relying on multistakeholder efforts. The same section calls for "enhanced private sector engagement" without mentioning the efforts of other stakeholders.

  Yet there are various examples of efforts towards implementing this Action Line, which illustrate the multistakeholder collaboration in action. For instance, the Mutually Agreed Norms for Routing Security (MANRS) initiative, is a global, community-driven initiative to improve the security and resilience of the Internet's global routing system that uses the Border Gateway Protocol (BGP). A decade after its establishment in 2014, MANRS has grown from nine original operators to a community of more than 1,000 participants.

  We, therefore, suggest that the review of Action Line 5 better recognizes the multistakeholder nature of efforts to build confidence and security in the use of ICTs. This aspect could be clearly highlighted by mentioning a variety of fora and efforts in addition to the UN efforts and by emphasizing the role of the technical community, civil society, and academia.

WSIS Action Line for Advancing the SDGs

8. **How can the alignment between the WSIS Action Lines and SDGs be strengthened towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?**

For the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is crucial to close the current and emerging digital divides. Therefore, the efforts should be directed at better aligning the WSIS Action Lines and SDGs that aim to bridge digital divides and build connectivity. In this context, we recommend enhancing the alignment between the most impactful WSIS Action Lines focusing on connectivity and capacity building, and relevant SDGs, in particular:

- WSIS Action Line C1: The role of public governance authorities and all stakeholders in promoting ICTs for development and SGD 17 (partnership for the goals) to facilitate multistakeholder partnerships for implementing WSIS Action Lines related to sustainable development.
- WSIS Action Line C2: Information and communication infrastructure and SGDs 8 (decent work and economic growth) and 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure) to increase the synergy between the efforts to grow sustainable connectivity and support innovation, infrastructure development, and economic growth.
- WSIS Action Lines C3: Access to information and knowledge, C4 "capacity building" and SDG 4 (quality education) to ensure inclusivity and equity in quality education and to facilitate opportunities for lifelong learning.
- WSIS Action Line C5: Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs is a cross-cutting issue crucial to many SDGs. In particular, we suggest enhancing its alignment with SDGs 4 (quality education), 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure), and 17 (partnership for the goals).

WSIS Action Line for Advancing the SDGs

9. **How can we further strengthen multistakeholder platforms such as the WSIS Forum as the platform for digital development and IGF as the platform for governance and policy issues?**

As we highlighted in our previous answers, the IGF has become an indispensable element of the Internet governance ecosystem because as a unique platform for various stakeholders to exchange experiences and practices and inform various efforts in their local communities. This platform has proven its ability to evolve, build mechanisms for intersessional work, and incorporate discussions related to new challenges. We strongly call for the WSIS+20 review to reconfirm the IGF mandate and make it permanent. This should be complemented by sustained funding of the IGF. Furthermore, the

current IGF mechanisms could be leveraged to serve as a vehicle for the implementation of the Global Digital Compact to avoid duplicative efforts and provide alignment between the WSIS and GDC implementation.

Regarding the WSIS Forum, we commend its role as a multistakeholder convener to share best practices and knowledge and foster partnerships in the WSIS implementation. While we recognize that there are new and emerging topics that might be relevant to the WSIS Forum and that the agenda has input from various stakeholders, we firmly believe that maintaining focus on connectivity and bridging digital divides is essential to strengthening the role of the forum. We suggest that the WSIS Forum puts in the center of its agenda the WSIS Action Lines related to connectivity and development, in particular, Action Lines C2 (information and communication infrastructure), C4 (capacity building), C5 (building confidence and security in the use of ICTs) to foster multistakeholder efforts in these areas.

We would also like to encourage increasing the interaction among the WSIS Forum participants by enabling conducive formats, such as roundtables or unconference formats, in which an opening statement would be allowed, but agile dialogue would be strongly promoted. Lastly, a balance between the duration of the segments and the number of speakers in the session would enhance the ability of the forum to facilitate multistakeholder discussions and further evolve as a platform for dialogue.

10. How can the implementation of the WSIS process and the Pact for the Future and its Global Digital Compact be aligned to achieve shared goals?

The Global Digital Compact already recognizes the need to "build on the processes and forums emanating from the World Summit on the Information Society" to advance its implementation. Some GDC objectives and commitments, especially those related to connectivity, are directly relevant to the current WSIS Action Lines and the work already undertaken during the WSIS implementation. The GDC should build on the lessons learned from 20 years of the implementation of WSIS, especially those related to multistakeholder collaboration. The WSIS-related multistakeholder efforts on growing connectivity and bridging digital divides are a perfect example to recognize that the ambitious aims of the GDC cannot be implemented by any stakeholder alone and also a showcase of the best practices in collaboration.

Duplicating efforts hinder the meaningful participation of all stakeholders, including governments from developing countries with limited resources to engage. To avoid this duplication, it is necessary to analyze the current WSIS Action Lines to find where the ongoing work already relates to the GDC. Where necessary and appropriate, there might be a need to carefully update the Action Lines to accommodate the GDC implementation. The United Nations, in the Resolution A/RES/79/194 of 19 December 2024, already recognized the need for coordinating efforts and requested the Commission

on Science and Technology to consider how the WSIS follow-up and implementation can contribute further to the implementation of the Global Digital Compact. We strongly believe that identifying the synergies between WSIS and GDC implementation must be a multistakeholder effort, which offers an invaluable opportunity to put into practice the guidelines provided in the NETmundial+10 Outcome Document.

We call for the implementation of the Global Digital Compact to be multistakeholder, transparent, and inclusive. It should fully leverage existing mechanisms such as the CSTD, WSIS Forum, and the IGF to avoid duplicative efforts that would divert resources for international and multistakeholder cooperation.

11. What are the key emerging digital trends and topics to be considered by ITU in the WSIS+20 review and future vision beyond 2025?

As we highlighted in our previous answers, we strongly believe that technology is a means to achieve the main goal of the WSIS: to build a people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society. While looking at emerging digital trends and technologies is important, the WSIS process should focus on people and how the Internet improves their lives, because each day without Internet access is a day of lost opportunity. In this regard, as long as a third of the world population is still not connected, building capacity to provide and sustain meaningful connectivity should be the priority. In the context of WSIS, the topics related to emerging technology should always focus on relevant Action Lines, especially those related to connectivity and sustainable development, be it growing the connectivity or closing emerging digital divides that new technology creates.

The Internet is an essential global tool and a space for innovation, growth, and transformation. It will continue delivering on its promise to improve the lives of people, communities, and society as a whole as long as we ensure even connectivity and access to the Internet and preserve its critical properties and the model of its governance. Any future vision of WSIS should rely on the ability of all stakeholders to work collaboratively in the Internet governance ecosystem to address emerging challenges and take new opportunities. By protecting the Internet and its governance model, we can make sure that the WSIS of tomorrow will remain people-centered and inclusive while continuing to enable sustainable economic and technological development around the globe.