

Reflections on WSIS+20: The value of WSIS moving forward and advocacy priorities for civil society¹

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The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is a unique United Nations summit that happened in two phases (in Geneva in 2003 and Tunis in 2005) and set the governance of the internet on a multi-stakeholder course. The consensus around this decision has endured for almost two decades. It emphasised the importance of strengthening partnerships and collaboration between different stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, the technical and academic communities, civil society and international intergovernmental organisations (IGOs).

Since then, there has been a strong call to build on the WSIS process by advocating for inclusivity and increased civil society participation at various levels. Empowering civil society to shape debates at the grassroots level was seen as crucial to bringing about significant change. The WSIS process has created space for civil society participation and cooperation within the UN system.

The outcomes of the two phases of WSIS – the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action in 2003 and the Tunis Commitment and Tunis Agenda for the Information Society in 2005 – are notable for incorporating the perspectives and involvement of non-state actors, reflecting a comprehensive and inclusive approach. The WSIS documents strike a balance between broad overarching principles and specific subject areas, providing a holistic yet detailed framework.

In the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society, the role of civil society is significant. It emphasises the importance of multistakeholder participation, highlighting civil society as a key partner in shaping

information society policies, bridging the digital divide (now acknowledged as the digital “divides”), access to information, freedom of expression and the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), while ensuring that the benefits of ICTs are accessible to all.

It is useful to recall that the Tunis Agenda outlines several mechanisms for involving civil society in the implementation of the WSIS outcomes:

Through multistakeholder partnerships: Civil society is viewed as a key partner, bringing its expertise, advocacy and grassroots experience to the table.

Participation in policy development: Civil society is encouraged to participate in the formulation of information society policies to ensure that the perspectives and needs of different communities are taken into account in decision-making processes.

Capacity building and empowerment: The Tunis Agenda stresses the importance of building the capacity of civil society organisations to participate effectively in information society initiatives. This includes providing training, resources and technical assistance to enhance their ability to contribute to policy discussions, advocate for their interests and implement projects at the local level.

Promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms: Civil society plays a crucial role in advocating for the protection of human rights, including freedom of expression, privacy and access to information in the digital age. The Tunis Agenda recognises the role of civil society in holding governments and other stakeholders accountable for upholding these rights in the context of ICTs.

Overall, the Tunis Agenda underlines the importance of an inclusive and participatory approach to building the information society, with civil society playing a central role in shaping its development and ensuring that it serves the interests of all people, especially those in marginalised or underserved communities.

¹ The aim of this report is not to present a research paper, but my opinion on the value of WSIS for the future and the advocacy priorities for civil society. All the terminology used reflects the WSIS language without any theorisation of what is meant.

When WSIS met in 2003 and in 2005, the information society and the knowledge-based society were an aspiration. Today, they are an observable reality. The two stages of the summit were also marked to a high degree by a prosperous decade for humanity. WSIS+20 will take place in the context of many more conflicts and a much broader international discussion about the role of the internet and other technologies and how they intersect with other global concerns and priorities. Many of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are running behind schedule as international disharmony increases. This is why the Summit for the Future, the Global Digital Compact (GDC), and the many other international and regional initiatives are so important.

WSIS+20: What is at stake?

Twenty years after the first phase of WSIS, the UN Secretary-General highlighted:

Inequality is rising. Enormous investments in technology have not been accompanied by spending on public education and infrastructure. Digital technology has led to massive gains in productivity and value, but these benefits are not resulting in shared prosperity. The wealth of those in the top 1 per cent is growing exponentially: between 1995 and 2021, they accounted for 38 per cent of the increase in global wealth, while the bottom 50 per cent accounted for only 2 per cent. Digital technologies are accelerating the concentration of economic power in an ever-smaller group of elites and companies: the combined wealth of technology billionaires, \$2.1 trillion in 2022, is greater than the annual gross domestic product of more than half of the Group of 20 economies.

Behind these divides is a massive governance gap. New technologies are lacking even basic guardrails.²

In this sense, the 20-year review of WSIS takes on prominence and momentum in reflecting on what

needs to be done to improve the work started two decades ago, which is crucial and significant precisely because of the multistakeholder commitment.

However, if different stakeholders have by their very nature different agendas and objectives, the differences within each stakeholder group may be deeper than they were 20 years ago. For example, governments all over the world are very different from each other, from democracies to totalitarian regimes and authoritarian regimes in between. The private sector is a myriad of interests of very different enterprises of different sizes, much more so than before. Civil society includes users and non-governmental organisations, which are of course very different, but their role is more fundamental than ever in terms of respect for human rights, addressing gender inequalities and other marginalisations, freedom of expression and the pressing concerns of the environment and climate change.³ Today's complex geopolitics, endemic wars and a world where values, rights and responsibilities are being challenged in terms of humanity and civilisation make it even more necessary for civil society to engage with national governments and IGOs.

Both the technical and academic communities, by virtue of their roles, are perhaps the ones where there is more consensus on open, inclusive access for individuals, and bottom-up, organic and decentralised governance of the internet.

Not forgetting the OECD, it is within a somewhat complex existing UN framework of various intergovernmental and multistakeholder cooperation forums on digital issues that WSIS+20 is being discussed (see Figure 1).

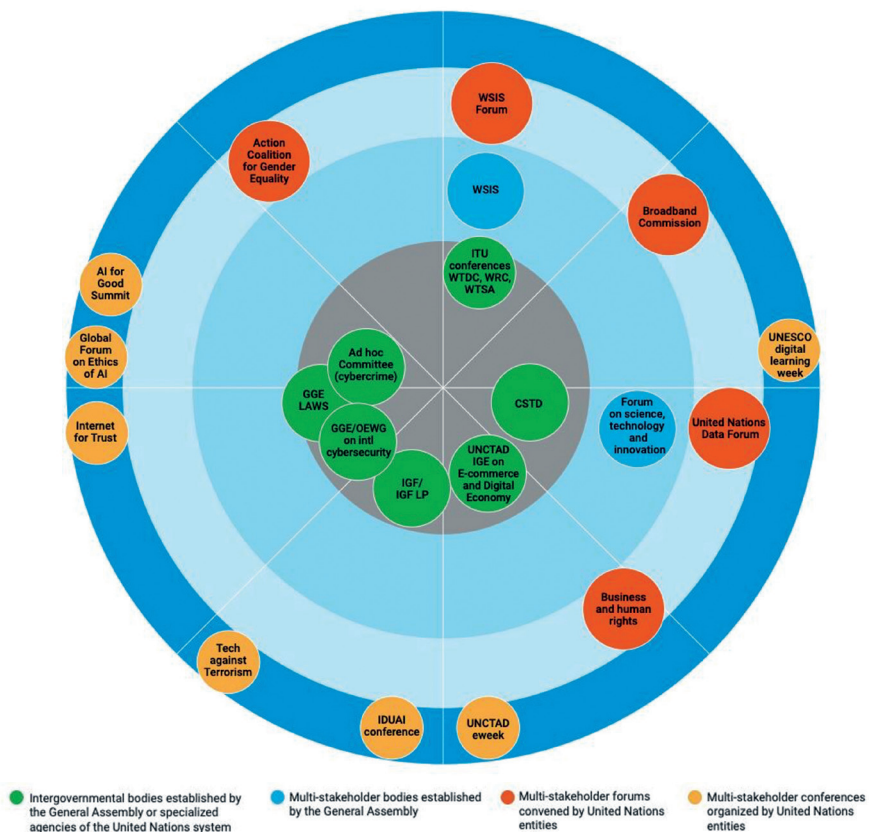
Civil society is undoubtedly challenged by the myriad forums in which digital cooperation and internet governance are discussed and lacks not only human but also financial resources, resulting in an unequal and unbalanced position with respect to other stakeholders. A commitment must be made to mitigate the difficulties that civil society faces in following multiple and simultaneous processes.

² United Nations Executive Office of the Secretary-General. (2023). *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 5: A Global Digital Compact – An Open, Free and Secure Digital Future For All*. <https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/papers/10.18356/27082245-28>

³ The overall review of the implementation of the outcomes of WSIS in 2015 (Resolution A/70/125) called for close alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, highlighting the cross-cutting contribution of ICTs to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and poverty eradication and noting that access to ICTs has also become a development indicator and aspiration in and of itself.

FIGURE 1.

UN intergovernmental and multistakeholder digital cooperation bodies and forums



Abbreviations: AI, artificial intelligence; CSTD, Commission on Science and Technology for Development; GGE, group of governmental experts; IGE, intergovernmental group of experts; IDUAI, International Day for Universal Access to Information; IGF, Internet Governance Forum; LAWS, Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems; LP, Leadership Panel; OEWG, open-ended working group; WRC, World Radiocommunication Conference; WSIS, World Summit on the Information Society; WTDC, World Telecommunication Development Conference; WTSa, World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly.

Source: Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 5: A Global Digital Compact – An Open, Free and Secure Digital Future For All, p. 26.

Internet governance or digital cooperation? Both

When used in good faith and in a peaceful manner, the internet and technology serve human dignity and individual freedom as valuable tools for peace, justice, poverty reduction and improved access to health and education. In doing so, they contribute to the achievement of the SDGs.

When used maliciously and with the aim to undermine fundamental rights, the internet and digital technologies can be tools of violence and war and used to suppress citizens’ political demands for participation, access to information, freedom of expression, equality and fundamental freedoms.

Digital technologies can spread misinformation, propaganda and hate speech, manipulate democratic elections and fuel political and social tensions that disrupt democracies. In addition, there is a growing recognition that the nature of the internet and the digitally mediated life we are currently experiencing is highly unequal and exclusionary. As new technologies are created and used, they create new facts faster than policy makers can regulate them. These smaller and larger changes in our ways of life, taken together, may have effects that are unintended and difficult to predict.

Recognising that the benefits of digitalisation and connectivity are uneven and that structural

asymmetries are emerging and worsening, the current context of multiple, overlapping crises prevents many from reaping the benefits of digital transformation.

To mitigate the risks of the current context, and maintain trust and confidence in the internet, there is an emerging need to strengthen digital cooperation. More than ever, a form of digital cooperation is needed that is about coordination and collaboration around a shared vision of principles, norms and rules, as well as decision making in economic, social, cultural and political areas, on cybersecurity, the digital economy, data, artificial intelligence (AI) and internet infrastructure, *inter alia* for equity, development, social justice, public value and human rights.

Civil society plays a crucial role in ensuring the meaningful participation of independent, rights-based and diverse stakeholders in this process, including in decision making.

Digital cooperation to build consensus among different stakeholders is key to the adoption of a common agenda to be implemented through multi-stakeholder governance processes, to be further strengthened in the WSIS+20 discussions. The Global Digital Compact will not just be an annex to the outcomes of the Summit of the Future, but the digital cooperation instrument to integrate the digital aspects of the different strands of the Compact of the Future.

How could the WSIS outcomes be revised to reflect the current context of digitalisation and datafication and the new challenges that these present?

To respond to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, new and emerging technologies are redefining digital public policy every day, so WSIS+20 should seek to reflect a balance between embracing innovation and ensuring fairness, security and sustainability.

WSIS+20 should be at the forefront of discussions on the economic implications of digitalisation and advocate for policies that ensure that social and economic transitions benefit all. To mitigate the ethical dilemmas posed by new and emerging technologies, the WSIS process should continue to strengthen frameworks to ensure the ethical development and application of such technologies. To reduce the environmental impact of ICTs, from e-waste to the energy consumption of massive data centres, WSIS+20 should promote green and sustainable technology initiatives to help shape a green digital revolution.

New challenges relate to digital human rights, data governance versus data rights and equity, the internet as a global public good without fragmentation by states or big tech companies, values of

inclusion, and democratic participation. And this is where civil society has an important role to play. But one of the key issues remains the ad hoc nature of civil society participation, which should be institutionalised to allow for the meaningful engagement of, among others, traditional development organisations expanding into digital issues, tech workers' and platform workers' trade unions, as well as new-age digital rights organisations and tech activists working on digital commons, design justice and reforming standards bodies from a diversity, equity and inclusion perspective.

While recent trends in the development of AI, particularly the emergence of generative AI technologies, have been hailed as the heralding of a new paradigm of information and knowledge, there have been numerous concerns about epistemic inequality and the appropriation of traditional knowledge and Indigenous cultures. Furthermore, in any process of developing AI, there is a high risk that the inherent biases and glaring omissions in data sets that reflect intersectional divides will be reified into objective truths, denying meaningful representation of the Majority World in the new regime of data-based truth. In this new era, all WSIS stakeholders have a greater role and responsibility.

As far as civil society is concerned, its perspectives and advocacy priorities should be further engaged and broadened at WSIS+20. It has a key role to play at least in the following areas:

- Contributing to bridging the digital divides in all their dimensions at regional, national and local levels, especially in rural and underserved areas. There is a major role for libraries, which have assumed enormous importance as trusted gateways and have contributed to the strengthening of civil society. Libraries, like the internet, have undergone radical changes in the last two decades, becoming multipurpose anchor institutions that actively engage the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, while their insight into the needs and concerns of these groups helps to overcome the impact of digital products and services. In cases where states have withdrawn funding for community libraries, civil society needs to campaign against this.
- Harnessing the potential of technological advances, in helping people to acquire the necessary skills to use, understand and even contribute to the development of these advances. The requisite digital skills as well as foundational literacy and education are essential for higher order digital fluency and competence.

- Creating a stronger focus on global digital education and literacy campaigns, and reskilling and upskilling initiatives, especially in regions where some jobs risk becoming obsolete due to technological progress. Local civil society organisations and technical experts should be invited to review and provide feedback on capacity-building curricula to ensure that they reflect local contexts. Most people in both developed and developing countries are still not adequately prepared to respond to the labour market transitions that technology-induced job displacement is likely to trigger in the medium term.

WSIS+20 moving forward

A pragmatic response to the needs of the whole society on which humanity depends has always been central to a multistakeholder approach, based on the assumption that all parties are working in good faith, in their own ways and with their own priorities. But this assumption may be less certain now than it was at WSIS in 2003 and 2005.

As we approach the WSIS+20 review, the future seems to be shaped by the technological paradigm, but the geopolitics and geoeconomics of mistrust could lead to the collapse of the environment and the anguish of societies. And if next-generation networked data technologies have infinitely expanded the scope of internet-related public policy issues, we can no longer expect perfect digital governance as AI advances in a data gold rush.

In this context, we need to continue to demonstrate that the multistakeholder model allows a wide range of stakeholders to participate and present ideas and concerns, pros and cons, leading to more and better solution design⁴ and creative problem solving. In fact, the agility, adaptability and flexibility in the solution design approach tends to respond much more effectively to today's rapidly changing technologies and the constantly evolving range of applications around the world than traditional regulatory or legislative models. So, perhaps the focus should shift from decision making to solution design?

A multistakeholder approach can go beyond internet governance decisions that are made solely or primarily for political reasons, which can often lead to deadlocks that are not recognised and overlooked in today's fast-paced technological world, and which can also jeopardise the technical or

operational impact of the global internet. The future governance of the digital world cannot be separated from the technology that underpins the internet and it cannot be separated from the human beings and businesses that use the internet in countless ways every day.

As stated in the *Human Development Report 2023-2024*:

[W]e may choose to deglobalize, but we cannot “deplanetize”. [An] unfolding Digital Revolution has led to a dizzying increase in the sharing of data, ideas and culture across societies. [...] Many interdependences among economies, people and [the] planet are emerging and deepening as the Digital Revolution powers ahead and we go deeper into the Anthropocene – the age of humans.⁵

Anthropocene is a concept that should be fully integrated into WSIS+20.

As important mechanisms for multistakeholder engagement, the Internet Governance Forum's National and Regional Initiatives (IGF NRIs) give a voice to several countries that are usually absent from discussions on democracy, human rights and freedom of expression. Civil society has played a key role in the NRIs, not only because of its invaluable work at the local level, but also because it has managed to raise the voices of its countries in the global arena, showing that there is hope for a better world based on values that allow human rights and their meaning to be placed on the global political agenda.

We must thank civil society for all the work it has done so far and provide it with the best conditions to take on a greater role and responsibility at WSIS+20. Civil society is one of the main stakeholders that contribute greatly to the accountability of the multistakeholder governance of digital policies.

By 2023, there were more than 155 NRIs across all five UN regions and around the world. But do we have 155 governments participating in the IGF? No! However, the 193 UN member states will be negotiating the GDC and ultimately the WSIS+20 review.

Action steps

Civil society has a key role to play in empowering everyone to demand a human-centred and environmentally sustainable digital transformation, by

⁴ Solution design can be defined as the process of articulating how a system or application can meet the requirements of an objective or a problem.

⁵ United Nations Development Programme. (2024). *Human Development Report 2023-2024: Breaking the gridlock: Reimagining cooperation in a polarized world*. <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2023-24>

providing critical education and raising awareness in their communities. In terms of multistakeholder engagement, at WSIS+20 and elsewhere, this role includes:

- Upholding human rights. Digital technologies can be used to either enhance or infringe upon human rights; therefore, there is a huge need for strong advocacy to ensure that technologies help amplify rights, not diminish them.
- Remaining vigilant to the new and emerging risks of internet fragmentation and threats to the open internet.
- Raising awareness of the links between human rights, a free and open internet, inclusion and sustainable development.
- Communication. It is difficult to effectively communicate messages to remote communities due to the lack of adequate participation mechanisms. To involve ordinary citizens in governance debates is likely to enhance the perspectives of those who depend on the internet for their daily lives and who have not been heard or taken into account to date. Involving ordinary citizens not only promotes inclusion, but also strengthens the inclusiveness, legitimacy and effectiveness of internet governance processes through the inclusion of diverse viewpoints and experiences.
- Strengthening cybersecurity. Improved cybersecurity requires whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches involving strong partnerships and coordinated efforts between parliaments, regulators, the judiciary, law enforcement and other relevant government agencies, the private sector, the technical community, academia and civil society.
- Participating in setting technical standards. Technical standards play an important role in enabling the development and enhancing the value of digital technologies and related infrastructures, services, protocols, applications and devices. Efforts should be made to ensure that such standards are set through transparent and clear processes, take full account of human rights concerns and encourage the full participation of all stakeholders, including through financial support for expert participants from governments, academia, the private sector, the technical community and civil society.
- Contributing to the development of good data governance and end-user privacy policies.
- Protecting rights in content moderation and combatting the spread of disinformation and misinformation. These are challenges that are increasingly important in the digital age. There is therefore a need for the implementation of structural programmes in support of the development of civil society organisations and fact-checking mechanisms. These efforts should aim to increase media and information literacy, which is crucial to combating the spread of false information.
- Informing the work of the private sector. To strengthen the legitimacy and ethical grounding of the private sector and to develop solutions that are socially responsible, sustainable and responsive to the needs of the information society, the private sector needs to engage meaningfully with civil society.

In conclusion, civil society needs to be institutionalised, given the structural importance of its work and actions. As such, civil society needs to have a stronger voice and more and more resources to be able to influence their governments. The UN system must recognise and consolidate the urgency of this need around the world, especially in developing countries; and WSIS+20 must recognise this.