



Key messages from the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) to the chairperson and organisers of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)+20 Forum High-Level Event 2024

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) has served as a pivotal platform for fostering cooperation among governments, civil society, the private sector and technical communities to collectively address the opportunities and challenges brought about by the digital age. The UN Global Digital Compact (GDC) has expanded the scope of the global digital governance agenda beyond the internet-related public policy issues outlined in the WSIS consensus. It has put the spotlight on global inequality, also calling attention to the concentration of market power, the challenges posed by emerging technologies, in particular AI, and the need for renewed and more effective cooperation.

As the WSIS+20 milestone approaches, WSIS action line facilitators and all digital governance stakeholders should reflect on the last two decades in the view of:

- Affirming the WSIS goal as outlined in the Geneva Declaration to “build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize 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, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”¹
- Reviewing and adjusting the action lines to respond to persistent and in some instances growing digital inequality.
- Addressing urgent global challenges such as that posed by climate change and degradation of our natural environment, in many instances exacerbated by digital transformation.
- Responding to trends in tech-related innovation and market structure.
- Mapping continuities and establishing new priorities, such as the urgent imperative to operationalise meaningful connectivity.

1 <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>

- Renewing commitment to the WSIS principles of participation in light of new developments towards truly transparent, inclusive, accountable and democratic governance of digital technologies at all levels, drawing on the NETmundial+10 São Paulo Guidelines.
- Integrating GDC and WSIS follow-up and implementation.
- Placing gender justice at the core of the WSIS and GDC processes, ensuring that the governance, development and use of technology are inclusive and benefit women and girls, in all their diversity, in order to prevent the deepening of gender inequality and promote equitable access and participation in the digital context.²

Based on its vision of a people-centred information society, the range of issues covered by the Geneva Plan of Action encouraged a systemic approach to integrating digital technologies into different sectors and disciplines. This, in turn, created opportunities for diversity in approaches and participation of stakeholders, particularly civil society. However, despite the fact that global digital resources reach more people across the world now, at the same time, barriers to internet access have reinforced social and economic inequalities. The transformation of the tech landscape has been parallel to key shifts in governance mechanisms, which have assumed a techno-solutionist approach, distanced, unfortunately, from the original communitarian, people-oriented promise of WSIS. The 20-year review provides an opportunity to move away from the focus on the digital to look at the well-being of people and the planet.

The multistakeholder principles of participation defined by WSIS and their practice, especially through the IGF, have contributed to an acknowledgment that partnership and collaboration make for more effective implementation. Unfortunately, these principles are not applied everywhere. The WSIS+20 process should build on the learning of almost two decades of implementation of the multistakeholder approach advanced by the IGF. The recently adopted “NETmundial+10 Multistakeholder Statement: Strengthening internet governance and digital policy processes” constitutes a valuable tool to address the disparities in applying the multistakeholder approach, permeated by dynamics of power, conflicts of interest and difficulties in consensus building. To be meaningful, multistakeholder participation needs to be consistently inclusive at all levels – from local to global – and be accountable and transparent across the entire digital governance ecosystem.

The unaddressed complexity of regulatory challenges that plague the tech landscape are multiple. These manifest in the alarming rise of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, continued lack of meaningful access and connectivity in the global South, heightened risk of AI-related bias and discrimination, undue harms from data extractivism, as well as deeply

2 <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/feminist-principles-including-gender-global-digital-compact-0>

unequal integration into the digital economy. In addition, the environmental footprint of digital technologies and infrastructures has multiplied exponentially, and is likely to continue to grow manifold, raising very critical questions for sustainability

It is not only the persistent and exacerbated digital inequality and exclusion caused by the assumption that digital technologies can enable economic growth and that economic growth equals development. It is also the predominance of private interests over public ones. The WSIS+20 review process needs to call for greater recognition of the internet and digital technologies as global public resources and their governance grounded in international human rights standards and public interest principles. This recognition needs to be backed by mechanisms that enforce corporate accountability, effective governance of global data public goods and public financing for public digital infrastructure and community-based connectivity solutions.

Global digital cooperation can only respond to the current challenges through effective complementarity of the multiple existing efforts, forums and processes. WSIS+20 can and should be seen as a way to implement the GDC to put forward an agenda of equity on the digital realm. Building on and promoting concrete links with existing global processes that deal with the internet and digital technologies, and not putting at risk historical gains in these processes, including in the realm of gender equality and human rights, is paramount. The WSIS+20 review can fill one of the missing pieces in the GDC in regard to the inclusion of civil society voices, perspectives and realities, particularly the communities and people who are most affected and vulnerable on account of gender, race, sexuality, caste, their location in cities or rural and remote areas, and Indigenous groups, among others. The IGF, in addition, could be strengthened towards nurturing thinking and the practice around the WSIS action lines, including policy responses.

Robust multistakeholder engagement has to be a priority for the WSIS review process to match the energy and hope generated 20 years ago in Geneva and Tunis. Meaningful engagement from civil society can only happen if backed up by political will and accompanying resources from governments and the international community. Civil society has a key role to play not only in community-based initiatives to empower people to acquire the necessary skills to use, understand and contribute to the development of technological advances, but also in creating awareness, building capacity, and most importantly, asserting and upholding the rights of the marginalised.

About APC

The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is an international networked organisation of activists and organisations, founded in 1990, dedicated to empowering and supporting people working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). We work to create a just and sustainable world by harnessing the collective power of activists, organisations, excluded groups, communities and social movements, to challenge existing power structures and ensure that the internet is developed and governed as a global public good.

More at <https://www.apc.org>

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