United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD)

RIPE NCC response to a questionnaire for the 20-year review of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) implementation

Amsterdam, 29 February 2024

Introduction

The Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) asked the RIPE NCC to share their experience, views and priorities in response to the following questions, addressing the issues they consider most important for the CSTD's twenty-year WSIS review.

Section 7: The Extent to Which the "People-Centred, Inclusive and Development-Oriented Information Society", Envisaged in the Opening Paragraph of the WSIS Geneva Declaration of Principles, Has Developed Within the 20 Years Since WSIS

The implementation of WSIS outcomes has made significant strides towards fostering a "people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society," although there is room for further progress. Through various initiatives and efforts, WSIS outcomes have helped bridge part of the digital divide, expand access to information and communication technologies, and promote inclusivity in digital spaces.

WSIS outcomes have emphasised the importance of inclusivity, ensuring that marginalised groups and those in rural areas are not left behind. Furthermore, WSIS outcomes have spurred discussions and collaborations on Internet governance, emphasising a multistakeholder approach that incorporates the perspectives of governments, civil society, academia, the technical community, and the private sector. This inclusion promoted transparency, accountability, and multistakeholder

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participation.

The RIPE NCC recognises numerous contributions being made to this vision not only by the technical community but also by other stakeholders, as well as by the ITU, UNCTAD, UNESCO and other entities aiming to harmonise WSIS objectives with the 2030 sustainable development goals such as inclusion, digital cooperation and innovation.

While progress has been made, challenges persist, including democratic balanced participation, participation from least developed countries, digital inequality, privacy concerns, and cybersecurity threats. Continued efforts are needed to address these challenges and advance towards a truly people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society.

Section 9: Progress Made in Implementing Specific WSIS Outcomes

The implementation of specific WSIS outcomes, notably the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), has seen significant progress over the years. Mandated in Paragraph 72 of the Tunis Agenda as a "new forum for multistakeholder policy dialogue," the IGF has facilitated discussions on internet governance and identified emerging issues since its inception in 2006. Convening annually in 16 different countries, the IGF has garnered participation from diverse stakeholders, including governments, civil society, academia, technical community and the private sector, totalling thousands of participants from a hundred countries over 18 years.

Beyond its annual gatherings, the IGF has evolved into a comprehensive ecosystem that fosters ongoing dialogue and collaboration. Intersessional projects, such as Best Practice Forums (BPFs) such as those focused on IPv6 or cybersecurity, issue-focused groups, national, regional and youth Internet governance initiatives, dynamic coalitions and dedicated conference tracks, such as parliamentary tracks, work in tandem to generate broad-based knowledge and develop innovative approaches to address the challenges posed by digital technologies.

Today, the impact of the IGF extends globally, with over 104 National Regional IGFs with the following geographical breakdown: 17 from the WEOG, 17 from Eastern Europe, 34 from Africa, 21 from the GRULAC region, and 15 Asia Pacific national IGFs, 24 regional and sub-regional and 40 Youth Initiatives actively contributing to the open multistakeholder platforms at the local and regional levels. These platforms

serve as inclusive spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds can come together to discuss key developmental issues and shape the future of the Information Society in their respective countries.

Section 10: Challenges to the Implementation of WSIS Outcomes

The challenges to implementing WSIS outcomes encompass various complexities that hinder realising its goals. Firstly, there exists a notable disparity in the ability of all individuals to participate in governance discussions and processes on an equal footing. Marginalised groups, including those from underserved regions or with limited access to resources, face barriers to engagement, limiting their voices in shaping digital policies.

Secondly, there's a concern regarding the potential retreat from multistakeholder governance processes. As the landscape of Internet governance evolves, there is a risk of reverting to more centralised or unilateral approaches, sidelining the input and perspectives of non-governmental stakeholders such as civil society, academia, and technical groups. Such a shift could undermine the inclusivity and diversity of viewpoints essential for effective governance.

Thirdly, the fragmentation of IG discussions within different UN agencies and decision-making poses a significant obstacle. Insufficient coordination among the different UN agencies leads to fragmented efforts in addressing critical issues and establishing cohesive approaches with far-reaching impacts. Without adequate collaboration and alignment, initiatives aimed at bridging digital divides, ensuring privacy and security, and promoting digital rights may fall short of achieving meaningful outcomes.

Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts to enhance inclusivity, reaffirm commitment to multistakeholder governance principles, and foster greater coordination and collaboration among all stakeholders, including governments and UN agencies. Stakeholders seeking to achieve WSIS outcomes and progress towards the Information Society should prioritise the following areas:

Digital Inclusion: Ensure universal access to ICTs, including broadband internet, mobile devices, and digital services, particularly in underserved communities and rural areas.

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Multistakeholder Collaboration: Foster inclusive and participatory decision-making processes. Promote dialogue, cooperation, and partnerships to address complex challenges and develop comprehensive solutions that reflect diverse perspectives and interests.

Engagement of Parliamentarians: Engage Parliamentarians at a more meaningful level by involving them in policy discussions, legislative processes, and oversight of ICT-related initiatives. Empower Parliamentarians to advocate for policies that promote digital inclusion, protect digital rights, and advance the goals of the Information Society.

Emerging Technologies: Embrace and harness the potential of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, and smart cities to address societal challenges and promote sustainable development.

Capacity Building and Education: invest in digital skills training and capacity-building programmes to empower individuals and communities to fully participate in the digital economy and society

Sustainable Development: integrate ICTs into sustainable development strategies and initiatives to address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change, and healthcare.

Human Rights-based Development: ensure that Internet users have their human rights protected online and offline.

To sustain the development of a trustworthy Internet governance model, there is a necessity for governments and the technical community to continue to work closer together. This collaboration is critical to safeguard the interoperability and security of the networks; preserve the one and global Internet; contribute to community development needs and capacity building efforts; and evolve the whole model of cooperation towards more inclusion, equity and diversity.

Section 11: Effective Approaches to Addressing the Challenges

Since the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 and 2005, the vision outlined in its principles has encountered varied outcomes. The original aspiration of creating an Information Society "where everyone can create, access, utilise and share information and knowledge" has seen both progress and setbacks. Technological advancements have undeniably provided immense value, exemplified

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by facilitating the transition to remote work during natural disasters and unforeseen events. However, persistent digital divides persist, leaving significant segments of the global population unable to fully leverage the Internet's benefits.

For those connected, the pervasive influence of digital technologies in all spheres of life has prompted concerns regarding their impact on users' well-being and human rights, as well as the expanded opportunities for criminal or unethical exploitation. Clearly, there are ongoing policy challenges within the realm of Internet governance that demand continued attention and commitment.

Yet, amidst these challenges, the inclusive, multistakeholder approach is practised by many and championed by the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), mandated by the WSIS process and reaffirmed in its 10-year review in 2015, remains pivotal. This approach ensures that discussions on Internet governance and the Information Society are open to diverse voices and perspectives, not only of governments but also of technologists and technical community, civil society, academia, internet users, and businesses.

Over the past two decades, the IGF has played a significant role in disseminating and implementing WSIS principles globally, fostering continuous debates on internet policies and strategies to construct a people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society. Moreover, the IGF has adapted to consider the recommendations of new UN processes, such as the Roadmap for Digital Cooperation and the Common Agenda, which aim to advance WSIS principles and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. In these endeavours, digital cooperation is indispensable, and the expertise and resources of the IGF serve as a valuable support platform facilitating these processes.

Section 12: Most Important Trends in Technology and Other Aspects of ICTs Which Affect the Implementation of WSIS Outcomes Since the Summit

Several significant trends in technology and ICTs have impacted the implementation of WSIS outcomes:

Internet of Things (IoT): Interconnection of physical devices to the Internet has transformed various sectors but raised concerns about privacy and security.

Artificial Intelligence (AI): AI applications offer healthcare, education, and finance

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opportunities but raise ethical and job displacement concerns.

Cloud Computing: Cloud services provide scalability and cost-effectiveness but pose challenges related to data privacy and security.

Cybersecurity Threats: Digitisation has led to an increase in cybersecurity threats, demanding proactive measures to protect digital assets.

Digital Transformation: Efforts to bridge digital divides and promote digital literacy have gained momentum but face persistent barriers.

Technologies such as Resource Public Key Infrastructure (RPKI), managed by the five Regional Internet Registries (RIRs), for IP numbers can help secure global traffic routing.

Internationalized Domain Names (IDNs) help advance multilingualism on the Internet and the general ability for users who use other language scripts than ASCII to come online.

Satellite Internet can complement help bring access to remote and underserved areas where terrestrial infrastructure is not feasible.

The above technology trends can play a vital role in achieving the WSIS outcomes by expanding Internet access, supporting disaster response and recovery, promoting the use of ICTs for development and enhancing the resilience of a single, secure, trustworthy and globally operated Internet.

Section 13: Priorities for Stakeholders Seeking to Achieve WSIS Outcomes and Progress Towards the Information Society

Ongoing trends and new developments in technology, particularly in ICT deployment, access, and use, will significantly impact human development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Here's an overview:

Education Access: Online learning platforms and digital resources can improve access to quality education (SDG 4), bridging educational gaps and facilitating lifelong learning opportunities.

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Healthcare Delivery: Telemedicine and digital health solutions can enhance healthcare access (SDG 3), particularly in remote areas, contributing to goals such as reducing maternal and child mortality (SDG 3.1) and combating diseases (SDG 3.3).

Economic Empowerment: Digital platforms and fintech innovations promote inclusive economic growth (SDG 1 and SDG 8), providing opportunities for entrepreneurship, employment, and financial inclusion.

Environmental Sustainability: ICTs support sustainable development practices, including climate action (SDG 13), sustainable cities (SDG 11), and responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), through smart technologies and data analytics.

Social Inclusion: ICTs amplify marginalised voices, promote social inclusion, and strengthen democratic processes, supporting goals related to gender equality (SDG 5), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), and peace and justice (SDG 16).

Data-driven Decision-Making: Big data analytics and AI enable evidence-based policymaking and monitoring of SDG progress, enhancing efficiency and transparency in governance.

Resilient Infrastructure: Advancement of all SDGs and above trends are heavily dependent on infrastructure development, industrialisation and fostering innovation (SDG9). Cybersecurity, 5G and next generation connectivity and other solutions and policies are emerging to address cybersecurity risks and protect critical infrastructure and industrial assets.

Section 14: Impact of the Ongoing Trends and New Developments in Technology, Specifically in the Deployment, Access, and Use of ICTs, Toward Human Development, Specifically in Relation to the SDGs

It is important to acknowledge that while technology presents vast opportunities for advancing human development and SDG achievements, it also poses challenges and risks that must be addressed.

The digital divide persists, with disparities in access to technology exacerbating inequalities within and between countries. Ensuring universal access to ICTs and addressing barriers such as affordability, infrastructure gaps, and digital literacy is

essential for maximising the benefits of technology for all.

The ethical and responsible use of AI and technology is paramount. Concerns about privacy, data security, algorithmic bias, and the impact of automation on jobs and livelihoods require careful consideration and proactive measures to mitigate potential harm.

Collaboration and partnerships among governments and other stakeholder groups are crucial for harnessing the full potential of technology for sustainable development.

Section 15: Additional Comments on the Subject

An inclusive approach to Internet governance is essential for safeguarding the interoperability, security and resilience of the global Internet. Inclusivity refers to the involvement of all stakeholders, such as governments, technical experts, civil society, academia, the private sector and international organisations. Such an approach helps ensure policies are based on a broad consensus of stakeholders, reflect a wide range of perspectives and take into account the needs and perspectives of different groups and communities. It is a key factor in ensuring that policies and decisions support an open, secure and accessible Internet for all.

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