

CSTD consultation on WSIS+20

At the Africa Regional WSIS+20 and alignment with the GDC

14-16 May 2025, Cotonou, Benin

In March 2025, the CSTD secretariat released a draft synthesis report on the 20 years' implementation of the WSIS. The report has been prepared as a background document from the secretariat to the WSIS+20 discussions on 9 April at the 28th annual session of the CSTD. The discussions were held upon request from the ECOSOC resolution (E/RES/2023/3) adopted in June 2023. The outcomes of the discussions will be reported to the General Assembly through ECOSOC, as CSTD's contribution to the twenty-year review to be conducted by the General Assembly in December 2025.

The secretariat's report has greatly benefited from the inputs that national Governments, United Nations agencies and other international entities, civil society organisations, technical communities, academia, the private sector and other stakeholders that participated in the consultations that the CSTD secretariat organized from September 2023 to February 2025. These consultations were organized in accordance with the same ECOSOC resolution mentioned above that also requests the CSTD to collect inputs from Member States, all facilitators and other stakeholders.

The secretariat is grateful to the United Nations Regional Commissions and all other entities which collaborated in organizing these consultations.

In addition, UN entities and other organisations with responsibilities for WSIS implementation provided detailed written contributions, for which the secretariat is equally grateful.

The report also benefited from views, thoughts and suggestions provided at annual meetings and intersessional panels of the CSTD, and from focus group discussions with respective experts on the themes of WSIS impacts on digital economy, the environment, e-government, women's rights and children's rights.

The report is of considerable length. It provides

- **An assessment of the changes that have taken place since WSIS, particularly since WSIS+10, in critical aspects of the Information Society.**

And

- **a review of stakeholders' perceptions of both the successes and ongoing challenges since WSIS, along with future priorities for the WSIS.**

The Report adopts a forward-looking approach, focusing not only on the past or the present but, more importantly, on the future. It also takes into account the outcomes of the Summit of the Future held in September 2024, in particular the Global Digital Compact.

The report is structured through six sub-chapters dealing with:

- o digital inclusion;
- o the digital ecosystem;
- o the digital economy;
- o sustainable development;
- o human rights and ethical dimensions of the Information Society; and
- o digital governance

There are some key findings that we could draw from the report, including the following:

First, the pace and scale of technological innovation in information and communication technologies (ICTs) since WSIS are unprecedented in human history. Even before the Summit, the world was experiencing the first wave of innovation associated with computerization. This was followed by a second wave driven by the rapid development of the Internet around the time of the Summit. Today, we are witnessing a third wave, marked by the emergence of artificial intelligence, advanced robotics, and other frontier technologies.

Second, access to digital infrastructure has expanded significantly, especially through mobile networks. Global mobile broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants have increased from around 4 percent in 2005 to more than 90 percent in 2024.

However, digital access remains uneven. These gaps are particularly evident in the least-developed countries and rural areas, where people may be connected in theory but are still unable to fully participate in digital society due to challenges related to affordability, digital skills, relevant content, and online safety.

Vulnerable groups, including the aged, the disabled, women, and the rural population, remain disproportionately affected by these challenges.

Third, digital technologies are increasingly integrated into public services, education, business, and governance. However, this growing reliance also brings important concerns. Data governance and digital security issues can undermine trust in digital systems and expose individuals and institutions to risks such as privacy violations, cyberattacks, and the misuse of personal data.

Moreover, the environmental impact of digital infrastructure—including high energy consumption and electronic waste—presents sustainability challenges that must be addressed alongside efforts to expand digital access and innovation.

Fourth, while the digital economy has expanded rapidly, its benefits remain unevenly distributed. This imbalance risks deepening existing socioeconomic inequalities.

Although global internet usage has grown significantly since WSIS, least developed countries and lower-income populations continue to fall behind. The report highlights the need for inclusive policy frameworks and enhanced international cooperation to ensure that all countries and communities can fully participate in—and benefit from—the opportunities of the digital economy.

Summary of key challenges

The report summarized **eleven policy challenges** identified by contributors to the consultation and in the wider literature on digital development as having remained or become substantial during the period since WSIS, particularly:

1. The growing need to achieve meaningful and fully inclusive connectivity;
2. The need for more financial resources for investment in infrastructure and developmental applications;
3. The affordability of digital equipment and data for users of online services;
4. The persistence of inadequate digital skills and digital literacy;
5. Cybersecurity;
6. Data governance, data protection, and data privacy;
7. Issues of information integrity, including misinformation, disinformation, and abusive behaviour online;
8. Environmental impacts, including climate change;
9. The growing concentration of economic and decision-making power;
10. The relationship between digitalization and national sovereignty; and
11. The need for greater international cooperation, including stronger participation by developing countries.

Key Priorities for the Future of WSIS

Looking ahead, the WSIS+20 report identifies a set of six strategic priorities to guide the future development of the Information Society, that also emerged from the consultation and the wider literature on digital development.

- Central among these is the need to close digital divides, including the gender digital divide—not only in terms of connectivity, but also in access to devices, affordability, and the skills needed for meaningful participation.
- A second priority is to foster a safe and secure digital environment, including enhanced cybersecurity and efforts to build trust and confidence in the integrity and value of digital resources.
- Another key area is the development of robust governance frameworks to manage the growing complexity of digital ecosystems. The report highlights the importance of improved data governance, privacy protection, and inclusive governance of emerging technologies—particularly artificial intelligence. It also stresses the need to protect human rights online, address issues of information integrity, and ensure greater accountability from technology companies and digital platforms.
- In parallel, it is noted that there is a need to align digital transformation efforts with national sustainable development goals, ensuring that digital solutions directly contribute to progress in sectors such as education, health, financial inclusion, and environmental sustainability.
- The Report also identifies the need for greater policy coherence at the national level, promoting holistic strategies that integrate digital and non-digital stakeholders across and beyond government.
- Finally, the report emphasizes the importance of maintaining the multistakeholder approach of the WSIS the need for enhanced international cooperation and policy coherence, inclusive multilateralism and greater participation by developing countries in global digital policymaking. Align WSIS implementation not only with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, but also with the Pact for the Future, and its annex the Global Digital Compact.

Since the WSIS outcomes are living processes, the WSIS framework and Action Lines could be adapted to reflect recent developments in the Information Society since 2005 and build integration between WSIS outcomes, the SDGs, and the GDC. As the United Nations' focal point for science and technology for development, the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) has a responsibility to provide an inclusive platform for addressing both current and future digital challenges and opportunities, and for building consensus around our shared goals.

To conclude, I wish to express our sincere gratitude to the stakeholders in Africa who have contributed valuable inputs to this report through participation in the consultations CSTD secretariat organized.

Thank you for your attention!