Statement on the occasion of the 18th session of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development, Geneva, 4-8 May 2015

From the Association for Progressive Communications, the International Federation of Library Associations and the Internet Democracy Project

With the overall WSIS+10 Review taking place in December 2015 at the UN General Assembly, this week's meeting is the final occasion for the CSTD to comment on the assessment of the progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of WSIS. As civil society organisations, we remain strongly committed to this goal of 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."

As this is an enduring vision and much still needs to be done to realise it, we urge CSTD member states to put at the heart of its 10-year review deliberations the central WSIS goal.

We request that CSTD members pay attention to the following in their work this week:

1. Report of CSTD secretariat: Implementing WSIS outcomes: A ten-year review

We welcome this report, which provides the most comprehensive review of WSIS implementation to date. It draws on many sources, and importantly, on public submissions from stakeholders around the world. As we noted in our joint statement at the CSTD intersessional panel in late 2014 [2], it offers a balanced view of differing perspectives on the state of WSIS implementation.

We encourage CSTD members to take this report fully into account by recommending in the draft ECOSOC resolution that the UNGA consider the report as a central input to the overall WSIS +10 review, in line with UNGA resolution 68/302 [3].

With the WSIS overall review rapidly approaching, we would additionally highlight the following points, drawing on the report's findings:

2. The centrality of development

Harnessing the potential of ICTs for development should once again be prioritised as we go forward, including in the post-2015 development agenda.

This requires more than access to technology; it requires states and other actors to invest in human development, institutional capacity, human rights, and democratic, transparent and accountable governance. It requires building more just societies.

These are processes that go well beyond the narrow internet governance issues that have dominated much post-WSIS intergovernmental debate, and they should have our full attention going forward.

3. Affordable and public access

We recognise the valuable role that has been played by the ITU in leading the WSIS action line related to access to infrastructure. We also value the work of the Partnership to Measure the Information Society, convened by the ITU.

We agree with the CSTD report that more needs to be done to achieve affordable access, particularly for people who are socially and economically marginalised. We reiterate the importance of public access through facilities such as libraries and community information centres, or other publicly available access points, particularly in rural and remote areas.

The principle of network neutrality should be considered in efforts to increase access. Quick fix solutions being offered by private sector actors such as zero-rated access to social networking platforms via mobile service providers should be approached with great caution, as they risk increasing, rather than decreasing inequality by creating different categories of users, with differential access.

4. Good governance

Transparent and accountable institutions and citizen participation in governance are critical to achieving the WSIS vision, and in particular the development dimension. Likewise, as stated in the WSIS outcome documents, ICTs should be used as an important tool for good governance. We would like to see more of an emphasis on good governance at national, regional and global levels in the overall WSIS review and in the future, and urge all stakeholders to renew their commitment to this end.

5. Human rights and the information society

We welcome the report's mention of human rights. WSIS's emphasis on human rights remains one of its most enduring features and it is significant that 10 years later, the principle that human rights standards apply online is now universally accepted, if not yet fully respected. Rights to freedom of expression and to privacy are being violated in many places through online censorship and mass surveillance.

Going forward we need renewed commitment by states to advancing economic, social and cultural rights, in addition to civil and political rights.

We would like to commend UNESCO for the work it has done in emphasising human rights in its facilitation of the action lines on education, science, media, cultural and linguistic diversity, and the ethical dimensions of the information society.

6. Gender

We applaud the report's attention to the issue of gender and reiterate the Geneva Declaration of Principles' affirmation that women "should be an integral part of, and key actors in, the Information Society" and that the Information Society should enable "women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes." [4]

We encourage the CSTD to support the recommendation coming out of the ITU convened 2014 WSIS+10 High Level Event calling for greater attention to gender dimensions of the information society beyond 2015.

7. IGF renewal

We are pleased that the CSTD report recognises the important role of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and the positive contribution it has made to the discussion of not just internet governance but to a wide range of internet-related issues.

We would like to see all stakeholders continue to contribute to a stronger IGF in line with the recommendations of the CSTD Working Group on IGF Improvements [5] and the NETmundial statement and roadmap. A stronger IGF can play a more effective role in informing other internet governance and policy processes. We would like to see greater participation of governments in the IGF. We recommend that the CSTD supports renewal of the IGF for at least a further 10 years, subject to appropriate monitoring and evaluation processes to assess and improve its capacity.

8. Participation

We strongly urge the CSTD to recommend that the President of the General Assembly and the eventual co-facilitators of the WSIS review, ensure an open, inclusive and transparent process with meaningful input from all stakeholders – including by facilitating regional processes to elicit such input. Regional UN economic commissions can contribute to this, as stated by Mr Adama Samasekou in his address to the 18th session of the CSTD.

The principle of multistakeholder participation was embraced at the WSIS. Since then, multistakeholder participation has evolved, and it needs to evolve further to be fully democratic and inclusive. But recognising the need for improving multistakeholder processes should not undermine affirmation of the principle. The goal of people-centred information societies can only be achieved through the implementation of processes that engage all stakeholders, including those representing marginalised groups.

Effective cooperation among stakeholders remains a challenge, particularly in places where civil society is not free to play one of its most significant roles: that of independent actors holding governments and businesses accountable for furthering the public interest and protecting human rights.

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[1] From part 1 of the Geneva Declaration http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html
[2] http://unctad.org/meetings/en/Contribution/CSTD_2014_IPanel_Con_APCandOthers.pdf
[3] http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/302
[4] http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html
[5] http://unctad.org/meetings/en/SessionalDocuments/a67d65_en.pdf