

APC POLICY EXPLAINER: THE WSIS+20 PROCESS

Definition

The problem

The change we want to see

How APC works on this issue

Regional and national implications

Where is the discussion taking place?

How to get involved

Timetable

Some spaces and institutions to engage with

Read more



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DEFINITION

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was a United Nations-led process held in two phases: the first in Geneva in 2003 and the second in Tunis in 2005.

The Geneva phase concluded with member states declaring a “common desire and commitment 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.”

Three core outcome documents form the foundation of WSIS:

1. The Geneva Declaration of Principles, which established a common vision and 11 key principles for a people-centred information society.
2. The Geneva Plan of Action, which translated these principles into practice through Action Lines designed to achieve concrete objectives.
3. The Tunis Agenda, which stated the need to move from principles to action, focusing on financial mechanisms for bridging the digital divide, internet governance, and implementation of the Geneva outcomes.

WSIS+20 marks the 20-year review of this process, which will conclude at the UN General Assembly session scheduled for December 2025. This review will assess progress made in implementing the original WSIS vision and outcomes, and determine future directions for creating an inclusive information society.

THE PROBLEM

Despite two decades of effort following the original WSIS, significant challenges persist in achieving an equitable information society:

- Despite the vision articulated in the original WSIS, significant digital divides continue to exist “between and within countries and between women and men,” as noted in the WSIS+10 review. These divides affect access to technologies, digital skills and meaningful participation in the information society. The WSIS+10 review expressed concern about “still significant digital divides” that “need to be addressed through strengthened enabling policy environments and international cooperation to improve affordability, access, education, capacity-building, multilingualism, cultural preservation, investment and appropriate financing.”
- The implementation of WSIS outcomes has often been fragmented and inconsistent across regions and countries. As highlighted in discussions surrounding the WSIS+20 review, most of the world has failed to incorporate a people-centred approach to policy and regulation on information and knowledge-sharing.
- The changing technological landscape has introduced new challenges not fully anticipated in the original WSIS framework. Issues such as artificial intelligence (AI), cybersecurity threats, surveillance technologies, and the concentration of corporate power in the digital economy present complex governance challenges that require updated approaches.

- While human rights and gender considerations were included in WSIS outcomes, their implementation has often been superficial. Without specific processes to support implementation of measures for the transversal integration of gender justice and human rights, monitoring of integration becomes challenging and results obscure.

THE CHANGE WE WANT TO SEE

The WSIS+20 review presents an opportunity to reaffirm and strengthen the original WSIS vision of a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society. The change we want to see includes:

- A renewed commitment to human rights in the digital environment, building on the strong affirmation in the WSIS+10 review that “the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online. [...] Progress towards the WSIS vision should be considered not only as a function of economic development and the spreading of information and communications technologies but also as a function of progress with respect to the realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms.”
- Addressing persistent and emerging challenges in the digital landscape, including digital rights, environmental sustainability, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, automated decision making, surveillance, and concentration of corporate power, identifying current challenges and how they are experienced and expressed by gender, racial, socioeconomic, and diverse identities and contexts.
- Strengthening multistakeholder participation, transparency, inclusivity, dialogue and accountability in internet governance processes. WSIS+20 should play a role in having the lessons from the experience in multistakeholder cooperation incorporated into future processes of digital cooperation. This must include the renewal of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) with an enhanced mandate to address emerging digital challenges.

- Tackling digital inequality as a critical priority, recognising that digital divides are direct manifestations of underlying social and economic inequalities. Digital inclusion strategies must address these root causes through coordinated efforts that link digital access with broader social justice and economic opportunity initiatives.
- Closing the digital gender divide, which was acknowledged in the WSIS+10 review with the commitment to “mainstreaming gender in the World Summit on the Information Society process, including through a new emphasis on gender in the implementation and monitoring of the action lines.”
- Aligning the WSIS process with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and ensuring that digital technologies contribute to sustainable development.
- Ensuring effective integration with the Global Digital Compact (GDC) process to create a coherent framework for digital cooperation while avoiding the creation of parallel or duplicative processes that fragment international efforts and resources.

HOW APC WORKS ON THIS ISSUE

APC has been involved in the WSIS process since its inception and continues to bring a feminist, rights-based perspective to WSIS-related processes:

APC conducts research and monitoring on WSIS implementation, with a particular focus on how implementation affects human rights and gender equality. In 2013, 10 years after WSIS, APC raised concerns about “an apparent absence – in most parts of the world – of a people-centred approach to information and knowledge-sharing society policy and regulation” and “the fragmentation of the communications rights movement” that had mobilised around WSIS.

APC advocates for open and participatory cyber policy processes at global, regional and national levels. APC has consistently raised awareness on the need for a human rights-based and a gender-sensitive approach in various international forums, including WSIS-related processes.

APC works collaboratively with its members, partners, civil society organisations, academia and the tech community to promote principles and norms that advance human rights in digital spaces. This includes advocating for the idea of a human rights-based approach to cybersecurity, since humans are the ones impacted by cyber threats, incidents and operations.

APC develops tools to support the work of different stakeholders in digital policy spaces. This includes frameworks to support policy makers and civil society organisations in achieving more inclusive and rights-respecting policies.

APC designs capacity-building initiatives that respond to local contexts, such as the African School on Internet Governance (AfriSIG), whose goal is “to strengthen the capacities of African leaders to participate in local and international internet discussions.”

APC develops tailored trainings for women’s rights activists to use the internet safely, such as the Feminist Tech Exchange (FTX), which “seeks to be a feminist contribution to the global response to digital security capacity building.”

REGIONAL AND NATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The WSIS+20 review process has significant implications at regional and national levels:

Global norms established through WSIS processes influence what states do at the national and regional level. What happens in global cybersecurity discussions influences processes at the regional and national levels (and vice versa): global norms can have an important influence on what states do at the national and regional level.

Regional intergovernmental bodies have increasingly taken up digital governance issues inspired by the WSIS framework. As noted in *APC policy explainer: A human rights-based approach to cybersecurity*, “increasingly, regional intergovernmental bodies are addressing cybersecurity, including the Organization of American States (OAS), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the African Union, and the European Union.”

Implementation of WSIS outcomes requires policy and regulatory instruments at national and regional levels. To be effective, “global norms on cybersecurity require policy and regulatory instruments, policies and frameworks at the regional and national levels,” as described in another policy explainer by APC, *What is a gender-sensitive approach to cyber capacity building?*

The approach to setting targets in the WSIS process recognises national diversity and sovereignty. The Plan of Action

acknowledges that “specific targets for the Information Society will be established as appropriate, at the national level in the framework of national e-strategies and in accordance with national development policies, taking into account the different national circumstances.”

The WSIS+20 review provides an opportunity to assess how regional and national implementation has progressed over two decades and to identify areas where more targeted support or policy interventions are needed to achieve the WSIS vision of an inclusive information society.

WHERE IS THE DISCUSSION TAKING PLACE?

The WSIS+20 review process encompasses multiple forums and mechanisms:

The UN General Assembly is overseeing the overall WSIS+20 review process. The 2015 resolution ([General Assembly resolution 70/125](#)) provided guidance on how the 20-year review should take place by requiring the General Assembly to hold a high-level meeting on the overall review in 2025, with input and participation of all stakeholders. This high-level, two-day meeting is scheduled for 16-17 December 2025.

The Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) serves as the focal point for system-wide follow-up to WSIS. The CSTD will develop its report following a consultation process with UN agencies and stakeholders and has prepared a [20-year \(substantive\) progress report](#) of the implementation of the WSIS outcomes for consideration at its [28th session](#) on 7-11 April 2025.

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) continues to play a central role in WSIS implementation and review. The ITU will co-host the WSIS+20 High-Level Event in July 2025 along with members of the UN Group on the Information Society (UNGIS), which includes UNESCO, UNDP, the OHCHR and UNCTAD. The ITU and these partner agencies are also hosting monthly consultative meetings, starting from 18 November 2024, as part of an open consultation process to gather inputs from stakeholders. The ITU carries out activities aimed at building

confidence and security in the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) through frameworks like the Global Cybersecurity Agenda and the Global Cybersecurity Index.

UNESCO, aside from leading on several WSIS Action Lines, will also be hosting a Conference on Capacity Building on AI and Digital Transformation in the Public Sector on 4 and 5 June 2025 that forms part of the review process.

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) is one of the major outcomes of the second phase of WSIS, mandated in the Tunis Agenda as a non-decisional forum to discuss internet-related public policy issues. Since 2006, the IGF has convened 17 annual forums across countries and regions. According to the Tunis Agenda, “the Internet Governance Forum, in its working and function, will be multilateral, multi-stakeholder, democratic and transparent” and “would be constituted as a neutral, non-duplicative and non-binding process.” As instructed by the Tunis Agenda, the IGF was reviewed in 2010 and had its mandate renewed for five years (2011-2015), and again in 2015 during the WSIS+10 review for another 10 years (2016-2025).

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

How could and should the preparations and the meetings for WSIS+20 be organised?

For many people, WSIS was the foundation of digital society global policy, particularly for those who were involved in the two phases of WSIS and who have been engaging over the years with its outcomes, including the IGF but also the processes around enhanced and multistakeholder cooperation.

So much has changed since WSIS and since the 10-year review of the implementation of its outcomes undertaken by CSTD in 2015. Some experts contend that the current capabilities of digital technologies are more than a thousand times what they were in 2005, when WSIS ended.

Preparations for WSIS+20 should first and foremost deal with the implications of those changes and with the reinterpretations of the WSIS vision that are needed to respond to the type of constantly changing digital society that we have today.

There are unquestionably remaining challenges that have persisted since the time of WSIS, such as inclusion and equality. No preparations for WSIS+20 could happen without identifying those challenges and the way in which they are expressed today. But we also need to clearly understand what has changed in all these years and what the trends are. What are the long-term opportunities and risks in areas that are critical today, such as digital rights, environmental sustainability and sustainable

development, digital inclusion, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence and automated decision making, surveillance and concentration of corporate power, among others?

The underlying questions that should guide preparations for WSIS+20 review are, at the end of the day, what do we want to achieve, where do we want to go, what type of digital society do we want and what do we need to build it.

For more information see the [Five-Point Plan for an Inclusive WSIS+20 Review](#), signed by more than a hundred civil society groups and dozens of experts and academics in the area.

Can WSIS+20 be used to develop new innovative forms of multistakeholder cooperation? If so, how? What are the challenges?

At the practical level, it is paramount to identify what will contribute to reaching compromise during the WSIS+20 review. Reaching compromise is a way to prove the extent and value of multistakeholder cooperation.

What type of process and inputs would contribute to arriving at agreements, to building on the processes that have been conducted in the fields of internet policy, internet governance and global digital cooperation? What are the conditions that have to be in place for coming up with outcomes that balance differences of power of contesting parties and multiplicity of interests?

For WSIS+20 to be effective and politically sustainable, preparations should start as soon as possible, including the production of substantive analysis, and the establishment of mechanisms to shape the agenda with participation of the different stakeholders, decide on formats and modalities, and set a timeline of milestones from now until the realisation of the Summit per se.

In particular, WSIS+20 should be used to contribute to renewing and strengthening the mandate of the Internet Governance Forum, operationalising global digital cooperation and bridging the gap between deliberative spaces and decision-making processes.

WSIS+20 should play a role in ensuring that the lessons learned from years of multistakeholder cooperation feed into future processes of digital cooperation and in setting parameters for safeguarding multistakeholderism, transparency, inclusivity, dialogue and accountability.

Critical challenges arise around addressing dynamics of power, conflicts of interest, areas of substantive and significant disagreement, and difficulties concerning consensus building. Multistakeholder cooperation cannot reach its full potential if we do not address dynamics of power not only between stakeholders but also within stakeholder groups.

WSIS+20 is an opportunity to perhaps think outside the box, explore and experiment with innovative approaches in order to get support from different stakeholders and increase the level of political commitment from all stakeholders, particularly

governments and the private sector, especially technology companies.

No effective multistakeholder cooperation can happen without integrating technological, policy and norm-building expertise into the process. WSIS +20 could contribute to making that integration happen.

In our era of cyber interdependence, can the WSIS+20 process be used to promote a “holistic approach” to dealing with the growing number of internet-related public policy issues? How?

As acknowledged by the UN Secretary-General in his Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, “Digital technology does not exist in a vacuum.” It has potential for positive change, but can reinforce and magnify inequalities. Digital transformation, accelerated due to the pandemic, has exposed the profound vulnerability of people and groups who have been historically discriminated against and excluded because of intersecting and multiple forms of systemic and structural inequality and injustice.

The crisis has been and continues to be the structural divides. It has also exposed the different complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk and how profound the climate and environmental crisis is.

Only holistic approaches can respond to the situation that we are facing if we want to avoid perpetuation of structural disadvantages, acknowledging that the challenges we face today affect people in many different ways. Even if differential contexts

and impacts require differential specific responses, including public policy interventions, there is still the urgent need for global responses built on true multilayer, multidisciplinary, multistakeholder collaboration based on principles of inclusion, transparency and accountability.

Digital technologies are part of the responses but are not the response itself, dissociated from integral and holistic strategies oriented to fix structural inequalities, to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, and to reinforce the enjoyment of the wide range of human rights.

The WSIS+20 review could be a unique opportunity to place global digital cooperation aimed at global and contextual responses at the top of the political agendas to address the persistent and emerging challenges in the digital age, including the environmental crisis.

TIMETABLE

A series of events where stakeholders will take part in discussions and consultations on WSIS+20 are taking place throughout 2025, culminating in the UN General Assembly meeting in December.

[The timetable of events can be consulted here.](#)

SOME SPACES AND INSTITUTIONS TO ENGAGE WITH

- World Summit on the Information Society overview page with details on the 20-year review managed by UN DESA
- UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD)
- World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)
- International Telecommunication Union (ITU)
- UNESCO
- Internet Governance Forum (IGF)
- Global Digital Compact (GDC)

READ MORE

[Inside the Digital Society: WSIS+20 is closer than you think](#)

[Framing the Internet Governance Debate: The Long Road to WSIS+20 \(2025\)](#)

[WSIS+20 and IGF+20 Review by the UN General Assembly \(2025\)](#)

[World Summit on Information Society, A/RES/56/183](#)

[Geneva Declaration of Principles](#)

[Geneva Plan of Action](#)

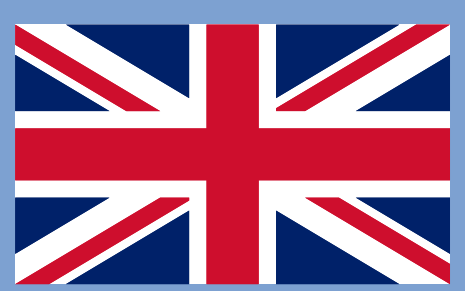
[Tunis Agenda for the Information Society](#)

[Women's Rights, Gender and Internet Governance](#)

[WSIS+20: Reimagining horizons of dignity, equity and justice for our digital future](#)

[Key messages from the Association for Progressive Communications \(APC\) to the Chair Person and Organisers of the World Summit on the Information Society \(WSIS\)+20 Forum High-Level Event 2024](#)

[Civil Society Statement from the Global Digital Justice Forum to the Chair Person and Organisers of the World Summit on the Information Society \(WSIS\)+20 Forum High-Level Event 2024](#)



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