Call for Inputs: WSIS+20 Review.

ITU Council Resolution 1332 resolves to invite the members and other stakeholders to contribute views on the work of the ITU in the WSIS+20 review including ideas related to the review of the WSIS Action Lines through the CWG WSIS&SDG.

Contribution by the EU and its Member States

1) What are the main achievements of the implementation of the WSIS process in the past 20 years?

The number of people connected to the Internet has increased[1] over the past 20 years. In the last two years alone the world population connected to the Internet has grown from 65% in 2023 to 68% (i.e. 5.5 billion people) in 2024. This is, at least in part, testimony to the efficacy of the WSIS process, which has **contributed positively to reducing digital divides** between and within countries, and between underrepresented socio-demographic groups based among other factors on age, disability and gender. There are signs of progress made towards gender digital parity in Internet use. Connectivity and affordable, ubiquitous Internet access have become a mark of development and progress. The widespread adoption of mobile devices and affordable Internet plans has further accelerated this process, helping digital literacy, online education, and social mobility. The human-rights-based and human-centric approach to digital transformation ensures that technological advancements prioritise the dignity, rights, and welfare of all individuals. This holistic approach encompasses safeguarding cultural heritage, ensuring equal access to information, and upholding the rights of vulnerable groups. By integrating these principles, digital technologies are developed and deployed in a manner that promotes inclusivity, accessibility, and the protection of fundamental human rights.

Indeed, the global and open Internet (at the technical layer) has played a pivotal role in development, enabling unprecedented access to information, education, and economic opportunities for individuals and communities worldwide. By providing an open and global platform for global connectivity and innovation, the Internet has modernised and interconnected economies, provided opportunities to scale up companies, empowered marginalised groups, including women, people with disabilities, and those from low-income backgrounds to participate in the global digital ecosystem equally. Meaningful connectivity thus contributes to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. As a result, the combination of the narrowing of the digital divide and the innate characteristics of the open Internet has led to the Internet benefits becoming more inclusive, paving the way for a more equitable and connected world, further leveraged by the application of a human-centric, human rights- based and development-oriented approach to the digital transformation.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) represents a landmark achievement in Internet governance and digital cooperation. It established the first comprehensive global framework for digital collaboration, a remarkable milestone. The WSIS framework has played a pivotal role in advancing an inclusive, human-centred digital transformation. For two decades, it has provided essential guidance for global digital cooperation and has steered and informed the work of several UN agencies. The WSIS Action Lines continue to inspire and shape digital initiatives worldwide, underscoring their lasting influence.

[1] ITU Facts and Figures 2024

The principles of the **multi-stakeholder model of Internet governance established in the Tunis Agenda have proven to be instrumental in keeping the technical layer of the Internet open and global.** The global Internet works because it does not rely on a single point of control. To manage it effectively, it needs a dynamic and inclusive governance ecosystem where governments, private sector, civil society organisations, academic and technical communities collaborate in open discussions and build consensus to manage the Internet in a fair and inclusive manner. New efforts to exert centralized control over the Internet undermine its fundamental openness, potentially fragmenting the global network at the very technical root and compromise the very attributes that have made it a powerful catalyst for progress and innovation. Furthermore, these efforts endanger fundamental human rights such as the right to privacy, the freedom of opinion and expression or the right to impart and receive information, making the internet prone to human rights violations and can accelerate the spread of disinformation and misinformation.

On the contrary, the successful approach established in WSIS ensures that the global Internet is an open space for development, with equitable access being indispensable also for the unobstructed progress of other digital technologies. WSIS has kept the integrity and functionality of the Internet intact, and it needs to continue ensuring that it remains a future-proof tool for development, especially in countries deeply affected by digital divides.

In that context, Internet governance must remain intrinsically global and multi-stakeholder in nature, as the UN Global Digital Compact (UN GDC par. 27) has highlighted, to successfully manage the technical architecture of the open Internet adhering to the principles set forth in the WSIS Summits in Geneva and Tunis, while constant improvement and inclusivity need to be ensured. Equally, a safe and secure digital space that respects, protects and promotes human rights must be pursued (UN GDC par. 3). As also highlighted in the Global Digital Compact, the Internet Governance Forum has proven to be one of the main successes of the WSIS process, and a primary forum to structure the broader Internet governance ecosystem.
Among the most notable outcomes of the WSIS process is the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). Initially envisioned as a forum for discussing the technical aspects of internet governance, the IGF has evolved into a vital platform for addressing the broader spectrum of digital issues. Virtually every significant international development or initiative on digital policy has found a place for dialogue at the IGF. It has become an indispensable event in the digital world, uniquely successful in uniting diverse voices from all stakeholder groups and fostering meaningful collaboration

As for broader international digital cooperation, the involvement of relevant stakeholders at all levels is **key in advancing the WSIS process** towards a shared vision for a free, global, accessible, affordable, open, stable, inclusive, interoperable, reliable, secure, safe, and green Internet with a high level of data protection where human rights (incl. the right to privacy) are respected, protected and promoted. **The WSIS Action Lines** have been instrumental in driving progress on key development issues. These include bringing together governments, private sector, civil society organisations, academic and technical communities to address pressing challenges in areas such as public governance and ICTs for development, information and communication infrastructure, access to information and knowledge, capacity building, and digital security, as well as specific ICT applications like e-government, e-business, e-learning, e-health, e-employment, e-environment, e-agriculture, and e-science, and promoting cultural diversity, media, and international cooperation, ultimately aiming to harness the Internet's potential to promote sustainable development, reduce poverty, and improve lives worldwide, and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

2) What are ITU's main contributions towards the implementation of the WSIS Process in 20 Years?

The ITU plays **a significant role in advancing universal and meaningful connectivity** and **closing all digital divides [**EU statement at the CSTD (21 October) on 'Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the WSIS outcomes at the regional and international levels, and the WSIS+20 review' and GDC Para 10]. Especially in terms of fostering gender equality, the ITU has shown great engagement. The ITU's initiatives highlight its efforts to close the gender digital divide, empower women as ICT leaders and promote women's engagement in the sector.

The ITU's role, through UN system-wide and international digital cooperation and in line with its mandate, could continue **its contribution to unlocking the full potential of digital technologies** by **further advancing the sustainable digital transformation and universal connectivity [UN GDC, par. 69]**. The ITU played a key role in facilitating several Action Lines, including C2 (Information and communication infrastructure), C3 (Access to information and knowledge), C4 (Capacity building), C5 (Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs), and C6 (Enabling environment), highlighting the organization's significant involvement in the WSIS process. In this regard, the EU and its Member States steadfastly support the ITU's endeavours, including through various development cooperation projects.

The ITU has been a key partner in advancing digital development through its facilitation of several WSIS Action Lines. Additionally, the ITU in collaboration with other WSIS facilitators, including UNESCO, UNCTAD, and UNDP, co-hosts the annual WSIS Forum. This forum has become a pivotal platform for reviewing the WSIS Action Lines and fostering coordination among WSIS facilitators. The ITU has also played and continues to play a significant role as the former chair and current vice chair of the UN Group on the Information Society (UNGIS).

3) The WSIS process stands as a strong example of global digital cooperation in action for over two decades now. How can we ensure that this inclusive multistakeholder model is sustained and further strengthened?

The WSIS established the multi-stakeholder approach in digital cooperation. WSIS was groundbreaking because it marked the first time that non-governmental stakeholders—including the private sector, the technical community, academia, and civil society—worked alongside representatives from 175 nations to shape the future of digital cooperation. Since then, the multi-stakeholder approach has influenced and improved numerous policy issues.

Inclusive multi-stakeholder processes that allow meaningful contributions from all stakeholder groups require sufficient resources to thrive. It is therefore important to design policy processes thoughtfully, ensuring they are both effective and complementary, while avoiding unnecessary duplication or fragmentation.

Global digital cooperation including on governance of emerging and disruptive technologies, such as AI, quantum technologies and others, must continue of the multi-stakeholder governance approach as structured in the WSIS Action Lines, with the **involvement of UN agencies, and** w**ithout duplicating existing work**. Due to its open, inclusive and participatory nature, we see the **multi-stakeholder approach** as a foundational fixture of global digital cooperation, which **needs to be in line with international law** and other existing **frameworks**, first and foremost the WSIS principles. Simultaneously international law, in particular international humanitarian and human rights must be respected, protected and promoted online and offline. Ensuring inclusivity for all relevant stakeholders from all regions is critical to guarantee that digital cooperation remains an active force of progress for the developing world. Inclusion of underrepresented communities from the Global South would foster sustainable, fit-for-purpose outcomes. Furthermore, it is important to ensure the effective inclusion of diverse stakeholders in the governance of new and emerging technologies.

Therefore, **newly emerging issues should be addressed through existing multi-stakeholder platforms**.
The outcome of the WSIS review must reaffirm the multi-stakeholder-model of internet and digital governance, as well as firmly establish the Internet Governance Forum as the primary UN platform for multi-stakeholder discussions on digital issues and multi-stakeholder follow-up to the Global Digital Compact.

4) What are the challenges that remain in the implementation of the WSIS process?

While the overall successes are evident, we have faced significant challenges regarding the creation of a digital society as envisaged in the WSIS Geneva Declaration of Principles, and to the implementation of an open, stable, free, inclusive, global, interoperable, reliable, secure and green Internet. The main challenges include:

a) Persisting digital divides, especially the gender and age digital divides. Some 2.6 billion people in the world still lack access and affordable tariffs to the Internet - the majority of whom are women and girls in developing countries. Addressing barriers to access for women and girls is particularly important for a series of SDGs to be achieved. Furthermore, two thirds of the world's school-age children – or 1.3 billion children aged 3 to 17 years old – do not have an Internet connection in their homes. Lack of digital skills and persisting language barriers[2] constitute additional obstacles, still preventing many individuals from fully, meaningfully and equally participating in all spheres of the digital economy and society, and political life.

b) Violations and abuses of human rights online. Human rights apply both online and offline. Yet, the use (including the misuse) of digital technologies can have a negative impact on human rights, democracy and the rule of law. They can be unintentional drivers of misinformation or can be intentionally misused to facilitate information manipulation and interference, disinformation, and hate speech enabling new forms of violence. They can create new forms of gender-based violence, facilitate the violation and abuse of the right to privacy and access to specific illegal content, including child sexual abuse and exploitation materials. Digital technologies can also favour the widespread surveillance of citizens, facilitating repression and censorship, while stifling freedom of expression and restricting civil society space, reinforcing discrimination and structural inequalities. Emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence are also poised to have significant legal, social and ethical implications.

c) Risks of Internet fragmentation. We see attempts to undermine the evolution of the Internet from within the multi-stakeholder institutions and other inclusive institutions that develop, deploy, and manage the Internet protocols, standards and core infrastructures. There is a trend to turn the Internet into a more centralised, government-controlled system. This would have serious consequences for the general availability, security and interoperability of the Internet, and lead to a fragmentation of the open, secure, and free Internet. In addition, we see new tendencies to abandon the principle of a whole and unfragmented Internet in favour of the unrestricted profit of a small number of tech companies.

d) Internet shutdowns and network disruptions. Internet shutdowns and network disruptions are a growing concern worldwide as some governments take measures to disrupt access to Internet and telecommunications, often in the context of political protests, electoral processes, crises or armed conflicts. Shutdowns and network disruptions negatively affect the ability of journalists, media workers and civil society to operate threatening democracy and the rule of law. They undermine access to life-saving information, critical support and protection, including for women and girls, hamper humanitarian assistance, and the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights as well as the achievement of SDGs.

[2] What are the most used languages on the Internet? | Internet Society Foundation (isocfoundation.org)

e) Climate change, energy consumption and sustainability. While the digital transformation has immense potential for sustainable development, it also poses risks for the planet. In its current form, digitalisation does not inherently lead to a reduction in the carbon footprint across sectors. Currently, it entails incremental savings that may not fully offset emissions. It is critical to steer digitalisation towards systemic changes that support a just transition. Digital technologies like artificial intelligence can help mitigate the effects of climate change and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. However, without concerted efforts, their rising energy and water demands might overshadow their benefits in terms of sustainability, potentially affecting local communities as well.

f) Security, sovereignty and resilience of critical infrastructure: There is a need to promote and use trustworthy network infrastructure and services suppliers, relying on risk-based assessments that include technical and non-technical factors for network security.

g) Strengthening the trust framework: A significant challenge in implementing the WSIS principles, particularly principle 35 on "strengthening the trust framework, is strengthening trust in the use of ICTs, which is under pressure due to rising cybercrime rates. The special Eurobarometer "Digital Decade 2024" shows that 51% of Belgians believe the EU protects their digital rights, which is a decrease of 5% compared to 2023. Additionally, concerns are growing regarding children's online safety (48%) and control over personal data (42%). These figures highlight the ongoing difficulty in building a global culture of cybersecurity as proposed in WSIS, due to increasingly complex and sophisticated cyber threats.

h) A trend towards government regulation of Internet-based services: addressing all challenges should be conducted in a way that upholds the fundamental principles of Internet governance.

5) Which specific Action Lines have had the most significant impact, and why?

The WSIS Action Lines were carefully crafted and thoughtfully designed, offering the significant advantage of being technology-neutral while addressing diverse policy dimensions. Each Action Line plays a crucial role in fostering inclusive and effective digital cooperation, depending on the specific context and priorities of stakeholders. Rather than singling out specific Action Lines, their collective impact lies in their ability to complement one another and address the multifaceted challenges of the information society. The EU is consulting the Member States and stakeholders on the specificities of this topic.

6) Considering that the WSIS outcomes have demonstrated their relevance and applicability to new and emerging areas, how can the implementation of the WSIS principles and corresponding WSIS Action Lines be enhanced to effectively address these topics?

The WSIS outcomes have proven to be universal in their relevance and applicability. Implementing the WSIS principles and Action Lines to address new and emerging areas requires a proactive and adaptive approach rooted in multistakeholder participation. Greater collaboration among all stakeholders—governments, private sector, civil society organisations, academic and technical communities —to ensure a holistic understanding of evolving digital challenges and mechanisms for regular review of the WSIS Action Lines will ensure their relevance to areas like AI governance, blockchain, virtual worlds, metaverse and quantum technologies.

Ensuring that the WSIS Action Lines reflect contemporary global challenges, such as climate change and emerging technologies, more explicitly, ensures their relevance and effectiveness.

Capacity-building initiatives should be widely available to support the meaningful participation of stakeholders from underrepresented regions, including with the tools and knowledge needed to address these emerging technologies and the issues that come with them. The primacy of the IGF as **the** multistakeholder platform for dialogue and innovative solutions that align with WSIS principles should be affirmed.

7) Have you any suggestions and inputs on the WSIS+20 Review Action Lines, highlighting key milestones, challenges and emerging trends beyond 2025 prepared by the WSIS Action Line facilitators.

The EU is consulting the Member States and stakeholders on the specificities of this topic, taking stock of the progress and identifying areas of continued focus and challenges. In light of the clearer picture we have today about the risks of emerging technologies for our societies, the WSIS+20 review must include a human rights-based approach, a clear gap in the WSIS Agenda.

8) How can the alignment between the WSIS Action Lines and SDGs be strengthened towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?

The EU is consulting the Member States and stakeholders on the specificities of this topic.
However, the relation between WSIS, GDC and SDGs will be a priority. The WSIS Actions Lines need to be underpinned by a human rights-based approach. Human rights are essential to achieving sustainable development that leaves no one behind and are central to all its three dimensions – social, environmental, and economic. This is reflected in the transformative ambition of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development affirming that the SDGs "seek to realize the human rights of all". The 2030 Agenda puts the principles of equality and non-discrimination at its heart, with a commitment to 'leave no one behind' and 'reach those furthest behind first' and two dedicated goals on combating discrimination and inequalities (SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 10 on inequalities within and between countries) as well as a cross-cutting commitment to data disaggregation. Thus, the 2030 Agenda and human rights are tied together in a mutually reinforcing way. The application of a human-centric, human rights-based and development-oriented approach to the digital transformation thus holds the potential of strengthening the alignment among WSIS Action Lines and SDGs towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Centrally, WSIS Action Lines should foster strategic alliances among states with different levels of development to ensure equitable participation and co-creation in global digital governance frameworks. This is why WSIS should champion global and inclusive partnerships, digital capacity-building and knowledge-sharing initiatives.

In order to focus work on closing the digital divides and on capacity building and harmonised approaches to governance, , WSIS Action Lines needs to be implemented in such a way that it serves the implementation of the GDC in order to maximise synergies and avoid splitting of resources which will dilute the achievement of the Agenda 2030.

9) How can we further strengthen multistakeholder platforms such as the WSIS Forum as the platform for digital development and IGF as the platform for governance and policy issues?

As a multistakeholder platform, the WSIS Forum is well placed to focus on digital development as the primary platform for reviewing the WSIS Action Lines. Moreover, it has been commendable in facilitating coordination and fostering mutual understanding among the various UN organizations involved in WSIS activities. However, digital development is necessarily part of the IGF's remit as well, given how important development is in attaining an open and accessible Internet. We look forward to the discussions on the IGF's primary role and more effective functioning during the WSIS+20 Review.
The IGF has proven itself as the place for all multi-stakeholder groups from different parts of the world to come together, discuss technological developments and their digital policy implications. To fully realize its potential, the IGF—including the IGF Secretariat, the Leadership Panel, and the Multi-

stakeholder Advisory Group—should be further strengthened through the provision of adequate financial and human resources. It is important to note that all stakeholder groups share responsibility in supporting this effort. These resources will enable the IGF to continue evolving, fostering collaboration with other international bodies, expanding participation opportunities for underrepresented groups, enhancing its deliberative processes, and maximizing its role within the UN framework.
As the primary global platform for multi-stakeholder discussions and consensus-building on internet/digital policy and cooperation, the IGF has an extensive global network and convening power, connecting actors with diverse perspectives from grassroots to the highest political levels. The WSIS review should renew and strengthen the mandate of the Internet Governance Forum, including by ensuring a sustainable financial basis from the regular UN budget. The Internet Governance Forum should be tasked to ensure and facilitate the multi-stakeholder approach to the implementation, assessment and review of the Global Digital Compact.

10) How can the implementation of the WSIS process and the Pact for the Future and its Global Digital Compact be aligned to achieve shared goals?

Both the WSIS process and the GDC share the goal of strengthened international cooperation to close all digital divides. The WSIS ecosystem, including the IGF and its work streams, derives its legitimacy and support from the decades of foundational work on digital issues by the stakeholder community. The GDC builds upon these efforts. In the GDC, UN Member States have committed to building onto the processes and forums emanating from WSIS to advance the implementation of the GDC by involving all relevant stakeholders.

The EU considers the WSIS ecosystem the most logical overall framework for the implementation of the GDC, with the Internet Governance Forum as its primary platform and fully anchored within the entire UN system, such as UNESCO, ITU, OHCHR and many other regional processes. The existing UN-system wide coordination mechanisms on digital cooperation and new technologies, such as AI, should oversee and prepare work to provide maximum synergies.

The WSIS+20 review should integrate measures from the GDC follow up to maximise impact and synergies, while reducing duplication and further competition for scarce financial and other resources. The outcomes of the GDC should be assigned to the WSIS Action Lines to ensure their effective integration into the work of individual UN agencies. Notably, the ITU has already made significant progress in this regard.

Through the objectives, principles, commitments, and actions in the GDC, we have established a constructive foundation that should guide us. It would be beneficial to preserve this positive momentum and avoid reopening negotiations during the WSIS+20 review.

Sessions on GDC implementation at the IGF in Riyadh revealed a mismatch between stakeholders' expectations and the structures and rules governing UN processes in New York. To address this, we should ensure the implementation of the GDC commitment to harness existing processes, instead of trying to reshape those systems around the GDC. The WSIS review should further anchor the GDC commitments within the existing structures of the UN system.

Alignment between the WSIS process and the Pact for the Future and the GDC should follow the objective of fostering international digital cooperation that continues to be strongly anchored in a human-centric and human rights-based approach, and within a multi-stakeholder model to Internet governance, to address digital divides and achieve the SDGs. The WSIS review should consider how the GDC implementation can be integrated within the WSIS framework. The GDC sets a new

benchmarking standard as it refreshes the objectives previously set by the WSIS and establishes updated goals for global digital development. Consequently, these objectives should be integrated into all UN activities, including future initiatives under the WSIS framework. The implementation of the GDC should leverage the infrastructures the WSIS has established, particularly the IGF, without proliferation of new bodies.

In the GDC, UN Member States have requested the Secretary-General to provide a Compact implementation map for the consideration of Governments and other stakeholders, which should be reflected in the report on progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of WSIS ahead of the WSIS+20 review.

11) What are the key emerging digital trends and topics to be considered by ITU in the WSIS+20 review and future vision beyond 2025?

While the EU will continue to engage constructively with the ITU, the EU invites the ITU to consider key emerging trends and topics such as those mentioned hereafter, with the aim of improving the effectiveness of a robust and inclusive multi-stakeholder model of international digital cooperation, including of the WSIS+20 process as we move towards its review and future vision beyond 2025 [EU written input to the Joint Questionnaire for 20-year review of WSIS implementation Feb 2024].

The EU considers Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as key to accelerating progress towards every single one of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including the SDGs on quality education, gender equality, climate action, helping to build resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, and fostering innovation.

Bridging the global digital divides through human centric and human rights-based digital transformation in a manner that aligns with the SDGs is indispensable. As stated in the EU Contribution to the Global Digital Compact, March 2023: "We need to close the various digital divides, including the gender digital divide, fostering access to digital, information and media education, and empowering everyone, regardless of age, ethnic or social origin, disability, geographical location, sexual orientation and gender identity or any other status or condition". This is with special regard to those in vulnerable situations so that they may participate confidently and safely in today's digital society and economy. It needs to be ensured that all the world's people, including those in least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing states, can benefit from the digital transformation and that the rights of persons in vulnerable situations are protected.

Secure digital connectivity is essential for working, learning and accessing basic services. Broadband connectivity, satellite and cloud technology are a necessity in the transition towards a data-driven economy and society. We need to promote the deployment of digital networks and infrastructures such as submarine and terrestrial fibre-optic cables, mobile wireless systems, space-based secure communication systems as well as cloud and data infrastructures, which together provide a basis for data exchange.

Meaningful Internet connectivity remains key to ensuring equitable access to the digital sphere for all, including women and young persons, and those in vulnerable situations, as lack of connectivity increases global inequality and deepens the digital divides. Certain groups have specific needs and require special attention in this context. Connecting all people to the Internet should take place via a global, free, accessible, affordable, open, stable, inclusive, interoperable, reliable, secure, safe and high-quality access, via trusted networks and given a human-centric, human rights-based approach.

Market concentration in the digital ecosystem: The emergence of dominant digital platforms is a challenge for competition enforcers and raises broader concerns about the dynamism of the economy.

Unlike traditional monopolists, who primarily controlled their own core products and services, today's digital players leverage their gatekeeper roles to influence outcomes in a wide range of markets. They can favour certain players, discourage users from switching to competitors, and deter entrepreneurs from encroaching on their domain. In addition, digital technologies may become "unintentional drivers of misinformation or can be intentionally misused to facilitate information manipulation and interference, disinformation, and hate speech enabling new forms of violence". Digital technologies can play a decisive role in shaping our common values and political processes. The tendency of digital services and AI systems to concentrate among a small number of global players poses additional challenges in addressing these concerns effectively.

AI and other emerging fields like quantum technologies, virtual worlds and immersive technologies, continue to evolve, and with them the need for an anticipatory approach to digital and technology governance. It is essential to avoid previous missteps where governments lagged in addressing the impact and governance of new technologies. An inclusive, risk-based, human rights-based, and human-centric approach can mitigate risks to human rights, democracy and the rule of law, while using these technologies for sustainable development.

The existing WSIS+20 Action Lines are written in an open, technology-neutral manner, which has proven to be agile and adaptable to emerging technologies. That is essential in maintaining relevance amidst rapid technological advancements and avoiding the obsolescence that can come from hype related to transient technological trends so that governance mechanisms remain effective and future-proof in the face of ongoing innovation.