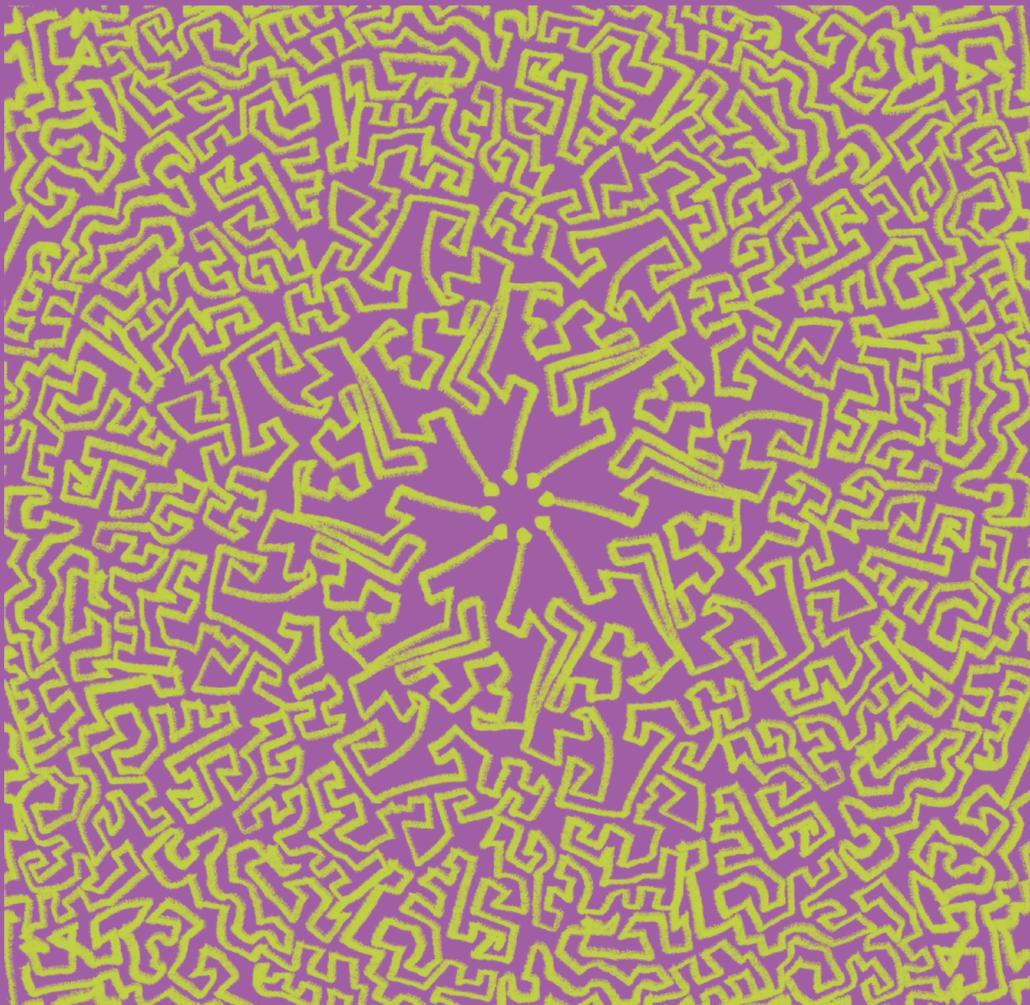


GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2024 SPECIAL EDITION

**WSIS+20: Reimagining horizons of dignity, equity
and justice for our digital future**



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC),
IT FOR CHANGE, WACC GLOBAL
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

Global Information Society Watch 2024 SPECIAL EDITION

WSIS+20: Reimagining horizons of dignity, equity and justice for our digital future

Operational team

Valeria Betancourt (APC)
Alan Finlay (APC)
Maja Romano (APC)

Project coordination team

Valeria Betancourt (APC)
Cathy Chen (APC)
Flavia Fascendini (APC)
Alan Finlay (APC)
Leila Nachawati (APC)
Lori Nordstrom (APC)
Maja Romano (APC)

Project coordinator

Maja Romano (APC)

Editor

Alan Finlay (APC)

Assistant editor and proofreading

Lori Nordstrom (APC)

Publication production support

Cathy Chen (APC)

Graphic design

Monocromo

Cover illustration

Matías Bervejillo



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We gratefully acknowledge the following: Ana Neves (Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia – Unidade FCCN)

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We would like to acknowledge and thank IT for Change, who have partnered with APC on this special edition, as well as WACC Global for their valuable contribution.

GISWatch is a joint initiative of APC and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), and follows up on our long-term interest in the impact of civil society on governance processes and our efforts to enhance public participation in national and international forums.

Preface

Valeria Betancourt (APC) and Anita Gurumurthy (IT for Change)

The “common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society”¹ articulated 20 years ago at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is still a promise to be crystallised.

Meanwhile, our world has changed. It would be difficult if not impossible, today, to separate the digital from the non-digital dimensions in all aspects of life. We live in an epoch of heightened inequalities, confronted by enormous emerging and persistent challenges that stand in the way of social justice. Our digital epoch is capitalism on steroids. It is a tragic totem of what could have been otherwise: a world based on people’s power, democracy, pluralism, peace, prosperity and human flourishing.

The emancipatory potential of the digital terrifies governments. And as they turn towards the authoritarianism latent in statist ideology, the imaginaries of WSIS seem to move one more step away from our grasp.

The writing on the wall is clear: the grand idea of the digital that emboldens the powerful and disenfranchises the majority must be dismantled. New meanings of the digital must be recovered, genuine commitments to effective digital cooperation adopted and new strength for resistance reclaimed.

The complexities of our present demand the juxtaposition of a multiplicity of responses

and actions. Network-scale oppression must be understood for what it is, so that a new grammar of solidarity can be built; a versatile repertoire of trans-constituency strategies that will make digital power a force for human rights, gender justice, ecological justice and more.

This special edition of Global Information Society Watch arises from the need to revitalise the vision adopted at WSIS two decades ago by offering analytical perspectives from civil society and social movements. At this critical juncture marking 20 years after the second summit in Tunis, our intention is to pause, look back and raise issues vital for dialogue, deliberation, cooperation and redefinition. As the Global Digital Compact, the Summit of the Future and NETmundial+10 also unfold and shape the directions for the future, we want the call for digital justice to resonate loudly in these processes. Years of digitality defined by institutional and corporate hegemonies have left a gaping democratic deficit in digital technology policy and governance, a status quo that represents an emergency for global justice.

What are the renewed visions of digitality – the bold alternatives that we want to forge for present and future generations? How can we weave together collaboration among the different actors, and a sense of community and solidarity from these visions? The reports contained in this edition are contributions that address these questions; a timely offering that we think can be a beacon in turbulent seas.

¹ <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/wsisis20-and-igf20-review-by-the-un-general-assembly-2025>

Introduction: Reclaiming a radically changed context

Alan Finlay, Valeria Betancourt and others¹

Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
www.apc.org

Twenty years ago, stakeholders gathered in Geneva at the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and affirmed a “common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society.”² This is considered a “first-ever, clear statement of political will on establishing digitally-connected societies for the benefit of all and harnessing information communication technologies (ICTs) to support development objectives.”³ Since the framework for cooperation was set out in the Geneva Plan of Action (2003),⁴ much has changed in the global digital context, while many recognised challenges still remain.

Some of these changes and ongoing challenges include the following:

The capabilities of digital technologies⁵

The capabilities of global digital resources are significantly greater than they were 20 years ago. These include the levels of bandwidth available, the transition from fixed to mobile connectivity, the scale of data that can be handled by devices and by networks, and the range of services that are now available. The ways in which these capabilities

have expanded the scope and range of services and applications is far beyond what was anticipated at WSIS when it first started. For example, mobile phones are hardly mentioned in the WSIS outcome documents, social media platforms barely existed two decades ago, cloud computing and the internet of things were in their infancy, and e-commerce was a fraction of what it has become. This has impacted on our understanding of digital inequality, its causes, and what it entails.

More people are online

Substantially more people across the world now have the opportunity to access the internet – from around 10% of the global population 20 years ago to about 70% now. However, easy access to high-speed internet is significantly biased in favour of developed countries. In many countries in the global South, the majority of people remain either unconnected or lack meaningful connectivity because they cannot afford to access the internet in a way that meets their needs, or do not have access to a stable internet connection.

Access has reinforced social inequalities

Barriers to internet access such as high data costs or education tend to mirror social inequalities in that they impact primarily the poor, in particular those in rural areas and women, with the result that the current pace and intensity of digitalisation has the potential to increase inequalities (referred to by Alison Gillwald as the “digital inequality paradox”).⁶ This is the opposite of the narrative 20 years ago, which persists until today, that digitalisation and infrastructure roll-out would automatically result in greater socioeconomic opportunities and equalities for most people – a narrative that has turned out not to be true. Linked to this is the perspective that economic growth on its own results in social development and a reduction in inequalities and poverty, which undermines the

1 The introduction is based on the concept note developed for this special edition of GISWatch. The concept note was compiled through invaluable input from several people, including Anita Gurumurthy, Anriette Esterhuysen and David Souter, as well as a number of APC staff members. In some instances, contributors allowed us to use their input and comments verbatim, and this is gratefully acknowledged here.

2 Internet Governance Forum. (n/d). WSIS+20 and IGF+20 Review by the UN General Assembly (2025). <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/wsis20-and-igf20-review-by-the-un-general-assembly-2025>

3 Ibid.

4 International Telecommunication Union. (2003) World Summit on the Information Society Plan of Action. <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/poa.html>

5 The succinct observations in this paragraph were made by David Souter, and his contribution to the concept note and in this introduction are used verbatim with permission.

6 See Gillwald’s report in this edition of GISWatch.

development and social equity imperatives to act underpinning the WSIS goals.

Digitalisation is a cross-sector concern

Digitalisation and the impacts of digital growth are no longer a concern of information and communications technology (ICT) policy makers, digital rights actors or expert technical communities alone, but have cross-field and widespread societal ramifications. This has introduced new cross-sectoral dynamics for consideration and analysis, and raised questions about who should be involved in deliberations. However, the aim of mainstreaming the use of ICTs across sectors envisaged in the WSIS Action Plan has also been uneven due to a lack of political will, low technological capacities and resources, poor inter-ministerial coordination, and poor programme design and follow-through, among other factors. In many areas (e.g. education), tech corporations, through well-resourced lobbying, have crowded out initiatives that respond to public interest concerns.

More people are aware of digital rights issues than before

Many digital and internet rights issues have become mainstreamed, such as those concerned with freedom of expression online, internet shutdowns, privacy, disinformation and online security. While this broad public awareness and concern is critical to the development and use of digital resources, in many instances it has also led to a preoccupation with the social harms that digitalisation can produce, rather than a foregrounding of the opportunities that ICTs can enable for social good. This preoccupation has impacted negatively on policy making, has been used to justify authoritarian measures, and has resulted in restrictions being imposed on access – which has created further barriers for unconnected communities to get meaningfully online.

The complexity of governance frameworks

The governance frameworks for internet access and digital technologies have become much more complex compared to 20 years ago, with multiple forums and processes that are often difficult for civil society actors, particularly from the global South, to access, understand and influence. The task of building effective governance norms and standards has in many respects also become more complex due to innovation in areas such as artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing and

robotics, and, for instance, the need to harmonise regional regulations in areas critical for countries to benefit from digitalisation and datafication (e.g. for taxation, or cross-border data flows).

A flagging commitment to multistakeholder participation

WSIS as a process was strongly shaped by the voices of governments and non-state actors from developing countries. Contributions from the global South were strengthened through regional preparatory events that saw collaborations emerge between governments and civil society that were essential to the WSIS outcomes, and also between global civil society and businesses (for their part, big tech companies had limited influence at WSIS 20 years ago). The multistakeholder approach was fundamental to the development of the WSIS Action Plan, and a formative approach for many subsequent governance deliberations, including at the national level in some countries. However, a commitment to this approach appears to be faltering. In particular, the influence of the big tech sector has significantly strengthened. Civil society participation in governance spaces, meanwhile, is becoming increasingly difficult, and the voices of civil society marginalised. This includes when it comes to proposing effective ways to further the multistakeholder approach as the basis for consensus building, decision making and the democratic governance of digital policy issues.

A much more powerful big tech sector

The structural role big tech firms play in multiple spaces and areas of service provision, and the dependency of markets on the corporate tech sector, suggest that the impact of any regulation is likely to be limited and compromised in curbing big tech's influence and power. That governments often use private sector platforms to deliver public services, and depend on the use of these platforms for surveillance and other mechanisms of control, has also aligned the market needs of the private sector with the desire of governments to manage their citizens and peoples. However, there are often few mechanisms ensuring transparency and accountability with respect to privacy, data use and algorithms, or on the nature of the arrangements reached with the platforms. In this context, there is a pressing need to push for the adoption of global principles or frameworks in multilateral forums to regulate big tech and to set parameters for the state use of platforms in the global governance of digital technologies.

An unsustainable internet

The environmental footprint of digital technologies and infrastructures has multiplied exponentially, is likely to continue to grow exponentially with the intensification of data economies and the widespread use of AI, and is environmentally unsustainable due to resource scarcity, a substantial increase in emissions due to our use of technology, and linear rather than circular economic development. A paradox has emerged where technologies are often presented as a panacea for mitigating or adapting to climate change, but the development and use of technologies themselves contribute substantially to climate change, as well as environmental and social harms for marginalised communities most immediately affected by the climate crisis.

In 2003, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) together with the Campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) published *Involving civil society in ICT policy: The World Summit on the Information Society*.⁷ The publication was designed to build awareness among civil society organisations of the nascent WSIS process, and their capacity to engage in WSIS.

This was followed by a GISWatch special report in 2013 called *Communication rights ten years after the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS): Civil society perceptions*,⁸ in response to the WSIS+10 review. The report, which was the result of a survey and interviews, discussed a number of areas such as freedom of expression and public debate, access to technology and cultural rights in communication, as well as the fragmentation of the communications rights movement.

This special edition, published at the time of the WSIS+20 review process, is driven by at least three framing questions:

- What should the role of WSIS be in the future in the midst of other processes shaping the digital terrain and its governance?
- What are its key and unique strengths?
- How can civil society – as well as governments – best respond to the changed context in order to crystallise the WSIS vision?

While the reports published here may not answer these questions directly, in different ways they inform further consideration of the questions by civil society organisations and governments.

In its interaction with other key ongoing processes, such as the Pact for the Future and the Global Digital Compact (GDC), and the need to build synergies among these processes, WSIS+20 is an opportunity to contribute to and reinterpret the WSIS vision. This needs to respond to the fact that internet governance and digital cooperation are interlinked, and that both need to take into account the realities of the constantly changing digital societies that we live in today. Moreover, as the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) mandate beyond 2025 will be considered by the review, WSIS+20, like the GDC, is key to strengthening and expanding the mandate of the IGF. The IGF remains at the heart of the internet governance and global digital cooperation ecosystems – there is no equivalent space for enabling public participation and shared learning on the positive and negative impacts of the internet and internet policies in a multidisciplinary and multistakeholder way.

As it stands, there is a danger that the architecture of digital governance emerging, fragmented as it is, is likely to reinforce the structural inequalities that are being amplified by digitalisation, rather than recognising these inequalities and their causes as unjust, and collectively committing to address these.

Ultimately, WSIS+20 needs to reflect the type of digital future we want and identify what we need to do to build this future. It could be a unique opportunity to place global digital cooperation – working towards both global and contextual responses – at the top of political agendas to address the persistent and emerging challenges in the digital age, including the environmental crisis. It could be used to ensure that the lessons learned from years of multistakeholder engagement feed into future governance processes and set the parameters for safeguarding inclusive dialogue, transparency and accountability. It could also renew and strengthen the mandate of the IGF and bridge the gaps between deliberative spaces and decision-making processes. As many of these reports suggest, the extent to which this will happen remains to be seen.

7 APC & CRIS. (2003) *Involving civil society in ICT policy: The World Summit on the Information Society*. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/InvolvingCivilSociety_EN.pdf

8 Finlay, A. (2013). *Communication rights ten years after the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS): Civil society perceptions*. APC. https://www.giswatch.org/sites/default/files/apc_surveywsis_en-2013.pdf

Shaping information societies for human needs: The relevance of the WSIS civil society declaration, 20 years on

Sally Burch¹

Agencia Latinoamericana de Información (ALAI)
www.alainet.org

The global future of our information societies is again in debate in the United Nations (UN), in the lead-up to the 20-year revision of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS+20), due to take place in Geneva in 2025. The vision constructed in the framework of the international community at WSIS two decades ago – “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”² – is still far from becoming a reality. However, there is broader awareness today of the importance and urgency of defining what information societies we need and identifying the steps to achieve them.

WSIS+20 will involve evaluating progress regarding fulfilment of the original WSIS agreements, as well as readjusting priorities for the future, given the rapid advances in technology and the information society itself. Over the coming months, governments, civil society organisations and private enterprise will be fine-tuning and updating their respective proposals and priorities. But much wider public debate and involvement will also be needed if we are to redress the present imbalance between private and public interests in the digital realm.

Civil society WSIS contributions

The first UN summit on these issues, held in two phases (2003 in Geneva and 2005 in Tunis), set a precedent by establishing a “multistakeholder” dynamic, where both civil society organisations and private enterprise, supposedly on an equal footing, were given a formal space as “observers”. This allowed for participation in certain official debates, though the final decisions remained in the hands of governments.

At that time, civil society participation led to several significant contributions to the official outcomes, in particular broadening the focus and vision of the summit to encompass human rights and principles of social inclusion, in contrast to the original proposal of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) – the main WSIS organising body – in collusion with private enterprise, which was basically technocratic, and centred on removing barriers to investment in internet infrastructure, services and e-commerce.

A number of other civil society inputs were also included in the Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action,³ such as the principle of universal access to information and communications technologies (ICTs), development of the public domain of information, support for “free” software,⁴ and promoting capacity for ICT research and development in developing countries. While UN declarations are not binding on governments, they do express a collective commitment and provide social actors with justification and leverage to press for their implementation.

Nonetheless, many other civil society proposals were side-lined in the process, and as civil society organisations, formally the third actor invited to

1 Sally Burch is a British-Ecuadorian journalist, executive director of the Agencia Latinoamericana de Información (ALAI) and co-facilitator of the Latin American Internet Ciudadana network. She was co-coordinator of the Civil Society Content and Themes Group during the Geneva phase of WSIS (2002-2003) and an active participant in the Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) Campaign.

2 WSIS Declaration of Principles, Geneva 2003: <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>

3 WSIS Plan of Action, Geneva 2003: <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/poa.html>

4 “Free software” refers to software that respects users’ freedom and community, for example, the freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software. Thus, “free software” is a matter of liberty, rather than gratuity; for this reason, it is often referred to as “free/libre”.

the table, we had to fight at every stage to make our positions heard. The achievements were largely possible due to the collective will to develop civil society consensus proposals in order to make a greater impact on the outcomes. A key actor contributing to this dynamic was the campaign on Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS), of which APC was an active participant. The CRIS Campaign was a global coalition of civil society organisations, launched at the first World Social Forum, in 2001, in the lead-up to WSIS. It had the goals of deepening the debate on the information society, promoting the democratisation of access to communications, and strengthening commitments to communications in the service of sustainable development.

At the second WSIS “PrepCom” (preparatory event), held in September 2002, the civil society plenary took the initiative of creating a “Content and Themes Group”, as a space for facilitating agreement and taking decisions by consensus on content-related issues, in order to have greater chances of input to the official summit process.

The Content and Themes Group, which met twice daily during preparatory events, facilitated speaking slots at the official events for the different thematic caucuses formed by civil society participants, organised monitoring and reports of the official sessions, compiled consensus documents, and coordinated strategic actions such as lobbying governments. The official WSIS organisers recognised that the degree of unity among civil society organisations was unprecedented in a UN conference, as well as our determination to make quality contributions and achieve impact on the summit outcomes. In the final days, the president of the summit even invited the Content and Themes Group to summarise the civil society “red lines” regarding inclusion of content we considered non-negotiable.

The civil society declaration in Geneva

Despite these successes, many of the civil society proposals were absent or not adequately reflected in the final official summit documents. In response, towards the end of the Geneva process, the civil society plenary decided to draw up its own declaration as a complement to the official document, with the aim of providing input for future discussion in the UN process, as well as contributing to more inclusive public debate on the issues.

This declaration, titled “Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs” and adopted by

consensus at the final civil society plenary on 8 December 2003 (just over 20 years ago), was presented to the final Geneva WSIS session and posted on the summit website,⁵ thus creating another precedent for a UN conference. Today, most of its standpoints are still valid – and their implementation still pending – and many of the action points outlined continue to be defended by civil society organisations, or are being updated to respond to the rapid technological evolution.

Throughout its 23 pages, the civil society declaration refers to “information and communication societies”, rather than *the* information society, recognising that there are possible future societies at the local, national and global levels, and considering communication as a critical aspect of any information society. Among its main emphases, it develops in greater depth the concept of people-centred, inclusive and equitable information and communication societies (which had achieved a brief mention in the summit’s official declaration), situating it within a framework of social justice, sustainable development and human rights, where developments in this field should be oriented towards solving people’s vital needs. This vision is then translated into policy and action proposals, many of which were excluded from the official outcomes.

For example, while the summit declaration refers to human rights simply by quoting the Universal Declaration, the civil society document reaffirms the full comprehensiveness of human rights, detailing the particular relevance of specific rights to the information society, such as freedom of expression, the right to privacy, the right to participate in public affairs, and the rights of workers, Indigenous peoples, women, children and persons with disabilities, also calling for their effective implementation.

The civil society declaration reaffirms that:

[C]ommunication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and a foundation of all social organisation. Everyone, everywhere, at any time should have the opportunity to participate in communication processes and no one should be excluded from their benefits.

Consequent with this vision, the document emphasises as priorities the development

5 WSIS Civil Society Plenary. (2003). “*Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs*”: *Civil Society Declaration to the World Summit on the Information Society*. <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/civil-society-declaration.pdf>

and non-privatisation of knowledge, diversity, communication rights and the public domain:

Human knowledge is the heritage of all humankind and the reservoir from which all new knowledge is created. The preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity, the freedom of the media and the defence and extension of the public domain of global knowledge are as essential, for information and communication societies, as the diversity of our natural environment.

It also underlines that:

The regulatory and legal framework in all information and communication societies must be strengthened to support broad-based sharing of technologies, information, and knowledge, and to foster community control, respectful of human rights and freedoms.

It maintains that “[k]nowledge creation and acquisition should be nurtured as a participatory and collective process and not considered a one-way flow or confined to one section of capacity building.” And it urges attention to both “the potential positive and negative impacts of ICTs on the issues of illiteracy in regional, national and international languages of the great majority of the world’s peoples.”

While the official outcomes barely include references to media, an issue that faced fierce debate, the civil society declaration calls for legislation to prevent excessive media concentration and underlines the importance of promoting both public service media and, in particular, community media, since the latter can be “vital enablers of information, voice and capacities for dialogue”. It adds that “[l]egal and regulatory frameworks that protect and enhance community media are especially critical for ensuring vulnerable groups access to information and communication.”

Recognising that no technology is neutral with respect to its social impacts, the civil society declaration considers that so-called “technology-neutral” decision-making processes are a fallacy. It therefore defends greater participation of citizens and communities in the design and use of technologies, and encourages the promotion of collective innovation and cooperative work in the information society.

To ensure effective community involvement in developing solutions using ICTs, the civil society declaration states that:

[Communities] must be empowered to develop their own productive forces and control the means of production within information societies. This must include the right to participate fully in the development and sustenance of ICT-based projects through democratic processes, including decision making with respect to economic, cultural, environmental, and other issues.

The document also recalls that “[c]ivil society actors have been key innovators and shapers of the technology, culture and content of information and communication societies, and will continue to be in the future.”

Also included is a critique of the concept of “intellectual property rights”, which civil society organisations prefer to call “limited intellectual monopolies”. Intellectual property rights should be granted “only for the benefit of society, most notably to encourage creativity and innovation.” The declaration goes on to state:

The benchmark against which they must be reviewed and adjusted regularly is how well they fulfill this purpose. Today, the vast majority of humankind has no access to the public domain of global knowledge, a situation that is contributing to the growth of inequality and exploitation of the poorest peoples and communities.

Free software is especially recommended, for its freedom of use, for the fact that its code is open for study, modification and redistribution for any purpose, and for its “unique social, educational, scientific, political and economic benefits and opportunities” as well as its special advantages for developing countries. Governments are encouraged to promote the use of free software in schools and higher education and in public administration.

The document expresses concern regarding the deployment of “information warfare” technologies and techniques, including:

[T]he purposeful jamming, blocking, or destruction of civilian communication systems during conflict situations; the use of “embedded” journalists coupled with the targeting of non-embedded journalists; the use of media and communication systems to promote hatred and genocide [...] by military, police, or other security forces, be they governmental, privately owned, or non-state actors, during conflict situations.

To this end, it calls for a future convention against information warfare, as well as the active promotion of media and communication for peace.

It also stresses the need to guarantee the right to privacy, recalling that the power of the private sector and of governments over personal data increases the risk of abuse, including monitoring and surveillance:

Such activities must be kept to a legally legitimised minimum in a democratic society, and must remain accountable. The collection, retention, processing, use and disclosure of personal data, no matter by whom, should remain under the control of and determined by the individual concerned.

With respect to global governance of ICT and communications, recalling that governments have liberalised international regulatory regimes in areas such as telecommunications and trade, while business groups have established a variety of “self-regulatory” arrangements, the civil society declaration affirms:

[I]t is not acceptable for these and related global governance frameworks to be designed by and for small groups of powerful governments and companies and then exported to the world as *faits accomplis*. Instead, they must reflect the diverse views and interests of the international community as a whole. This overarching principle has both procedural and substantive dimensions.

Therefore, procedurally, decision-making processes should be based on such values as inclusive participation, transparency and democratic accountability, ensuring adequate participation of marginalised partners in ICT governance mechanisms, such as developing countries, civil society organisations and small and medium-sized enterprises. Substantively, “global governance frameworks must promote a more equitable distribution of benefits across nations and social groups,” and “[t]o do so, they must strike a better balance between commercial considerations and other legitimate social objectives.”

New challenges

Building on the experience of the first phase of the WSIS Summit, for the second phase, which culminated in Tunis in 2005, the Content and Themes Group was reactivated, and produced a new joint civil society statement, titled “Much

more could have been achieved”,⁶ with the character of an evaluation of the official outcomes of the summit, recognising certain advances and criticising notable omissions.

Today, as the WSIS+20 evaluation approaches, while digital inclusion is still an important issue to resolve for much of the world, there is now also much greater awareness of the need to regulate significant areas of the internet and digital technologies. However, the panorama is far more complex than 20 years ago. Particular concerns relate to issues such as artificial intelligence (AI), especially the implications of generative AI and large language models; the environmental impact of these technologies; priorities of digital development and how these are decided, by whom; how to regulate the large digital corporations at the national and international level and make the regulation enforceable; implications of robotisation and AI on employment; positive and negative implications for health, education and democracy; and many other areas.

Many civil society actors are already working on these issues, formulating proposals and fighting for their rights. For example, there is a growing consensus that it is not sufficient, nor often feasible, to ensure individual control over one’s data (though that is indispensable in the case of intimate personal data), but that collective data should be under the control of the communities concerned.

Nonetheless, such initiatives are still often disconnected. Given the convergent nature of the digital realm and the overarching reach of the mega-corporations that control our data, the platforms we use and the AI we are increasingly dependent on, it is fundamental today, more than ever, to build bridges between these different initiatives, seek broader consensus and coordinate actions in order to achieve our goals.

Moreover, the international model for internet governance is still unresolved after 20 years. The WSIS outcomes anticipated two processes, one the multistakeholder road in the form of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), and the other a multilateral-driven approach called “enhanced cooperation”. As the digital corporations grew in power and reach, they came to extend major influence over the IGF, even funding some of the

6 Civil Society Content and Themes Group. (2005). “*Much more could have been achieved*”: Civil society statement on the World Summit on the Information Society. <https://www.itu.int/net/wsisc/docs2/tunis/contributions/co13.pdf>

civil society inputs and decisively influencing its processes and structure, though it remains useful as a forum to share and debate ideas. At the same time, efforts to promote enhanced cooperation, which if done effectively offer a real opportunity for governments of the South to exert some significant influence, became bogged down in acrimonious discussions, deliberately engineered by countries opposing the approach, and has in effect been in abeyance since 2018 when the Working Group established to bring it forward last met.

Yet the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has maintained its support for the idea of enhanced cooperation and a stronger role for multilateral processes. In July 2021, in an assessment of the process of the WSIS outcomes, it strongly reaffirmed the importance of enhanced cooperation "to enable Governments, on an equal footing, to carry out their roles and responsibilities in international public policy issues pertaining to the Internet," noting that it and the IGF are "distinct processes [that] may be complementary."⁷

WSIS+20 faces the challenge of building towards a binding global governance framework in relation to digital human rights. Such a process can be reinforced through revisiting the enhanced cooperation mechanism. It offers civil society a clear opportunity, acting collectively nationally and internationally, to support those governments that are committed to building a binding framework relevant to the global South and to civil society everywhere – and to lobby those governments that are reticent. In the lead-up to WSIS+ 20 in 2025, other opportunities for civil society to refine its positions, build coalitions and exert influence include the IGF, but more significantly, the Global Digital Compact (in the framework of the Summit of the Future – convened by the UN Secretary General for September 2024) and arenas such as NETmundial+10 (Sao Paulo, April 2024) and the G20, currently chaired by Brazil, due to meet in Rio de Janeiro in November 2024. The G20 agenda includes "information integrity on the internet", for which Brazil is inviting civil society input.

Given the enormous and rapidly increasing impact that digital technologies are already having on our societies, and the prevalence of the corporate model of digital development, the challenge to build information societies designed for human needs, rather than corporate gain, will require mobilising the peoples of our planet to take an active part in these debates and to demand decisive action from our governments.

Action steps

Based on the discussion above, the following are some key advocacy priorities for civil society in the context of WSIS+20:

- Build alliances and seek consensus on key issues among civil society actors and organisations that are already undertaking advocacy in this field, as well as with others, such as people's organisations that are seeking how to intervene and defend their rights in the digital sphere.
- Work towards a binding global governance framework for digital rights, responsive to the interests and concerns of the global South and the peoples of our planet. This includes the rights of workers in algorithmic work environments and the right of communities to share the benefits of their collective data and control its use.
- Encourage governments to define basic internet connectivity, whether under public, private or community management, as an essential public service, that must be regulated to ensure equity and quality.
- Prioritise the establishment of clear obligations for digital corporations, particularly concerning user rights, the collection, use and protection of data, and transparent algorithms. Such regulations should put the onus of compliance on the corporations themselves (as a condition for their operation), rather than depending only on the effectiveness of regulatory scrutiny and audits.
- Support the call for a global pact against digital warfare and autonomous weapons.

⁷ UN Economic and Social Council. (2021). *Assessment of the progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society*. E/RES/2021/28. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ecosoc_res_2021d28_en.pdf

Reflections on WSIS+20: The value of WSIS moving forward and advocacy priorities for civil society¹

Ana Neves

Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia – Unidade FCCN
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/anacristinaamorosoneves/>

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is a unique United Nations summit that happened in two phases (in Geneva in 2003 and Tunis in 2005) and set the governance of the internet on a multistakeholder course. The consensus around this decision has endured for almost two decades. It emphasised the importance of strengthening partnerships and collaboration between different stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, the technical and academic communities, civil society and international intergovernmental organisations (IGOs).

Since then, there has been a strong call to build on the WSIS process by advocating for inclusivity and increased civil society participation at various levels. Empowering civil society to shape debates at the grassroots level was seen as crucial to bringing about significant change. The WSIS process has created space for civil society participation and cooperation within the UN system.

The outcomes of the two phases of WSIS – the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action in 2003 and the Tunis Commitment and Tunis Agenda for the Information Society in 2005 – are notable for incorporating the perspectives and involvement of non-state actors, reflecting a comprehensive and inclusive approach. The WSIS documents strike a balance between broad overarching principles and specific subject areas, providing a holistic yet detailed framework.

In the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society, the role of civil society is significant. It emphasises the importance of multistakeholder participation,

highlighting civil society as a key partner in shaping information society policies, bridging the digital divide (now acknowledged as the digital “divides”), access to information, freedom of expression and the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), while ensuring that the benefits of ICTs are accessible to all.

It is useful to recall that the Tunis Agenda outlines several mechanisms for involving civil society in the implementation of the WSIS outcomes:

Through multistakeholder partnerships: Civil society is viewed as a key partner, bringing its expertise, advocacy and grassroots experience to the table.

Participation in policy development: Civil society is encouraged to participate in the formulation of information society policies to ensure that the perspectives and needs of different communities are taken into account in decision-making processes.

Capacity building and empowerment: The Tunis Agenda stresses the importance of building the capacity of civil society organisations to participate effectively in information society initiatives. This includes providing training, resources and technical assistance to enhance their ability to contribute to policy discussions, advocate for their interests and implement projects at the local level.

Promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms: Civil society plays a crucial role in advocating for the protection of human rights, including freedom of expression, privacy and access to information in the digital age. The Tunis Agenda recognises the role of civil society in holding governments and other stakeholders accountable for upholding these rights in the context of ICTs.

Overall, the Tunis Agenda underlines the importance of an inclusive and participatory approach to building the information society, with civil society playing a central role in shaping its development and ensuring

¹ The aim of this report is not to present a research paper, but my opinion on the value of WSIS for the future and the advocacy priorities for civil society. All the terminology used reflects the WSIS language without any theorisation of what is meant.

that it serves the interests of all people, especially those in marginalised or underserved communities.

When WSIS met in 2003 and in 2005, the information society and the knowledge-based society were an aspiration. Today, they are an observable reality. The two stages of the summit were also marked to a high degree by a prosperous decade for humanity. WSIS+20 will take place in the context of many more conflicts and a much broader international discussion about the role of the internet and other technologies and how they intersect with other global concerns and priorities. Many of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are running behind schedule as international disharmony increases. This is why the Summit for the Future, the Global Digital Compact (GDC), and the many other international and regional initiatives are so important.

WSIS+20: What is at stake?

Twenty years after the first phase of WSIS, the UN Secretary-General highlighted:

Inequality is rising. Enormous investments in technology have not been accompanied by spending on public education and infrastructure. Digital technology has led to massive gains in productivity and value, but these benefits are not resulting in shared prosperity. The wealth of those in the top 1 per cent is growing exponentially: between 1995 and 2021, they accounted for 38 per cent of the increase in global wealth, while the bottom 50 per cent accounted for only 2 per cent. Digital technologies are accelerating the concentration of economic power in an ever-smaller group of elites and companies: the combined wealth of technology billionaires, \$2.1 trillion in 2022, is greater than the annual gross domestic product of more than half of the Group of 20 economies.

Behind these divides is a massive governance gap. New technologies are lacking even basic guardrails.²

In this sense, the 20-year review of WSIS takes on prominence and momentum in reflecting on what needs to be done to improve the work started two decades ago, which is crucial

and significant precisely because of the multistakeholder commitment.

However, if different stakeholders have by their very nature different agendas and objectives, the differences within each stakeholder group may be deeper than they were 20 years ago. For example, governments all over the world are very different from each other, from democracies to totalitarian regimes and authoritarian regimes in between. The private sector is a myriad of interests of very different enterprises of different sizes, much more so than before. Civil society includes users and non-governmental organisations, which are of course very different, but their role is more fundamental than ever in terms of respect for human rights, addressing gender inequalities and other marginalisations, freedom of expression and the pressing concerns of the environment and climate change.³ Today's complex geopolitics, endemic wars and a world where values, rights and responsibilities are being challenged in terms of humanity and civilisation make it even more necessary for civil society to engage with national governments and IGOs.

Both the technical and academic communities, by virtue of their roles, are perhaps the ones where there is more consensus on open, inclusive access for individuals, and bottom-up, organic and decentralised governance of the internet.

Not forgetting the OECD, it is within a somewhat complex existing UN framework of various intergovernmental and multistakeholder cooperation forums on digital issues that WSIS+20 is being discussed (see Figure 1).

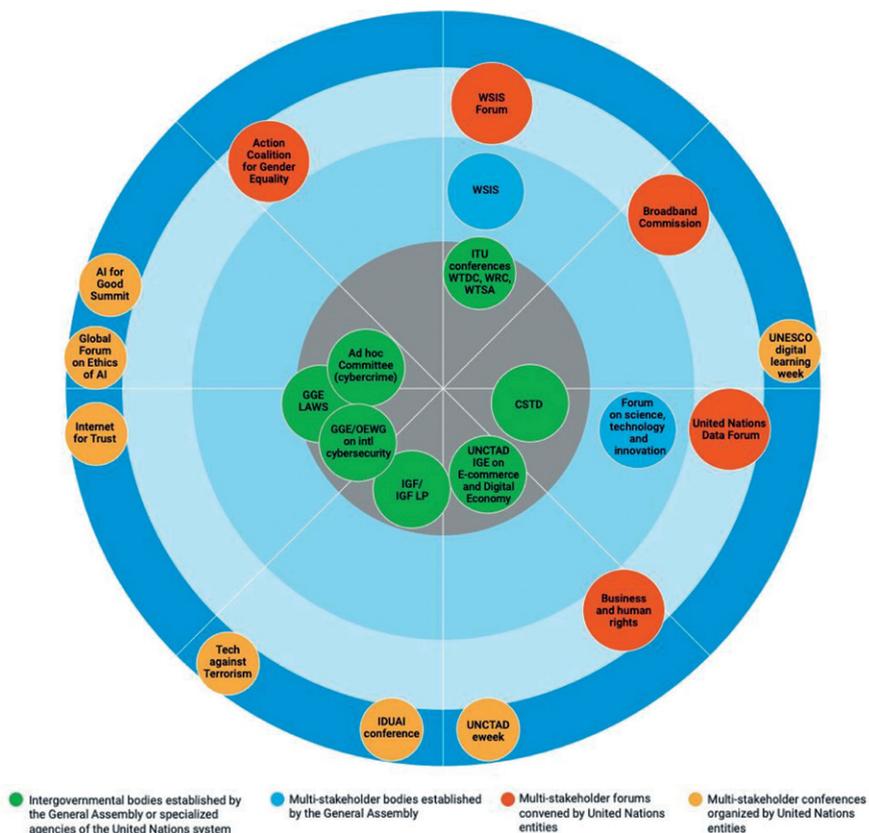
Civil society is undoubtedly challenged by the myriad forums in which digital cooperation and internet governance are discussed and lacks not only human but also financial resources, resulting in an unequal and unbalanced position with respect to other stakeholders. A commitment must be made to mitigate the difficulties that civil society faces in following multiple and simultaneous processes.

² United Nations Executive Office of the Secretary-General. (2023). *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 5: A Global Digital Compact – An Open, Free and Secure Digital Future For All*. <https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/papers/10.18356/27082245-28>

³ The overall review of the implementation of the outcomes of WSIS in 2015 (Resolution A/70/125) called for close alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, highlighting the cross-cutting contribution of ICTs to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and poverty eradication and noting that access to ICTs has also become a development indicator and aspiration in and of itself.

FIGURE 1.

UN intergovernmental and multistakeholder digital cooperation bodies and forums



Abbreviations: AI, artificial intelligence; CSTD, Commission on Science and Technology for Development; GGE, group of governmental experts; IGE, intergovernmental group of experts; IDUAI, International Day for Universal Access to Information; IGF, Internet Governance Forum; LAWS, Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems; LP, Leadership Panel; OEWG, open-ended working group; WRC, World Radiocommunication Conference; WSIS, World Summit on the Information Society; WTDC, World Telecommunication Development Conference; WTSa, World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly.

Source: Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 5: A Global Digital Compact – An Open, Free and Secure Digital Future For All, p. 26.

Internet governance or digital cooperation? Both

When used in good faith and in a peaceful manner, the internet and technology serve human dignity and individual freedom as valuable tools for peace, justice, poverty reduction and improved access to health and education. In doing so, they contribute to the achievement of the SDGs.

When used maliciously and with the aim to undermine fundamental rights, the internet and digital technologies can be tools of violence and war and used to suppress citizens’ political demands for participation, access to information, freedom of expression, equality and fundamental freedoms.

Digital technologies can spread misinformation, propaganda and hate speech, manipulate democratic elections and fuel political and social tensions that disrupt democracies. In addition, there is a growing recognition that the nature of the internet and the digitally mediated life we are currently experiencing is highly unequal and exclusionary. As new technologies are created and used, they create new facts faster than policy makers can regulate them. These smaller and larger changes in our ways of life, taken together, may have effects that are unintended and difficult to predict.

Recognising that the benefits of digitalisation and connectivity are uneven and that structural

asymmetries are emerging and worsening, the current context of multiple, overlapping crises prevents many from reaping the benefits of digital transformation.

To mitigate the risks of the current context, and maintain trust and confidence in the internet, there is an emerging need to strengthen digital cooperation. More than ever, a form of digital cooperation is needed that is about coordination and collaboration around a shared vision of principles, norms and rules, as well as decision making in economic, social, cultural and political areas, on cybersecurity, the digital economy, data, artificial intelligence (AI) and internet infrastructure, *inter alia* for equity, development, social justice, public value and human rights.

Civil society plays a crucial role in ensuring the meaningful participation of independent, rights-based and diverse stakeholders in this process, including in decision making.

Digital cooperation to build consensus among different stakeholders is key to the adoption of a common agenda to be implemented through multistakeholder governance processes, to be further strengthened in the WSIS+20 discussions. The Global Digital Compact will not just be an annex to the outcomes of the Summit of the Future, but the digital cooperation instrument to integrate the digital aspects of the different strands of the Compact of the Future.

How could the WSIS outcomes be revised to reflect the current context of digitalisation and datafication and the new challenges that these present?

To respond to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, new and emerging technologies are redefining digital public policy every day, so WSIS+20 should seek to reflect a balance between embracing innovation and ensuring fairness, security and sustainability.

WSIS+20 should be at the forefront of discussions on the economic implications of digitalisation and advocate for policies that ensure that social and economic transitions benefit all. To mitigate the ethical dilemmas posed by new and emerging technologies, the WSIS process should continue to strengthen frameworks to ensure the ethical development and application of such technologies. To reduce the environmental impact of ICTs, from e-waste to the energy consumption of massive data centres, WSIS+20 should promote green and sustainable technology initiatives to help shape a green digital revolution.

New challenges relate to digital human rights, data governance versus data rights and equity, the internet as a global public good without

fragmentation by states or big tech companies, values of inclusion, and democratic participation. And this is where civil society has an important role to play. But one of the key issues remains the ad hoc nature of civil society participation, which should be institutionalised to allow for the meaningful engagement of, among others, traditional development organisations expanding into digital issues, tech workers' and platform workers' trade unions, as well as new-age digital rights organisations and tech activists working on digital commons, design justice and reforming standards bodies from a diversity, equity and inclusion perspective.

While recent trends in the development of AI, particularly the emergence of generative AI technologies, have been hailed as the heralding of a new paradigm of information and knowledge, there have been numerous concerns about epistemic inequality and the appropriation of traditional knowledge and Indigenous cultures. Furthermore, in any process of developing AI, there is a high risk that the inherent biases and glaring omissions in data sets that reflect intersectional divides will be reified into objective truths, denying meaningful representation of the Majority World in the new regime of data-based truth. In this new era, all WSIS stakeholders have a greater role and responsibility.

As far as civil society is concerned, its perspectives and advocacy priorities should be further engaged and broadened at WSIS+20. It has a key role to play at least in the following areas:

- Contributing to bridging the digital divides in all their dimensions at regional, national and local levels, especially in rural and underserved areas. There is a major role for libraries, which have assumed enormous importance as trusted gateways and have contributed to the strengthening of civil society. Libraries, like the internet, have undergone radical changes in the last two decades, becoming multipurpose anchor institutions that actively engage the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, while their insight into the needs and concerns of these groups helps to overcome the impact of digital products and services. In cases where states have withdrawn funding for community libraries, civil society needs to campaign against this.
- Harnessing the potential of technological advances, in helping people to acquire the necessary skills to use, understand and

even contribute to the development of these advances. The requisite digital skills as well as foundational literacy and education are essential for higher order digital fluency and competence.

- Creating a stronger focus on global digital education and literacy campaigns, and reskilling and upskilling initiatives, especially in regions where some jobs risk becoming obsolete due to technological progress. Local civil society organisations and technical experts should be invited to review and provide feedback on capacity-building curricula to ensure that they reflect local contexts. Most people in both developed and developing countries are still not adequately prepared to respond to the labour market transitions that technology-induced job displacement is likely to trigger in the medium term.

WSIS+20 moving forward

A pragmatic response to the needs of the whole society on which humanity depends has always been central to a multistakeholder approach, based on the assumption that all parties are working in good faith, in their own ways and with their own priorities. But this assumption may be less certain now than it was at WSIS in 2003 and 2005.

As we approach the WSIS+20 review, the future seems to be shaped by the technological paradigm, but the geopolitics and geoeconomics of mistrust could lead to the collapse of the environment and the anguish of societies. And if next-generation networked data technologies have infinitely expanded the scope of internet-related public policy issues, we can no longer expect perfect digital governance as AI advances in a data gold rush.

In this context, we need to continue to demonstrate that the multistakeholder model allows a wide range of stakeholders to participate and present ideas and concerns, pros and cons, leading to more and better solution design⁴ and creative problem solving. In fact, the agility, adaptability and flexibility in the solution design approach tends to respond much more effectively to today's rapidly changing technologies and the constantly evolving range of applications around the world than traditional regulatory or legislative models. So, perhaps the focus should shift from decision making to solution design?

4 Solution design can be defined as the process of articulating how a system or application can meet the requirements of an objective or a problem.

A multistakeholder approach can go beyond internet governance decisions that are made solely or primarily for political reasons, which can often lead to deadlocks that are not recognised and overlooked in today's fast-paced technological world, and which can also jeopardise the technical or operational impact of the global internet. The future governance of the digital world cannot be separated from the technology that underpins the internet and it cannot be separated from the human beings and businesses that use the internet in countless ways every day.

As stated in the *Human Development Report 2023-2024*:

[W]e may choose to deglobalize, but we cannot “deplanetize”. [An] unfolding Digital Revolution has led to a dizzying increase in the sharing of data, ideas and culture across societies. [...] Many interdependences among economies, people and [the] planet are emerging and deepening as the Digital Revolution powers ahead and we go deeper into the Anthropocene – the age of humans.⁵

Anthropocene is a concept that should be fully integrated into WSIS+20.

As important mechanisms for multistakeholder engagement, the Internet Governance Forum's National and Regional Initiatives (IGF NRIs) give a voice to several countries that are usually absent from discussions on democracy, human rights and freedom of expression. Civil society has played a key role in the NRIs, not only because of its invaluable work at the local level, but also because it has managed to raise the voices of its countries in the global arena, showing that there is hope for a better world based on values that allow human rights and their meaning to be placed on the global political agenda.

We must thank civil society for all the work it has done so far and provide it with the best conditions to take on a greater role and responsibility at WSIS+20. Civil society is one of the main stakeholders that contribute greatly to the accountability of the multistakeholder governance of digital policies.

By 2023, there were more than 155 NRIs across all five UN regions and around the world. But do we have 155 governments participating in the IGF?

5 United Nations Development Programme. (2024). *Human Development Report 2023-2024: Breaking the gridlock: Reimagining cooperation in a polarized world*. <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2023-24>

No! However, the 193 UN member states will be negotiating the GDC and ultimately the WSIS+20 review.

Action steps

Civil society has a key role to play in empowering everyone to demand a human-centred and environmentally sustainable digital transformation, by providing critical education and raising awareness in their communities. In terms of multistakeholder engagement, at WSIS+20 and elsewhere, this role includes:

- Upholding human rights. Digital technologies can be used to either enhance or infringe upon human rights; therefore, there is a huge need for strong advocacy to ensure that technologies help amplify rights, not diminish them.
- Remaining vigilant to the new and emerging risks of internet fragmentation and threats to the open internet.
- Raising awareness of the links between human rights, a free and open internet, inclusion and sustainable development.
- Communication. It is difficult to effectively communicate messages to remote communities due to the lack of adequate participation mechanisms. To involve ordinary citizens in governance debates is likely to enhance the perspectives of those who depend on the internet for their daily lives and who have not been heard or taken into account to date. Involving ordinary citizens not only promotes inclusion, but also strengthens the inclusiveness, legitimacy and effectiveness of internet governance processes through the inclusion of diverse viewpoints and experiences.
- Strengthening cybersecurity. Improved cybersecurity requires whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches involving strong partnerships and coordinated efforts between parliaments, regulators, the judiciary, law enforcement and other relevant government agencies, the private sector, the technical community, academia and civil society.
- Participating in setting technical standards. Technical standards play an important role in enabling the development and enhancing the value of digital technologies and related infrastructures, services, protocols, applications and devices. Efforts should be made to ensure that such standards are set through transparent and clear processes, take full account of human rights concerns and encourage the full participation of all stakeholders, including through financial support for expert participants from governments, academia, the private sector, the technical community and civil society.
- Contributing to the development of good data governance and end-user privacy policies.
- Protecting rights in content moderation and combatting the spread of disinformation and misinformation. These are challenges that are increasingly important in the digital age. There is therefore a need for the implementation of structural programmes in support of the development of civil society organisations and fact-checking mechanisms. These efforts should aim to increase media and information literacy, which is crucial to combating the spread of false information.
- Informing the work of the private sector. To strengthen the legitimacy and ethical grounding of the private sector and to develop solutions that are socially responsible, sustainable and responsive to the needs of the information society, the private sector needs to engage meaningfully with civil society.

In conclusion, civil society needs to be institutionalised, given the structural importance of its work and actions. As such, civil society needs to have a stronger voice and more and more resources to be able to influence their governments. The UN system must recognise and consolidate the urgency of this need around the world, especially in developing countries; and WSIS+20 must recognise this.

Cornerstone, Achilles heel or “fake news”? WSIS and the role of the multistakeholder approach in empowering civil society’s participation in internet governance

Anriette Esterhuysen¹

APC

<https://afrisig.org>

The WSIS ought to be considered both as an experiment in global communication governance and a political marker. As a multi-stakeholder experience, the event tested the effectiveness and feasibility of integrating non-government actors into an intergovernmental political negotiation process. As a political marker, the WSIS set a new level – theoretically at least – for the participation of NGOs in subsequent political negotiations. The political and institutional legacy of the WSIS will thus be largely judged by the role the summit played in the democratization of global communication governance going forward. – Marc Raboy, Normand Landry and Jeremy Shtern²

Looking back on the occasion of the 20-year review of the World Summit on the Information Society

The idea of multistakeholder partnership was not invented by the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). But it was during WSIS that it came to be seen as indispensable to achieving the overarching WSIS goal of a people-centred information society. This was outlined unequivocally in the Geneva Declaration of Principles, an outcome document of the first phase of WSIS:

Governments, as well as private sector, civil society and the United Nations and other international organizations have an important role and responsibility in the development of the Information Society and, as appropriate, in

decision-making processes. Building a people-centred Information Society is a joint effort which requires cooperation and partnership among all stakeholders.³

WSIS took place when civil society was actively campaigning against approaches to globalisation, which was being encouraged by the international financial institutions, and which activists felt was entrenching the power of multinational corporations, weakening the role of the public sector, and undermining social and economic justice.⁴ It is no accident that some organisers of the World Social Forum (WSF) which first took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil, were also active in WSIS.⁵ For civil society organisations working in the late 1990s and early 2000s for social and economic justice, peace and environmental sustainability, information and communications technologies (ICTs) and the internet strengthened global solidarity, interconnection and South-South collaboration. Even prior to the widespread availability of the mainstream commercial internet, APC and its partners were using email networks and news groups to give life to the WSF motto, “Another world is possible.”⁶

At the same time, the information and communications sector was dominated by the drive to privatise and liberalise telecoms. Particularly in developing countries, many civil society organisations did not oppose this move, having lost faith in the ability of government-owned telcos to roll out the affordable and widely available fixed-line infrastructure that was needed to access the internet. But they were also sceptical of the prevailing approach to telecoms liberalisation as, in many cases, privatising ownership of state-owned postal, telegraph and telephone services

1 Anriette Esterhuysen is APC’s Senior Advisor on Internet Governance. The author would like to acknowledge the contributions and support of Avri Doria in the compilation of this report.

2 Raboy, M., Landry, N., & Shtern, J. (2010). *Digital Solidarities, Communication Policy and Multi-stakeholder Global Governance: The Legacy of the World Summit on the Information Society*. Peter Lange.

3 <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>

4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-globalization_movement

5 The Brazilian civil society organisation Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas (Ibase), a founding member of APC, was a driving force in the establishment of the WSF, and also played an active role in WSIS.

6 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Social_Forum

occurred before market regulation had effectively enabled competition in a way that lowered costs and expanded infrastructure. The result was that state-owned monopolies were replaced by the “new incumbents” – privately owned monopolies, and in many cases, the predecessors of the mega-mobile network operators (MNOs) that still dominate internet access provision for most people in the developing world.

Rhetoric coming from international financial institutions and development agencies and donors posited public-private partnerships (PPPs) as the only viable approach to ICTs for development. This approach was largely top-down and often vendor-driven and it did not provide space for civil society or community-based voices. It also often explicitly opposed efforts to expand the emerging support for open-source software development, open standards, open content licensing and open government that emerged in the late 1990s.

As a result, for civil society organisations who identified with the idea of communications rights, and the use of ICTs for social justice and sustainable development, WSIS represented an opportunity to work towards the goal of an inclusive people-centred information society in a manner that itself promised to be people-centred and inclusive. The text of the Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action contains a section dedicated to the role of governments and all stakeholders in the promotion of ICTs for development and the need for them to work collaboratively:

C. Action Lines

C1. The role of governments and all stakeholders in the promotion of ICTs for development

8. The effective participation of governments and all stakeholders is vital in developing the Information Society requiring cooperation and partnerships among all of them.

- a) Development of national e-strategies, including the necessary human capacity building, should be encouraged by all countries by 2005, taking into account different national circumstances.
- b) Initiate at the national level a structured dialogue involving all relevant stakeholders, including through public/private partnerships, in devising e-strategies for the Information Society and for the exchange of best practices.
- c) In developing and implementing national e-strategies, stakeholders should take into consideration local, regional and national

needs and concerns. To maximize the benefits of initiatives undertaken, these should include the concept of sustainability. The private sector should be engaged in concrete projects to develop the Information Society at local, regional and national levels.

- d) Each country is encouraged to establish at least one functioning Public/Private Partnership (PPP) or Multi-Sector Partnership (MSP), by 2005 as a showcase for future action.
- e) Identify mechanisms, at the national, regional and international levels, for the initiation and promotion of partnerships among stakeholders of the Information Society.
- f) Explore the viability of establishing multi-stakeholder portals for indigenous peoples at the national level.
- g) By 2005, relevant international organizations and financial institutions should develop their own strategies for the use of ICTs for sustainable development, including sustainable production and consumption patterns and as an effective instrument to help achieve the goals expressed in the United Nations Millennium Declaration.
- h) International organizations should publish, in their areas of competence, including on their website, reliable information submitted by relevant stakeholders on successful experiences of mainstreaming ICTs.
- i) Encourage a series of related measures, including, among other things: incubator schemes, venture capital investments (national and international), government investment funds (including micro-finance for Small, Medium-sized and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs), investment promotion strategies, software export support activities (trade counseling), support of research and development networks and software parks.⁷

References to PPPs are scattered all over the document, but so is a commitment to human rights and calls for broader multistakeholder participation, working with Indigenous communities, using open-source software and community development, as well as recognition of the important role of civil society in achieving the WSIS goals.⁸

⁷ <https://www.itu.int/net/ws/is/docs/promotional/brochure-dop-poa.pdf>

⁸ Ibid.

If it was the 2003 Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action that built legitimacy for multistakeholder partnerships, it was the multistakeholder Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) that elevated the concept of multistakeholder internet governance to an aspirational ideal of a better, more effective way of approaching global governance. Mandated at the end of the first phase of WSIS by the UN Secretary-General, the WGIG explored how to approach the oversight, management and coordination of the internet and presented its report in Tunis at the conclusion of the second and final phase of WSIS.

Nitin Desai, the UN Under-Secretary-General appointed as chair of the WGIG, captures the sense of excitement in response to what was felt to be an opportunity to “get global governance right”:

I came to the task after spending over a decade managing the issue-based summits organized by the UN between 1992 and 2002. These summits came at a time when globalization was connecting national economies through production value chains, national cultures through the spread of global communications, tourism and migration and ecosystems through a vastly increased global flow of materials and energy. They required governments to look beyond their national interest to the broader interest of the human species. To a certain extent this was already happening in the global networks of non-governmental organizations for the promotion of human rights, women’s rights, environmental protection, development assistance, humanitarian relief, etc. These global communities of concern focused their analysis, actions and advocacy on their global interest. Their growing engagement in the great global summits altered the dynamics of the multilateral negotiating process by superposing issue-based advocacy on the usual interplay of national interest. But in the final analysis the governments remained in control and the non-governmental participants remained vocal, and sometimes strident, advocates rather than becoming consensus seekers.⁹

He continues by reflecting on how different WSIS was:

The Internet governance dialogue that I came to in the World Summit on the Information Society was very different. This was a case where the

Internet technical community negotiated the needed protocols and a set of private bodies managed the operations of the net. Governments (other than one) were left outside and were looking for a way of acquiring control or at least significant influence on public policy concerns. Whereas in the global summits that I had managed in the UN the political challenge was to persuade governments to give non-government organizations space in the process, in the Internet governance process it was the other way around. The private non-governmental network of technologists had to be reassured that engagement with governments and other stakeholders was necessary and useful.¹⁰

The WGIG also produced a working definition of internet governance which was endorsed by the UN General Assembly and is still used widely:

Internet governance is the development and application by Governments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the Internet.¹¹

While William Drake, a member of the WGIG, points out that this formulation was not unproblematic, he identifies strength in the expansiveness of the definition:

To reach agreement, the WGIG had to include the “respective roles” clause, which is logically extraneous but luckily paired with the “shared” clause. Even so, the working definition did usefully indicate that Internet governance is a process of steering via collectively recognized prescriptions and procedures, rather than an authority relationship; and that its scope extends beyond “critical Internet resources” like the root server system, names and numbers to encompass the range of shared mechanisms that shape both the Internet’s physical and logical infrastructures and their use to convey transactions and content. This broad and holistic approach framed the terrain in a manner that helped to unclench the definitional dispute.¹²

9 Desai, N. (2015). Preface. In W. J. Drake (Ed.), *The Working Group on Internet Governance: 10th anniversary reflections*. APC. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/IG_10_Final_o.pdf

10 Ibid.

11 Working Group on Internet Governance. (2005). *Report of the Working Group on Internet Governance*. <https://www.wgig.org/docs/WGIGREPORT.pdf>

12 Drake, W. J. (2015). Introduction: Why the WGIG still matters. In W. J. Drake (Ed.), *The Working Group on Internet Governance: 10th anniversary reflections*. APC. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/IG_10_Final_o.pdf

What has the multistakeholder approach meant for civil society in global communications governance?

The idea, contained in the WSIS Geneva outcome documents in 2003, that non-state actors have a role not just as practitioners in the development of the information society, but in decision making – which implies in policy making – was really quite revolutionary at the time. This formulation, together with the Summit’s subsequent endorsement of the idea of multistakeholder internet governance at its conclusion in 2005, has left a legacy of opportunity and ambiguity which continues to embody the hopes and fears of civil society groups who care about internet governance and digital justice.

The questions that civil society needs to reflect on in the course of the 20-year review of WSIS are summarised in the quotation at the beginning of this report: how to judge the Summit’s political and institutional legacy in terms of the role it played in the democratisation of global communication governance. This is not an easy task, as there is so much diversity at the level of civil society itself, in how the concept of “democratisation” is understood, and in internet and communications governance processes, which have grown exponentially in scope and scale.

At a big picture level, it is very difficult to assert that global communications governance has been democratised. It has expanded, there is more to govern, more role players and many more spaces where discussion and decisions take place. More governments take an active interest in global communication governance, particularly in cybersecurity, cybercrime and data. More civil society organisations pay attention and participate. Technical community engagement has also expanded, particularly at regional levels, even though their participation in global governance is usually focused on the technical management and coordination of the internet. Private sector participation grows and shrinks, according to the prevailing appetite for regulation in global forums. There is so much concentration of power in a few big internet-based companies that they are sometimes treated, even within the UN system, as being on a par with states.¹³

¹³ For example, the April 2024 zero draft of the Global Digital Compact, an annex to the Pact for the Future, the planned outcome document of the UN General Assembly’s Summit of the Future to be held in September 2024, calls on states and big tech to implement the Compact in a manner that debunks any notion anyone might have had of these companies being accountable to governments, or that governments should be holding these companies accountable for respecting human rights.

“More” does not equal “better” or “democratic”, but it can result in greater awareness and increased participation, and, for civil society, more participation holds the potential for deepening democratic deliberation.

Jeanette Hofmann, a political scientist who has studied multistakeholder internet governance with the benefit of hands-on experience through her active participation in WSIS and Internet Governance Forum (IGF) processes as part of civil society, provides a useful reality check in her paper “Multi-stakeholderism in Internet governance: putting a fiction into practice”. She points out that the political spectrum in internet governance, which is increasingly diverse, particularly among governments but also civil society, is “at odds with the basic idea of multi-stakeholderism, which assumes that political positions can be aggregated along the lines of formal affiliations.”¹⁴

Has the multistakeholder approach been used to deepen democratic deliberation and participation, or has it become a “brand” to give false legitimacy to processes?

To respond to this question, it is necessary to unpack what is meant by the concepts of “democratic” and “democratic deliberation” in internet governance, and the differences in how they are understood. For many governments, particularly those from the global South, the “democratisation” of internet governance rested on the process of “enhanced cooperation”,¹⁵ which for them implies states – on an equal footing

¹⁴ Hofmann, J. (2016). Multi-stakeholderism in Internet governance: putting a fiction into practice. *Journal of Cyber Policy*, 1(1), 29-49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23738871.2016.1158303>

¹⁵ Enhanced cooperation refers to an increased, and more equal, role for governments in internet governance and public policy. It is included in the Tunis Agenda along with an endorsement of the WGIG definition and approach to internet governance, and the creation of the Internet Governance Forum as a platform for multistakeholder dialogue and debate on all things to do with internet governance. It has to be understood in the context of the vast differences between states in the degree of power and influence they have with regard to digital development, innovation and markets, as well as in decision-making processes pertaining to the internet. It is a contentious term, and has also been interpreted (often correctly, but not always) as being in opposition to multistakeholder governance and a desire by states to reduce the influence of the private sector, the technical community and international civil society in internet governance processes. However, as with multistakeholderism itself, there are a variety of views among governments who are still campaigning for enhanced cooperation. Some, such as South Africa, for example, support multistakeholder governance at national level, but oppose it at the international level, where they believe decisions should be made “multilaterally”, as in among governments.

– and intergovernmental organisations achieving more oversight and coordination of internet governance. For them, “democratic” equals “among states”, with decisions being made by the formal representatives of those states nominated to represent governments in international public forums. It is an understanding that assumes the intrinsic legitimacy of governments, and of their representation in multilateral (intergovernmental) bodies such as the UN and regional organisations like the African Union Commission. This understanding of democratic does not necessarily imply total exclusion of non-state actors, but it would see their role as limited to providing input, not participating in decision making.

Governments who oppose enhanced cooperation and who are firmly committed to multistakeholder governance of the internet, primarily those from North America and Western Europe, will therefore mostly avoid using the term “democratic” in the context of the internet. This lack of consensus among governments on how to approach internet governance has resulted, unfortunately, in “multistakeholder” often being used as an alternative term to “democratic” – ironically, usually by governments who consider themselves to be mature democracies.

Civil society – diverse as it is – does not have a single, common understanding of “democratic” internet governance and it is not uncommon to see a civil society document referring, aspirationally, to “multistakeholder and democratic governance of the internet”. This is further complicated by differences in how various civil society networks and movements relate to the legitimacy of the governments that claim to represent them, and the degree to which the positions that those governments put forward in international negotiations reflect the views and interests of civil society stakeholders at national level. Those in civil society who believe that states should be more empowered in global internet governance are likely to use only the term “democratic”, avoiding multistakeholder. And the opposite would be true for those in civil society who do not want to entrust the governance of the internet to states.

As with “democracy”, the concept of “multistakeholder” is also defined, and understood, differently in different contexts. It was initially used to emphasise the need for a multiplicity of perspectives and voices in the WSIS process, and there was a clear assumption in how WSIS negotiations took place that each stakeholder group referenced in the WSIS

documents was internally diverse. That is why, to use civil society as an example, input into the formal WSIS negotiations was facilitated by a “civil society bureau”, a group of nominated individuals with the respect of their peers who had to perform the complex task of trying to build consensus between hundreds of different organisations with as many priorities. Consensus was not always possible, particularly not during the second phase of WSIS when civil society meetings were overrun by large numbers of quasi-NGO delegates. Individual networks or organisations could still choose to release their own statements if they wanted to add to or disagree with a negotiated consensus position.

There is also an inherent tension between “positionality” and democratic deliberation. This is always complex, but can be more so in multistakeholder contexts. Global South civil society organisations are frequently in a position where, to promote human rights-based internet and communications governance in global forums and challenge authoritarianism, internet shutdowns and censorship, they oppose global South states and rely on the support of global North states. At the same time, however, and often in the same decision-making process, these civil society organisations would align with global South states against these global North states when the latter promote positions that marginalise the economic interests of global South countries and deny the legitimacy of the right to development and the need for development assistance. These tensions add complexity to civil society interaction with states and with other stakeholder groups in a multistakeholder context, but they also affect collaboration, coordination and sometimes even solidarity within civil society.

During WSIS, the idea of multistakeholder governance was fairly broad and homed in on process (as opposed to substantive decision making on particular topics) and it therefore easily acted as a unifier for most civil society participants – be they from the left, the centre, libertarian, or as was the case for many who prioritised ICTs for development, not particularly political. This changed after WSIS, and support for multistakeholder governance became an active divider. One need only look at the rise and fall of the IGF Civil Society Caucus mailing list (known as the IGC list). For many years after WSIS, it was a common space for diverse civil society voices from all over the world to debate, learn, plan and collaborate.

As a result of this ideological loading of the multistakeholder approach, the question of whether it has deepened democratic deliberation is often overlooked. One is either for multistakeholderism or against it.

I would argue that multistakeholder approaches have, in many instances, definitely deepened democratic deliberation through introducing a wider and often divergent set of perspectives into a policy discussion. For APC and Rhizomatica, for example, their work in supporting community-centred connectivity provision through the Local Networks initiative (LocNet)¹⁶ has benefited enormously from working with a multistakeholder approach. By bringing together techies, regulators, policy makers, international intergovernmental organisations, community organisations, researchers, feminists and operators, an analytical, political and operational methodology evolved that enriched policy formulation and implementation. This has enabled LocNet to be more effective in supporting the building of empowered community networks that meet community needs through providing locally managed meaningful connectivity.

Another example of deepening democratic deliberation has been multistakeholder engagement on bias in content moderation by social media platforms. It is only through direct engagement with these companies that digital rights activists are able to effectively understand when, and how, the platforms' commitment to human rights is constrained by their business models. And, by the same token, such deliberation can reveal whether government efforts to address harmful content are motivated by the desire to restrict, control or enable freedom of expression. In traditional non-multistakeholder contexts, governments, regulators and companies would negotiate agreements on content moderation without the participation of civil society, thus making it harder for civil society to play the role of holding both the state and the private sector accountable. Even if civil society does not achieve the outcomes it wants from such a process, the learning and relationship building it enables is valuable in the longer term.

But there are six factors that are absolutely critical when considering whether, and how, multistakeholder approaches can deepen democratic deliberation:

- Design and execution: The extent to which a multistakeholder process deepens democratic deliberation is a function of how well it is designed and executed, *not* of whether it is multistakeholder or not.
- Power, politics and interest: Multistakeholder processes are as political as any other type of process. Politics and vested interests always play a role. It is only by actively analysing and confronting power dynamics that these processes can contribute to deepening democratic deliberation, and, ultimately, contribute to policy outcomes that serve the public interest effectively. This links back to design. If multistakeholder processes are designed in such a way that they gloss over power, politics and interests, they will not only fail to deepen democratic deliberation, they can undermine it.
- Consensus should not be a required indicator of success: There is a common but false assumption that all multistakeholder processes have to achieve consensus. Consensus can be a successful outcome, but should not be forced. Surfacing differences in interests and objectives, in a transparent manner, is usually one of the most useful outcomes of an effective multistakeholder process.
- Applying the multistakeholder approach in a “fit for purpose” manner: Multistakeholder participation and deliberation are not the same as multistakeholder decision making. There is a tendency to use the concept of multistakeholder quite loosely, without distinguishing between how it is used in different contexts. For example, if legislation is being developed that would require companies to comply with it, having their input into its development is essential for the lawmakers and regulators to get a sense of what the possible impact can be, where compliance will have to be forced rather than encouraged. It would also be important to get input from civil society on the potential implications of this regulation on human rights, from small businesses on what it could mean for market conditions that can affect them, and from the research community on evidence of how similar legislation has had positive or negative consequences in other contexts. All this constitutes multistakeholder participation and deliberation. If done well, this will be considered, transparently, in the draft legislation which is developed by the concerned

¹⁶ <https://www.apc.org/en/project/connecting-unconnected-supporting-community-networks-and-other-community-based-connectivity>

authority, and this draft itself will then again be opened for public, multistakeholder input. But the ultimate decision will rest with the lawmakers. In other instances, however – for example, in the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) – the decision-making process itself is multistakeholder.

- Multistakeholder “groupism”: Multistakeholder groupism (or “multistakeholdergroupism”) is a critical term coined by Avri Doria, a member of the WGIG and a veteran of multistakeholder internet governance. She defines it as the organisation of multistakeholder modalities based on predefined groupings in a manner that is delinked from their interests, or how they are affected by a process.¹⁷ It weakens and perhaps even “cheapens” meaningful multistakeholder participation. There is as much diversity within each so-called stakeholder group as there is between them. Assumptions that all businesses are the same, or that the policy positions proposed by big tech reflect those of smaller or regional companies, are false. Multistakeholder groupism is not an effective application of the multistakeholder approach. However, that is not to say that there is no room for constituencies or separate group processes in a multistakeholder process.
- Spaces for individual stakeholder groups to convene as part of a multistakeholder process can deepen democratic deliberation: A multistakeholder approach can include spaces where the multistakeholder “whole” splits into different stakeholder constituencies or groups. This gives those specific stakeholder groups the opportunity to review the process, and revise their input into it. For civil society such moments can be particularly important as they tend to represent such a diverse range of interests and regions.

Has the multistakeholder approach played out differently at the national, regional and global levels and what has this meant for civil society?

Yes, very profoundly. It is a lasting legacy of WSIS that more governments initiated public participation in internet governance

and communications policy and regulation in compliance with the WSIS principles. The emergence of national and regional IGFs has created the expectation of – and facilitated – partnerships in internet and ICT development, policy making and regulation. Civil society organisations and small and medium-sized businesses that were previously excluded from any opportunity to be heard in policy shaping increasingly have the opportunity to interact with, on a relatively equal footing, governmental officials and regulators and larger internet and ICT businesses, as well as research and technical organisations.

At national and regional levels, the multistakeholder approach to deliberation on policy matters can enable both confrontation and collaboration between stakeholders. For example, a national multistakeholder hearing convened by parliament or a regulator on the cost of connectivity creates the opportunity for civil society to confront MNOs with the evidence of the harmful impact on poor communities of their pricing structure. Individuals from those communities can speak out directly, addressing policy makers, regulators and companies, and, importantly, do so in the presence of the media. If the process is well facilitated, it may not only produce the regulation on pricing that civil society asked for, it could also lead to support from regulators and MNOs for those same civil society organisations in a subsequent hearing on creating licences for community networks.

The UNESCO Internet Universality Indicators¹⁸ is a proven multistakeholder approach to assessing national internet contexts from the perspective of how it addresses rights, openness, accessibility, multistakeholder participation and gender equality (based on the R.O.A.M. principles). Using this approach creates the opportunity for civil society to raise concerns, based on evidence, directly with governments.

Codifying multistakeholder internet governance through legislation, as was done in Brazil through the *Marco Civil da Internet* (Civil Rights Framework for the Internet),¹⁹ helps to create more transparency at the level of how companies influence policy by requiring them to use the established multistakeholder mechanism created for the purpose.

At global level it has been more complex. In the UN system, for example, nominal endorsement

¹⁷ Doria, A. (2015). The WGIG and the technical community. In W. J. Drake (Ed.), *The Working Group on Internet Governance: 10th anniversary reflections*. APC. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/IG_10_Final_0.pdf

¹⁸ <https://www.unesco.org/en/internet-universality-indicators>

¹⁹ <https://itsrio.org/en/projetos/brazils-internet-bill-of-rights>

of the multistakeholder approach has tended to increase the influence of corporations and decrease that of civil society. Multinational companies have the resources to dedicate personnel to UN agencies and processes, which means they have frequent and direct access to government delegations. They have legal and policy experts that analyse documents, resolutions and proposals and pursue advocacy to prevent decisions that could harm their interests.

Civil society, on the other hand, is increasingly limited to observer status in intergovernmental negotiations, if at all. Spaces that have been created for civil society “major groups” are well attended, with one group after another delivering statements on whatever issue is being discussed. However, member states do not participate in these spaces. They do not interact with, debate or respond to civil society input. This is what was so unique about WSIS, and it established a tradition of direct interaction and deliberation between stakeholders that the IGF has continued, at the global, regional and national levels.

This is not to say that civil society is powerless. It can raise concerns, build coalitions, protest, use evidence and lobby government delegations. Many government delegations include individuals from civil society as well as from business and the technical community. But its influence is indirect, and it constantly has to fight for recognition of the importance of its role in holding governments and companies accountable to international law and agreements.

Action steps: Civil society and the multistakeholder approach in the post-WSIS+20 context

Looking ahead, learning from experience and trying to anticipate future challenges, this report wants to leave civil society with some questions and suggestions to consider.

Engage frankly and openly on the risks and potential of the multistakeholder approach

During WSIS, civil society was, at one point, divided between those who wanted to campaign for new communications rights, and those who felt it was more prudent to focus on demanding that existing rights enshrined in international treaties (such as the right to development, economic, social and cultural rights, civil and political rights, and the rights of people with disabilities) be applied in the

context of the internet. Consensus was achieved, more or less, at the time. Initiatives such as the APC Internet Rights Charter²⁰ and the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee’s Principles for the Governance and Use of the Internet²¹ evolved into the IGF’s Internet Rights and Principles Dynamic Coalition. Later, APC – working through UN human rights mechanisms and with governments (notably Sweden), private sector entities and many civil society partners – succeeded in its campaign to have internet rights recognised as human rights with the pivotal Human Rights Council resolution in 2012 that recognised the internet as an enabler of human rights and established that the same rights that apply offline also apply online.²² This has really made a difference, as it created a common framework for holding states and private actors accountable for upholding rights – and it was a multistakeholder and multinational effort.

Currently, global South civil society working for social and economic justice generally views the multistakeholder approach as institutionalised capture by large multinational internet companies. This is a real risk, particularly in the UN system where it coincides with the UN’s financial crisis, which elevates the need for private sector financial support.

But corporate capture is always a risk. Its manifestation that has the most profound impact on social justice is when companies engage governments directly, shaping public policy and investment in a very hands-on manner. This is not an unusual occurrence.

Does the multistakeholder approach enable this? Do big tech companies, or for that matter other big multinationals, need multistakeholder approaches to promote their interests? Can the multistakeholder approach actually help to create more transparency and expose dealings driven by vested interests by engaging a greater diversity of businesses, particularly at the national level, who are struggling to compete with global big tech? It is important to remember that big business had seats at government tables long before any notion of civil society participation was conceivable. What is new is the possibility of civil society seats.

Several other questions are worth asking in this context. There is also an assumption that the multistakeholder approach is institutionalising the

²⁰ <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/about-apc/apc-internet-rights-charter>

²¹ <https://cgi.br/principles>

²² <https://digitalibrary.un.org/record/731540?ln=en&v=pdf>

dominance of global North governments over the voices and interests of global South states. Is that always the case?

How can civil society in the global South effectively challenge structural inequality and injustice emanating from the global North (for example, in how international financial mechanisms operate), while also holding their own governments accountable for investing in people, local capacity and resilience, and respecting and promoting human rights?

What can civil society in the global South do to encourage global South states to collaborate with them, consistently, on the basis of mutual respect and common economic justice goals, in global negotiation processes? Can global South governments be relied on to promote the interests of civil society if they have common concerns on countering the power of big tech?

Give one another the benefit of the doubt: Different strategies and tactics do not have to fracture an already fragile civil society sector

We know that civil society is at its most effective when it works together, across borders and across issues. There are substantial differences in values and proposed solutions within civil society, but don't assume that this implies "evil intentions"; for example, that civil society activists who care about individual human rights have "sold out" on social justice issues, or that organisations who support the positions of authoritarian governments in global forums (e.g. on trade) do not challenge these same governments in other spaces.

By listening, learning and understanding, civil society analysis and practice can be strengthened. Debate and disagreement are essential, but so is respect for one another's priorities. *Real* differences in goals, objectives and values, on the other hand, should be acknowledged and are not a good basis for collaboration.

Recognise the value of learning from, and collaborating with, people and institutions from other stakeholder groups

Alignment in positions among different stakeholder groups exists, particularly at national level, but also globally. Civil society should be more open to finding common ground with private sector entities and the technical community. There are companies that believe in environmental justice and some whose commitment to human

rights is reflected in their business models, not just in their rhetoric. Many, of all sizes, are truly committed to sustainable local economic development. They can benefit from the experience, analysis and policy expertise found in civil society. Civil society can benefit from their management skills and tools.

Connect with the technical community! Civil society organisations who care about building autonomous infrastructure and services that are safe, secure and not reliant on multinational big tech companies should reach out and partner with individuals and organisations who identify as part of the technical community. Don't make assumptions that they are apolitical, or uncritical of the status quo, simply because they wear different T-shirts and speak a different language. APC would not have achieved what it has in strengthening community-centred connectivity provision without partnering with the Internet Society and many individuals who identify as being part of the technical community.

In many cases, different stakeholder groups only discover that they have common interests late into a negotiation process, by which time it is too late for them to form an alliance that could have strengthened their chances of victory.

There are numerous instances where timely collaboration between business, consumer rights and human rights organisations, social justice activists, techies and communities could have contributed to "better" policy and implementation outcomes.

Build multistakeholder coalitions around emerging issues

Artificial intelligence (AI) is not at the top of this author's priorities. AI is an old issue which, not inappropriately, is attracting concern because it demonstrates how shortsighted humanity has been in its approaches to tech innovation and governance. Tech innovation needs to become far more accountable, applying the precautionary principle and assessing the social, human rights and environmental impacts before roll-out.

The greatest priority is caring for our planet and the sustainable livelihood of the people and other living creatures who live on it. Collaboration between civil society, innovators, engineers, governments and businesses is the only way to counter the seemingly unstoppable tendency to solve problems created by unsustainable consumption and growth with even more

unsustainable consumption and growth. This needs carrot and stick approaches, bottom-up solution building, and at times top-down regulation. It needs creativity and change – the kind of change that has to emerge from multiple directions, that has to be nurtured, and enforced.

Only relying on states, and the traditional model of states creating enabling regulation, and compelling non-state actors to comply with this regulation, is not going to be sufficient. In contexts where states lack the will or the capacity, it is impossible. Multi-pronged solutions and approaches, particularly ones that are developed and enforced in a bottom-up manner with the participation of people affected by the specific problems being addressed, has to be part of building a different way of living, working, governing and doing business. Direct constructive, critical, collaborative and sometimes confrontational engagement with other non-state actors is unavoidable. How civil society navigates this engagement is likely to determine how effectively it is able to have agency and influence and achieve its social justice and sustainable development goals.

Continue to interrogate and strengthen governance through critical thinking and by developing norms, principles and methodologies for participative, accountable governance, including for the multistakeholder approach

Different public interest-oriented processes, based on what they are trying to do, will need different methodologies. Some principles apply across the board, such as being inclusive, making information available about a process to all who will participate in it, facilitating participation and documenting outcomes. Other aspects, like the choice of language, location or the structure of the agenda, will vary. There is no perfect design. What matters is taking design seriously, but not so seriously that it depletes a process of its purpose and politics.

The title of this report asks whether the multistakeholder approach is a cornerstone or Achilles heel of internet governance, or whether it is just “fake news”. Jeanette Hofmann refers to it as a kind of “fiction” rooted in the idea that it is a “panacea to cure the well-known shortcomings and gaps of transnational governance.” She describes the multistakeholder concept as “a discursive artefact that aims to smooth contradictory and messy practices into a

coherent story about collaborative transnational policymaking” – a story with the characteristics of a romantic plot, hoping for a happy ending. But she points out:

The fictional quality of the concept does not imply that the tale is out of touch with the real world, or that organisations are just pretending to follow the multi-stakeholder approach. On the contrary, they are struggling to accommodate and implement its goals.²³

For civil society, this is not fake news, and the continued effort to strengthen governance has been and continues to be a cornerstone of its work for an inclusive, open, fair and rights-oriented internet that contributes to social and economic justice and sustainable development. If believing that the multistakeholder approach can strengthen governance is a kind of fiction, it is one that is connected to the belief that “another world is possible” – a belief which itself is not a fiction, but rather an imaginary aspiration based on concrete analysis of the world we live in now.

Jeanette concludes with a message that is both positive, and cautionary:

[F]ictions are by no means intrinsically static. They emerge in, and adapt to, specific contexts; even their basic messages are open to debate and change. Because fictions have a history and always compete against other fictions they encourage critical reflection. Thus, there is [a] problem when this critical reflection no longer takes place, or is only tolerated at the fringes, and when fictions become static and begin resembling a religion. In this spirit, a measured “desecration” of the multi-stakeholder approach in Internet governance which could facilitate a debate about achievements, failures and its reasons would be a positive effect.²⁴

²³ Hofmann, J. (2016). Op. cit.

²⁴ Ibid.

The role of governments in policy and regulation in the digital sphere: An academic perspective

Wolfgang Kleinwächter

European Summer School on Internet Governance
<https://eurosig.eu/eurosig/>

Although the history of the internet goes back to the 1960s, governments did not see the internet as a political issue for many years. This has changed dramatically. In the 2020s, everything is now “cyber” or “digital”: from the global economy to the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, from sustainable development to the protection of human rights. The internet is on the agenda of the United Nations (UN). It is discussed by the leaders of the G20, G7 and BRICS. There are endless diplomatic negotiations on related issues. And there are hundreds of cyber and digital conferences, including the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), where stakeholders from around the world are trying to identify issues, to develop policies and to solve problems. In the “2024 Security Index” of the Munich Security Conference (MSC), the perceived threat of instability in cyberspace ranks second behind climate change.¹

The mothers and fathers of the internet, who are now grandmothers and grandfathers, were interested primarily in developing a technical environment to enable people to communicate freely. Security was not a number one issue. But their inventions did have political, economic, cultural, social and legal implications. And their grandchildren are now struggling with a commercialised and politicised internet, which is today’s nerve centre of a globalised, but more and more fragmented and also polarised world.

In 2019, the UN High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation (HLP) labelled our time as the “age of digital interdependence”.² In this age, the challenge is to both protect free communication and promote

a secure cyberspace. If more than five billion people are now driving on the global “Information Superhighway”, it needs “rules of the road” to avoid anarchy and a digital jungle.

Law making is primarily a responsibility of governments. However, in the information age, where everything and everybody is interconnected, law making is very complex. It needs more than governmental executive power and parliamentary majorities. It needs the involvement of all stakeholders from business, civil society, academia and the technical community to build sustainable regulatory frameworks.

The “information revolution” has created a new global complexity with new contradictions. Manuel Castells told us already in 1998 that in a “Network Society” there is a conflict between “borderless spaces” and “bordered places”.³ And indeed, the borders of time and space have disappeared, but the borders among nations and in our minds continue to exist. To deal with this contradiction, we need a “double strategy” which recognises both the global nature of digital interdependence and respects the sovereignty of nation states as well as differences in political cultures.

Contradictions can be barriers for innovation, but also drivers for development. To find sustainable solutions for the new issues of the digital age – cybersecurity, artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, etc. – there is no alternative to a holistic approach and the involvement of all stakeholders. Looking for special solutions in separated silos will have unintended side effects. Excluding affected and concerned stakeholders will backfire. In other words, regulation in cyberspace is no longer a question of “yes” or “no”; it is a question of “how” and “who”.

1 Bunde, T., et al. (2024). *Munich Security Index 2024*. MSC. <https://securityconference.org/en/munich-security-report-2024/munich-security-index-2024>

2 <https://www.un.org/en/sg-digital-cooperation-panel>

3 Castells, M., & Cardoso, G. (Eds.). (2005). *The Network Society: From Knowledge to Policy*. Johns Hopkins Center for Transatlantic Relations. <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/san/waysofbeing/data/communication-zangana-castells-2006.pdf>

From the myth of the early days to the new internet governance complexity

The myth of the early days of the internet, that the “network of networks” is a “virtual space” which is separated from “real places”, fed an illusion that there is no need for regulation and it is enough to respect “netiquette”. Futuristic visions, developed by William Gibson, John Perry Barlow and others, like the “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace”⁴ or the “Cluetrain Manifesto”,⁵ helped to open our eyes to the “silent internet revolution” in the 1990s. But they also promoted misunderstandings and confusion about freedom and responsibilities, rights and duties, legitimacy and accountability in cyberspace.

The internet broadened individual freedom, created new economic opportunities and challenged existing regulatory frameworks. But what happened online was still subject to existing national and international legislation. The internet removed the barriers of time and space, it allowed innovation without permission, it enabled individual users to become global players; but this new freedom never included the freedom to steal money or to harm other people. What was illegal offline became illegal online.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the internet became more prominent in policy discussions in the United States, which were dominated by concepts of “deregulation” (under the Reagan administration, 1980-1988) and “private sector leadership” (under the Clinton administration, 1992-2000). The idea was to reduce the role of governments to that of “moderators” or “facilitators” and leave internet policy development and decision making in the hands of affected and concerned stakeholders, such as those from the technical community and innovative business players who developed the so-called “new economy”.

This approach, which triggered the “dot-com boom” of the 1990s, enabled the fast development of the internet as a global infrastructure. Neither national parliaments nor international diplomatic codification conferences were involved in the making of TCP/IP⁶ or the Domain Name System (DNS). When Jon Postel delegated the management of country code top-level domains (ccTLDs) to more than 100 countries, no government was involved. It was done by Postel himself via a handshake with a

trusted manager. Internet governance mechanisms evolved in the shadow of governmental regulation.

But the regulatory mechanisms for the internet developed by the technical community are rather different from traditional public law making. Internet standards and codes, described in Requests for Comments (RFCs) documents produced by the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), are not the result of top-down decisions or majority voting of elected parliamentary representatives. They are drafted “bottom-up” by respected and competent key players of the global internet community and adopted through “rough consensus”. It is “humming”,⁷ not “voting”. The number of RFCs has grown since 1969 to more than 10,000. This is the “Internet Lawbook”.⁸

This coexistence of the “two worlds” worked quite well. The internet community was small and did not touch political controversies. This changed with the digitalisation of nearly all areas of daily life.

WSIS: A new approach to global problems

The first global policy response to the emerging internet challenges started in 2001 with the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). In his opening speech to the WSIS Geneva Summit in 2003, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan pointed out:

This Summit is unique. Where most global conferences focus on global threats, this one will consider how best to use a new global asset. We are going through a historic transformation in the way we live, learn, work, communicate and do business. We must do so not passively, but as makers of our own destiny.

And he added:

Yet even as we talk about the power of technology, let us remember who is in charge. While technology shapes the future, it is people who shape technology, and decide what it can and should be used for.⁹

What in 2003 was “the future” is now the reality. But while times have changed, the problems are more or less the same. It therefore makes sense to look back and remember the lessons learned.

4 Barlow, J. P. (1996). *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. <https://www.eff.org/de/cyberspace-independence>

5 <https://www.cluetrain.com>

6 Communication protocols used to interconnect network devices.

7 Resnick, P. (2014). *On Consensus and Humming in the IETF*. Internet Engineering Task Force. <https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/html/rfc7282>

8 <https://www.ietf.org/standards/rfcs>

9 United Nations. (2003, 11 December). WSIS opening meeting discusses how digital divide is preventing equal sharing of opportunities concerning ICTs. <https://press.un.org/en/2003/pi1541.doc.htm>

WSIS became the first clash of cultures in the information age. For the first time in UN history, business, civil society, academia and the technical community were officially invited as participants to a UN summit. However, it was unclear how governments and non-governmental stakeholders could work hand-in-hand by developing policies for the digital age.

It was a complicated process. Governments realised that the internet was much more complex than previous communication technologies like telecommunications or broadcasting, which were regulated by national laws. Cross-border issues such as frequency coordination were negotiated among governments in conventions and led to the establishment of intergovernmental organisations like the ITU, WIPO or UNESCO.

The borderless, decentralised and open network architecture of the internet is very different from the hierarchical structures of broadcasting and telecommunication. With the internet, everybody is both sender and receiver (the end-to-end principle). There is no “central authority”. Various groups of mainly private developers, providers and users of internet services manage parts of the whole infrastructure and communicate, coordinate and collaborate both informally and formally by sharing rights, duties and responsibilities voluntarily. Nobody controls everything. IETF does protocols, ICANN the DNS, regional internet registries (RIRs) and IP addresses, and the Internet Society (ISOC) discusses concepts.

The reality is that it is difficult to separate “real places” and “virtual spaces”. Every virtual communication among netizens starts and ends with a real citizen. The challenge is to bring these two worlds together. It sounds simple, but the best way forward is to enhance cooperation between law makers and code makers. This is easier said than done.

WSIS produced a broad range of different ideas. Extreme positions on both sides of the spectrum contributed to a growing internet governance controversy. Concepts of private sector-led self-regulation conflicted with the call for strong governmental regulation, with a broad variety of mixed, multidimensional policy concepts and co-regulatory ideas in between.

What WSIS finally produced in its Tunis Agenda for the Information Society (2005) was a remarkable “grand compromise”, based on a concept of “grand collaboration”. The Tunis Agenda recognised that “policy authority for Internet-related public policy issues is the sovereign right of States.” And it also recognised:

[T]he existing arrangements for Internet governance have worked effectively to make the Internet the highly robust, dynamic and geographically diverse medium that it is today, with the private sector taking the lead in day-to-day operations, and with innovation and value creation at the edges.¹⁰

The Tunis Agenda made clear that governance in the information society needs the involvement of all stakeholders “in their respective roles”. This formula, with its diplomatic ambiguity, allowed a differentiated approach. Each stakeholder has a special role, but no stakeholder can act alone or substitute another stakeholder. The conflict between “governmental leadership” and “private sector leadership” was solved by recognising that the information society doesn’t need “leadership”, but the collaboration of all stakeholders.

The agreement on the multistakeholder approach, which was one of the main WSIS outcomes, recognised that governments, business, civil society and the technical community have different but complementary roles, interests and capacities. Rule making by governments will fail if they don’t engage and ignore the wisdom of affected and concerned non-state actors, including civil society. Leadership by the private sector alone will fail without rules, which guarantee stability, fair competition and respect of human rights.

However, there is no single multistakeholder model. The Tunis Agenda calls for “shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes”. But it did not agree on a procedure, nor how stakeholders should interact. How deeply different stakeholders should be involved in policy development and decision making remains unclear and depends to a high degree on the specific subject. There is no “one-size-fits-all”.

It is very natural that governments play a strong role in international cybersecurity. And it is also understandable that the technical community plays a leading role in internet standards. But it would be unwise if governments in cybersecurity negotiations ignore advice from non-state actors. And it would also be bad if governments do not raise their voices in discussions held by technical bodies, as they do via the Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC) within ICANN. Governmental ignorance is as bad as technical arrogance.

¹⁰ <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/6rev1.html>

Governance of the internet and governance on the internet

The Tunis Agenda also differentiated between the “evolution” and the “use of the Internet”.¹¹ This differentiation allowed another flexible approach to manage the interrelationship between internet-related technical and public policy issues. The UN Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG), which was tasked by the WSIS Geneva Summit to produce a definition of internet governance, rejected the idea of a “narrow definition”, which would have included only technical aspects, and proposed a “broad definition”. The Tunis Agenda two years later recognised this broad definition, stating:

Internet governance includes more than Internet naming and addressing. It also includes other significant public policy issues such as, *inter alia*, critical Internet resources, the security and safety of the Internet, and developmental aspects and issues pertaining to the use of the Internet.¹²

This is very relevant for today’s discussion around new emerging issues such as the internet of things (IoT), cybersecurity, AI or social networks. There are calls now for data governance, AI governance, ICT governance, IoT governance, digital governance, cyber governance, platform governance, etc. But all these involve “using” the internet. Insofar as the essence of the broad WGIG definition – governance in the digital space needs the involvement of all stakeholders, and related processes have to be open, inclusive, transparent, bottom-up and human-centric – is also relevant for all the new digital issues, there is no need to reinvent the wheel.

Policies and regulation for AI, cybersecurity or social networks will fail if they are done behind closed doors, and are exclusive and top-down. And it will be impossible for governments to find sustainable solutions without non-governmental stakeholders. Certainly, there are specifics and it needs fine-tuning. But at the end of the day, it is the governance of the whole digital sphere that has to be multistakeholder, open, transparent, inclusive, bottom-up and human-centric.

Nevertheless, the internet is a layered system. Roughly said, it can be divided into the technical and political layers, and the transport and application layers. The “One World – One Internet” philosophy is rooted in the design of the universal

internet identifiers and the common use of the same technical protocols (TCP/IP, DNS, BGP,¹³ HTTP, IPv4 and IPv6, etc.) based on a unified but decentralised root and name server system. This differs from the application layer, where internet-related public policy issues are discussed.

The distinction between “evolution” and “use” of the internet allows us to differentiate between the governance of the internet and governance on the internet. It allows us to keep the internet unfragmented on the transport layer, but enables different approaches on the application layer. How governance works on these different layers is therefore necessarily different: on the transport layer, the technical community needs to lead and convene the discussions, with input from governments and civil society. Policy discussions for the application layer, though implemented by governments, can in theory be convened by any stakeholder. Therefore, what we call “internet governance” is not necessarily the same in all circumstances.

Nevertheless, internet governance, whatever the practicalities involved, needs to conform with the WSIS principles, as embedded in the general WSIS commitment, that an information society should be human-centric and development-oriented and has to be based on the respect of international law and human rights, as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).¹⁴

The message from WSIS was that governance in the information age needs co-regulatory models which take into consideration both the sovereignty of the nation state and the universality of global networks. Decisions have no formal legal status, but they are the substance of a policy, which, besides being human-centric and development-oriented, has to be adequate, efficient, accountable, predictable, fair, balanced, inclusive, safe and workable. And it must avoid the emergence of “responsibility holes” (cybersecurity weaknesses that no party has direct responsibility for) and “safe havens” for cybercriminals.

What is needed is a constructive co-existence among the different stakeholders, the development of innovative models of “co-governance”. Such a multilayered, multiplayer mechanism of communication, coordination and collaboration is the best way to promote both stability and flexibility in the global internet governance ecosystem. The weakness of one partner in one area can be

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Border Gateway Protocol.

¹⁴ <https://www.itu.int/net/osis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>

compensated by the strength of the other and vice versa. Policy and regulation become more and more issue-oriented, which means that for each topic a special governance model has to be designed.

Governments have to learn to share power with non-governmental actors, while non-state actors have to accept that they operate in a political environment of sovereign nation states. Governments have to understand that the legitimacy they get from national democratic elections today includes a greater international responsibility towards a global community. And stakeholders have to demonstrate that they understand that the rights and freedoms they are calling for are linked to duties and responsibilities.

From WSIS to the Global Digital Compact and WSIS+20

The world has changed in the last three decades. In the 1990s, the internet was primarily a technical issue with some political implications. In the 2020s, digital issues are big political problems with a technical component. Today our world is a digital world. Security means “cybersecurity”, economy means “digital economy” and the UN Human Rights Council has stated that human rights have to be recognised both offline and online.

In just 30 years, the number of internet users grew from less than one million to more than five billion. The new emerging global internet infrastructure created a new environment for many public policy issues. Technology, economy and policy became more and more interwoven.

In the 1990s there were no smartphones, no social networks, no ChatGPT. Bridging the digital divide, managing domain names and access to the internet were top on the agenda. On today’s political agenda are AI, IoT, platform regulation, digital oligopolies, sustainable development, cybercrime, cyberwar, digital trade and the protection of human rights like freedom of expression or privacy, among others.

The “old issues” are still on the table, but what we have seen is a fundamental shift from technical-dominated to political and economic-dominated discussions. When the Tunis Agenda was adopted in 2005, only a small number of intergovernmental organisations had “digital” or “cyber” in their workplans. In 2024, internet-related issues are a first priority within nearly every international organisation.

Conference halls around the globe are filled with diplomats who negotiate intergovernmental arrangements on digital issues: cybersecurity is

discussed by the UN’s Open-Ended Working Group, cybercrime by its Ad Hoc Committee, internet-based lethal autonomous weapon systems by the Group of Government Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (CGE LAWS), digital trade at the WTO, platform regulation in UNESCO, infrastructure development at the ITU. AI is negotiated at the UN, UNESCO, the OECD, the G20 and other organisations. The WSIS+20 review is being prepared by the UN’s Commission on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD). More than 30 UN organisations are coordinating their digital activities in the UN Group on the Information Society (UNGIS). Additionally, the G20, G7, BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and numerous regional bodies such as the OECD, ASEAN, OSCE, OAS, etc. are working on intergovernmental arrangements. And from what we see in the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the arms race in cyberspace is exploding.

In other words, the role of governments in the digital age is rather different from what it was 30 years ago. Governments no longer stand on the sidelines. They are back as a key player. At the same time, today’s intergovernmental negotiations are different from what they were in the last century. They are embedded in a multistakeholder environment. Governments have to take note of what non-state actors have to say. There is a new culture of transparency, inclusivity and openness. Deals behind closed doors or exclusion of meaningful participation of non-state actors will lead to failure.

In this context, it is worth remembering the words of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan when he addressed the opening session of the Global Forum on Internet Governance, organised by the UN ICT Task Force in New York in March 2004. He said:

[W]e need to develop inclusive and participatory models of governance. The medium must be made accessible and responsive to the needs of all the world’s people.

And he added:

In managing, promoting and protecting [the internet’s] presence in our lives, we need to be no less creative than those who invented it. Clearly, there is a need for governance, but that does not necessarily mean that it has to be done in the traditional way for something that is so very different.¹⁵

¹⁵ United Nations. (2004, 25 March). Secretary-General’s remarks at the opening session of the Global Forum on Internet Governance. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2004-03-25/secretary-generals-remarks-the-opening-session-of-the-global-forum-internet-governance>

His call for “policy innovation” triggered the WSIS concept of the multistakeholder approach, helped to establish the IGF, and launched a process of enhanced cooperation. But a lot of detailed questions remained unanswered. What is the legal basis for the multistakeholder approach? What are the procedures for interaction among state and non-state actors? How can the IGF produce more tangible output? And a lot of practical issues are still unsolved. More than two billion people are still offline. The digital divide is now a knowledge divide. The global South is lagging behind when it comes to AI or quantum computing. In other words, the Tunis Agenda was just the start of a beginning. More has to be done.

A big step forward was the 2014 NETmundial conference in Sao Paulo and its Multistakeholder Statement. NETmundial defined universal principles for multistakeholder cooperation.¹⁶ This was very helpful. The principles offer very good guidelines for dealing with all the new issues, such as AI or IoT.

But what is still missing is how such collaboration should be implemented in policy development and decision making. The good news is that a majority of governments support the concept in principle. But preaching multistakeholderism is one thing; practising it is another. Many governments pay only lip service to the concept, but continue with their classical top-down policy making, which is often neither open and transparent nor inclusive.

It is certainly a step in the right direction if more and more governments organise consultations with business, civil society and the technical community before making decisions. But it remains unclear how the “input” of non-state actors leads to an “impact”. The Tunis Agenda speaks about “sharing of decision making”. “Consulting” is not “sharing”. There is still a long way to go. Talking the talk is not enough; walking the walk is the issue.

A good case is the IGF. The IGF has its strengths and weaknesses. And there was a good reason why the IGF was designed for “discussion only”. The fear in Tunis was that an IGF with a decision-making capacity would turn the new discussion platform into an intergovernmental battlefield. The hope was that a discussion-only platform would open minds, mouths and ears to allow all voices and arguments to be expressed and heard, to stimulate free and frank dialogue among all stakeholders on an equal

footing. The expectation was that knowledge and wisdom produced in the IGF discussions would enable decision makers to find innovative solutions. Those decisions should not be made inside but outside the IGF, by mandated policy organisations, businesses and civil society ventures. But the weak point so far is that there is a missing link between the “discussion layer” in the IGF and the “decision-making layer” in intergovernmental organisations.

In 2021, UN Secretary-General António Guterres was wise to recommend in his Roadmap for Digital Cooperation to keep the strengths of the IGF, but to overcome its weaknesses.¹⁷ He accepted the HLP recommendation to transform the IGF into an IGF+. The appointment of the UN Tech Envoy, the nomination of the IGF Leadership Panel, the introduction of the IGF Parliamentarian Track and other concrete steps have given more steam to the IGF.

The Global Digital Compact (GDC) is a unique opportunity to continue the walk, to inspire political innovations and to enhance the conceptual understanding of the multistakeholder approach.¹⁸ There is no need to reinvent the wheel or to start new processes.

The GDC will not be the end of the story. It will be just the next step on the long road into our digital future. The next milestones are WSIS+20 in 2025 and the review of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2030. It would be wise if the GDC picks the IGF as its natural landing place. The IGF is the best multistakeholder platform we have. The GDC could invite the IGF, together with UNCSTD, to prepare an annual report on “The State of Digital Cooperation”. Such a report could document progress, identify weaknesses, and recommend concrete steps on how to move forward. And it would be wise if governments could agree in 2030 to bring the SDGs and the WSIS objectives under one umbrella of “Comprehensive Development Goals” (CDGs). The world beyond 2030 will be a digital world. And the governance of the digital world has to be based on the multistakeholder approach.

Action steps

Based on the discussion above, the following are key advocacy priorities for civil society in the context of WSIS+20:

¹⁶ <https://netmundial.br/2014/netmundial-multistakeholder-statement>

¹⁷ <https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap>

¹⁸ <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/global-digital-compact>

- There is a need for civil society to raise its voice in digital intergovernmental negotiations and call for the inclusion of basic values such as human rights, sustainable development, as well as peace and mutual understanding. These are core values for all civil society organisations.
- Civil society organisations have to enhance communication and collaboration with other stakeholders, including businesses, the technical community, parliamentarians and governmental representatives. If the argument is right that governments alone will be unable to solve the problems of the digital age, one has to recognise that civil society organisations alone will also be unable to solve the problems. Civil society organisations have to be prepared to work with other players who have different core values and prefer different approaches. They have to be prepared to negotiate, to search for consensus and to make compromises.
- Civil society organisations active in the digital sphere have to put their own house in order. They have to enhance cooperation among themselves. If the dozens of civil society groups speak with one voice in intergovernmental negotiations, their impact will be much greater than if every organisation makes its individual contribution. United, civil society is strong. This is also a lesson from the WSIS process 20 years ago. It was the unity among civil society organisations, and their coordinated statements in plenary and working sessions, which finally organised the pressure needed for governments to accept the multistakeholder approach as the key principle for the governance of the digital sphere. The making of the WSIS Civil Society Declaration¹⁹ in 2003 is a good source of inspiration for developing an enhanced civil society strategy to meet the coming challenges of the digital age.

¹⁹ WSIS Civil Society Plenary. (2003). "Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs": Civil Society Declaration to the World Summit on the Information Society. <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/civil-society-declaration.pdf>

Diminishing returns: Are tech companies opting out of multistakeholder discussions?

Gayatri Khandhadai

www.linkedin.com/in/gayatri-khandhadai-b1a79461

Technology has irreversibly changed our lives and continues to deliver on the enormous potential for human development: to enhance democracy, improve access to human rights and increase transparency within our society to combat inequality. The private sector, across software, hardware, infrastructure, data and other tech-related services, has played a critical role in driving innovation and development. However, this convenience and progress has come at a significant price to our liberties. The abject lack of robust accountability and regulatory mechanisms has led to the evolution of a sector lacking in demonstrable commitment to human rights and accountability for the harms caused at the behest of their operations, products and services. As states are grappling with the reality of needing to balance innovation, job creation and development through technology with responsible business conduct, international mechanisms, regulatory bodies and courts are stepping in to provide the roadmap for sustainable tech-facilitated futures.

Technology companies have a clear responsibility to respect human rights and comply with the requirements set out in national and international frameworks. In line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, companies need to ensure that they comply with national and international requirements, and an essential part of this is human rights and environmental due diligence. This is a process through which companies assess actual and potential negative impacts of their products and services, and take measures based on this to prevent, address and mitigate harms. A critical part

of this process is stakeholder engagement. Directly engaging with affected communities, their representatives/proxies and experts allows companies to gain valuable insights on harms and prospective solutions that would work for all parties. In addition to intentional direct engagement, sustained participation in multistakeholder spaces provides tech companies with a broad spectrum of inputs. It also presents them with an opportunity to engage in dialogue and share their perspectives and measures taken to fulfil their responsibilities towards consumers or communities.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is one key space for tech companies to demonstrate their commitment to stakeholder engagement. WSIS was developed with the purpose of building a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society with the participation of various stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, civil society, academia and technical communities. The WSIS's Action Lines¹ are aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals and focus on areas such as access, infrastructure, e-health, e-learning, e-agriculture and e-governance, and using ICT innovations, which are central to the private sector.

Companies, including Google, IBM, Microsoft, Cisco Systems, Huawei, Intel, Meta and Amazon, among many others, participate in WSIS directly and through industry collectives by being present, represented in discussions, workshops or panels, and through engaging in policy advocacy. The extent of their participation varies over time, and is dependent on factors such as the thematic focus of

¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=30022&nr=102&menu=3170>

discussions, priorities of individual companies, and broader trends in the tech industry. Their participation, perspectives and expertise are critical in shaping policies and initiatives aimed at harnessing the potential of information and communications technologies (ICTs) for sustainable development. Their participation is also key to initiatives linked to their corporate social responsibility programmes.

Overall, WSIS serves as a strategic forum for tech companies to engage with stakeholders, influence policy decisions, showcase innovation, forge partnerships, and demonstrate their commitment to driving positive change through ICTs. By actively participating in WSIS, tech companies can advance their business objectives while contributing to global efforts to harness the power of technology for sustainable development.

This participation has become even more critical as media and civil society have consistently raised alarm about the pervasive negative impacts of unchecked technologies. Engagement with tech companies has proven to be an uphill battle, particularly for civil society based in the global South.² As the role and failure of tech companies in conflicts such as those in Myanmar,³ the Occupied Palestinian Territory,⁴ Ukraine⁵ and Nigeria⁶ have become apparent, the

responsible business conduct of global platforms has become paramount. Sustained participation in WSIS and similar processes including the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and the Global Digital Compact may help tech companies regain trust and the social licence to operate with the support of other stakeholders.

However, the presence of the private sector in several multistakeholder processes including WSIS and the IGF has been on the decline, at least from a civil society perspective. One of the key shifts that are identifiable in the dynamics between civil society and companies pertains to allyship or a sense of shared vision in fighting back against censorship by states, an issue that was discussed in the initial periods when digital rights started finding more prominence in the reports of UN Special Rapporteurs before the Human Rights Council. This equation has unquestionably shifted since.

On the one hand, as states have opted for more regulation, companies invariably welcomed the move,⁷ as it shifts the burden of decision making to a large extent from them, especially in terms of decisions relating to content and artificial intelligence. On the other hand, while tech companies, especially those setting up offices in multiple jurisdictions, are dependent on licensing and regulatory clearances issued by states, governments have increasingly become clients of large tech companies. As a result, a mutually dependent relationship between states and the private sector has evolved. This bilateral relationship is often with the exclusion of civil society. Therefore, the two major players who impact our rights online have also shifted to a model of direct engagement with each other, making it harder for civil society to glean information on the nature of these engagements or their outcomes. Moreover, company engagement in multistakeholder processes is yielding diminishing returns as the processes themselves do not seem to have sufficient influence on national decision making and frameworks.

2 Business & Human Rights Resource Centre. (2023, 18 April). Dismantling the facade: A global south perspective on the state of engagement with tech companies. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/from-us/briefings/dismantling-the-facade-a-global-south-perspective-on-the-state-of-engagement-with-tech-companies>

3 Business & Human Rights Resource Centre. (2022, 22 February). Myanmar: Civil society calls for tech companies to resist military pressure to activate surveillance and abuse social media platforms; includes company responses. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/myanmar-civil-society-calls-for-international-community-and-tech-companies-to-resist-military-control-for-surveillance-and-abuse-of-social-media-to-propagate-fear-and-insecurity-includes-company-responses>

4 <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/big-issues/global-spotlight/bhr-israel-palestine>

5 <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/big-issues/russian-invasion-of-ukraine>

6 Business & Human Rights Resource Centre. (2016, 6 April). Nigeria: President Buhari blames MTN for Boko Haram attacks, says unregistered sim cards were used to plan attacks. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/nigeria-president-buhari-blames-mtn-for-boko-haram-attacks-says-unregistered-sim-cards-were-used-to-plan-attacks>

7 Deutsch, J. (2023, 27 June). Big Tech Companies Want AI Regulation – But On Their Own Terms. *Bloomberg*. <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/big-tech-companies-want-ai-regulation-but-on-their-own-terms-1.1938321>

Another key issue relates to the lack of a prominent presence of both tech companies and digital rights in corporate accountability spaces that do not have an exclusively digital focus. This essentially limits the participation of companies and rights defenders to specialised spaces, skipping an essential layer of a larger and holistic approach to business models and business conduct.

Encouraging the continued engagement of tech companies, a critical player in multistakeholder processes, in forums such as WSIS and the IGF requires further effort from all parties. States must replicate efforts geared towards mandating human rights and environmental due diligence similar to the European Commission's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive,⁸ taking into account the specificities of the tech sector. This will provide the much-needed impetus for tech companies to participate in WSIS-like processes, going beyond a check-box approach. WSIS and states involved in organising summits could better take into account the needs of the private sector,

particularly in organising closed and open spaces for civil society and other stakeholders to engage with them in different formats. This will create a better context for all actors, including the private sector, to present their initiatives, progress and perspectives relating to human rights challenges. While holding the private sector to account in all spaces and through all mediums is critical for civil society, multistakeholder processes like WSIS can also be helpful for fruitful engagement, even on issues where there is deep mistrust. They present civil society with an opportunity to ask tough questions while also providing the leeway to work collaboratively in addressing complexities, and evolving creative solutions.

WSIS and the 20 years of progress since then have remarkably brought different stakeholders, even those that have mismatched interests, together. Ensuring that the path forward is charted with the aim of transparency and engagement towards shared prosperity and accountability requires deliberate action, one that is within reach when we work together.

⁸ https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/doing-business-eu/corporate-sustainability-due-diligence_en

From “digital divide” to “digital equality”: Unpacking the digital inequality paradox

Alison Gillwald¹

Research ICT Africa and University of Cape Town
<https://researchictafrica.net>

Flawed though they may be, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and Global Digital Compact (GDC) are likely our only hope of mobilising the global cooperation required to redress widening digital inequalities and to harness technological innovations for humanity.

This report starts with a brief history and background to the dynamic and complex issues at the heart of WSIS and the GDC. It proceeds to identify the wicked policy problems arising from digital inequality and data injustice, through an intersectional inequality lens and from a Majority World perspective. Then, the report provides a global digital public goods framing for the global governance of the intensifying process of digitalisation and datafication. In doing so, it surfaces critical areas that could contribute significantly to more equitable and just digital policy outcomes.

WSIS and the potential of the internet for inclusive development

The rapidly evolving processes of digitalisation at the close of the previous millennium had placed information and communications technologies (ICTs) at the centre of development discourses. Investments in more efficient and lower-cost converging broadcasting and telecommunications platforms and mobile infrastructure had pushed ICTs onto the agendas of the G7, development banks and multilateral institutions, specifically the UN – its significance culminating in a global, multistakeholder and member state-driven summit. WSIS was held first in Geneva in 2003, then in Tunis

in 2005, the two stages of the summit eliciting a global commitment towards building a “people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society.”²

The summit was an acknowledgement that up to that point, communications, both broadcasting and particularly telecommunications, had largely not been people-centred, or inclusive, and had not contributed significantly to development – certainly not in the global South.

For many, WSIS gave pause to reflect on the failure of previous efforts to redress inequalities in communication. Touchstones of these ambitions for a “New World Information Order” were the UNESCO 1980 MacBride report, *Many Voices, One World*,³ and the Maitland Report.⁴ Not only had the information asymmetries and injustices that had been identified 20 years previously not been ameliorated, but in many ways, they had been perpetuated and amplified by increasingly globalised communication systems. With the concentration of commercial global news networks and the decline in public broadcasting, there was also little diversity or unity in the dominant communication order envisioned by MacBride.

The digital divide – the telecommunications gap between individuals, households and firms within and among countries – that the Maitland Report sought to rectify persisted and was central to the WSIS global commitments. With new mobile technologies and the rise of the internet, the summit foresaw ubiquitous access to information with economic prospects that would level development outcomes of globalisation. But there was much to be done. At the time of WSIS 2003 in Geneva, the reference to people on Manhattan Island in New York having more households connected than the whole of Africa had become a mantra. South Africa, the sub-Saharan country with the highest fixed-line penetration, stood at only 9%

¹ Thanks to Jamie Fuller from Research ICT Africa for research assistance.

² <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MacBride_report

⁴ <https://www.itu.int/en/history/Pages/MaitlandReport.aspx>

of the population, with other sub-Saharan countries trailing way behind at 1% and 2%.

The internet emerged amidst these developments as the latest general-purpose technology cutting across sectors, firms and individuals' social and economic existence. Unlike previous general-purpose technologies (such as electricity), the internet was transnational, non-state and potentially unifying. Its development promise was reflected in strategies such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with its seven underlying ICT sub-targets.⁵

Not only did the dynamic technological developments have significant implications for economic efficiencies and new opportunities, but also for the democratic and social movements that both drove and were enabled by the expansion of the internet at the turn of the millennium. Globalisation, intensified by new media technologies, allowed localised actors to enter the international arenas that had previously been exclusive to nation-states.⁶ Instantaneous and borderless communication made possible the mobilisation of people around the world on issues of social justice. These included the Occupy Wall Street social movement against corporate excesses and national democratic resistance to repressive states, such as the unprecedented uprisings in North Africa in the so-called Arab Spring.

Eroded promises

The excitement about the potential of the internet and social networks to disrupt and transform dominant power relations, both within countries and geopolitically, was tempered by the response of states in countering dissent. This was done through traditional forms of coercion and violence and through their leveraging of social networks for purposes of surveillance and repression.⁷

By WSIS+10 in 2013, the promise of a free and open internet, providing unlimited access to information for all, was significantly

eroded, including through the increasing commercialisation of content with paywalls and “walled gardens” restricting access. Moreover, as broadband infrastructure was increasingly liberalised, the varying quality of services according to price packages raised concerns about net neutrality on public infrastructure, even as it was privately provisioned.

Datafication was accompanied by the rise of platformisation and “over-the-top” (OTT) services, particularly social networking. Users shifted from being consumers of data and information to becoming unwitting data subjects. Although advanced data-driven technologies initially appeared to offer new forms of wide-reaching social and economic engagement, they also ushered in a global monopoly of platforms extracting massive amounts of data from users, in what Zuboff describes as “surveillance capitalism”⁸ and Couldry and Meijas more contentiously describe as “data colonialism”.⁹

The Global Digital Compact

Fast forward two decades since WSIS, and we see renewed calls for digital inclusion in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The inability of billions of people to mitigate the health and economic risks associated with pandemics and lockdowns by digitally substituting for their work, schooling and public services, including social grants to ensure their survival, has highlighted the compounding effect of digital inequality on underlying structural inequalities. The uneven capabilities of nations in the digital era to deploy the internet for post-pandemic economic and social reconstruction shows the unevenness of the “progress” afforded by high-speed broadband internet envisaged 20 years ago.

This unevenness, marginalisation and exclusion apply not only to economic and social participation, and global competitiveness, but also to exercising effective citizenship. Rather than fostering political inclusion, increased digitalisation is accompanied by a sense of democratic erosion, disinformation and disorder in an increasingly digitalised public sphere.¹⁰

5 <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/backgrounders/Pages/icts-to-achieve-the-united-nations-sustainable-development-goals.aspx>

6 Castells, M. (2011). *The Rise of the Network Society*. Wiley. https://books.google.com.uy/books/about/The_Rise_of_the_Network_Society.html?id=FihjywtjTdUC; Sassen, S. (2013). Expelled: Humans in Capitalism's Deepening Crisis. *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 19(2), 198-201. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2013.495>

7 Gillwald, A., & Wavre, V. (2024). Rerouting Geopolitics: Narratives and the Political Power of Communications. In C. Padovani et al. (Eds.), *Global Communication Governance at the Crossroads*. Spring International Publishing; International Telecommunication Union. (2022). *Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2022*. <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/facts-figures-2022>

8 Zuboff, S. (2018). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. Profile Books.

9 Couldry, N., & Meijas, U. (2018). *Data colonialism: Rethinking big data's relation to the contemporary subject*. SAGE Publications. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89511/1/Couldry_Data-colonialism_Accepted.pdf

10 Research ICT Africa. (2022). After Access surveys [dataset]. <https://researchictafrica.net/data/after-access-surveys>

Reflecting this sentiment, UN Secretary-General António Guterres has identified digitalisation as one of “two seismic shifts” that will shape the 21st century, the other being climate change. He has warned that unless urgently addressed on a planetary scale, digitalisation will exacerbate already extreme inequalities. With digitalisation being one of the central pillars of the UN’s “Our Common Agenda”, Guterres has called for the GDC to “outline shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all”¹¹ and improve the progress made towards the SDGs. Occurring 20 years after WSIS, the GDC has been able to highlight the growing complexity and transversal nature of digitalisation and datafication, and the need for global collaboration in the governance of monopoly platforms to limit the harms associated with advanced data-driven technologies such as machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI). However, the linkages between foundational inequality and the uneven impact of those harms, and the distribution of opportunities associated with the deployment of large-scale digital technologies, remain opaque. In terms of solutions, there is little acknowledgement of the need for new ways to redress inequality if we want different outcomes.

The policy limitations of the digital divide seen as “connectivity”

One of the reasons why policies of the past two decades have failed to produce more equitable outcomes is because of the way in which digital inequality has been very narrowly conceived of as a digital divide – as a supply-side, infrastructure and connectivity gap. WSIS+10 identified the high cost of digital services driven by the cost of business models or ineffectual regulation as a cause for the highly uneven digital access rates. As a result, the discourse on the digital divide shifted from the issue of ensuring sufficient infrastructure, to addressing “affordable access”.

The need for significant bandwidth to fulfil some of the most basic requirements for social and economic inclusion was acknowledged by the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, which employed the language of “meaningful access” in its Digital Cooperation Roadmap.¹² This did extend the concept of universal and affordable broadband access to the need

for sufficient quality bandwidth to be able to benefit from the internet, and more recently to an acknowledgement that this needs to be coupled with investments in digital skills, localised digital content, accessible hardware, and cybersecurity measures. But the focus continues to be on connectivity in the framing documents of the GDC, even in the arguably progressive efforts of the G20 under the leadership of India and now Brazil to develop a transformative digital agenda.¹³

WSIS+20 and persistent digital inequality

The WSIS+20 review process in 2025 will be informed by the GDC to be adopted at the Summit of the Future later in 2024. The WSIS review outcome document will also be an input into the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. As the processes strengthen their alignment, and “as new technologies deepen their imprint on societies,” they are intended to provide an opportunity to assess “the continuity and progress toward the aim of a people-centred and multistakeholder approach to global digital transformation.”¹⁴

In doing so, one can only be struck by the greatest continuity being persistent digital inequality and the lack of progress toward “digital transformation” – a term now used so loosely as to have lost its meaning. Despite the commitments to harnessing the disruptive potential of dynamic and adaptive general-purpose technologies, first the internet and now advanced data-driven technologies of AI and machine learning, progress has been extremely uneven both between and within countries. In any serious assessment there must also be concerns about the absence of both data and analysis to critically assess our progress. With the limited decision-making power of global multistakeholder processes, it is questionable how transformative the outcomes of the processes can be. Can the multistakeholder process of consensus building between states, the private sector and civil society (academia and the technical community) redress digital inequality and digitally perpetuated injustices? Given the outcomes of powerful interests reflected in dominant intellectual property, trade and taxation regimes, the international standards and business models associated with them and increasing concentration in the hands of a few large tech companies with

11 United Nations. (2021). *Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General*. <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda>
12 <https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap>

13 International Telecommunication Union. (2022). Op. cit.

14 UNDESA. (n/d). *WSIS+20 and IGF+20 Review by the UN General Assembly (2025)*. <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/ws20-and-igf20-review-by-the-un-general-assembly-2025>

resources to lobby and influence well beyond the means of even mature economies, can the WSIS review process critically engage with these issues?

And what are the implications of this for the Sustainable Development Agenda? Has there been progress on the global commitments made 20 years ago? Have digital policy reforms produced more people-centred, inclusive knowledge societies? Have ICTs been able to contribute to the SDGs to which they have been associated? The answers are: partially, no and we don't know.

Data as an essential public good

The fact of the matter is there is little data at the international level to really assess our progress towards the digital targets of the SDGs, especially in the global South – other than knowing that we are far off from them.¹⁵ There is no comprehensive and complete global data available that can be used to establish a baseline from which progress towards the SDG targets can be measured and that can be disaggregated to identify and address the unequal impact of digitalisation on different categories of people or communities. This is particularly so in the global South, where the vast majority of people reside – many of them far removed from the transformative potential of digital technologies.

The need for high-quality public statistical data is recognised in the UN statistical system, specifically the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) as the entity responsible for the development of digital indicators. Together with the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the ITU was responsible for establishing a multistakeholder Partnership for Measuring the Information Society following the WSIS, and in the first decade considerable progress was made in reviewing and extending telecommunications indicators to universal digital indicators. Yet there is no system in place to support the costly collection of particularly demand-side data, which is essential for policy, planning and implementation and to measure and assess outcomes and the progress being made towards more sustainable development.

With prepaid mobile services being the predominant form of telephony and internet

access in the global South, traditional supply-side administrative data is unable to identify even unique subscribers from the active SIM cards in a country. It also cannot provide disaggregated data on gender, education or income, particularly for those offline and marginalised from different digital services, in order to assess precise points of policy intervention necessary for governance in the public interest.

With little provisioning of digital data as part of the public statistics required to build the evidence needed for policy formulation, patchy administrative data is drawn together through often spurious estimations and forecasting. These are complemented by incomplete private data and studies that are not required to meet national statistical standards. Often collected in support of industry interests, they have become the problematic, but unproblematised, global reference points and the default evidence base for countries without alternative data sources or their own public statistics.

High-level aggregated data at national level such as GNI per capita or internet penetration, for example, masks the inequalities that exist within countries. This is even more the case when data is aggregated at the regional level with very different levels of development, such as is done in Latin America or Asia but even more so Africa, with all its states and diversity. Even disaggregated categories of data such as gender, for example, when aggregated at national, regional or global levels conceal the heterogeneity within categories of indicators such as men or women, whose common challenges to accessing the internet are far better explained by poverty, lack of education or employment.

The digital inequality paradox

While many of the policy objectives of WSIS remain valid today and hopes of contributing to the SDGs as elusive, the conditions under which WSIS+20 takes place are far more globalised, dynamic and therefore challenging. Efforts to ensure digital equality, not simply inclusion, have also become more complex than they were a decade or two ago when policy concerns around the “digital divide” reflected narrow connectivity challenges resulting from a lack of access to basic communication services.

Rather than reducing inequality, data-driven technologies have exacerbated inequality over the past two decades. Redressing this “digital inequality paradox” has become one of the most

¹⁵ This has been conceded by the former ITU Secretary-General on several occasions of the WSIS and Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and by the director general of GSMA, which represents mobile network operators worldwide, at the WSIS High-Level Panel in 2018.

wicked policy problems of our time. The paradox lies in the fact that as more people come online and as some are able to use digital services more productively, digital inequality has increased. This is because people are differently connected to advanced technologies and these technologies are layered over underlying foundational infrastructures. Inequalities exist not only between those online and those offline (as is the case in a voice and basic text environment), there is a significant disparity between those who have the technical and financial resources to use the internet actively and even productively and those who are “barely” online, passively using tiny bits of data to communicate intermittently as many people in the Majority World do.¹⁶

Intersectional inequality

Adopting an intersectional approach to understanding inequality can help to overcome the homogenising language of marginality, exclusion and poverty common in the WSIS process and UN processes more generally. It can also overcome the binary constructions and gender essentialism manifest within the UN system and across many of the problematic “gender and digital divide” studies that currently inform policy in the absence of public statistics. Arguably more importantly in terms of policy of redress, it also draws attention to the relevance of analytically significant political economy and feminist concepts of social context, power relations, social inequality, relationality, social justice and complexity.¹⁷

Although the seminal literature on intersectionality is largely qualitative and grapples with the many complex issues of inequality that cannot be quantified, it is necessary to inform policy empirically through rigorous, disaggregated data to ensure the precise points of policy intervention. Yet as discussed above, there is very little quantitative data measuring digital policy outcomes, and what does exist fails to assess the intersectional nature of marginalisation.

The After Access survey¹⁸ undertaken by Research ICT Africa (RIA) across the global South

demonstrates that the most marginalised are not a single category of people but those located at the intersections of multiple inequalities – class, race and gender, and in some countries ethnicity, caste or religion. These inequalities in the digital realm can be quantified in relation to geographic location (urban/rural), age, income and education. When facing these inequalities, the possibilities of full substitution of the digital are limited, preventing society as a whole from harvesting the cost savings from a more efficient service delivery to the most-in-need.

Within its binary construction of gender, inequalities that exist between men and women have long been recognised within the UN development agenda, yet there is in fact very little data on women. This is because data is not generally collected in this area and because when it is, the data is not or cannot be disaggregated.

Studies conducted by RIA over the years have shown that using descriptive indicators alone to measure the gender gap tend to mask inequalities across groups of men and women.¹⁹ These studies have also demonstrated that the disparities in internet access exist not only between men and women, but also among women within countries. What they show is whether living in rural areas or city slums, women located at the intersection of other factors of exclusion, such as class and race (and associated marginalisation from education and employment), will experience even greater digital inequality than women generally.

From this intersectional perspective, the highly uneven impact of digitalisation, datafication and now platformisation is not caused by a single factor and cannot be redressed by attention to a single cause. Those at the intersections of multiple inequalities are least able to enjoy the opportunities and least able to mitigate the risks associated with rapidly advancing technology. With the layering of advanced data-driven technologies over existing digital inequalities, the poor outcomes

16 Gillwald, A. (2020, 5 October). COVID-19 compounds effect of digital inequality. *Research ICT Africa*. <https://researchictafrica.net/2020/10/05/gillwald-covid-19-compounds-effect-of-digital-inequality>

17 Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2020). *Intersectionality*. John Wiley & Sons.

18 The After Access survey was last undertaken across 20 countries in Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America in 2018 and in eight African countries again in 2023. Limited surveys were undertaken in some countries during the pandemic. See <https://www.afteraccess.net>

19 Gillwald, A., & Mothobi, O. (2019). *After Access 2018: A demand-side view of mobile internet from 10 African countries*. https://researchictafrica.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019_After-Access_Africa-Comparative-report.pdf; Khan, S., Deen-Swarray, M., & Chair, C. (2016). *Taking the Microscope to ICT Gender Gaps in Africa*. CPRSouth Zanzibar Conference Proceedings. https://researchictafrica.net/publications/Conference_Publications/2016_Chair_Deen-Swarray_Khand_Taking_a_microscope_to_ICT_gender_gaps_in_Africa_CPRsouth_Best_Paper.pdf; Deen-Swarray, M., Gillwald, A., Khan, S., & Morrell, A. (2012). *Lifting the veil on ICT gender indicators in Africa*. Research ICT Africa. https://www.researchictafrica.net/publications/Evidence_for_ICT_Policy_Action/Policy_Paper_13_-_Lifting_the_veil_on_gender_ICT_indicators_in_Africa.pdf

of existing policies are arguably amplified and result in an even greater exclusion of people from the potential to improve lives and livelihoods.

Active inclusion of all those affected by decisions in processes of policy formulation, regulation and governance is essential to ensure more equitable and just digital and data outcomes.

The exclusion of people from online financial services, remote and platform work and digital production makes them invisible in the data extracted by global monopoly digital platforms for the purposes of creating lucrative digital intelligence. As a result, particularly Black women are absent, underrepresented and discriminated against in the algorithmic decision making that is being opaquely used to make and direct decisions that affect them.

Data justice

These intensifying global processes of digitalisation and datafication are simultaneously accompanied by a plethora of individual and (particularly poorly understood and defined) collective risks that, unmitigated, could result in widespread harms to human rights, sustainable development and democracy.²⁰

With the global crisis precipitated by COVID-19, the growing dominance and linkages of data, big data analytics, the internet of things (IoT) and algorithms placed data as a key resource in public management and economic reconstruction. This has amplified the need for data governance and institutional arrangements to reduce the current unevenness of negative impacts and opportunities within and between countries.

The emerging literature and practice of data governance have mostly been approached from a negative regulatory perspective. That is to say, it has sought to prevent harms in relation to rights violations and mitigate associated risks – particularly privacy and security but also freedom of expression. Positive discrimination to redress intersectional inequality, in the areas of access to affordable, adequate quality broadband, consumer protection, data protection, public procurement and data access and sharing, is required.

While various global and local epistemic communities are grappling with these issues, increasingly in relation to AI becoming the next general-purpose technology, very little of this

has focused on economic governance. Yet there are many areas of data governance such as data availability, accessibility, usability and integrity, as well as concerns about ownership and impacts on trade and competition, that require positive regulatory or governance intervention.

Beyond the challenges of safeguarding citizens as data subjects, states are challenged by the need to create an enabling environment for data value creation locally, in the face of increasing global concentration in digital and data global markets. The need for economic regulation to ensure public access to quality public data and local innovation creates opportunities for greater participation by marginalised groups. Ensuring historically marginalised groups gain access to the foundational digital and data infrastructures, and services on top of which these platforms and services operate, in order to be better represented is the primary way to deal with bias in the giant datasets that dominate commercial activity.²¹

Balancing current commercial, supply-side valuation of data used in the allocation of resources and which has produced the outcomes that we have, with the demand-side valuation in the allocation of resources that recognise their social value including as common goods, is necessary to ensure more inclusive and equitable policy outcomes.

Global governance of digital public goods

The rise of the internet as a global digital public good underpinning global trade and financial and information flows requires new forms of global cooperation. Awareness about the value of data for socioeconomic development and its ability to contribute to the realisation of the 2030 SDGs has become increasingly prevalent. The shift in traditional power relations between states, markets and citizens in global governance has blurred notions of “international” and “national” and of what constitutes public and private. After several decades of private interests dominating evolving forms of data governance, the role of public regulation of the internet and specifically platforms has re-emerged as a priority.²²

20 Research ICT Africa. (2022). After Access surveys [dataset]. <https://researchictafrica.net/data/after-access-surveys>

21 Gillwald, A., & Partridge, A. (2022). *Gendered Nature of Digital Inequality: Evidence for policy considerations*. UN Women. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/_Background%20Paper_Alison%20Gillwald_Digital%20Inequality.pdf

22 Research ICT Africa. (2023). *Research ICT Africa's Submission to the Global Digital Compact*. <https://researchictafrica.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Global-Digital-Compact-Submission-fnl-formatted.pdf>

The current challenges to ensure the provision of global digital public goods lie in the increasing complexity and adaptiveness of the global communications systems and the shifting global governance responses to these. These include complementary and competing systems of governance ranging from nation-state-based multilateral systems that have traditionally governed and coordinated global development, to new multistakeholder formations accommodating state, private sector and civil society interests, as well as to new forms of private authority, both commercial and non-commercial, as found in the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).

In economic terms, data can be understood as a public good in that it is inherently non-rivalrous (at the technical level, it is infinitely usable without detracting from another person's ability to use it). It is naturally non-excludable, which means that there are no natural barriers to multiple people using the same data at once. Although there are attempts to render data excludable through technological and sometimes legal means, these are not inherently features of data. Attempts to limit access, whether for purposes of commercialisation or security, can be regulated to be non-excludable. For example, data that is made open under an internationally recognised licence or public statistics can be regulated to be accessible like free-to-air public broadcasting, as a classical public good.

Underpinning the policy and regulation of global digital public goods is that they are a common good that has to be made available to all. While the concept of paying for national public goods such as providing education or protecting clean air is widely understood, it is less clear who should be held responsible for general-purpose global public goods, such as the internet, that serve the common interest. While investment in global public goods has traditionally taken the form of official development assistance, this has produced highly uneven results. Because of this, new forms of international cooperation and institutions that will support the development of global digital public goods and ensure greater digital inclusion are necessary.²³

However, a global consensus on the good governance of the internet as a public good only

emerges, in considerable measure, to the extent that countries can reproduce this consensus at the national (or regional and sub-regional) level (e.g. creating the conditions for private delivery of public goods such as the internet, or complying with global agreements to enforce cybersecurity). Therefore, treating the internet, data or cybersecurity, indeed global governance, as a global public good can only be defended through implementation at a national level in *all* countries, including developing countries.

Conclusions and actions steps

The world is a very different place 20 years on and one of the things that has changed most is digitalisation and datafication of human planetary existence. This dramatic transformation of the world accompanied by planetary degradation, internecine wars, democratic erosion and severe challenges to the multilateral system meant to hold it together, demands that strategic moments such as WSIS+20 or the GDC are used to challenge the perpetuation of inequality and injustice through digitalisation, datafication and platformisation. For too long the exacerbation of inequality has been treated as an inevitable outcome of innovation and progress, about which little can be done.

While the inherently paradoxical nature of digital inequality makes it impossible to eliminate for as long as structural inequality persists, the success of WSIS+20 and the GDC will be the degree to which they are able to provide a way in which it can be managed through global governance and collective action. Moreover, there are some systemic issues that can be redressed through policy intervention.

Global governance and national-level policy formulation need to develop from their sectoral silos into transversal digital and data policy that recognises the role of digital public goods as central to contemporary forms of democratic participation and as key inputs and enablers of economic transformation. This needs to happen together with human development strategies and rights-preserving regulatory arrangements to redress intersectional inequality and foster integrity in the information environment. Acknowledging the political economy of developing countries will be essential to high social value post-pandemic economic reconstruction and the building of more democratic, inclusive social compacts.

At the very least, effective policy will require the regulation of global digital public goods such

²³ Gillwald, A., & van der Spuy, A. (2019). *The Governance of Global Digital Public Goods: Not Just a Crisis for Africa*. GigaNet Annual Symposium, Berlin, Germany. https://www.giga-net.org/2019symposiumPapers/34_Gillwald_VanderSpuy_Global-Governance.pdf

as spectrum, internet and data to ensure access to the means of communication and production, and a system of governance to mitigate the associated risks. To promote more equitable and just outcomes, economic regulation (as well as other regulatory arrangements) is necessary to enable the more even distribution of the opportunities arising from the data economy, not only the prevention of harms to democracy and development.

It is important that while global reform and donor agendas and resources have been diverted from foundational digital inequality and its measurement for purposes of policy intervention to issues of data and algorithmic governance, resources are found to collect public data so that the foundational connections between inequitable outcomes are demonstrated. The increasingly complex and adaptive data systems are not unrelated to the exclusion of significant parts of the global population in the digital polity and economy. If there are to be more equitable outcomes, far more effective data collection is essential to enable disaggregated analyses by sex, income, education, employment and age for the informed and innovative policy that will be required to regulate these dynamic, complex and adaptive information systems. This will require multilateral agencies, development banks and states to move beyond the rhetoric of statistics as a public good. To ensure that standardised, non-proprietary data is publicly available for public planning, research and preferential commercial benefits for marginalised groups, concerted policy intervention and the dedication of resources to make this happen will be required.²⁴

With the intensification of datafication, the uneven distribution of benefits associated with the new forms of value creation both between and within countries requires new forms of regulation and global governance to be effective. The rise of monopoly platforms that drive the global economy on the basis of the extraction of vast amounts of user-generated data that is converted

into intelligence and super-profits has severe implications for those invisible or underrepresented in the data sets used for algorithmic decision making underpinning daily platform life. While the harms associated with such data-extractive value creation such as breaches of data subjects' privacy rights or online abuse and gender violence are universal, their impacts are highly uneven. Many people are unable to exercise their rights online (and very often offline). Even where data regulators may have been established, the institutional and legal challenges of extra-jurisdictional enforcement are impossible without global cooperation and alignment that most developing countries do not necessarily have the institutional capacity to engage in.²⁵

The implications of failing to address digital inequality, as a reflection of structural inequality, are evidenced in the intensifying global processes of digitalisation and datafication which are simultaneously accompanied by a plethora of individual and (particularly poorly understood and defined) collective risks. Unmitigated, these are resulting in widespread harms, not only to first-generation rights of privacy and freedom of expression with implications for democracy, but to second and third-generation rights with implications for equitable, just and sustainable development. To promote more equitable and just outcomes, economic regulation is needed in conjunction with data governance to ensure the protection of personal data, data portability and non-digital alternatives to safeguard consumer welfare and digital labour rights. Economic regulation is also necessary to enable a more even distribution of the opportunities arising from the data economy, not only the prevention of harms to democracy and development. Positive discrimination to redress intersectional inequality in the areas of access to affordable, adequate quality broadband, public procurement and data access and sharing, through the creation of digital and data commons is required.

24 Research ICT Africa. (2023). Op. cit.

25 Gillwald, A., & Partridge, A. (2022). Op. cit.

Understanding the marginalisation of Pacific Small Island Developing States through digitalisation

Sala Weleilakeba

Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)

<https://www.dawnfeminist.org/projects/feminist-digital-justice>

In recent years, there has been growing concern about the marginalisation of civil society perspectives in global and national processes. Civil society organisations play a crucial role in advocating for the interests of marginalised communities and holding governments and international organisations accountable.¹ However, their voices are often sidelined or overlooked when decisions are made and policies are set. Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) face unique challenges in embracing digitalisation that are often not taken into account in global governance processes. At the same time, governments in the Pacific Islands do not sufficiently leverage the skills and capacities of civil society organisations better to bridge the digital divide. This short report delves into the factors contributing to the digital divide experienced by PSIDS and suggests ways of fostering digital inclusion in the region.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) stands as a pivotal platform for addressing global issues concerning the use and impact of information and communications technologies (ICTs). As we navigate the complexities of our increasingly interconnected world, it is imperative that WSIS takes into account the perspectives of marginalised

geographies and communities in the Pacific. These communities often face unique challenges and barriers in accessing and using ICTs, and addressing their concerns is essential for achieving the overarching goals of WSIS. The digital divide in the Pacific is often a result of intersecting issues including infrastructural hurdles,² inadequate regulatory frameworks,³ socioeconomic factors, limited digital literacy and awareness,⁴ and climate vulnerability.

Due to the unique physical geography, cultural and linguistic diversity, and dispersed population, Pacific Island countries encounter numerous obstacles in providing information services.⁵ Digital disparities prevalent in the Pacific region encompass divides within nations, among nations, and between the Pacific and the global community. PSIDs are facing a range of challenges due to their size, isolation and vulnerability to external forces. Internet accessibility varies significantly across the Pacific region, with a general deficiency compared to other global regions.⁶ Among those with internet access, mobile phones are a prevalent means of connectivity, as opposed to tablets, laptops or desktop computers.

1 The Global Digital Justice Forum sees a strong and central role for civil society and social movements in global to local digital policy making. See: Global Digital Justice Forum. (2023). *Submission of Inputs for the Global Digital Compact*. https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/2333/ITFC_Submission%20of%20Inputs%20for%20the%20Global%20Digital%20Compact.pdf

2 Wolfenden, A. (2023). *A Strategy to Where? The Pacific Regional E-Commerce Strategy and the Need to Put Data Sovereignty First*. *DAWN Informs: Towards Feminist Digital Justice*. <https://www.dawnfeminist.org/library/dawn-informs-towards-feminist-digital-justice>

3 Global Digital Justice Forum. (2023). Op. cit.

4 The Pacific islands have a narrow focus on what constitutes e-commerce, only referring to e-commerce as online transactions.

5 UNFPA Pacific Sub-Regional Office. (2014). *Population and Development Profiles: Pacific Island Countries*. https://pacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/web_140414_UNFPAPopulationandDevelopmentProfiles-PacificSub-RegionExtendedv1LRv2_o.pdf

6 UNESCAP. (2018). *Broadband Connectivity in Pacific Island Countries*. https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/PACIFIC_PAPER_Final_Publication_1_1.pdf

However, mobile phone accessibility and adoption differ among Pacific countries. For example, while Fiji boasts an 84% subscriber penetration rate, the Federated States of Micronesia lag behind with only 17%.⁷ Merely 37% of Kiribati's population can access mobile internet – it has an even lower internet penetration rate of 15% – resulting in a majority of the population residing in a state of digital obscurity.⁸ Broadband data services come at a high cost, often triple that of Fiji.⁹

The diverse yet typically expensive internet access costs, partly influenced by national telecommunication monopolies, are widening the digital gap based on socioeconomic status. However, they also contribute to regional disparities, leading to the effective isolation of certain countries like Kiribati and Tuvalu. Currently, there are no plans in these countries to tackle digital disparities or consider the impacts of technology on traditional hierarchies of rank, status and power, which are essential aspects in Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian societies.¹⁰ Even though Pacific governments have made a concerted effort to improve infrastructure,¹¹ poor internet speeds and unreliable electricity among Pacific countries deepen the digital divide. Since most PSIDS rely on diesel fuel to generate electricity, this means that most mobile telephone towers require costly solar systems and backup diesel generators.¹² Telecommunication services entail

significant fixed costs for most PSIDS. In regions with sparse populations, economies of scale are typically limited. This results in substandard services, elevated prices and slower internet speeds.¹³ For instance, telecommunications providers might opt for a 2G or 3G network installation instead of investing in the latest generation network.¹⁴

Most people typically do not associate poverty with the Pacific. Instead, it is often associated with the plight of children in Africa or the arduous labour endured by many in Asia. However, as the people of the Pacific well know, the reality does not always align with the idealised image. The Pacific Islands are vulnerable to natural disasters and the rise in sea levels (due to the climate crisis), most have few resources, almost all are remote, and many have small populations.¹⁵ One commonly held view is that Pacific Islanders live in a state of subsistence affluence.¹⁶ However, this characterisation does not apply universally, and even where it does, it implies minimal prospects for advancement and growth. Factors such as the quality of education and available resources, remoteness from the global economy, constraints on engagement with this economy, and traditional land management systems combine to restrict opportunities available to most Pacific Islands.¹⁷ Given this

7 GSMA. (2023). *The Mobile Economy: Pacific Islands 2023*. <https://www.gsma.com/mobileeconomy/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/GSMA-ME-Pacific-Islands-2023.pdf>

8 UNCTAD. (2020, 20 May). Kiribati sets sights on overcoming hurdles to e-commerce. <https://unctad.org/news/kiribati-sets-sights-overcoming-hurdles-e-commerce>

9 Ibid.

10 McLeod, A. (2008). *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia*. Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/10082/1/McLeod_LeadershipModels2008.pdf

11 For example, the Tui-Samoa undersea cable connects Fiji to the major Southern Cross cable. The Coral Sea Cable System connects to the domestic undersea cable with the Solomon Islands and its links to Papua New Guinea and Australia. There is also the Kumul Submarine Cable in Papua New Guinea, and the Manatua One Polynesia Cable linking the Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa and French Polynesia.

12 Watson, A. H. A., & Fox, R. (2021). Digital divide: Mobile internet speeds in the Pacific. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 27(1&2), 215-231. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v27i1and2.1168>

13 Highet, C., Nique, M., Watson, A. H. A., & Wilson, A. (2019). *Digital Transformation: The Role of Mobile Technology in Papua New Guinea*. GSMA. <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/digital-transformation-the-role-of-mobile-technology-in-papua-new-guinea>

14 GSMA. (2023). Op. cit.

15 Nakatani, R. (2019). *A Possible Approach to Fiscal Rules in Small Islands – Incorporating Natural Disasters and Climate Change*. IMF. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2019/09/06/A-Possible-Approach-to-Fiscal-Rules-in-Small-Islands-Incorporating-Natural-Disasters-and-48590>

16 See, for example: Yari, M. (2004). Beyond “subsistence affluence”: Poverty in Pacific island countries. *Bulletin on Asia-Pacific Perspectives 2003/04*. UNESCAP. <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/bulletin03-04-ch3.pdf> and Asian Development Bank Office of Pacific Operations. (2001). *Poverty: Is it an issue in the Pacific?* <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/29747/poverty-pacific.pdf>

17 UNESCAP. (2010). *Sustainable Development in the Pacific: Progress and Challenges. Pacific Regional Report for the 5-Year Review of the Mauritius Strategy for Further Implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action for Sustainable Development of SIDS (MSI+5)*. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/11783Pacific_Regional_Synthesis-MSI5-Final.pdf

context, the digital sector has frequently been overlooked in terms of setting priorities.¹⁸ This oversight, combined with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, has had a negative economic impact that in turn has limited Pacific national budgets for ICTs. Some have argued that the economic consequences of the pandemic outweighed those of the health crisis itself.¹⁹

The threat of climate change is a significant factor that WSIS must consider when assessing the key issues for marginalised geographies and communities in the Pacific. The Pacific Islands is one of the first regions experiencing the impacts of climate change.²⁰ Many of the islands are low-lying, often atolls or other islands that rise only a few feet above sea level.²¹ Sinking shores and storm surges continuously threaten habitable and arable land, freshwater resources and infrastructure.²² The climate crisis affects Pacific nations not only environmentally but also culturally, as there are shared traditional values emphasising the significance of their oceanic homelands.²³ The land holds more than mere habitat; it symbolises cultural and spiritual prosperity.

Inadequate government frameworks have also contributed to the digital divide. Pacific

governments have a tendency to have sweeping policies that often overlook fundamental elements. For example, in Fiji the Bainimarama administration introduced the “One Laptop per Child” initiative to improve digital education for students, overlooking that the teachers required significant professional development in e-learning platforms and an overhaul in curriculum.²⁴ For the Pacific, ICT policy must be guided by appropriate technical choices that need to be complemented by effective institutional approaches.

Another notable deficiency in ICT initiatives is the tendency for policies to be portrayed as Pacific Island-owned, yet they are frequently propelled and upheld by international organisations. The reliance of PSIDS on international entities to finance and facilitate these initiatives significantly influences their success.²⁵ This reliance fosters market deregulation and provides access for international corporations, aligning with the interests and objectives of the international organisations involved. The disparity in geopolitical power and the realities of global ICT interests restrict policy makers’ capacity to alter the processes and pursue results that suit the Pacific context.

Civil society involvement is thus critical in reducing the digital divide and improving digitalisation for marginal communities in the Pacific. Pacific governments must make a concerted effort to include civil society organisations advocating for equitable access to digital resources, promoting digital literacy programmes, and fostering community engagement in the consultation process. A vital reason for the inclusion of civil society organisations²⁶ is that they

18 See the Feminist Digital Justice background paper (<https://feministdigitaljustice.net/background-paper>) and declaration (<https://feministdigitaljustice.net>), which examine the various perspectives of the digital paradigm and evolve a new vision of feminist digital justice.

19 Hoy, C. (2020, 15 June). Poverty and the pandemic in the Pacific. *Development Policy Centre Blog*. <https://devpolicy.org/poverty-and-teh-pandemic-in-the-pacific-20200615-2>; Howes, S., & Surandiran, S. (2020, 18 August). COVID-19: economic damage and Pacific strengths. *Development Policy Centre Blog*. <https://devpolicy.org/covid-19-economic-damage-pacific-20200818>; United Nations Pacific. (2020). *Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 in Fiji*. <https://pacific.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/200901%20SEIA%20Fiji%20-%20Consolidated%20Report%20-%20FINAL%20%28002%29.pdf>

20 UNESCAP. (2010). Op. cit.

21 Parsons, C. (2022, 23 May). The Pacific Islands: The front line in the battle against climate change. *U.S. National Science Foundation*. <https://new.nsf.gov/science-matters/pacific-islands-front-line-battle-against-climate>

22 Ibid.

23 Pacific Community SPC. (2021, 17 August). Did you know? Land is fundamental to the identity and way of life of indigenous Pacific islanders. <https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/did-you-know/2021/08/did-you-know-land-is-fundamental-to-the-identity-and-way-of-life>

24 Raturi, S., & Kedrayate, A. (2015). Impact of elearning on primary school children and teachers: A study of the One Laptop per Child pilot project in Fiji. *International Journal of Instructional and Distance Learning*, 12(8), 3-23. http://repository.usp.ac.fj/8462/1/Impact_of_elearning_on_primary_school_children_and_teachers-a_study_of_the_one_laptop_per_child_pilot_project_in_Fiji.pdf

25 International Telecommunication Union. (2021). *Digital trends in Asia and the Pacific 2021: Information and communication technology trends and developments in the Asia Pacific region, 2017-2022*. <https://www.unapcict.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Digital%20Trends%20in%20Asia%20Pacific%202021.pdf>

26 Global Digital Justice Forum. (2023). Op. cit.

advocate for policies and initiatives that prioritise extending internet infrastructure and technology access to underserved areas, but in a way that also halts the encroaching artificial intelligence (AI) and surveillance issues prevalent in the rest of the world. Digital literacy workshops and training sessions are more effective working through grassroots organisations than through heavily bureaucratic ministries where politics often impedes the process.²⁷ Pacific civil society organisations could also facilitate community-led initiatives that leverage digital tools to address local challenges. For example, the Pacific Blue Line Campaign is advocating for the total ban of deep sea mining and challenging the narrative that deep sea mining is the solution to clean energy.²⁸ Its effective use of social media has led to ongoing, successful social and digital mobilisation.

A holistic strategy is needed to tackle the marginalisation of PSIDS in the digitalisation process, which involves addressing infrastructure limitations, improving digital literacy and capacity, fostering collaboration, and advocating for climate-resilient solutions. By prioritising efforts to achieve digital inclusion,²⁹ PSIDS could unlock the potential of digital technologies to enhance socioeconomic development and improve the welfare of their citizens.³⁰ Beyond access and affordability, Pacific marginalised communities may also experience forms of digital exclusion stemming from discrimination, social inequalities and structural barriers. WSIS needs to address these underlying issues by supporting policies and interventions that promote social equity, tackle systemic discrimination, and empower Pacific Islanders to participate fully in the digital society.

27 Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2022, 6 September). Fiji Parliament works with government and civil society on climate change. <https://www.ipu.org/news/case-studies/2022-09/fiji-parliament-works-with-government-and-civil-society-climate-change>

28 For more information, see: <https://www.pacificblueline.org>

29 The Feminist Digital Justice declaration (https://feministdigitaljustice.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/JNC-WG-Declaration-of-Feminist-Digital-Justice_2023.pdf) suggests key principles to achieve gender inclusion in the digital sphere. Its background paper (https://feministdigitaljustice.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/FDJ-Background-paper_23-Aug.pdf) takes stock of the dominant digital paradigm from a critical feminist perspective, teasing out the various dimensions of gender injustice.

30 Aker, J. C. (2017). Using Digital Technology for Public Service Provision in Developing Countries: Potential and Pitfalls. In S. Gupta, M. Keen, A. Shah, & G. Verdier (Eds.), *Digital Revolutions in Public Finance*. IMF. <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/downloadpdf/display/book/9781484315224/choo8.pdf>

Innovative financing mechanisms to bridge the digital divide

Carlos Rey-Moreno, Laina Greene and Mike Jensen¹

APC and Angels of Impact

<https://www.apc.org> and <https://www.angelsimpact.com>

Since the start of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process, after more than 20 years of deployments in developing countries, traditional telecommunication and mobile network operators have yet to meet universal access goals, even for basic voice connectivity.² The continued inability to meet universal service aspirations amply demonstrates that ensuring the WSIS vision of “a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information”³ cannot be left solely to traditional telecommunication incumbents to solve.

Within this context, it should be noted that the pursuit to bridge the digital divide in underserved or remote areas pre-dates WSIS. It has been a longstanding challenge, first identified in *The Missing Link*, also known as the Maitland Report,⁴ published in 1985 by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and since then in many ITU development forums and global information society discussions. The shift in focus from access to telephony, to broadband internet, and now to meaningful connectivity⁵ underscores the changing landscape of digital inclusion. However, the absence of a business case

that meets the profitability requirements of traditional commercial operators continues to pose significant challenges for these players to offer services that can bridge the digital divide in remote and rural areas with small populations.

Given that traditional strategies are failing to close digital gaps in the global South, multitudes of national and international workshops and discussions have taken place that have now begun to consider the role of innovation in financing mechanisms for addressing the digital divide. Within this context, the critical role of new and innovative financing mechanisms is now more widely accepted, and community-centred connectivity solutions are gaining increasing attention as strategies to close the digital gaps.

Background on financial mechanisms as part of WSIS

During the first phase of the WSIS process, one of the issues on which consensus could not be reached was the creation of a Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF), which was supported by many developing countries, but was resisted by many donor countries, who preferred to adhere to the agreements of the Monterrey Consensus. As a result, to study the proposal of a DSF ahead of the second phase, a Task Force on Financial Mechanisms (TFFM) was established by the UN Secretary-General. It was chaired by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and included APC among its members. Although initially concerned with the proposal to establish a UN-led DSF, the TFFM remit ended up being extended to review the adequacy of existing financial mechanisms, and to propose “improvements and innovations of financing mechanisms” including the DSF.⁶ The DSF was inaugurated in 2005, before the Tunis meeting and without waiting for the TFFM’s blessing, and its funding was dependent

1 The authors are grateful to Steve Song, Jochai Ben-Avie and Willie Currie for their feedback on the original draft, as well as to Valeria Betancourt, Anriette Estherhuysen and Karen Banks for their pointers to relevant sources.

2 Shanahan, M., & Bahia, K. (2023). *The State of Mobile Internet Connectivity 2023*. GSMA. <https://www.gsma.com/r/somic/?ID=a6g1r000000xnpAAA&JobID=1709262>

3 <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>

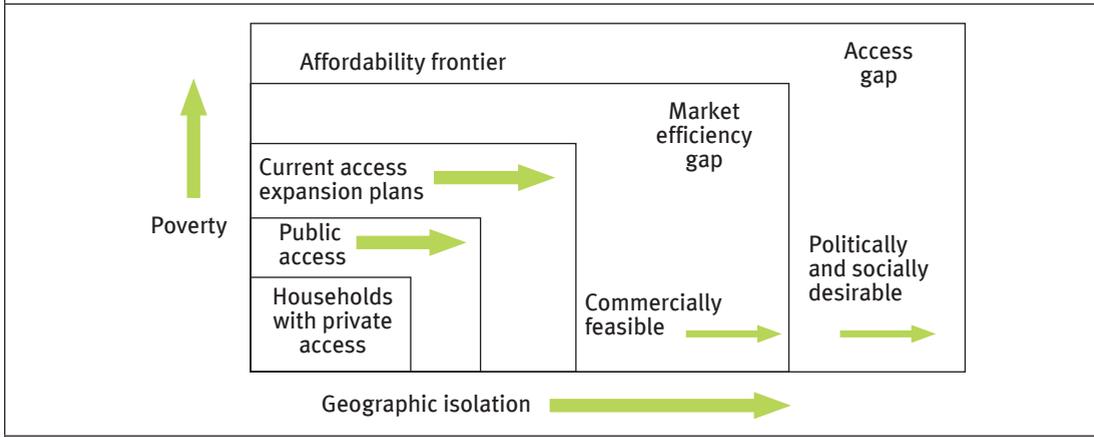
4 ITU. (1985). *The Missing Link: Report of the Independent Commission for World Wide Telecommunications Development*. <https://www.itu.int/en/history/Pages/MaitlandReport.aspx>

5 According to the UN’s Broadband Commission, “meaningful universal connectivity” encompasses broadband that is available, accessible, relevant and affordable, but also that is safe, trusted, user-empowering and leads to positive impact. See: <https://www.broadbandcommission.org/universal-connectivity>

6 Souter, D. (2007). *Whose Summit? Whose Information Society? Developing countries and civil society at the World Summit on the Information Society*. APC. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/books/whose-summit-whose-information-society>

FIGURE 1.

The increased access gap due to greater poverty and geographic isolation.



Source: World Bank

on an innovative financing mechanism known as the “1% digital solidarity contribution”, which was a voluntary commitment of local and national governments and the private sector who agreed to introduce the 1% digital solidarity clause on all their bids relating to information and communications technology (ICT) equipment and services. This meant that the vendor who won the bid contributed 1% of the transaction price to the DSF.

The most important conclusion from the TFFM was to highlight the vital role of public finance in closing the digital divide. This is important because donors and the international financial institutions had effectively been withdrawing from this area since the early 1990s as private capital stepped in. However, it was clear that private capital driving profitability for maximising shareholder value had proven to be insufficient incentive to fund the connectivity needs for bridging the digital divide, particularly at the local level and in remote regions where efforts to ensure an inclusive information society are most needed.⁷ A pioneering report from the World Bank⁸ visualised the underlying reasons behind this funding gap clearly (see Figure 1). The report has since influenced many discussions that called for more countries to create or use their existing universal service funds (USFs) and called

for their implementing agencies to more effectively bridge the digital divide using them.

USFs were first implemented when countries began to privatise and open up the telecommunications industry for greater competition. The aim was to impose a “universal service fee” based on a small proportion of the revenues of operators who had obtained licences in profitable areas. These funds were then to be used to offset the higher costs of provisioning infrastructure in rural areas, as well as providing a mechanism for attracting more providers to apply for licences for universal access.

The United States was the first to establish a USF, promulgated in its 1996 Telecommunications Act. Many other countries followed, but the adoption of USF strategies was not as widespread as expected, and the funds have often not been fully disbursed or have been inefficiently spent on under-used services. In light of this, the TFFM highlighted the potential role of unlocking USFs (if adequately resourced and managed) as a driver for the coordination of not only the funds from the telecommunications industry but also as a mechanism to attract external funds.

The TFFM’s findings and conclusions were incorporated into the recommendations of the Tunis Agenda, including a) “Helping to accelerate the development of domestic financial instruments, including by supporting [...] networking initiatives based on local communities” and b) “Strengthening capacities to enhance the potential of securitized funds and utilizing them effectively.”⁹

7 Task Force on Financial Mechanisms. (2004). *The Report of the Task Force on Financial Mechanisms for ICT for Development*. <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/tffm/final-report.pdf>

8 Navas-Sabater, J., Dymond, A., & Juntunen, N. (2002). *Telecommunications and Information Services for the Poor: Toward a Strategy for Universal Access*. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/0-8213-5121-4>

9 <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/6rev1.html>

Evolution of financial mechanisms after WSIS

As an indication of the extent of funding required to achieve universal access to broadband by 2030 at the global level, the ITU estimated in 2020¹⁰ that the total capital required would be about USD 428 billion. Its study proposed to split the funds needed between public (25%) and private finance (75%), drawing mostly on private investments for infrastructure, and public investments for skills and policy.

The DSF closed in 2009 after being said to have only raised USD 6.4 million. The Digital Development Partnership (DDP) created in 2017 and coordinated by the World Bank could be considered as helping to fill the gap in funding left by the DSF, even if only around knowledge production, technical assistance and unlocking finance. The DDP has raised USD 50 million from different donors since its inception, mainly in development aid from global North governments. Its work has also led to leveraging over USD 10 billion in lending and investment operations,¹¹ primarily through its Digital Development Global Practice programme.¹²

More recently, the pledge platform of the Partner2Connect multistakeholder initiative launched by the ITU and the Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology¹³ has become a central space for expressing economic commitments to closing the digital divide. However, it lacks mechanisms to ensure that those commitments are effectively met. Another innovative financial mechanism that is yet to show significant results is Giga, the UNICEF/ITU initiative that aims to mobilise USD 5 billion to provide connectivity in schools.¹⁴

Concerning public finance from multilateral development banks (MDBs), investment in the ICT sector has in general been relatively limited. A study by the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) showed that “only around 1% of MDB cumulative commitments to projects in low- and middle-income countries over the 2012-16 period were specifically targeted towards the ICT sector, or had ICT as a

primary project component.”¹⁵ This means that only about USD 5 billion in cumulative funds were invested in the entire sector in the period. Among other things, the A4AI study stressed the need to “change the investment narrative within and outside of MDBs to re-establish the ICT sector as a priority sector.”

This narrative seems to be indeed changing, with initiatives such as the World Bank committing USD 25 billion to connect all African governments, businesses and citizens to high-speed broadband by 2030, or by the inclusion of “Enabling Digitalization” as one of eight priority areas of their new vision of “a world free of poverty on a livable planet”.¹⁶ Other initiatives looking at financing telecommunications infrastructure in rural areas include the recent European Commission's Global Gateway,¹⁷ which aims at unlocking EUR 300 billion for five key areas, one being digital infrastructure, and the G7-led Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment, which aims to mobilise USD 600 billion in energy, physical, digital, health and climate-resilient infrastructure in low- and middle-income countries by 2027.¹⁸ Both initiatives are rooted in countering the influence of China, which, through the Digital Silk Road component of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, was estimated to have already invested USD 79 billion in projects outside China by 2018.¹⁹ However, these investments are primarily aimed at supporting the same traditional actors to consolidate their existing infrastructure and invest in advanced services such as 5G in urban areas.

Nevertheless, all these financing commitments combined still fall far short of the ITU's USD 428 billion estimate of the needed funds. The UN Conference on Trade and Development's *World Investment Report 2023* similarly concluded that the increased level of investment required is not taking place, stating that “the contribution

10 ITU. (2020). *Connecting humanity: Assessing investment needs of connecting humanity to the Internet by 2030*. https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/gen/D-GEN-INVEST.CON-2020-PDF-E.pdf

11 Digital Development Partnership. (2022). *DDP Annual Review 2022: Towards green, resilient and inclusive digitalization*. World Bank. <https://indd.adobe.com/view/6a1d7a70-3b72-498d-afba-64fb0f84a8e6>

12 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/digitaldevelopment>

13 <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/sites/partner2connect/landing>

14 <https://giga.global/finance>

15 Zibi, G. (2018). *Closing the Investment Gap: How Multilateral Development Banks Can Contribute to Digital Inclusion*. World Wide Web Foundation & Alliance for Affordable Internet. <https://a4ai.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/MDB-Investments-in-the-ICT-Sector.pdf>

16 World Bank Development Committee. (2023). *Ending Poverty on a Livable Planet: Report to Governors on World Bank Evolution*. <https://www.devcommittee.org/content/dam/sites/devcommittee/doc/documents/2023/Final%20Updated%20Evolution%20Paper%20DC2023-0003.pdf>

17 https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en

18 Keith, T. (2022, 26 June). Biden announced a \$600 billion global infrastructure program to counter China's clout. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/26/1107701371/biden-announced-a-600-billion-global-infrastructure-program-to-counter-chinas-cl>

19 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belt_and_Road_Initiative

of international investment to SDG [Sustainable Development Goal] 9.c (access to information and communication technology, and universal and affordable Internet coverage) remains limited.”²⁰

At the national level, although progress has been made in the number of countries establishing USFs, growth has been less than expected (only about 42% of ITU’s member states reported a fund in 2021).²¹ In addition, the functioning of USFs is not meeting expectations in most countries, as indicated in the 2022 report on *Financing for Sustainable Development* from the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Financing for Development.²² The report’s main recommendation proposes to look at how “[u]pdated universal service and access funds (USAFs) could help to pool funds and provide expertise to achieve universal and inclusive broadband coverage and use.” The report acknowledges the difficulties of managing USFs reported elsewhere,²³ and considers even the possibility of discontinuing them in countries where fixing them is too difficult. Reforming USFs as a mechanism is also proposed by the Broadband Commission in its report on *21st Century Financing Models for Bridging Broadband Connectivity Gaps*,²⁴ as well as by the DDP, which currently has a project in its portfolio titled “Reaching the bottom 10%: Financing, policy and regulatory models and country case studies” that looks at providing recommendations for a new model for USFs.

The Financial Mechanisms section of the WSIS+10 review resolution also supports a prominent profile for ICTs in the Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM) established in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development.²⁵ However, the outputs of the TFM do

not indicate any specific solutions that may have contributed to bridging the digital divide.²⁶

In contrast to the public finance efforts, a clear trend in the last 20 years has been the massive influx of private capital into the telecommunications industry, and the adoption of innovative technologies requiring lower capital costs in mobile, satellite and fibre, both terrestrial and submarine, along with the explosion of Wi-Fi in the last mile, which has been dramatic. This, and the push to deregulate and privatise the telecommunications industry, have created many opportunities for private capital to profit from these new innovations. With the proliferation of capital-intensive, privately owned low earth orbit (LEO) satellite companies, along with the extension of 5G networks by mobile operators, there are opportunities to address universal access; however, the private capital used to fund these new technologies tends to focus on the more profitable markets that maximise the returns for their shareholders. Furthermore, despite subsidies from USFs, operators find the return on investment insufficient to justify the cost of offering services and maintaining their infrastructure in less profitable areas, perpetuating the challenge of bridging the digital divide.

Even where sufficient numbers of users exist to justify the infrastructure investment, statistics from GSMA, the association representing mobile operators globally, show that in rural areas, traditional operators are only able to provide traffic-capped mobile data services, which are unaffordable for the general population in those areas.²⁷ Hence, the absence of a clear business case for offering affordable, uncapped high-speed services in areas with low average revenue per user (ARPU) continues to pose a significant hurdle.

This reality of the high cost of value-added services highlights the need to transition from financing mechanisms based on models that meet universal coverage targets included in the SDGs, to those that meet the meaningful connectivity targets established by the Office of the UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology, and the ITU.²⁸ Despite some unlocking of new funding sources and improvements in USFs, challenges in financing infrastructure for bridging digital divides still persist 10 years after the last WSIS review. As

20 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2023). *World Investment Report 2023: Investing in sustainable energy for all*. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/wir2023_en.pdf

21 <https://datahub.itu.int/data/?e=LIE&i=100093&s=3183>

22 Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development. (2022). *Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2022*. United Nations. https://www.un.org/ohrls/sites/www.un.org.ohrls/files/fsdr_2022.pdf

23 Thakur, D., & Potter, L. (2018). *Universal Service and Access Funds: An Untapped Resource to Close the Gender Digital Divide*. Web Foundation. <http://webfoundation.org/docs/2018/03/Using-USAFs-to-Close-the-Gender-Digital-Divide-in-Africa.pdf>

24 Working Group for the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development. (2021). *21st Century Financing Models for Bridging Broadband Connectivity Gaps*. <https://broadbandcommission.org/publication/21st-century-financing-models>

25 https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ares70d125_en.pdf

26 <https://sdgs.un.org/tfm>

27 Shanahan, M., & Bahia, K. (2023). Op. cit.

28 ITU. (2022, 19 April). New UN targets chart path to universal meaningful connectivity. <https://www.itu.int/hub/2022/04/new-un-targets-chart-path-to-universal-meaningful-connectivity>

long as we rely on traditional players and private investment approaches that prioritise profitability, these divides will continue to widen. Public funds channelled through traditional USF models also seem insufficient, and the mechanisms created as part of the WSIS follow-up process do not appear to have had a significant impact. Clearly we need additional sources of finance from non-traditional funders using innovative and flexible financial mechanisms along with a regulatory environment that allows many more complementary network operators to emerge that are socially focused on bridging the digital divide as opposed to solely focused on profitability. Ultimately, to improve the balance between profit maximisation and the goal of reaching universal access, the time has come to fully review where socially driven investments are made and how effective they are at addressing digital inclusion.

Including more cost-effective complementary network providers in the financing mix

ITU Secretary-General Doreen Bogdan-Martin has stressed that to achieve meaningful universal connectivity, “business as usual” will not work.²⁹ Reinforcing this view, the business case for the deployment of digital infrastructure in most unserved and underserved populations appears more favourable to decentralised, local or community-centred connectivity providers. This has led to the emergence of community networks and social enterprises as alternative or complementary network providers in many regions. These providers are driven by completely different investment imperatives, bringing unique assets to the economic calculus of deployment.³⁰ They are part of the ecosystem of micro, small and medium-sized businesses that are the lifeblood of so many economies around the world, especially in the developing world, but that have been neglected for a long time in the telecommunications sector used to building large networks.

In remote, sparsely populated areas, connectivity provision by traditional operators is not a priority given the small scale of potential revenues and the much higher costs of backhaul,

energy, transport and sourcing of the business and technical skills, which are usually scarce in these areas. This contrasts with the business case of local, community-centred connectivity providers that can start at a very small scale and have a more diverse range of ownership and operating models for achieving financial sustainability for their operations.

To address startup costs, many community-centred operators fundraise internally, especially if there are some businesses or other organisational users willing to commit to being anchor tenants (ideally with an upfront payment for services). However, in most rural areas in the developing world, the resident population is unlikely to have the financial capacity to provide all of the needed resources, so in most cases some form of external funding is required. Grants and awards from charities and civil society organisations, the support of the technical community, as well as corporate social responsibility (CSR) schemes donating equipment and premises to host equipment or towers, have all contributed to lowering the outstanding capital expenditure necessary to set up a network.³¹ Although largely untapped, there are also cases of national, state and local public administrations financing initial deployments.³² Overall, however, while operational and maintenance costs can be sustained despite low ARPU, initial startup costs will still require raising external funding, and this is where some innovative funding mechanisms and funding sources can be explored.

To address operational and maintenance costs, while some community-centred connectivity providers operate similarly to traditional commercial networks where user fees cover all the setup and operating costs, others often reduce costs by drawing on the local community for volunteer labour, donations of upstream bandwidth, and the permission to use high sites to erect towers. They are sometimes able to tap into subsidies from government and other commercial sources. Some also innovatively obtain funds by offering services such as e-payments, energy provision/charging, and hosting local information

29 ITU. (2020). Op. cit.

30 Rey-Moreno, C., et al. (2021). Funding Bottom-up Connectivity: Approaches and Challenges of Community Networks to Sustain Themselves. In L. Belli & S. Hadzic (Eds.), *Community Networks: Towards Sustainable Funding Models*. FGV Direito Rio. <https://comconnectivity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Community-Networks-Towards-Sustainable-Funding-Models.pdf>

31 Bidwell, N. J., & Jensen, M. (2019). *Bottom-up connectivity strategies: Community-led small-scale telecommunication infrastructure networks in the global South*. APC. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/bottom-up-connectivity-strategies_o.pdf

32 Forster, J., Matranga, B., & Nagendra, A. (2022). *Financing mechanisms for locally owned internet infrastructure*. APC, Connect Humanity, Connectivity Capital & the Internet Society. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/financing-mechanisms-locally-owned-internet-infrastructure>

servers or remote sensing equipment (weather, air quality, etc.) for a government programme or research agency.

The key point is that by being community-centred (structured as NGOs, social enterprises or community-owned networks) as opposed to profit-centred, most community-centred connectivity providers are not constrained by the need to provide the kind of return on investment that commercial investors require. They also do not need to spend money on costly marketing or public relations, as there is typically a high level of awareness among community members about the network. As a result, substantially higher sign-up rates for community-centred internet service providers (ISPs) as opposed to incumbents are often observed, which substantially (and favourably) changes the economics. This leads to a markedly lower cost of customer acquisition, again favourably improving the economics for community-centred providers.

In addition, with only a modest amount of training required, community-centred service providers can also build the capacity of community members to contribute, especially women. These trained community members are able to take responsibility for most tasks required by the operations, such as erecting towers and installing equipment on roofs, or even day-to-day technical and administrative tasks (troubleshooting, adding users, collecting fees, etc.), thereby significantly reducing their overall operating costs. Many of these providers have also used innovations in energy-efficient equipment powered by green energy, lowering their operating costs significantly. Last but not least, they are able to use a cross-subsidisation model, where local businesses pay a monthly fee that allows discounts for end users.

Beyond being more cost effective, these community-centred models allow broader participation of diverse community members to address their needs, which tend to go beyond the provision of connectivity on its own. For example, this includes building digital skills and creating local digital content that is culturally sensitive and relevant. Because of this, the case for community-centred connectivity providers has the added advantage of bringing many important social and economic benefits to the community, as described elsewhere.³³ It may be difficult to translate some of these benefits into the return on investment needed to pay for the network and its operations, but the

benefits clearly make a strong case for funding these solutions for more effective digital inclusion.

While there have been some examples of innovative financing mechanisms to support community-centred connectivity providers, the financial resources currently available are insufficient to help them scale up. Attempts to engage commercial financial institutions that invest in traditional communications infrastructure to increase the options for financing community-centred operators have surfaced three difficulties that need to be addressed: their limited scale, their high real and perceived levels of risk, and their lower returns on investment.

However, we believe that with sufficient will from different financial stakeholders to address these difficulties (including understanding the benefits of community-centred networks beyond strict return on investment calculations), focusing on funding community-centred service providers is a more cost-effective way to bridge the digital divide effectively, compared to trying to incentivise and fund large private telecommunications companies to do so.³⁴

As mentioned above, while some community-centred connectivity providers are steadily building solutions to persistent digital divides, their relatively small size and limited number underscore the struggle to access capital to expand or seed new networks. To address these funding constraints, there is a strong need to create an enabling and flexible policy, regulatory and financing environment that encourages the emergence of more innovative local and regional investment models for community-centred connectivity providers, which allows them to expand and operate cost-effectively.³⁵

Leveraging increased recognition of community-centred connectivity providers

Community networks were recognised in 2019 in the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution on the “Assessment of the progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the

³⁴ As mentioned above, the funding may help traditional players cover the startup costs, but it will not help them sustain and maintain these networks in the long run, given the low ARPU in these areas.

³⁵ APC, Redes A.C., & Universidad Politécnic de Catalunya. (2020). *Expanding the telecommunications operators ecosystem: Policy and regulatory guidelines to enable local operators*. APC. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/expanding-telecommunications-operators-ecosystem-policy-and-regulatory-guidelines-enable-local>

³³ Bidwell, N. J., & Jensen, M. (2019). Op. cit.

Information Society”.³⁶ At the ITU level, the recognition of “complementary networks” as a solution to bridging the digital divide at different national and regional levels was crystallised at the World Telecommunication Development Conference in 2022 (WTDC-22) in Resolution 37 (Rev. Kigali, 2022), which resolves to instruct the Director of the Telecommunication Development Bureau (BDT) to “continue supporting Member States, where requested, in developing policy and regulatory frameworks that could expand and support the engagement of telecommunication/ICT complementary access networks and solutions in bridging the digital divide.”³⁷ The 2024-2027 Kigali Action Plan resulting from the WTDC also includes community networks in the expected results for two of the priorities for the Americas region for this period. Giga, meanwhile, considers community networks among the models that can contribute to delivering connectivity to all schools by 2030.³⁸

However, greater recognition of the role of community networks is not enough. Key policy and regulatory elements also need to be in place for this initial recognition to translate into access to capital and ease of operation for these providers. Primarily, there needs to be an appropriate licensing framework for small social-purpose operators that incentivises them to contribute to solving the challenge. Among those incentives, lowering licence fees, or even waiving them, and reducing their administrative burden, are among the most important. At the national level, a few countries around the world are leading the way and have already created community network categories in their licensing frameworks. In Africa, Zimbabwe,³⁹ Uganda,⁴⁰ Ethiopia⁴¹ and Kenya⁴² have all included community networks within their regulatory

frameworks, while South Africa proposes to include a new licence category specifically for community networks⁴³ following the recommendations from the Competition Commission that deemed mobile network practices anti-poor and requested support for alternatives.⁴⁴ In Latin America, similarly, Mexico and Argentina have created provisions for their recognition, with Colombia⁴⁵ and Brazil⁴⁶ working actively to enable them within their current frameworks.

This aligns closely with the recommendations in the Best Practice Guidelines from the ITU’s Global Symposium for Regulators held in 2021, which specifically state that “[r]egulatory tools are at hand to bridge the funding and financing gap in digital markets” and identify the need to “[p]romote local innovation ecosystems and provide incentives for the participation of small and community operators in deploying low-cost rural networks, including specific licensing measures, access to key infrastructure and funding, and social coverage promotion programs.”⁴⁷

The guidelines, together with recommendations from the Broadband Commission, among others, also point to another related enabler: the need of community networks to access the mobile spectrum that is usually either unused or unassigned in rural areas in the global South. Mobile spectrum offers opportunities to bridge the digital divide more cost-effectively, including meeting Target 9c within the SDGs. Approaches to spectrum sharing are becoming widespread in the global North, but their adoption in the global South, where they are most needed, is still the exception.

As indicated earlier, a key source of funding would be from USFs, an important enabler

36 https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ecosoc_res_2023d3_en.pdf

37 ITU. (2022). *World Telecommunication Development Conference 2022 (WTDC-22): Final Report*. https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/tdc/D-TDC-WTDC-2022-PDF-E.pdf

38 Giga & Boston Consulting Group. (2021). *Meaningful school connectivity: An assessment of sustainable business models*. ITU. <https://giga.global/bcg-report>

39 Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe Licence Fee Categories. <http://www.potraz.gov.zw/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Licence-Categories-Including-Fees.pdf>

40 Uganda Communications Commission Communal Access Provider License. <https://www.ucc.co.ug/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/DESCRIPTION-OF-TELECOM-LICENSES-AND-AUTHORISATIONS.pdf>

41 Ethiopian Communication Authority’s Telecommunications Licensing Directive 792-2021. <https://cyrilla.org/en/entity/x12axn3r10k?page=1>

42 Communications Authority of Kenya Community Networks Service Provider Licence. <https://www.ca.go.ke/sites/default/files/articles/Telecoms%20Forms/Application%20Form%20For%20Community%20Network%20and%20Service%20Provider%20Licence1-TL-8-0.pdf>

43 South African Government Electronic Communications Amendment Bill: Draft. <https://www.gov.za/documents/electronic-communications-amendment-bill-draft-23-jun-2023-0000>

44 Competition Commission of South Africa. (2019). *Data Services Market Inquiry: Final Report*. <https://www.compcom.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/DSMI-Non-Confidential-Report-002.pdf>

45 Contreras García, V. (2023, 4 July). Gustavo Petro firma decreto para que comunidades autogestionen su Internet fijo. *DPL News*. <https://dplnews.com/gustavo-petro-firma-decreto-para-que-comunidades-autogestionen-su-internet-fijo/>

46 Agência Nacional de Telecomunicações. (2023, 4 December). Publicado relatório com atividades realizadas pelo Grupo de Trabalho sobre Redes Comunitárias. <https://www.gov.br/anatel/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/publicado-relatorio-com-atividades-realizadas-pelo-grupo-de-trabalho-sobre-redes-comunitarias>

47 ITU Global Symposium for Regulators. (2021). *Best Practice Guidelines*. https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Conferences/GSR/2021/Documents/GSR-21_Best-Practice-Guidelines_FINAL_E_V2.pdf

that some governments are now starting to operationalise. Here progress has been slower, but change is starting to accelerate, especially in countries where a community network licence exists. The interest from regulators and policy makers is generally on the rise, as indicated by various workshops organised by APC in collaboration with ITU-D, the ITU's development sector, after Resolution 37 was approved – in Kenya, Indonesia, Nigeria, Cameroon and Colombia – and with regional regulatory agencies such as CRASA in Southern Africa and CITELE in the Americas. In addition, recent reports from the Broadband Commission⁴⁸ recommend that community networks should be beneficiaries of USFs for extending affordable broadband access to commercially challenging rural and remote areas, to women and to low-income users.

In an example of USF funding specifically for community networks, Argentina created a mechanism within its USF to both incentivise the adoption of a community network licence and the use of the fund to help establish connectivity providers in underserved communities.⁴⁹ This mechanism does not prevent the regulator from supporting more traditional approaches, since the USD 3 million dedicated to these programmes represented 0.63% of the regulator Enacom's 2020-2022 budget.⁵⁰

Similarly, in Kenya, its USF Strategy 2022-2026 is now looking to adopt financing mechanisms that will support 100 community networks and other complementary connectivity providers.⁵¹ In both countries, civil society is playing an important role in building the capacity of these providers to meet regulatory requirements and to encourage collaboration between disparate projects. In addition, other countries such as Malawi⁵² and

Papua New Guinea⁵³ have proposed supporting community networks in their USF strategic plans for the coming years. This trend is expected to continue following the ITU's inclusion of community networks as one of the innovations recommended in its USF toolkit.⁵⁴

Beyond support from USFs, the Broadband Commission report on financing models proposes that community networks should be beneficiaries of other types of support from public sources, at the national and international level.⁵⁵ In recent years, international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank⁵⁶ and the Asian Development Bank,⁵⁷ and other regional financial initiatives such as the European Commission's Global Gateway, have now also begun to show interest in these types of small local providers.⁵⁸ However, financial solutions from these institutions have yet to materialise, partly due to the relatively recent emergence of community connectivity providers.

From recognition to tangible action

Although the Tunis Agenda already included the importance of "supporting [...] networking initiatives based on local communities," the reality is that over the last 20 years, community-centred connectivity initiatives have evolved, for the most part, in relatively challenging environments. The majority of regulators in the sector have not expanded their views outside of the narrative that views private companies as the only model for providing telecommunication services. Hence, licensing frameworks and financial mechanisms are designed to privilege private sector participation in the industry. While this has had many positive effects, closing the

48 Broadband Commission Working Group on Broadband for All. (2019). A "Digital Infrastructure Moonshot" for Africa. https://www.broadbandcommission.org/Documents/working-groups/DigitalMoonshotforAfrica_Report.pdf and Working Group for the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development. (2021). Op. cit.

49 https://enacom.gob.ar/multimedia/noticias/archivos/202106/archivo_20210625022117_4017.pdf

50 https://www.enacom.gob.ar/multimedia/noticias/archivos/202305/archivo_20230523045957_7544.pdf

51 <https://ca.go.ke/sites/default/files/CA/Strategic%20Plan/CA%20Strategic%20Plan%202023-2027%20Final.pdf>

52 There are plans to support 30 community networks during the period covered. See: Mlanjira, D. (2022, 20 May). MACRA launches Universal Service Fund's strategic plan. *Nyasa Times*. <https://www.nyasatimes.com/macra-launches-universal-service-funds-strategic-plan/>

53 <https://uas.nicta.gov.pg/index.php/consultations/10-uas-projects-consultations/70-public-consultation-uas-strategic-plan-2023-2027-and-proposed-uas-projects-for-2023>

54 <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/regulatory-market/usf-financial-efficiency-toolkit/>

55 Working Group for the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development. (2021). Op. cit.

56 García Zeballos, A., et al. (2021). *Development of National Broadband Plans in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Inter-American Development Bank. <https://publications.iadb.org/en/development-national-broadband-plans-latin-america-and-caribbean>

57 Brewer, J., Jeong, Y., & Husar, A. (2022). *Last Mile Connectivity: Addressing the Affordability Frontier*. Asian Development Bank. <https://www.adb.org/publications/last-mile-connectivity-affordability-frontier>

58 Degezelle, W. (2022). *The Open Internet as cornerstone of digitalization*. European Commission. https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/news-1/new-report-released-open-internet-opportunities-eu-africa-partnership-2022-10-24_en

digital divide is not among them. On the contrary, as the COVID-19 pandemic showed,⁵⁹ the divide is intensifying.⁶⁰

We believe that now is the time that those participating in the WSIS process recognise that community-centred models are not receiving enough attention, and there needs to be more proactive engagement in supporting these complementary solutions that are critical to ensuring the inclusion of marginalised groups such as women and Indigenous communities, as well as the most financially disadvantaged. In particular, to unlock financial mechanisms for digital inclusion and solidarity, it is crucial to ensure community-centred approaches to digital inclusion are featured more prominently in events where financing for development will be discussed. This includes processes such as the Global Digital Compact (GDC), where the role of community-centred approaches requires more explicit attention in order to counterbalance the prominent role in the debate of multinational companies, whose profit-maximising needs are in conflict with the needs of those excluded from the information society.

There are positive signs that certain governments, UN agencies and multilateral actors, including financial institutions, are starting to recognise the role that community-centred initiatives can play. We welcome this trend. At the national level, some governments are creating space for these initiatives within their telecommunications licensing regimes, and in some specific cases, allowing them to access mobile broadband spectrum. But those countries remain, by far, in the minority.

In order to be successful, any financing mechanisms must be part of a larger enabling environment for community-centred operators. But the centrality played by private companies in the telecommunications sector, and their success in expanding services to the market frontier, has distracted from the need to also create an enabling environment for other alternatives. Because of this, it is critical that digital exclusion is considered by

all WSIS actors as a development problem that transcends the dynamics of the telecommunications industry. Despite the positive trend in recognition that community-centred approaches have achieved, much needs to be done to raise awareness of community-driven alternatives to bridging the digital divide and how to create innovative, affordable and flexible financial products that enable them to sustain their businesses.

Some steps have been taken to bridge this gap,⁶¹ but much more is required.

Unlocking financing mechanisms for community-centred connectivity providers to complement existing solutions to close the digital divide is a frontier area of work, which could be compared to the early days of microfinance for underserved communities and businesses. The challenge today is to mainstream, accelerate and incentivise more innovative financing and investment models for new community-centred operators, and for expansion and upgrades for existing operators, while providing the enabling regulatory environment and training needed at each stage of development for their long-term sustainability.

Action steps

Based on the above discussion, the following key recommendations can be made to inform the WSIS+20 process going forward:

- The UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) should convene a series of workshops to help multilateral development banks and other public finance institutions better understand community-centred network providers and explore financial mechanisms within their mandate to support community-centred connectivity solutions.

A potentially important venue for this could be as part of the preparations for the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development scheduled to take place in Spain in 2025.⁶² This includes the Summit for the Future, where linkages between the GDC and reforms to the international financial architecture should be established as part of the long-term financing of sustainable development.⁶³ The workshops should result in

59 Even though the absolute number of people connected is slowly increasing, the impact of COVID-19 in driving services, employment and social interactions online has increased our overall societal dependence on digital infrastructure. This means that all those without affordable access are at an increasing disadvantage. Rising demand for broadband also means that those with only weak or unaffordable connectivity who might otherwise have been considered connected are still without meaningful access.

60 Brito, C. (2020, 24 September). COVID-19 has intensified the digital divide. *World Economic Forum*. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/09/covid-19-has-intensified-the-digital-divide>

61 Forster, J., Matranga, B., & Nagendra, A. (2022). Op. cit.

62 <https://sdg.iisd.org/events/fourth-international-conference-on-financing-for-development-ffd4>

63 Martens, J. (2023). *Reforms to the global financial architecture*. Global Policy Forum. https://www.globalpolicy.org/sites/default/files/download/Briefing_Reforms%20to%20the%20global%20financial%20architecture.pdf

a clear action plan that goes beyond high-level recommendations to include a minimum testing of some of the solutions already suggested in the reports from the TFFM, Giga and the Broadband Commission, with a particular focus on countries where the regulatory environment is already conducive to these approaches.

- In parallel, policies and regulations need to be adapted to provide a more supportive enabling environment for community-centred connectivity providers.

This includes streamlining licensing processes and reducing licence fees, making spectrum available and minimising reporting burdens.

- Incentivise more local and regional socially driven impact funds that financially support new complementary network providers focused on digital inclusion.

Innovative funding mechanisms include blended finance catering to the scale and perceived risk level of community-centred solutions. These innovative instruments are run by socially driven funds which assess risk and impact differently from the traditional project viability or credibility assessment schemes that institutional funders are acquainted with. New specialised funds which invest in small-scale infrastructure are already emerging and successfully supporting community-centred solutions. Examples include Connectivity Capital and Connect Humanity. They have leaner structures and understand the local context better, resulting in lower transaction costs than more traditional funds in the telecommunications industry. This means these new initiatives can support a variety of small-scale and community-centred approaches, showing that making these types of investments is a viable strategy. Many other regional, national or local social impact funds, such as FISIQ and Angels of Impact, could be encouraged to follow these examples and invest in community-centred connectivity providers. An additional advantage of these impact actors is that they can disburse and manage funds in amounts that can be effectively absorbed by community-centred providers, something that is much more difficult for the instruments of development finance institutions and other large investors, which are designed to manage multi-million dollar disbursements. It is important to note that these specialised intermediaries are already pervasive in many other sectors of development finance and financial assistance and there is an opportunity to

incentivise them to add digital inclusion to their portfolio with support from public finance.

National governments can in turn support these funds via tax incentives as well as through direct investment from USFs or other government mechanisms as well as using tools such as guarantee pools, first-loss investments and other credit guarantees. This will allow new social investors to expand the range of their integrated capital mechanisms to be more effectively applied here.

- Review current financing mechanisms and strengthen existing funding interventions.

Given the multiple voices requesting revision of USF models to encompass support for community-centred approaches, the recommendation to act on this swiftly is an obvious one. USF funds should flow either directly to community-centred network providers or through new or existing social impact investors, thereby creating more effective incentives to channel investment for public-private partnerships, tax breaks for donations, and the modification of public procurement guidelines. Community networks can also participate, and conditional funding from multilateral development banks can also be used to create enabling frameworks. There are already mechanisms for this such as the World Bank's Development Policy Financing.⁶⁴ Providing guarantees so that local banks can also offer financing products to these providers would be helpful too.

In addition to the role of government and multilateral funding agencies, the potential role of philanthropy in unlocking supporting funds should not be underestimated. Although it has been observed that their role in the ICT sector is currently relatively small,⁶⁵ with only 0.05% of US philanthropic funds going to digital equity-related projects,⁶⁶ some charities are starting to take much-welcomed action⁶⁷ and could play a more central role in addressing digital exclusion. While philanthropic dollars have traditionally been

64 <https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/topic/development-policy-financing-dpf>

65 Gilbert, L. (2022, 18 July). Open Philanthropy Shallow Investigation: Telecommunications in LMICs. *Effective Altruism Forum*. <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/H6GhXkbfAy949xhGf/open-philanthropy-shallow-investigation-telecommunications>

66 Connect Humanity. (2022). *Funding to bridge the digital divide: U.S. philanthropic giving to digital equity causes*. <https://connecthumanity.fund/research-philanthropic-giving-to-digital-equity>

67 USAID. (2023, 7 April). Women in the Digital Economy Fund. <https://www.usaid.gov/digital-development/gender-digital>

used to support digital skills, funds can be used as catalytic investments in USF social impact funds to support investments into community-centred network providers.

- Ensure replication of solutions by raising awareness of community access solutions in rural communities as well as among policy makers and financiers.

For these recommendations to be successful, awareness raising is needed among the rural communities that could become community-centred connectivity solution providers. It is also critical to raise more awareness among policy makers and financiers about community-centred connectivity as the best-positioned model to end the digital divide.

- Build rural communities' capacity to access financial mechanisms.

Building the human capacity, not only technical but also financial, of those who wish to take advantage of these new mechanisms is equally critical. As such, there is a need to provide technical assistance to increase the investment readiness of community-centred connectivity providers and thereby build a pipeline of investment opportunities for the financial products mentioned above. This assistance can be provided by the social impact funds mentioned above in partnership with local civil society organisations. Working with structurally marginalised communities as internet

service providers differs significantly from the traditional operation of the telecommunication sector. In this context, it is encouraging to see local civil society organisations supporting community-centred connectivity providers.⁶⁸ They are more familiar with the ecosystem and can thus better evaluate potential opportunities, aggregate needs, and provide legal and administrative support, and so can be partnered with to offer the customised skills needed.

If we want to make progress in the WSIS goals for digital inclusion, we need to do something more. We should take this opportunity to reflect on what WSIS has achieved, and recognise that traditional players and traditional financing mechanisms have not solved the problem. That includes the incapacity of their business models to offer affordable, uncapped high-speed services in areas with low ARPU, which in turn prevents them from meeting the meaningful connectivity targets established by the Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology, and the ITU. The problem requires innovative business and financial models that can better leverage public, private and philanthropic finance to reducing digital exclusion. We should therefore take a broader view on how best to support new, innovative, socially driven investors who can better support community-centred connectivity providers focused on bridging the digital divide.

⁶⁸ <https://www.apc.org/en/grants-local-implementation-apcs-strategic-plan-2022#Altermundi>

What does “meaningful connectivity” actually mean? A community-oriented perspective

Kathleen Diga (APC),¹ Nils Brock and Bruna Zanolli (Rhizomatica)

APC and Rhizomatica

<https://www.apc.org/en/node/35376/>

This report reflects on some of the current definitions of “meaningful connectivity” or “meaningful access”. It draws on the work of the Local Networks (LocNet) project, an initiative by APC and Rhizomatica, which has been advocating for and supporting community-centred connectivity initiatives since 2017. Its purpose is to draw attention to the different meanings of “meaningful” connectivity and access so that when these terms are used by stakeholders in discussions at forums such as WSIS+20, participants are aware that there may be an overlap in understandings, but there also may not be shared meanings about what the terms signify. Understanding the differences is important for any collective discussion to be grounded and transparent.

An overview of some definitions of meaningful connectivity and access

There is a great deal of focus from different actors on how to address the so-called digital divide, and the concepts of “meaningful connectivity” and “meaningful access” have been in use for some time as a way to qualify how digital inclusion for marginalised communities might be made relevant to these communities. Many global or macro-level institutions are moving away from a perspective that the work of “connectivity” is complete once this connectivity, mainly through mobile coverage, has been supplied. They also realise that when broadband supply reaches communities, there remain other factors holding people back from using the connectivity, resulting in what is called the “usage

gap”.² This measures the “gap between the total potential for the market and actual current usage by all consumers in the market”,³ and includes unused spectrum and telecommunication infrastructure. The same global or macro institutions are also articulating the idea that there are many issues that prevent people from getting online as “beyond connectivity”.

Some of the latest definitions of meaningful connectivity and access come from global institutions such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the Global Digital Inclusion Partnership (GDIP, formerly the Alliance for Affordable Internet), and the Internet Governance Forum Policy Network on Meaningful Access (PNMA). Their definitions of meaningful connectivity and access are listed in Table 1.

Overall, these definitions appear to fall short in trying to understand the meaning of the internet or connectivity from the perspectives of people themselves, especially those located in the global South. In particular, they fail to consider aspects of community participation and the potential for digital production by communities themselves. Rather, the metrics used to measure meaningful connectivity and access are largely quantitative and top-down, offering a narrative of access shaped by assumptions. The result is that people are merely seen as passive consumers in the consumption value chain.

In the aspects that try to incorporate the human experience, there are some individual or household-level measures around competencies or digital skills and how often the internet is used. For example, the ITU includes “digital skills” in its five axes defining “meaningful connectivity”.⁴ However, it chooses

¹ We would like to acknowledge the substantive inputs from our Local Networks (LocNet) community and team members, specifically from the collective inputs of the 2023 in-person LocNet team meeting, interviews with LocNet regional coordinators Sarbani Belur, Catherine Kyalo, Josephine Miliza, Talant Sultanov and Lilian Chamorro, and comments on various drafts from Carlos Rey-Moreno and Peter Bloom.

² GSMA. (2022, 21 September). Addressing the Mobile ‘Usage Gap’ is Key to Achieving Sustainable Development Goals. <https://www.gsma.com/newsroom/press-release/addressing-the-mobile-usage-gap-is-key-to-achieving-sustainable-development-goals>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gap_analysis#:~:text=The%20usage%20gap%20is%20the,Existing%20usage

⁴ Prado, D. (2023, 30 June). Seeding change: How Indigenous villages in Brazil built Nhandeflix, their own streaming platform. APC. <https://www.apc.org/en/blog/seeding-change-how-indigenous-villages-brazil-built-nhandeflix-their-own-streaming-platform>

TABLE 1.

“Meaningful access” or “meaningful connectivity” definitions and indicators

Organisation	Definition	Indicators
ITU	Meaningful connectivity “is a level of connectivity that allows users to have a safe, satisfying, enriching and productive online experience at an affordable cost.” ⁵	Five connectivity axes: Infrastructure (availability and quality of mobile and fixed networks), affordability (affordability of connection and device), device (access to mobile and fixed devices), skills (digital skills), and security and safety (connection security and navigation safety).
GDIP	Meaningful access/meaningful connectivity “is a tool to raise the bar for internet access and set more ambitious policy goals for digital development.” ⁶	Four meaningful connectivity indicators: 4G-like speed, an appropriate device, unlimited broadband connection, and daily use. ⁷
PNMA	Meaningful access “is the potential of the internet as a way to create, communicate and produce contents and services locally and in local languages.” ⁸	Three areas of focus: Connectivity (infrastructure and business models), digital inclusion through a citizen approach (accessibility and multilingualism: local services and content in local languages based on local needs and resources), and capacity development (technical skills training).

not to include an account of things like value-added services or the use of applications, as well as benefits of connectivity, in its definition. Questions such as “what is connectivity used for?” and “what impacts does connectivity have?” are considered outside of its scope of work. The problem is that it is in these areas that you discover the meaningfulness of connectivity for communities, including in areas it defines as falling outside of the scope of its definition, such as accessing information, “communication, civic participation and collaboration”, “e-commerce, trade, and transactions”, learning, work and entertainment.

Similarly, the GDIP concentrates mainly on technological aspects “as a way for differentiating levels of internet access.”

The PNMA has some interesting areas of focus beyond connectivity, specifically looking at digital inclusion through a citizen approach and capacity development. However, it does not provide much detail on its conceptualisation of these focus areas, nor technical guidance.

Exploring meaningful connectivity from a community-centred perspective

Our approach to meaningful community-centred connectivity can be defined by the need to strengthen local interests, social ties and relevant activities of respective communities. In other words: connectivity is not created as an external “add-on”, but rather part of ongoing dialogues that are already happening (or “already put in common”, which we consider an interesting definition of communication) in a community. These locally expressed activities, based on specific needs, are preconditions to create ownership and trust and thereby also ensure support for new local services, technologies and communication formats.

5 Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology & International Telecommunication Union. (2022). *Achieving universal and meaningful digital connectivity: Setting a baseline and targets for 2030*. https://www.itu.int/itu-d/meetings/statistics/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2022/04/UniversalMeaningfulDigitalConnectivityTargets2030_BackgroundPaper.pdf

6 Jorge, S., & Woodhouse, T. (2022, 21 December). What is meaningful internet access? Conceptualising a holistic ICT4D policy framework. Global Digital Inclusion Partnership. <https://globaldigitalinclusion.org/2022/12/21/what-is-meaningful-internet-access-conceptualising-a-holistic-ict4d-policy-framework> and <https://a4ai.org/meaningful-connectivity>

7 Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology & International Telecommunication Union. (2022). Op. cit.

8 IGF Policy Network on Meaningful Access. (2023). *IGF 2023 Policy Network on Meaningful Access Work Plan*. https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/256/2611

In the absence of looking at the local value or meaning of this connectivity, access can intersect with power and control in a way that does not benefit the community. Aside from the potential introduction of a mono-culture through the global internet, there are some communities we have worked with, especially Indigenous communities from Latin America, that are very aware of the harms that internet connectivity can bring. This includes cultural and social alienation, exposure to harmful content, financial scams, the manipulation of opinion, psychological stressors such as relationship problems, and facilitating environmental crimes, among others. Because of this, there are situations where communities do not feel ready to connect to the internet. In some cases, they want to have a more controlled experience of connectivity. For example, Cabécar women who worked with the organisation Sulá Batsú in Costa Rica have stated that they do not feel safe or confident to have internet connectivity in their territory. In the end, they chose to use walkie-talkies as a communication technology for their initial community network initiative. In a Guarani project supported by Intervozes in Brazil, the Indigenous communities have opted to reduce the exposure of youth to harmful content by blocking IPs and limiting the time of certain online activities such as gaming. This decision was made by local leaders in discussions with the community. In turn, the limitations have fostered some local content production and a local video streaming platform called Nhandeflix⁹ as a way to counterbalance the negative impacts of the internet and stimulate Indigenous media. At the extreme end, the lack of good content alternatives that mitigate the potential harms of the internet may entice some communities to rather remain unconnected.¹⁰

When unpacking the term “meaningful” within a community-centred perspective, it is important to look at several elements, such as cultural practice and political relevance, community processes, gender empowerment, agency and livelihoods. Also, when saying the word “meaningful”, there should be space for grassroots organisations and local, rural and Indigenous communities to determine what “value” is to them in order to shape what meaningful community-centred connectivity signifies. It is through the collective contribution of

communities and their agency that an appropriate local or community communication activity or digital pathway is designed for their future. If applied in a strategic and reflective manner, the fostered connections can serve as tools to further enhance cultural sovereignty, local economies and the sustainability of the planet.

Cultural practice and political relevance:

“Meaningful” community-centred connectivity activities derive from everyday practices and needs that already exist in a community. For example, connectivity might facilitate access to government services, digitally document or archive local traditions like dance or artisanal products for e-commerce or collective sharing, or locally develop content as educational resources, amongst numerous other everyday needs. Many traditional communities have difficulties in demarcating their territories and face constant incursions into their lands like through illegal mining and logging, and the dumping of pollutants, on top of human rights violations. Connectivity can and should serve as a monitoring and reporting tool for these violations, using, for example, environmental sensors, local services and offline-first and decentralised services to collect data that can serve as evidence in such political processes. In other words, “meaningful” comes from activities done on a regular basis which address people’s existing demands for specific community services, and cultural, human and environmental rights-based needs on the ground.

Engaging community processes: Community-centred connectivity networks work best when communities are proactive in their interest to change their current connectivity situation. It is then that the transformative potential of collective efforts can be seen. The bottom-up and “local action” approach will make a difference in terms of local ownership. Community-centred connectivity can create this drive for local and participatory action, bringing people closer together. Intrinsicly, this could promote self-determination not only in the field of connectivity, but by pushing communities to mobilise in other areas that have been structurally absent in the community.

Increasing gender equity and reducing prejudice: Although addressing gender and other power imbalances and prejudices may not be the main priority for community-centred connectivity projects, we see that when women and gender-diverse people have active roles in the community’s projects and have a strong sense of gender justice, connectivity acts as a way to address gender imbalances and gender-based violence in those

9 Prudencio, K., & Bloom, P. (2021, 9 June). Mantenlo análogo: parámetros para una exclusión voluntaria de la conectividad. *Rhizomatica*. <https://www.rhizomatica.org/mantenlo-analogo-parametros-para-una-exclusion-voluntaria-de-la-conectividad>

10 Ibid.

communities. There are many examples of how the process of building community-centred connectivity can increase gender awareness and improve the lives of women and gender-diverse people. For instance, fostering the participation of women in technical and management capacity-building processes usually increases their sense of self-value and capability. Women and gender-diverse people also tend to see and understand both the community's needs and individuals' struggles better.

Agency: One perspective that can help us to think of “meaningfulness” beyond “connectivity” measurements is offered in a 2022 piece by Richard Heeks¹¹ who asks us “how” people are connecting. Is their access to the internet going to lead to greater inequality or what he calls “adverse digital incorporation”? This refers to “inclusion in a digital system that enables a more-advantaged group to extract disproportionate value from the work or resources of another, less-advantaged group.” In practice, this might entail, for example, communities getting connected but being subjected to things like data harvesting and treated as consumers, which only benefits big, already powerful corporations. His paper suggests that increasing the agency of underserved groups is part of the meaningful change we should be seeking when it comes to connectivity.

Local economic development/livelihoods:

This is an understanding that communities and individuals are collectively instrumental through their actions to determine not only their digital pathways but also in developing alternatives of meaning through local economic development. This is similar to the idea of “localisation”. Localisation is about production that is for one's own community and can enhance local bonds of interdependence, whether they be economic, social or environmental. Localisation aims for biodiversity, community well-being and resilience.

Conclusion

Global definitions on connectivity fall short in expressing community-centred perspectives because they are guided by top-down mechanisms. Rather, grassroots communities have a strong understanding of what is meaningful or of high value to them.

Our articulation of “meaningful” refers to an approach that remains community-oriented. The

future of local communication reaching those who remain disconnected or poorly connected will not merely be reached by just concentrating on the technical: devices, better broadband quality, affordability, and treating people merely as consumers. What becomes apparent when comparing the top-down paradigm of connectivity and access to the bottom-up approach, concludes Josephine Miliza, a LocNet co-ordinator, is “a missing link between the internet as such and all the grassroots activities: high levels of illiteracy, language, relevance and affordable devices. Those gaps of language, content, information and devices should be addressed.” Although the technical axes are very important, it seems to us that there is a great lack of cultural and historical recognition in the technical, supply-side approach, since for connections to be really meaningful for a population, it is essential to recognise value in the community production of knowledge, community understandings of the world, and the ways of life that inhabit unconnected territories.

Action steps

Based on the above observations, it is important for civil society to:

- Contest ideas of meaningful connectivity and access that do not centre communities and their needs in this definition. Technology comes second, and the right not to be connected needs to be respected.
- Encourage inclusive community face-to-face dialogues and assessments around community values and needs in order to determine “meaning” that may catalyse connectivity efforts.
- Support efforts where grassroots communities are trying to shape and co-design their connectivity, local service and/or technology proposals. Dialogue and facilitation should empower voices that are usually unheard, especially the voices of women and Indigenous, Black and traditional community members from the global South, and encourage active participation by the community around technology choices, use and adoption.
- Develop safe and open spaces of exchange which allow peers to learn from each other and share their expertise or experiences.
- From these understandings, help to build community-centred connectivity solutions that have embedded meaning for communities.

¹¹ Heeks, R. (2022). Digital inequality beyond the digital divide: conceptualizing adverse digital incorporation in the global South. *Information Technology for Development*. <https://www.ictworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Adverse-Digital-Incorporation.pdf>

Are we missing anyone? Indigenous peoples in the Global Digital Compact and Summit of the Future

Erick Huerta Velázquez

Redes por la Diversidad Equidad y Sustentabilidad AC (REDES)

<https://redesac.org.mx/>

This year is when a new agenda for the states of the world will be set, at the Summit of the Future to be held in New York in September, and based on 12 commitments identified in the document *Our Common Agenda*.¹ These commitments are designed to “accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals” and, as *Our Common Agenda* states, “the choices we make, or fail to make, today could result in further breakdown, or a breakthrough to a greener, better, safer future.”

Commitment 7 suggests a Global Digital Compact (GDC), as an appendix to the Pact for the Future to be adopted at the Summit in New York,² to improve digital cooperation through specific principles, actions and commitments that will be discussed at that Summit.

Regardless of the numerous contributions that Indigenous peoples can bring to the Summit of the Future, the Roadmap for Digital Cooperation and its updates only mention them once³ in a general mention related to gender. No other reference is made to Indigenous peoples, and there has been no process of consultation

with Indigenous peoples in the development of the GDC.

This is unlike the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process, in which the Declaration of Principles established that: “In the evolution of the Information Society, particular attention must be given to the special situation of indigenous peoples, as well as to the preservation of their heritage and their cultural legacy.”⁴

In *Our Common Agenda*, “Commitment 7: Improve digital cooperation” lists seven items which will frame the discussions at the Summit of the Future:

- Connect all people to the internet, including all schools
- Avoid internet fragmentation
- Protect data
- Apply human rights online
- Introduce accountability criteria for discrimination and misleading content
- Promote regulation of artificial intelligence
- Digital commons as a public good.

I will offer some examples on why the input of Indigenous peoples is needed around these commitments, and by extension in the GDC process; otherwise, we run the risk of excluding important advances on the recognition of their communication rights, and restrain the application of Indigenous values and thinking around technological development.

Connect all people to the internet: According to Article 16 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, they have the right to own, manage and operate their own media. So, “connecting them to the internet” is far from accomplishing this right.

1 United Nations. (2021). *Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary General*. https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf

2 <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future>

3 “This gender gap has been growing rather than narrowing, standing at 17 per cent in 2019, and was even larger in the least developed countries, at 43 per cent. Similar challenges affect migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons, older persons, young people, children, persons with disabilities, rural populations and *indigenous peoples* [emphasis added].” United Nations. (2020). *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation*. https://www.un.org/techenvoy/sites/www.un.org.techenvoy/files/general/Roadmap_for_Digital_Cooperation_9June.pdf

4 <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>

When we talk about connectivity in Indigenous communities, states should consider establishing the necessary conditions that allow them to develop their own connectivity solutions, for example, by setting up community-led access networks, acknowledging their right to run and operate their own media.

Also, it is important to consider that Indigenous peoples have the right to choose their own development and therefore they can choose to remain unconnected or partially connected.⁵

Protect data and Promote regulation of artificial intelligence: In recent years, the principle of data sovereignty has been claimed by Indigenous peoples as part of their rights to territory. This claim is related to how they govern and protect their knowledge, how they share their artwork, and how they manage their cultural heritage.

The way they manage their knowledge and cultural heritage often encounters opposition to frameworks that establish property rights (copyright) but also to the ones that look for the open sharing of data.

Some attempts like the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance⁶ have been proposed around this matter, but as some Indigenous activists say, “Data is the last frontier of colonization.”⁷

Digital commons as a public good: What many of us call the “governance of commons” is already a well-developed idea in Indigenous communities.⁸ This way of organising in their territories has passed to the virtual space and to their media, where they reproduce their way of life. From community radios, to community telecommunications networks, digital archives and mapping tools, Indigenous peoples are innovating in presenting alternatives to govern digital commons.

As we can see in these three examples, Indigenous peoples’ input into both the GDC and the Pact for the Future is essential – and it is necessary according to WSIS Declaration of Principles.

We urgently need to incorporate the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous peoples in these processes if we seriously want to take action towards a better future for all.

5 For more on the right to be disconnected, see: Prudencio, K., & Bloom, P. (2021, 8 June). Keeping it Analog: A framework for opting out of connectivity. *Rhizomatica*. <https://www.rhizomatica.org/keeping-it-analog-a-framework-for-opting-out-of-connectivity>

6 The acronym CARE stands for Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility and Ethics. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CARE_Principles_for_Indigenous_Data_Governance

7 Hao, K. (2022, 22 April). A new vision of artificial intelligence for the people. *MIT Technology Review*. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/04/22/1050394/artificial-intelligence-for-the-people/>

8 Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons*. Cambridge University Press.

Free, prior and informed consent: Accountability, environmental justice and the rights of Indigenous peoples in the information society

shawna finnegan

APC

www.apc.org

In the 20 years that have passed since the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), our planet has experienced a massive expansion of digital infrastructure, the greatest benefits of which have been claimed by big corporations and governments in the global North. Multistakeholder processes like the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) have been critical to bring government and corporate actors into conversation with individuals and communities that are being impacted by digitalisation and the corporate capture of “public infrastructure”.

Despite the progress made towards greater transparency and accountability for internet governance, the WSIS Action Lines towards “a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society” have been undermined by the dominance of “market-based solutions” that consistently violate human rights standards and commitments. The most powerful and influential actors in the field of internet governance have influenced policy to benefit their own agendas while promoting themselves as leaders for “sustainable development” – hiding behind vague statements, buzzwords and jargon in order to avoid real accountability for harm.

The future of internet governance must be grounded in agreed standards, commitments and processes that uplift and uphold environmental justice and the rights of Indigenous peoples. It is critical that efforts to reclaim a people-centred information society are grounded in commitments to the free, prior

and informed consent of Indigenous peoples and communities impacted by digitalisation.

Upholding the rights of Indigenous peoples

Free, prior and informed consent is foundational to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which has been adopted by more than 140 countries since it was passed as a legally non-binding resolution in 2007.¹ Upholding the free and informed consent of Indigenous peoples has also been codified in a legally binding convention of the International Labour Organization (ILO); however, only 24 countries have ratified the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention since it was adopted by the General Conference of the ILO in 1989.²

In April 2023, at the UN Forum on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in New York, UN Special Rapporteur Francisco Calí Tzay identified so-called “clean energy” projects as an urgent threat, echoing concerns raised by many delegates at the forum of the rise of “green colonialism” that violates the rights of Indigenous peoples and threatens their land tenure, management and knowledge.³

In September 2023, Oxfam released the results of an assessment of the publicly available policies of 43 companies engaged in the exploration and production of minerals used in rechargeable batteries, focusing on

1 <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/indigenous-peoples/historical-overview>

2 https://webapps.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C169

3 Sax, S. (2023, 21 April). Scramble for clean energy metals confronted by activist calls to respect Indigenous rights. *Mongabay*. <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/04/scramble-for-clean-energy-minerals-confronted-by-calls-to-respect-indigenous-rights>

policies and commitments to community consultation and consent processes.⁴ Of the 43 companies assessed by Oxfam, only two companies made clear and unequivocal commitments to the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous peoples. Oxfam's recommendations parallel those made at the UN forum in April 2023, that is, the need to create binding policies and guidelines requiring the free, prior and informed consent of communities for clean energy mining projects.

Planetary boundaries and access to justice: Principles for environmental governance

In 2023, APC and the Latin American Terraforming Institute convened conversations among our networks to define principles for environmental justice and sustainable development for a submission to the Global Digital Compact.⁵ These conversations highlighted two intersecting principles that align with the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992):⁶

1. Respect planetary boundaries and the rights of nature in the design, production and deployment of digital technologies.
2. Ensure meaningful access to information, participation in decision making, and access to justice for environmental rights and the rights of nature.

These principles complement existing standards and commitments by governments

and corporations to ensure the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous peoples, and underscore the need for accountability mechanisms that cross-cut decision-making processes for environmental and internet governance, and meaningfully facilitate access to justice.

Environmental standards and commitments to free, prior and informed consent offer grounded responses to ideologies of infinite growth that yield high profit for some and devastating consequences for many. The free, prior and informed consent of communities is only possible when we are able to ensure meaningful access to information and participation in decision making, and when we understand that planetary boundaries exist, and no amount of profit will protect us from crossing those boundaries.

Conclusion

When we reflect on the shifting landscape of digitalisation and connectivity, and the promotion of technology-based “solutions”, it is critical that we learn from the mistakes of the past decades. We must be suspicious of buzzwords like “smart cities” and learn from the experiences and activism of environmental defenders and advocates working against “carbon offsets” and other market-based systems that seek to commodify our planet and all public goods.⁷

In order to achieve “a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society”, progress must be assessed through updating, expanding and connecting the implementation of the WSIS Action Plan with the commitments made by governments and corporations towards environmental justice and Indigenous peoples, which cross-cut UN bodies and regional, national and local mechanisms of accountability.

4 Sellwood, S., Hirschel-Burns, T., & Hodgkins, C. (2023). *Recharging Community Consent: Mining companies, battery minerals, and the battle to break from the past*. Oxfam. <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/research-publications/recharging-community-consent>

5 APC and others. (2023). *Joint submission to the Global Digital Compact on Earth justice and sustainable development*. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/joint-submission-global-digital-compact-earth-justice-and-sustainable-development>

6 In 1992, following the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), more than 175 countries signed on to the Rio Declaration of 27 principles for sustainable development. These principles informed and lay groundwork for many existing global and regional environmental governance mechanisms, including the precautionary principle which states: “Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.”

7 A “public good” refers to something that is of benefit to society as a whole, with minimal or no barriers for different people to benefit from that good. Source: <https://www.apc.org/en/apcs-2024-2027-strategic-plan>

Gender in global digital discussions: A timeline

Paula Martins

APC

www.apc.org

For women and gender-diverse people, digital technologies, in particular information and communications technologies (ICTs), may be an important tool to overcome barriers to freedom of expression, and to build their economic agency and political representation. However, inequalities that women face in terms of economic power, education and access to resources also affect their participation in shaping the development and use of digital technologies, and in debates and policy-making processes at the national and global levels.

While these challenges remain, through sustained activism, gender has played a growing and more prominent role in the global digital discussions. This report seeks to provide an overview of the normative progress in this regard.

The initial section will look at how gender has slowly achieved a more prominent role in policy discussions taking place at the United Nations (UN), in particular in internet governance, human rights, cybersecurity and cybercrime processes; that is to say, core digital policy spaces and processes.

The following section does the reverse: mapping how technology incrementally gained prominence in core gender policy spaces and processes.

Advances made on these two fronts have been, of course, parallel and reinforcing – the division proposed is, in a way, artificial. But the groups, activists, UN agencies and state representatives acting in these spaces too often are not the same.

The final sections of this report bring the historical account to present debates, especially in relation to the Global Digital Compact (GDC). In the case of both the GDC and the WSIS+20 negotiations, this report seeks to argue for (i) the importance of recognising, and building and expanding on historical struggles that led to slow

legal recognition of the relationship between tech and gender, and (ii) the need to create increased interaction, synergy and collaboration between digital rights and gender rights civil society organisations, activists and researchers.

This report is in effect a policy paper that focuses on normative developments in the past 30 years. Policy developments, however, are only possible as a result of significant research, movement building and other types of advocacy and activism that can never be fully reflected in dry accounts of global negotiations and what takes place in UN corridors. Nothing that is described below could be achieved without the relentless activities of women in all their diversity fighting for their rights, on the ground, in diverse contexts across the globe. Nothing that is described below is exempt of the power relations and dynamics characteristic of global politics, and the exclusion and selectivity that results from it.

Gender in tech: An agenda still under construction

At the global level, the Fourth Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, is considered a defining moment in the discussions concerning the relationship between gender and technology. Information technology was seen for the first time as a powerful tool that women could use for mobilisation, information exchange and empowerment. Substantive issues relating to women and ICTs, however, despite being debated, were still somewhat on the margins of the core agenda.

In the years following Beijing, international awareness around this gender agenda started to grow – women’s participation in the regional and global preparations for the Beijing meeting also helped build a network of women concerned about gender and ICT issues and policies.¹

¹ Primo, N. (2003). *Gender Issues in the Information Society*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf000132967>

Five years later, in the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing+5, June 2000), effective use of ICTs emerged as one of the major challenges to be addressed in promoting women's advancement. In July 2000, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) signed a memorandum of understanding to collaborate on developing gender-responsive approaches to telecommunications and ICT policy development.

In March 2002, the World Telecommunication Development Conference agreed on the establishment of a gender unit within the Telecommunication Development Sector (ITU-D), the mainstreaming of gender issues throughout the organisation's work, and the conversion of its Task Force on Gender Issues into a permanent Working Group of the ITU-D. The conference also urged the inclusion of a gender perspective in the themes and work of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

At UNESCO, one of the key programming areas at that point was Women and the Media, under which it launched two special projects in 1996: "Women Working on the Net" and "Women Speaking to Women: Women's rural community radio in least developed countries". Through the Women in the Media programme, the organisation sought to assist member states in developing their communication, information and informatics capacities in practical and policy terms.

All these efforts provided critical background experiences and knowledge when the discussions around the first WSIS began in 2002.

At the first regional preparatory meeting of the WSIS process, held in Bamako, Mali in July 2002, a group of about 12 organisations who attended the meeting responded to an invitation by UNIFEM to contribute to ensuring that gender dimensions were included in the process of defining and creating the global information society.²

This group was multistakeholder, including women from government, private telecommunications services providers, women located in UN agencies, as well as women in NGOs

and other civil society bodies. These organisations and representatives came together as the founders of what was set to become a global WSIS Gender Caucus, intent on advocating for the inclusion of gender concerns during the preparatory processes and WSIS summits, as well as in the outputs of these processes.

At the first global WSIS Preparatory Conference held in Geneva in July 2002, women's groups active in gender and the ICT field argued for the need for a separate but parallel gender caucus to make sure the particular concerns of the gender and ICT activists located in NGOs were well represented, both within the multistakeholder gender caucus and the broader WSIS civil society structure caucus. This group, the NGO Gender Strategies Working Group, developed *The "Seven Musts": Priority Issues for Gender Equality in the WSIS Process*, at the second WSIS Preparatory Conferences held in February 2003.³

The Seven Musts set out some broad principles that should underpin the WSIS deliberations if they were to include women and their gender concerns successfully:

- *An intersectional approach* that takes account of the diverse needs of women located in different geo-political, historical, class-based, racial, ethnic and other contexts.
- The need to *build on global consensus and reaffirm commitments made at previous UN conferences and summits*, in particular the World Conferences on Women in Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995, as well as those focused on the rights of the child, on environment and development, human rights, and population and social development.
- *People-centred development* that embraces the principles of social justice and gender equality by addressing the needs of women and starting a process of redressing fundamental economic and socio-cultural gaps.
- *Respect for diversity* that also recognises the role and importance of traditional and Indigenous forms of media and communications, rather than a singular focus on digital technologies. The diversity of needs should be reflected in a diversity of solutions and strategies.

² See the key recommendations of the WSIS Gender Caucus meeting in Bamako here: https://web.archive.org/web/20050817233921/http://www.genderwsis.org/uploads/media/KeyRecommendations_GenderCaucus.pdf

³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20050419010148/http://ngo-wsis.genderit.org/csw/musthaves.htm>

- *Peace and human development* where ICTs are harnessed in the service of peace and in opposition to wars.
- *A human rights framework*, meaning that instruments that ensure human rights for women, together with fundamental communication rights – such as freedom of expression, the right to information, and the right to communicate – should be reiterated in the final outcomes of the WSIS processes and summits.
- *Supporting local solutions*, given that the framework for ICT infrastructure development was seen as too focused on creating regulatory and fiscal incentives for investment in the global South by corporations based in developed countries. There was an urgent need to also encourage local low-cost and open-source solutions as well as South-South exchanges, and to encourage local content producers through public funding to support the prevention of “content dumping” from large entertainment corporations in the North.

APC was an initiating member of the WSIS NGO Gender Strategies Working Group and a member of the WSIS Gender Caucus. The networks formed and meetings held, especially at the regional level, motivated feminist activists in different fields to come together and discuss the relationship between ICTs and their work.⁴ Engagement continued from 2002 to 2005.

Despite all the advocacy efforts, at the end of the WSIS process in 2005, Jac sm Kee, then part of APC’s Women’s Rights Programme, concluded:

In terms of official documents produced, after a LOT of resources, effort and time spent [on] gathering information, sleepless nights, many cups of coffee and sticks of cigarettes (for some), talking, training, skills sharing, lobbying and writing, gender has a few specific mentions.⁵

The WSIS process was divided into two phases: Phase 1 in Geneva, Phase 2 in Tunis.⁶ Four outcome documents were adopted – the Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action, and the Tunis Commitment and Agenda. The objective of the first phase was to develop and foster a clear statement of political will and take concrete steps to establish the foundations for an “Information Society” for all, reflecting different interests at stake. The second phase aimed at putting the Geneva Plan of Action into motion as well as finding solutions and reaching agreements in the fields of internet governance and financing mechanisms, and following up on the implementation of the Geneva and Tunis documents.

The Geneva Declaration of Principles of 2003 refers to the challenge posed for the information society to harness the potential of ICTs to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, and affirms:

[The] development of ICTs provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of, and key actors, in the Information Society. We are committed to ensuring that the Information Society enables women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis on equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes. To this end, we should mainstream a gender equality perspective and use ICTs as a tool to that end.⁷

The accompanying Plan of Action established 11 Action Lines. Gender appears under three of the lines (C4, C7 and C8) which refer to equal access to ICT training and education; the adoption of gender equality principles for e-workers and e-employers; the strengthening of programmes focused on gender-sensitive curricula in formal and non-formal education for all; and enhancing communication and media literacy for women.

The Tunis documents were more focused on addressing the digital divide, including through the development of indicators, and promoting women’s participation in decision making.

4 Kee, J. (2005, 7 December). Mirror image: Part IV - What about gender? *GenderIT.org*. <https://genderit.org/index.php/feminist-talk/mirror-image-part-iv-what-about-gender>

5 APC. (2005, 17 November). Overview of gender-related language in WSIS documents. <https://www.apc.org/en/blog/overview-gender-related-language-wsis-documents>

6 UN General Assembly Resolution 56/183 (21 December 2001) endorsed the holding of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in two phases.

7 <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>

2003 documents – Geneva	
Geneva Declaration of Principles	<p>2. Our challenge is to harness the potential of information and communication technology to promote the development goals of the Millennium Declaration, namely the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; achievement of universal primary education; promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women; reduction of child mortality; improvement of maternal health; to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and development of global partnerships for development for the attainment of a more peaceful, just and prosperous world. We also reiterate our commitment to the achievement of sustainable development and agreed development goals, as contained in the Johannesburg Declaration and Plan of Implementation and the Monterrey Consensus, and other outcomes of relevant United Nations Summits.</p> <p>12. We affirm that development of ICTs provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of, and key actors, in the Information Society. We are committed to ensuring that the Information Society enables women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis on equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes. To this end, we should mainstream a gender equality perspective and use ICTs as a tool to that end.</p>
Geneva Plan of Action	<p>C4. Capacity building</p> <p>11. Everyone should have the necessary skills to benefit fully from the Information Society. Therefore capacity building and ICT literacy are essential. ICTs can contribute to achieving universal education worldwide, through delivery of education and training of teachers, and offering improved conditions for lifelong learning, encompassing people that are outside the formal education process, and improving professional skills.</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">a. Develop domestic policies to ensure that ICTs are fully integrated in education and training at all levels, including in curriculum development, teacher training, institutional administration and management, and in support of the concept of lifelong learning. [...]</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">g. Work on removing the gender barriers to ICT education and training and promoting equal training opportunities in ICT-related fields for women and girls. Early intervention programmes in science and technology should target young girls with the aim of increasing the number of women in ICT careers. Promote the exchange of best practices on the integration of gender perspectives in ICT education.</p> <p>C7. ICT applications: benefits in all aspects of life</p> <p>14. ICT applications can support sustainable development, in the fields of public administration, business, education and training, health, employment, environment, agriculture and science within the framework of national e-strategies. This would include actions within the following sectors: [...]</p> <p>19. E-employment:</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">a. Encourage the development of best practices for e-workers and e-employers built, at the national level, on principles of fairness and gender equality, respecting all relevant international norms.</p> <p>C8. Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content</p> <p>23. Cultural and linguistic diversity, while stimulating respect for cultural identity, traditions and religions, is essential to the development of an Information Society based on the dialogue among cultures and regional and international cooperation. It is an important factor for sustainable development. [...]</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">h. Strengthen programmes focused on gender-sensitive curricula in formal and non-formal education for all and enhancing communication and media literacy for women with a view to building the capacity of girls and women to understand and to develop ICT content.</p>

2005 documents – Tunis	
Tunis Commitment	23. We recognize that a gender divide exists as part of the digital divide in society and we reaffirm our commitment to women’s empowerment and to a gender equality perspective, so that we can overcome this divide. We further acknowledge that the full participation of women in the Information Society is necessary to ensure the inclusiveness and respect for human rights within the Information Society. We encourage all stakeholders to support women’s participation in decision-making processes and to contribute to shaping all spheres of the Information Society at international, regional and national levels.
Tunis Agenda	114. The development of ICT indicators is important for measuring the digital divide. We note the launch, in June 2004, of the Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development, and its efforts: [...] d. to develop specific gender-disaggregated indicators to measure the digital divide in its various dimensions.

Progress towards these commitments has been monitored since 2005 (as per paragraphs 109 and 110 of the Tunis Agenda) through the WSIS Forum.⁸ The Tunis Agenda also created another space (as per paragraph 72), the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), as a forum for multistakeholder policy dialogue. In both these spaces, gender discussions expanded slowly (for example, through the integration of gender in the IGF’s Best Practices Forums and Dynamic Coalitions), in particular from 2015 onwards, with the linking of the WSIS Action Lines with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁹ Both the WSIS Forum and the IGF will continue to be held annually until 2025.

In 2015, a review of the implementation of the outcomes of WSIS (WSIS+10) was held by the UN General Assembly. After preparatory and negotiation meetings, the General Assembly adopted Resolution A/70/125 calling for close alignment between the WSIS process and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It highlighted the crosscutting contribution of ICTs to the SDGs and poverty eradication, noting that access to ICTs had also become a development indicator and aspiration in and of itself.

The 2015 WSIS+10 Resolution was organised under four thematic sections, addressing:

- ICTs for development
- Human rights in the information society

- Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs
- Internet governance.

Gender, however, only explicitly appears in the section on ICTs for development, under a subsection on bridging the digital divides. In this subsection, the resolution recognises that ending the gender digital divide and the achievement of SDG 5 on gender are mutually reinforcing efforts. States commit to mainstreaming gender in the WSIS process, including through a new emphasis on gender in the implementation and monitoring of the action lines, with the support of relevant UN agencies, such as the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, better known as UN Women.

Despite the silence in other sections of the WSIS+10 Resolution, gender has been gaining increasing attention in spaces discussing human rights, as well as cybersecurity and cybercrime.

Human rights discussions at the global level have been centred around the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), and its predecessor the Human Rights Commission, its Special Procedures, Treaty Bodies, and the work of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. In this realm, important highlights are the 2018 report by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, which discusses the causes and consequences of online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective;¹⁰ the 2019 report by the Special Rapporteur on the

8 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=30022&nr=102&menu=3170>

9 <https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/sdg>

10 A/HRC/38/47

right to privacy, on privacy and technology from a gender perspective;¹¹ the 2019 report by the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, on integrating a gender perspective in implementing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), which provide, under Principle 13, that business enterprises should ensure that new technologies such as artificial intelligence and automation do not have disproportionate adverse impacts on women’s human rights;¹² the 2020 and 2022 reports by the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, on women’s human rights in the changing world of work, which focuses on technological change and on girls’ and young women’s activism, addressing offline and online harassment and violence;¹³ and the 2021 and 2022 reports on freedom of expression and gender justice and on gendered disinformation by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression.¹⁴

In 2018, the HRC also adopted a specific resolution on preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts. It recognises growing trends in this regard, in particular discrimination, violence, intimidation or threats, harassment, stalking, bullying, arbitrary or unlawful surveillance and tracking, trafficking in persons, extortion, censorship, and the hacking of accounts or devices.¹⁵ Other relevant HRC resolutions include those dedicated to the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet;¹⁶ one on freedom of expression;¹⁷ another on freedom of assembly and association;¹⁸ and one on privacy,¹⁹ in their more recent iterations. More recent General Assembly and HRC resolutions also express concern with the gender dimensions of online disinformation campaigns.²⁰

The HRC has emphasised the need to ensure women’s participation in the development of technology, its implementation and its governance.²¹ The need for gender impact

assessments of digital policies has also been stressed.²²

Many cybersecurity threats are experienced differently by women and girls, men and boys, and people of non-binary gender identities.²³ This has also been a key discussion that organisations and activists seek to see recognised in global cybersecurity discussions.²⁴

Important work has been carried out by the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights’ B-Tech Project in relation to the application of the UNGPs²⁵ in the tech sector. The B-Tech Project is, at the time of the drafting of this report, conducting efforts to provide guidance on the application of the UNGPs from a gender perspective. Applying the UNGPs framework in relation to the impact of technologies on women and girls can possibly assist in the identification of strategies to prevent risks and threats.

At the UN General Assembly’s First Committee, two processes – the UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) and the Open-ended Working Group (OEWG) – have been exploring the question of responsible state behaviour in cyberspace since 2018.

The GGE has produced 13 norms, rules and principles for the responsible behaviour of states,²⁶ where a specific mention of human rights has been included. The accompanying explainer further details this specific provision, referring more broadly to differentiated impacts on specific groups, especially those in vulnerable situations, and then explicitly stating that the “[o]bservance of this norm can also contribute to promoting non-discrimination and narrowing the digital divide, including with regard to gender.”

On 31 December 2020, the General Assembly adopted resolution 75/240 which established an Open-ended Working Group on ICT security (OEWG). The working group is expected to publish a final report in 2025. A previous resolution²⁷ had established a process which started in 2019 and culminated in a report published in 2021.²⁸ The

11 A/HRC/40/63

12 A/HRC/41/43

13 A/HRC/50/25

14 A/76/258 and A/78/288

15 A/HRC/RES/38/5

16 A/HRC/RES/38/7

17 A/HRC/RES/50/15

18 A/HRC/RES/50/17

19 A/HRC/RES/48/4

20 A/RES/76/227 and A/HRC/RES/49/21, respectively.

21 A/HRC/RES/38/5

22 Ibid.

23 APC. (2023). *APC policy explainer: What is a gender approach to cybersecurity?* <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/apc-policy-explainer-what-gender-approach-cybersecurity>

24 <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/framework-gender-cybersec>

25 https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Business/Intro_Guiding_PrinciplesBusinessHR.pdf

26 A/76/135

27 A/73/27

28 OEWG. (2021). *Final Substantive Report*. <https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Final-report-A-AC.290-2021-CRP.2.pdf>

report’s introduction highlights the importance of reducing the “gender digital divide” and promotes the effective and meaningful participation and leadership of women in decision-making processes related to the use of ICTs in the context of international security. Its conclusions and recommendations affirm that a threat may be experienced differently and have different impacts on different entities and groups, including women. When stressing the relevance of capacity-building measures, it concludes that these should respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, and be gender-sensitive, inclusive, universal and non-discriminatory. The hope is that the upcoming report to be released in 2025 will expand on these provisions.

Gender concerns have been raised in relation to setting norms and standards for combatting cybercrime, since they may be used as tools to legitimise the surveillance and censorship of historically excluded groups, and may heighten pre-existing structural inequalities.²⁹ In 2020, the General Assembly, through its Resolution 74/247, established an open-ended ad hoc intergovernmental committee of experts to elaborate a comprehensive international convention on countering the use of ICTs for criminal purposes. A lack of a proper gender lens throughout the negotiation process was a major concern for groups such as APC and its member Derechos Digitales.³⁰ The lack of proper human rights safeguards and the expansive nature of the criminal provisions were also considered a risk. After two years of negotiations, state representatives gathered in New York in 2024 for the concluding session of the ad hoc committee. Despite the many meetings which preceded it, fundamental disagreements among states led to the postponement of the decision about the need for a new treaty and its reach.³¹

Tech in gender: Slow progress

As mentioned above, the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were critical documents at the global level addressing the impact of technology on women and girls. While the previous section paid attention to how gender concerns

were gradually foregrounded in digital governance and human rights spaces, this section will look at developments within gender-specific spaces, such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action accounted for the role of technology across – as a 2022 paper published by UN Women put it – various critical “areas of concern and recognized that it is essential that women not only benefit from technology, but also participate in the process of developing it, from design to application, monitoring and evaluation.”³² However, the paper also notes:

The Platform for Action frames technology issues from an education, employment and communication perspective. This focus is no longer reflective of the breadth of gender equality challenges and opportunities that the technological evolution has triggered since 1995.³³

Beijing+25 had nevertheless further elaborated on the need for gender-led technological innovation and women’s participation in the tech sector.³⁴

Since Beijing in 1995, most developments to do with technology and gender have been observed at CSW sessions. In 2003 and 2017, specific provisions were included in its agreed conclusions and, after that, recurrent references have been reinforced and amplified. These have addressed issues such as online gender-based violence, including the need to establish comprehensive multisectoral services, programmes and responses that are adequately resourced; building the capacity of public officials in executive, legislative and judicial branches of government to adopt enhanced prevention measures; and the misuse of ICTs for sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and trafficking in women and girls. The 67th session held in 2023 was the first since the creation of the CSW in 1946 to have a specific focus on gender equality and digital technologies (the session was titled “Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls”).³⁵

Before and during the session, APC stressed that the empowerment of women and girls cannot

29 APC. (2024). *APC policy explainer: Cybercrime and gender*. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/policyexplainer_cybercrimegender.pdf

30 APC. (2023). *When protection becomes an excuse for criminalisation: Gender considerations on cybercrime frameworks*. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/gender_considerations_on_cybercrime_o.pdf

31 <https://www.eff.org/issues/un-cybercrime-treaty>

32 Lee, J. (2022). *Normative frameworks on gender perspectives in technology and innovation*. UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/Normative%20frameworks%20on%20gender%20perspectives%20in%20technology%20and%20innovation.pdf>

33 Ibid.

34 E/CN.6/2020/3

35 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw67-2023>

be fulfilled if it does not include the full realisation of human rights, participation, security and the well-being of women and girls in all their diversity. APC further emphasised that historically unequal power relations between men and women and systemic gender-based discrimination must be recognised for broader, effective societal change. Other priority issues included freedom of expression, online gender-based violence, and bridging the gender digital divide.

CSW67's agreed conclusions³⁶ strengthened the integration of a gender perspective in the global normative frameworks for technology and innovation. This includes the renewal of a global commitment to achieving inclusive gender equality, despite significant pushback on fundamental issues in this agenda. Hivos has usefully summarised some of key gains in the agreed conclusions, and some highlights of its summary are quoted verbatim here:

We are encouraged to see progress made in this year's agreed conclusions in recognizing:

- The need to ensure that human rights are promoted, respected, and fulfilled in the conception, design, development, deployment, evaluation, and regulation of technologies and to ensure that they are subject to adequate safeguards in order to promote an open, secure, stable, and accessible and affordable information and communications technology environment for all women and girls.
- Strong focus on policy actions for the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence, including gender-based violence that occurs through or is amplified by the use of technologies, with particular emphasis on victims and survivors-centered approaches.
- The potential of technology to promote women's and girls' human rights, but also to perpetuate gender stereotypes and negative social norms, amplified and perpetuated through digital tools as well as gender bias in technology, including artificial intelligence.
- The critical role digital platforms can play as spaces where all women can advocate, mobilize and participate fully, equally, and meaningfully in public life.

- The importance of labor rights in addressing the challenges of technological change in the world of work. The conclusions also recognize the importance of addressing occupational segregation and the reality that women are more likely to lose jobs because of automation and digitalization. These barriers to women's economic justice have not been adequately addressed in previous CSWs.
- The addition of 'non-consensual' when speaking of outlawing the sharing of sexual or otherwise explicit materials, which reflects the rights of sex workers while safeguarding victims of deep fakes or sextortion, both examples of gender-based violence facilitated by the use of technology, specific to the priority theme of this year's CSW.

Furthermore, the agreed conclusions also acknowledged:

- That multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalization are obstacles to the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age.
- The important role of digital health including digital health technologies, digital tools, telemedicine and mobile health for ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, as well as the need to protect personal information.
- That there is a pressing need to address the major impediments that developing countries and small island developing states face in accessing and using new technologies, stressing the need to close the digital divides, both between and within countries, including the rural-urban, youth-older persons and gender digital divides.³⁷

These provisions represent important, positive developments. However, other issues such as those pertaining to the protection of LGBTQIA+ people's rights online, as well as those concerning the environmental impact of technological progress (and

³⁶ <https://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?OpenAgent&DS=E/CN.6/2023/L.3&Lang=E>

³⁷ Hivos. (2023, 23 March). UN Commission on the Status of Women closes with renewed commitment to gender equality. <https://hivos.org/un-commission-on-the-status-of-women-closes-with-renewed-commitment-to-gender-equality>

its gendered effects), did not make it into the final draft, despite advocacy by different gender groups.

Another concern has been the diversity of participation in the CSW, as in other gender and digital global governance spaces. As highlighted by Whose Knowledge?, the Numun Fund and APC:

CSW67 convened organisations from different parts of the world but continued to carry many contradictions and power imbalances present on its global stage. Being held in the United States, the CSW brings together those who manage to obtain a visa and navigate the strict entry policies of the US, as well as access the funding necessary to join the discussions and participate in person. This affects many under-resourced collectives in the Larger World, especially those that suffer the harshest consequences of multiple/intersecting systems of oppression and injustice.³⁸

The Global Digital Compact

In September 2021, responding to a request from the General Assembly in a 75th session declaration,³⁹ the Secretary-General released his *Our Common Agenda* report.⁴⁰ In *Our Common Agenda*, he proposes a Global Digital Compact (GDC) to be agreed at the Summit of the Future in September 2024 through a technology track involving all stakeholders.

The preparatory work around the GDC has been considered confusing and obscure, with civil society groups calling for increased clarity in relation to both the process that would lead to the adoption of the GDC, as well as its expected content.

Taking advantage of the momentum created around CSW67, a coalition of civil society organisations joined forces to raise gender concerns as a central element of the GDC, calling for feminist principles to guide the negotiations and drafting efforts. APC is a founding and leading member of this coalition. Discussions organised to map expectations in relation to the GDC and the Feminist Principles for Including Gender in the Global Digital Compact⁴¹ were launched in Kyoto, Japan, in 2023 during the 18th annual meeting of the IGF.

The coalition has also been calling for a stand-alone principle on gender to be included in the GDC text.

Conclusion and action steps

At the time of the drafting of this report, the zero draft of the GDC has just been released. An important victory has been the inclusion of the stand-alone principle on gender. However, an initial assessment of the document shows it has not properly mainstreamed the principle through specific gender provisions in other sections of the draft, particularly those referring to artificial intelligence, data governance and the digital economy. The upcoming months will be critical to achieve a GDC that ensures that the governance, development and use of technology are inclusive and benefit women and girls and gender-diverse people around the world.

APC and other civil society groups have also called for the GDC to build on and promote concrete links with existing global processes that deal with the internet and digital technologies, and not to put at risk historical gains in these processes, including in the realm of gender and human rights.

One of these is WSIS. Mobilisation around the WSIS review will need further collaboration between gender and digital rights groups, ensuring that global digital governance expands into a truly representative multistakeholder process. The feminist principles created for the GDC will also provide a gender framework for debate in the review.

In the face of the past 30 years of digital transformation, we find ourselves at a critical moment. With the GDC and the WSIS+20 review, we have concrete opportunities to shape and co-create a digital space that is inclusive and safe for all, but in particular for those who have been pushed to the margins, and will continue to be if we do not approach digital governance with the goal of increasing people's agency and autonomy, rights and capabilities. At least the following should be priorities for civil society organisations:

- Ensure that the key historical gains with respect to gender rights that have been articulated in this report are properly represented, reinforced and, possibly, expanded in the GDC and in the WSIS+20 review.
- Adopt an intersectional approach that recognises the reinforcing layers of discrimination and inequality that affect women and gender-diverse people's relationship with digital technologies, intensifying risks and harms and disproportionately allocating benefits.

38 Whose Knowledge? (2023, 30 March). Protest+power: centering feminist technology at CSW67. <https://whoseknowledge.org/centering-feminist-technology-csw67>

39 A/RES/75/1

40 <https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report>

41 https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/feminist_principles-gdc-september2023.pdf

- Form coalitions and alliances with feminist organisations, or digital rights organisations focusing on gender and sexual rights, to amplify the voice of gender rights actors in these processes and discussions.
- Be careful of a token representation of gender and sexual rights concerns in documents emerging from these discussions, in particular outcomes that do not reflect a systemic gender analysis across all aspects of digital technologies, including their production, use and governance.
- Use the Feminist Principles for Including Gender in the Global Digital Compact as a tool to assess and evaluate draft documents that emerge from these processes from a gender perspective.

The Feminist Principles for Including Gender in the Global Digital Compact

Each of these principles includes important explanatory text that can be read online.¹

1. Ensure concrete commitments to protect the digital rights of women and girls and marginalised groups

Advance concrete commitments to assure a digital future grounded on existing human rights law and standards for gender-just societies and economies in which States and private sector protect, respect and promote the human rights of women and girls in all their diversity and people facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. This includes recourse for violations of human rights in the digital sphere, and the adoption of an intersectional approach when interpreting human rights that considers gender alongside race, class, caste, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, (dis)ability and any other relevant factor, so as to address any gendered discrimination and inequality.

2. Guarantee freedom from technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

Include provisions for States to pass legislation that protects the right to freedom from technology facilitated gender-based violence. This would include measures for prevention and survivor-centred responses including swift and meaningful redress for survivors, safe and ethical technology and

transparent and responsive processes for improving technology in response to technical and social changes. Crucially, States must insist that technology companies practise transparency by disclosing their actions, methods, and motivations, and enforce accountability for their conduct.

3. Promote universal rights to freedom of expression, privacy, peaceful assembly, and participation of women and girls in all their diversity in all aspects of life.

Promote the full realisation of universal rights to freedom of expression and information, to freedom of peaceful assembly and association including the freedom to protest and organise, as well as to full participation in and enjoyment of economic, social, cultural, civil and political life. This includes protection of the right to encryption and online anonymity, and the prohibition of Internet disruptions that do not comply with international human rights standards.

4. Ensure universal, affordable, accessible, and safe internet access for all.

Promote universal, affordable, unconditional, open, meaningful and equal access to the Internet for women and girls in all their diversity and people of diverse genders, including those facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. This includes the right of people with disabilities to receive and impart information and ideas

¹ https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/feminist_principles-gdc-september2023.pdf

through safe, accessible and affordable formats and technologies, as well as the right to create, share and engage with information in their own language.

5. Demand strict action against harmful surveillance applications and high-risk AI systems.

Expressly ban surveillance applications that cannot be operated in compliance with international human rights law and impose moratoriums on the sale and use of AI systems that carry a high risk for the enjoyment of human rights, unless and until adequate safeguards to protect human rights are in place.

6. Expand women's participation and leadership in the technology sector and digital policymaking.

Include measures to increase the participation and representation of women in all their diversity across all levels of the technology sector including in the design, leadership and decision-making processes at national and international levels on digital technology governance, infrastructure planning and regulation, and technology development. These measures should include the promotion and support of women and girls studying and working in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), facilitating women's involvement in democratic processes, and strengthening women's rights movements and young women-led organisations to participate in decision making and policy making processes.

7. Prioritise strategies that reduce the environmental impact of new technologies.

Climate change is a global phenomenon that impacts all people. However, the consequences of climate change are not experienced evenly, and women in developing countries are likely to be disproportionately affected. In light of the pressing contemporary environmental challenges that endanger global populations, particularly women and girls, States must take action to reduce the energy consumption of the Internet and digital technologies and minimise harm from the extraction of natural resources to fuel new technologies.

8. Implement measures for states and transnational corporations to ensure data privacy, governance, and consent.

Include measures for states and transnational corporations to protect the right to privacy and protection and data governance systems to ensure that women and girls in all their diversity are able to exercise full control and provide ongoing and informed consent over their personal data and information online at all levels.

9. Adopt Equality-by-Design principles and a human-rights based approach throughout all phases of digital technology development.

Make sure that a human-rights based approach and Equality-by-design principles,² including transparency and human rights and gender rights impact assessments, are incorporated into the development of any algorithmic decision-making systems or digital technologies prior to deployment. And are not tested without these principles, to prevent discrimination and harmful biases being amplified and/or perpetuated.

10. Re-shape the participation and role of women in accessing and using digital technology [and] address its potential impacts on labour and entrepreneurship.

Safeguards and standards developed in consultation across global civil society, women's rights and feminist organisations, government, and private sector, with those most harmed leading the design, should be adopted to ensure that gender stereotyping and discriminatory biases are not translated into AI systems. This should include, at a minimum, transparency in relation to data sets, their sources and uses, and applied algorithms.

² Equality by Design is an approach to system design which requires and enables the potential equality impacts of an algorithmic system to be identified, assessed and addressed as an integral part of the development process. See: Equal Rights Trust. (2023). *Principles on Equality by Design in Algorithmic Decision-Making*. https://www.equalrightstrust.org/sites/default/files/ertdocs/Principles%20on%20Equality%20by%20Design%20in%20Algorithmic%20Decision%20Making_o.pdf

Preliminary feminist provocations on internet governance and WSIS+20

Namita Aavriti

APC

www.apc.org

For this intervention I have chosen to speak to a few feminists, activists and scholars¹ that engage with internet governance at the national, regional or global level. This is not a comprehensive mapping of the field of those engaging with internet governance from feminist and/or queer political perspectives, though it does point to the value of such a mapping. These were broad and unstructured conversations and interviews around their experiences of internet governance processes so far. How open have they been? How relevant? How effective? How inclusive? What are the feminist priorities? What are the questions that still remain? While many of the conversations focused on the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), the observations have clear implications for WSIS+20, or any other process where a multistakeholder approach to internet governance is promised.

When did the internet grow up?

In the 20 years since the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), one thing that has changed dramatically is the internet itself. In an interview with Jac sm Kee, an activist who set up the Numun Fund as the first dedicated fund for feminist tech,² she pointed out that in 2003 and 2005, when the first meetings of WSIS took place, “the internet was a grey, still-yet-forming nebulous space.” Jia Tolentino’s book on the internet is one of those records of how the internet radically changed and also has changed us over the last two decades. “In 1999, it felt different to spend all day on the internet,” she writes. “This was the You’ve Got Mail

era, when it seemed that the very worst thing that could happen online was that you might fall in love with your business rival.”³ This may not be entirely true, because attempts at control and censorship online as well as accounts of assault are coeval with what we came to know as the internet from the mid-1990s. But what is true is that by 2006, just a year after the second WSIS meeting in Tunis, there were several digital rights and women’s rights groups already having to campaign and work towards policy change that took into account violence and hate speech against women and other groups online.⁴

However, there was a rosy promise of the internet that spread from development to education, from entertainment to the democratisation of information and news, from the digitalisation of governments to the coordination of movements and protests. This was also perhaps what made it possible to imagine that the internet, as Jac says, “could potentially be governed by a different kind of mechanism that allowed for the relative flattening of institutions and stakeholders, and that it could be a mechanism that would make participation in governance accessible.” What is obvious, though, is that the internet is a different beast today, though the need for open, transparent, accessible frameworks of governance and “new forms of solidarity, partnership and cooperation among governments and other stakeholders, i.e. the private sector, civil society and international organizations”⁵ remains.

Alice’s tea party:⁶ Multistakeholderism

A recurring theme in the conversations I had was exhaustion but also a sense of faith in the idea of multistakeholderism. There are those of us who are

1 Conversations with Wala Mohammad, Chenai Chair, Dhyta Caturani, Shubha Kayastha, Jac sm Kee, Ruhya Seward and Mariana Fossatti. Thank you for participating. Additional input was received from Karla Velasco, Erika Smith and Hija Kamran from the APC Women’s Rights Programme.

2 <https://numun.fund>

3 Tolentino, J. (2020). *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*. Random House.

4 <https://www.takebackthetech.net>

5 International Telecommunication Union. (2005). *WSIS Outcome Documents*. <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/outcome/booklet.pdf>

6 Sontag, S. (1994). *Alice in Bed: A play in eight scenes*. Vintage.

tired of the charade of inclusion and being brought to the table to not be heard, or to be misheard. But what is the other option – to not be heard at all?

Dhyta Caturani – an activist from Indonesia – points out that “for small collectives, the IGF was not accessible... It was very rare to have a woman/LGBTQIA+ or minority to speak about their interests on a general issue at the IGF,” she said, adding that it is important to have our perspectives on a wide range of issues heard, like artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, etc.

The objective of participating in WSIS for many civil society organisations was to ensure that international human rights standards were integrated into internet governance in an inclusive way. As stated in the APC input to the most recent IGF held in Kyoto:

The IGF and its associated regional and national forums as well as the intersessional mechanisms (the IGF ecosystem as a whole) has consistently been a space for enabling public participation and learning, monitoring of progress in achieving inclusive, human-rights based, people-centred internet and digital governance, and discussing the positive and negative impacts of the internet and internet policies in a multidisciplinary and multistakeholder setting. The IGF nurtures thinking and practice around the WSIS action lines, including policy responses. The IGF dynamic coalitions on community connectivity and net neutrality, along with the best practice forums on gender and access and on local content, have continued to make significant progress in identifying innovative approaches and practices to help move forward in enabling complementary models of connectivity that address digital exclusion.⁷

But it is not just civil society and international organisations that must be included in multistakeholder discussions and processes. Inclusion means the participation of communities and people who are most affected and vulnerable on account of gender, race, sexuality, caste, their location in cities or rural and remote areas, and Indigenous groups, among others. This is also the missing piece in the recently released zero draft of the Global Digital Compact (GDC),⁸

that nevertheless reiterates the commitment to multistakeholderism.⁹ The necessity of ensuring access for vulnerable communities and of creating openness in internet processes is that, unlike in 2003 and 2005, internet and data governance now impact everyone regardless of what level of access they themselves are at.

The fantasy of being brought to the table to participate equally attempts to flatten the power differential and dynamics at play between technology companies, civil society and international organisations, governments, academics, and other communities. But over the years, the IGF has shown that the needle on the inclusion of women and gender-diverse people has not shifted enough. This is evident from the annual Gender Report Card on the IGF,¹⁰ and also the fact that many actors are dropping out of the space. Chenai Chair, who works on movement building for trustworthy AI, says:

The IGF may be perceived as a “failed space” or a “talk shop” given that there are no policy outcomes and the locations of events have come with concerns of upholding democratic open space. In addition, technology companies and organisations have preferred to go directly to lobbying and legal interventions in the European Union or United States for more effective mechanisms to bring about change.

Nonetheless significant possibilities were opened up because of IGFs, like the visibility of feminists and groups from the global South leading on online gender-based violence (GBV) and harassment, but also on myriad panels, including on digital taxation, access, privacy, etc. DNS Research Foundation mapping found that, among other things, the IGF helped in consolidating a global ecosystem of knowledge sharing.¹¹ Jac suggests that online and technology-facilitated GBV as an issue is particularly important in the context of internet

7 See the comments by APC Internet Governance Lead Valeria Betancourt in the section on “Overarching Issues” here: <https://intgovforum.org/en/content/kyoto-messages>

8 <https://dig.watch/resource/global-digital-compact-zero-draft>

9 The Geneva Declaration of Principles 2003 does do a better job at inclusion. Aside from explicit mention of gender, poverty, Indigenous people, rights of children, etc., the 13th principle states: “In building the Information Society, we shall pay particular attention to the special needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups of society, including migrants, internally displaced persons and refugees, unemployed and underprivileged people, minorities and nomadic people. We shall also recognize the special needs of older persons and persons with disabilities.”

10 Gender Report Card on the IGF. See: <https://genderit.org/tags/gender-report-card> and https://www.intgovforum.org/system/files/filedepot/49/igf_2019_gender_report_cards_overview.pdf

11 Caeiro, C., et al. (2024). *Net Effects: An evidence-led exploration of IGF impact*. DNS Research Federation. <https://dnsrf.org/blog/net-effects--an-evidence-led-exploration-of-igf-impact/index.html>

governance because “it allowed local organisations, especially feminist ones, to enter these spaces.” Shubha Kayastha, who works on digital security and related issues in Nepal, says that their first exposure to feminism in relation to digital rights was at a regional IGF and at a pre-conference on feminism and digital rights organised by APC. Almost everyone I spoke to recalls moments of meeting other feminists or queer people at the IGFs as moments of recognition and solidarity. The expansion of our networks of solidarity across borders has been one of the concrete benefits of the IGF.

Shubha, however, adds a caveat that the experience of being involved at the level of the national IGF in Nepal was disheartening in spite of closer involvement, because it was made to look more participative and inclusive than it was, and often this extended to a kind of tokenism, especially in relation to gender. Organisations, big and small, grapple with how the processes around internet governance might change with the introduction of the GDC and high-level advisory boards (on AI and other issues) that only involve government officials and multilateral partnerships. Mariana Fossatti, who works with Whose Knowledge?,¹² says: “From this corner of the world, I feel overwhelmed.” There is an increasing disarray in the spaces and institutions to go to when there is harm or rights are violated. Is it the IETF, UN, IGF, EU? How do we ensure safeguards and accountability?

Feminist thematic priorities

There are of course thematic priorities that will remain hugely relevant regardless of how governance takes place or how we are (or are not) included, and these include the following:

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is an important thematic priority for women’s rights, gender and sexuality organisations, and increasingly so as disinformation and violence online impact those who are already marginalised, and also those who are journalists, activists, or simply outspoken and public. Wala Mohammad, who works with the Hopes and Actions Foundation¹³ and has done research in Sudan, says that disinformation often forms public opinion, and that the prevalence of hate speech and trolling has a major impact on communities and in relation to how they are perceived by those with

power. Gendered disinformation, including virulent homophobia, often plays a role in national politics and elections¹⁴ and also in a dehumanisation that paves the way for genocide and atrocities.¹⁵ Ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexuality and sexual expression, caste, religion, political views and other factors all play a role in violence online faced by women and gender-diverse people.

TFGBV has been a vehicle for the participation of local organisations and feminist collectives in conversations around violence and safety online, privacy, data governance, anonymity, encryption, political expression, sexuality and sexual expression, movements online, and so on. But Chenai warns against the co-optation of feminist perspectives and issues, including TFGBV, without a clear understanding of the complexities. It is undeniably an imperative to address this violence so that the foundations of the internet are not discriminatory or do not exclude women or those who are marginal and vulnerable; though the question remains as to whether we are too late for that. “Technology companies want to be the first actor, but what is imperative for them is their business model, and this costs great harm to those who face discrimination,” says Jac.

Meaningful access and connectivity are also key themes, and bridging the gender digital divide is a main priority. Mariana, whose work with Whose Knowledge? is about decolonising the internet, says that concerns around access to the internet and information/knowledge need to be framed with reference to current realities and take into account barriers such as local languages, the hegemony of English, and the continuing challenges of connectivity. She adds: “There have been more subtle changes that affect how we can or can’t relate to each other. How the algorithms are shadow banning our messages – how AI is shaping communication is subtle.”

Ruhiya Seward, a feminist working with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), also believes meaningful access and connectivity are important; that access should be secure and

¹² <https://whoseknowledge.org>

¹³ <https://hopesandactions.org>

¹⁴ Sívori, H., & Mochel, L. (2021). *Brazilian feminist responses to online hate speech: Seeing online violence through an intersectional lens*. Latin American Center on Sexuality and Human Rights (CLAM). <https://firn.genderit.org/research/brazilian-feminist-responses-online-hate-speech-seeing-online-violence-through>

¹⁵ Kamran, H. (2024, 3 April). “This is a Zionist model”: Atrocities propaganda is another weapon in Israel’s genocide kit against Palestine. *GenderIT.org*. <https://genderit.org/feminist-talk/zionist-model-atrocities-propaganda-another-weapon-israels-genocide-kit-against>

private and is more than merely access to a device. While recognising the many problems with content online, “for many of us the internet is about finding things, information,” she noted, adding, “I use it a lot for research. I love the internet.” She returns to the Feminist Principles of the Internet¹⁶ as a framework that sets out consistent feminist priorities. Access is also about participating in the digital economy, and Wala emphasises the need to look at access in relation to how the ongoing war in Sudan and restrictions on access to technologies meant people were excluded from economic opportunities, including digital labour platforms that were not allowed.

Data governance and privacy continue to be priorities for feminist collectives, but so are emerging issues around *AI governance*. As pointed out by Nishant Shah, “somewhere in the last few years, without us even realising it, and in an almost non-dramatic fashion, we have foundationally changed our idea of who we are as information subjects.” The human being has become “‘rehumanized’, ‘parsed’, ‘processed’, and presented only through interfaces that render it recognizable.”¹⁷ From a feminist perspective, what is troubling is the possible growing reliance on AI when the problem of inherent biases in systems built using AI is not yet addressed – and yet AI is part of content moderation, facial recognition and surveillance, and so on.

What is absolutely essential is that our *movements, organisations, collectives, activists and researchers* build networks and the internal strength and ability to address the challenges now. Jac says:

Our movement lacks capacity and ability to address the multiple forums and spaces in which the threads of internet governance need to be followed. Building this movement and the comprehension of the importance of digital technology and the internet to different movements (but also how and why it is important) is a feminist priority.

Often it seems that this disarray of forums is almost deliberate, as our energies get scattered and redirected.

Conclusion

Most people I spoke to suggest a fatigue and impossibility of negotiating within governance spaces. Ruhiya pointed to how it took two decades of work to get online GBV noticed globally and to begin to effect policy and language change. “We are still in the middle of those changes,” she says. “Time will tell if we have been successful.” This perhaps was the most hopeful note struck in all the conversations I had.

Before we move forward, we need to take stock of our experiences so far; what needs to be parsed through is power and visibility. Given that the inclusion of women and LGBTQIA+ people marginalised on account of their sexuality has been inadequate, what still needs to be addressed is how we were and will be included, where we are seated, when we are given a voice, and whether it is merely tokenism or an actual accounting of our experience. Beyond visibility, it is about our true volubility.

¹⁶ <https://feministinternet.org>

¹⁷ Shah, N., Rajadhyaksha, A., Hasan, N. A., & Arun, C. (2022). *Overload, Creep, Excess – An Internet from India*. Institute of Network Cultures. <https://networkcultures.org/blog/publication/overload-creep-excess-an-internet-from-india>

Let's occupy the internet governance processes!

Renata Ávila

Open Knowledge
www.okfn.org

It is the second quarter of 2024, and the past six months have weakened the international community rapidly. It is evident that the institutions, processes and spaces of action were not capable of preventing what many experts have described as a textbook case of genocide¹ against the Palestinian people. Unsurprisingly, cutting-edge technologies and mobile phones have taken a prominent role in this as tools to attack and massacre civilians.² What the commission of the most terrible of all crimes has triggered everywhere is an unprecedented abandonment of the so-called international rules-based order, selectively, on all fronts, including in the use of the internet and adjacent technologies.

The atrocities in Gaza, visible to everyone with an internet connection in real-time, are creating an even more profound divide between what is called the global North and the global South³ at the government level. At the social level, solidarity demonstrations occur every day in plazas, public forums, and universities across the world. Often, these actions are followed by acts of repression and blatant censorship.

What does it have to do with internet governance and the future rules for our global digital sphere?

Everything.

As the entire system is shaking at its very foundations, it might be a pivotal moment to either fix the current international institutions

and multilateral mechanisms that are not serving their purpose, or revolutionise the way states and citizens cooperate and the norms they observe.

This report calls for a strategy to reclaim a space where citizens have a voice about the future of technology, and to translate into action the spirit and priorities that the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) had at the beginning of the century. It closes with a reflection of promising signs and first steps in the right direction.

They beat you in the streets and ignore you inside

More than two decades ago, activists, advocates and emerging experts gathered in Geneva to challenge the WSIS process following the spirit of the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) Seattle protests⁴ that raised legitimate concerns of a future shaped by superpowers and giant transnational corporations. Activists all over the world were alarmed that technology companies would have a seat at the table – even though their power was nothing like today. They understood, after the unprecedented demonstrations of the previous years, facilitated to a great extent thanks to emerging communication technologies, that the stakes were high. Governments were catching up, assisted by corporations. Soon, police repression would increase, and there would be attempts to block the newly gained ability for people to organise online rapidly.

For some the preparatory meetings for WSIS were an early alert that information and communications technologies (ICTs) would be the next target as a control point, which had already become evident with newly passed laws in countries like the United States. Many saw the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) effort to call for a global conference to shape the future of technology as a warning sign of the awareness among

1 OHCHR. (2024). *Anatomy of a genocide: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967*. Francesca Albanese. A/HRC/55/73.. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session55/advance-versions/a-hrc-55-73-auv.pdf>

2 Abraham, Y. (2024, 3 April). 'Lavender': The AI machine directing Israel's bombing spree in Gaza. *+972 Magazine*. <https://www.972mag.com/lavender-ai-israeli-army-gaza/>

3 Group of 77. (2024). *Third South Summit Outcome Document*. https://www.g77.org/doc/3southsummit_outcome.htm

4 For a detailed account of the Seattle protests, see <https://depts.washington.edu/wtohist>

governments of the emerging forms of collaboration and action enabled by technology and connectivity. Others saw it as a blatant attempt to use a multiyear, multilayered, multistakeholder process without a binding outcome or real financial commitment to translating the talk into action, to distract, divert and disrupt these emerging forms of collaboration before they grew into a transformative social movement.

Early digital activists were resisting the foundations on top of which the superstructures that control everything today were built. They understood that digital technologies, their architecture and governance would play a vital role in changing the game, which up until then had enabled activists to shape technology to organise, demonstrate and create alternatives.

In 2003, a collective of activists, artists, lawyers and technologists organised a parallel conference in response to the official programme under the title “WSIS? We Seize!”.⁵ It had a public interest agenda and questioned what was happening in the official event. Activists and experts followed both events and provided a critical voice to what unfolded in the official process. The outcome of the alternative process was a robust Civil Society Declaration under the title of “Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs”.⁶ It rested on four pillars: Social Justice and People-Centred Sustainable Development, the Centrality of Human Rights, Culture, Knowledge and Public Domain and Enabling Environment. The aim was the accountable and democratic governance of technology, with governance mechanisms properly funded.

The demands remain almost the same today, but the world is not the same. The promise of more technology and connectivity leading to a better society and more development was never fulfilled. That was the effectiveness of a multistakeholder system where corporations were allowed to grow in influence and shape the process inside, while using lobbyists to influence national and regional rules on the outside.

The WSIS process encountered a savvy and well-organised, even if small, civil society. Its analysis – reading old documents and watching the footage available – was sharp.⁷

Activists foresaw the threat of a concentration of wealth, the lockdown of innovation and further commodification of knowledge and science, the concentration of power to inform and in the provision of services to communicate, and the use of technology to police, to control, to divide, to exclude. This would later result in an unprecedented power to extract resources, labour and time, and to exploit people and the planet.

Over two decades since the first WSIS, and in a crucial moment for the future of humanity, we need to stop for a second and recalibrate our strategies and priorities, so that citizen voices are the ones listened to, both in negotiation rooms and in the streets.

Owning the discourse, dispelling myths

The main narratives in internet governance spaces, as well as its thematic priorities, are often led by the most powerful corporations and the governments that host governance events. Their press and public relations teams get effective press coverage, engage in targeted lobbying, and place their spokespeople and leaders on panels to draw the lines in a debate on any particular topic. Even worse, there is a practice of repeating myths as truths, which inevitably leads to, in the best case, a distraction from more important points that need to be discussed, and in the worst, ineffective and harmful policies. One example of hyped narratives is last year’s debates around the existential threat that general-purpose artificial intelligence (AI) would pose to the future of humanity.⁸

There are at least three reoccurring sets of myths in internet governance spaces.

The first set of myths usually gravitates around ideas of what is “best for the poor” without properly addressing or acknowledging the accelerated socio-economic precarity of marginalised groups and communities through digitalisation, as well as other negative consequences that have a direct link to owning a mobile phone and being online. Instead the sustainable development narrative mostly equates development with simply connecting more people to the internet.⁹ Over the last decades,

5 <http://www.noborder.org/archive/www.geneva03.org/display/about.php.html>

6 WSIS Civil Society Plenary. (2003). “*Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs*”: *Civil Society Declaration to the World Summit on the Information Society*. <https://www.itu.int/net/ws/is/docs/geneva/civil-society-declaration.pdf>

7 https://media.ccc.de/v/20C3-537-WSIS_Overview

8 LaGrandeur, K. (2023, 4 October). The consequences of AI hype. *AI Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-023-00352-y>

9 Reisdorf, B. C., Fernandez, L., Hampton, K. N., Shin, I., & Dutton, W. H. (2022). Mobile Phones Will Not Eliminate Digital and Social Divides: How Variation in Internet Activities Mediates the Relationship Between Type of Internet Access and Local Social Capital in Detroit. *Social Science Computer Review*, 40(2), 288-308. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439320909446>

civil society and academia have collected vast amounts of evidence on the harms against the most vulnerable triggered by technologies, including online threats of violence and being profiled and targeted in mass surveillance. Recent research also suggests how digitalisation is creating a new kind of digital divide with those not having a stable or always-on internet connection not being able to properly participate in the digital economy.¹⁰ All of this leads to more exclusion and discrimination.

The second set of myths seeks to restrain sovereign decisions about the way technology and connectivity are regulated in a particular country, if such regulations are not aligned with the mainstream regulations in the US and/or the European Union (EU). This set of myths often raises hyped-up alarm about the danger that a divided internet would present to humanity and the quasi-obligatory need for poorer nations to either abstain from regulating the internet or, if they regulate, to use the laws and policies found in the US and EU as templates, praising them as “gold standards”. However, this is done without considering the particular needs or challenges faced by specific countries,¹¹ and can expose them to sanctions. One example of this is the US sanctions on Venezuela in 2019, which impacted the ability of its citizens to use software services, including receiving critical security updates; another is the battle of the US to neutralise China as 5G provider through its Clean Network initiative.¹²

These myths can end up creating an antagonistic relationship between the government trying to implement a change and civil society. An example of this is the recent controversy around restrictions to the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) in Brazil, a particular context with real threats against democracy and a direct conflict of interest between the company’s owner and the democratically elected government in the country.¹³ Many online freedom of expression advocates argued against such measures, but without taking into consideration the local context, where jurists and human rights advocates considered the measures legitimate and proportionate. Countries

can and should regulate digital technologies to preserve and enhance the rights of their citizens.

The third set of myths concerns the independence of academia and civil society organisations in their participation as stakeholders in internet governance. Their input should be examined thoroughly, especially when funded by big corporations, to assess whether their input and research priorities are influenced by their funders. Civil society and academia must acknowledge their political biases and limitations because of a funder’s agenda and sphere of action. The lobbying of the tech giants should also be monitored closely.

Upgrading the insider game, abandoning participation-washing¹⁴

Recent developments have made it clear that other spheres offer a concrete possibility to achieve local and global results for a more equitable and sustainable digital future for all. This includes engaging the tax justice movement, or advocating for better competition, electoral and consumer protection laws, or better public health frameworks. In the current political configuration, these spheres of engagement offer a shortcut to achieving the outcomes internet governance has failed to achieve.

The internet governance community today has an opportunity to build new knowledge in these and other areas to influence local and regional processes. For example, they can work with local and international consumer protection networks with strong experience in monopolistic practices and competition law, or with public health officials working on the ground. At the same time, following a bottom-up approach, they can push for some harmonisation and norm setting in a fragmented internet governance environment.

What is clear is that processes like WSIS need to be coupled with other processes – such as those where economic and climate justice is being fought for, and are areas which currently have the resources and teeth for real action – instead of continuing the conversation in a disconnected space. If its agenda stays where it is and does not have real implications in spaces where the allocation of resources or the creation of binding rules are made, it can sink into irrelevance or be replaced by an even more closed and captured mechanism. The technology

10 See Alison Gillwald’s report in this edition of GISWatch.

11 See, for example, Sala Weleilakeba’s commentary on the Pacific Islands in this edition of GISWatch.

12 Ortiz Freuler, J. (2023). The weaponization of private corporate infrastructure: Internet fragmentation and coercive diplomacy in the 21st century. *Global Media and China*, 8(1), 6-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364221139729>

13 Mier, B. (2024, 18 April). Brazilian lawyer exposes deceit at heart of “Twitter Files”. *BRASILWIRE*. <https://www.brasilwire.com/brazilian-lawyer-exposes-deceit-at-heart-of-twitter-files/>

14 For the purpose of this report, “participation-washing” is a term to describe the performative participation of people pretending to represent citizens from a country or belonging to specific groups, without a mandate to do so or previous consultation with them.

industry is one of the most concentrated and resourceful industries of all times. The bargaining power of developing countries is minimal, but a broad alliance of movements, and (sometimes) a joint effort by governments and civil society could deliver results.

For example, developing countries really committed to fighting inequality and the role of the tech industry in producing this inequality could focus on taxing tech giants in their jurisdictions. A campaign pushing for tax adherence and proper taxation of the tech companies would create common ground from which to work and a concrete victory for the global South. Similarly, to show a real commitment to digital development, the richest nations in the world could conditionally write off the debts of developing countries so they can prioritise investments in sustainable and inclusive digital financial and development infrastructures as well as digital literacy. If financial inequalities are not addressed, so-called digital development will become, if it is not already, a tool for soft diplomacy and a distraction from the real needs in developing countries, and continue to be a wellspring for the extraction of data and money from the poorest nations to the richest.

Two decades after WSIS 2003, with its very few successes, and a long list of global, regional and local events, with a multitude of conversations between stakeholders and no binding results, the WSIS+20 process and its Internet Governance Forum need to move at an accelerated pace with less dispersed dialogue and more binding actions for the parties involved. Each stakeholder needs to accompany their words with meaningful actions and the policies and resources to make them happen. With the converging crises of climate and inequality, it seems more important than ever to move away from corridors and panels of non-binding conversations.

So two things are clear. We are in something of a stalemate. And a change is necessary.

The moment is now for a broad alliance between those advocating for justice across different fields, including economic and climate justice, and digital rights. The ultimate goal should be to create a digital justice agenda with other movements and rally behind a comprehensive Global Green New Deal built on a bottom-up process of consultation, providing a broad governance framework for a fair and sustainable future. Once the general demands from the digital civil society are integrated with the other demands, it should be activated in all the spaces where a top-down Green New Deal is being discussed.

That would mean bringing up digital issues in the climate conversations, at International Monetary Fund meetings, at the World Trade Organization, etc. – in all the spaces where our future is configured and where the allocation of financial resources is being decided.

A closing note of hope: Another world is still possible

The internet governance space in recent years is experiencing new dynamics, with alliances being formed between digital activists and social movements. New agendas, focused on climate justice and labour, among other issues, are being developed. This gets us closer to the original spirit of the Geneva Declaration, and to the path of addressing digital issues in other spaces suggested in this report. The interrelated agendas are getting clearer, and the thematic silos are breaking and being replaced by bridges and intersections. It is clear for everyone that systemic changes need to happen, but these will only happen with coordinated efforts and clear targets.

Reclaiming the power of imagination and collective action, as well as the resilience of the locally grown, globally interconnected and trusted networks of the early days of the internet, is now a viable necessity. Using the tactics of our time in a broader, diverse, but united alliance will allow us to start meaningfully influencing ongoing processes, making clear that the technology debate, the environmental debate and the financial and debt justice debates, amongst them, are interrelated and need to be addressed together. Only then can we shape the institutions and infrastructures of a fair and sustainable future for all.

Action steps

The following action steps should be a priority for civil society:

- Lead the narrative. For optimal results it is important for civil society to lead the narrative on emerging digital issues and refuse to adopt the rhythm and thematic priorities of the big tech companies and most powerful governments. Targeted research, alliances with independent media and constant advocacy, with connected global and local efforts, are necessary. It is important to counter the digital myths with evidence-based arguments and good storytelling. The perfect way to lead the narrative is to craft a global, positive agenda rather than only responding to the constant

threats to the digital future we want. The 2014 Delhi Declaration for a Just and Equitable Internet¹⁵ and the work by the Global Digital Justice Forum¹⁶ are excellent starting points.

- Work closely with broader social justice efforts. Civil society has before their eyes the opportunity to lay the foundations of a new digital social contract, moving towards stronger social protections, low-carbon development and financial sustainability, all integrated and harmonised with just digital policies and rights-enhancing technologies. Civil society working in digital spaces can choose to remain in specialised internet governance forums, or as suggested in this report, contribute from their local bases and through their global networks towards drafting and actioning a comprehensive, citizen-centred Global Green New Deal. Such an integrated green and inclusive vision of the future of digital transformation should influence the next wave of aid, trade and cooperation agreements. For this to happen, active participation is needed outside of internet governance spaces.
- Make stronger alliances with governments on public interest fronts such as competition law and consumer protection law, as well as with respect to investments in digital public infrastructure. When the power is concentrated in a few companies and governments, finding points in common with some government agencies and coordinating common efforts across borders could deliver innovative ways to govern the internet in a decentralised way.
- Preserve spaces for imagination and collective action in parallel to mainstream governance processes. As the early questioning of WSIS ahead of the Geneva summit showed, there is an exponential value in maintaining and nurturing exclusive spaces for civil society to strategise, contest and reimagine the ongoing institutions and processes affecting the digital sphere. Developing trust and intergenerational collaboration outside of the processes and logic of the current internet governance system will be key to take more radical steps towards a possible digital future for and by the people.

¹⁵ <https://www.justnetcoalition.org/delhi-declaration>

¹⁶ <https://globaldigitaljusticeforum.net/>

Points on digital justice

Alan Finlay

“Digital justice” is a comparatively recent term to be used by rights activists, although at least some of what it signifies were already concerns for ICT-for-development organisations in the mid-1990s. It seeks to build collective action and a common analytical framework for organisations working in different fields and at different levels in order to respond to the rapid, intersecting changes that are the result of digitalisation and datafication, and the significant power imbalances that have become evident in the process.¹ It is a form of movement building, and positions itself alongside and in dialogue with activists working towards “environmental justice”, “climate justice”, “food justice”, “gender justice” and “economic justice” – as well as “data justice” (which seems to have come into prominent use after the Snowden revelations in 2013) and “technology justice” (for some digital justice is considered a sub-set of technology justice) – among other articulations of how systemic injustices impact on those in the Majority World.

However, this is only one view of “digital justice”.

This report offers an overview of some uses of the term, including two used by global institutions and corporations which are different to the meanings intended by advocacy organisations. It then offers several tentative “points on digital justice” – perspectives that seem important for civil society organisations to address in any conception of what digital justice may be. These draw on discussions at a recent meeting co-organised by the Global Digital Justice Forum, IT for Change, Third World Network and APC.

What is digital justice?

Despite its relatively short life span, and perhaps because of its short life span, there have been several different attempts to define what “digital justice” might mean. One of these definitions is the outcome of community consultations with equity experts and networks by the smart city programme in Portland in the United States (US). This follows efforts in 2020 to ban the use of facial recognition technologies in the city because of discrimination,² which also resulted in “digital justice” being foregrounded in the city’s work as “a strategy to incorporate anti-racism and social justice into [its] priorities, policies, programs and plans.”

With both surveillance and open data³ being important components of the smart city programme, it defines digital justice as:

[T]he equitable treatment of all people in [the context of] technology and information, regardless of race, abilities, gender, age, personal circumstances or social context. Digital justice ensures that people have the digital rights and resources they need to thrive – including access to digital infrastructure, shared ownership of digital resources, data protection, and open and accountable digital governance.⁴

It then discusses data rights and data accessibility and concludes that:

Digital Justice must be an instrument of individual and collective empowerment, as well as the conduct for building equitable wealth, inclusion and governance relationships with transparency and accountability, [in a way that does] not marginalize or increase

1 See the introduction to this edition of GISWatch, where some of these changes from a digital and internet rights perspective are discussed.

2 Smart City PDX. (2020) *Digital Justice definition: Report*. City of Portland. <https://www.portland.gov/bps/smart-city-pdx/surveillance-policy/documents/digital-justice-definition/download>

3 <https://www.portland.gov/bps/smart-city-pdx>

4 <https://survey123.arcgis.com/share/01b63ccceb5c4715a8e3b1ba7cb7b9c>

disparities impacting BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and people of colour] communities and people with disabilities.

In this definition, as in others discussed below, the concern with “digital rights and resources”, the “shared ownership” of these resources, “collective empowerment”, equality and transparent and accountable governance are all ideas anchored in the historical human rights struggles of digital and internet rights organisations.

Also in the US, the Detroit Digital Justice Coalition has developed a definition of digital justice⁵ through interviews with its coalition members who use “media and technology for community organizing or grassroots economic development.” Although the interviews focused on a “vision for ‘digital justice’ in Detroit”, the principles are general enough to be applicable in other contexts, and were seen as a useful articulation in the context of the Black Lives Matter protests in the US in 2020.⁶

The principles are grouped into four areas: access, participation, common ownership and healthy communities. The first emphasises “equal access to media and technology” as “producers as well as consumers”, and valuing “different languages, dialects and forms of communication”. The principle of participation “prioritizes the participation of people who have been traditionally excluded from and attacked by media and technology” and “[demystifying] technology to the point where we can not only use it, but create our own technologies and participate in the decisions that will shape communications infrastructure.” “Common ownership” encourages technologies that are “free and shared openly with the public” and “promotes diverse business models for the control and distribution of information, including: cooperative business models and municipal ownership.” And “healthy communities” focuses on community organising, the environment, community-based economic development by “expanding technology access for small businesses, independent artists and other entrepreneurs,” and education.

While neither appears to make claims for their definitions of digital justice outside of their sphere of activity (geographically the cities of Portland and Detroit), many aspects of these definitions are clearly applicable elsewhere, such as participation,

open and transparent governance, collective ownership of resources, and valuing and supporting diversity, among others. Ideas around the appropriation of technology are also strong in the Detroit Coalition’s definition, and both definitions emphasise the “demystifying” of technology, in the case of the Portland definition, with respect to data.

Nevertheless, one might still want to call them narrower definitions of what digital justice is or could be. Particularly when it comes to the Detroit Coalition’s principles, there may also be moments of ideological assumption that others might wish to contest, such as considering “independent artists” to be entrepreneurs, which is a specific conception of the role and function of an artist in capitalist society, or when members of the community are described as “producers and consumers” (i.e. in some conceptions of “meaningful connectivity” at the local level, it is precisely this expectation that is challenged – that internet users should be “consumers” in any way in the market sense).⁷ While their principle on the environment states that “digital justice promotes alternative energy, recycling and salvaging technology, and using technology to promote environmental solutions,” some may find this insufficient in addressing important considerations for environmental justice in the context of digital technologies, including campaigning against the marginalisation of communities impacted by the mining of scarce minerals used in technology, insisting on transparency in the sourcing of materials by producers, and even campaigning for labour rights in digital production. In both definitions, there is the potential for collaboration with local or municipal government in the forms of civic engagement envisaged; by implication through the Portland government consulting the community on the idea of digital justice, or in the Detroit Coalition’s definition of promoting “diverse business models for the control and distribution of information, including: cooperative business models and municipal ownership.” In this respect, digital justice includes a component of civic-to-government engagement, even civic co-management of public infrastructures, and is collaborative in its engagement with at least some institutions of power.

The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) has produced a “study and

5 <https://www.detroitdjc.org/principles>

6 Sapara-Grant, A. (2020, 8 September). Defining Digital Justice. *DAI*. <https://dai-global-digital.com/defining-digital-justice.html>

7 See the report on meaningful connectivity by APC and Rhizomatica in this edition of GISWatch.

action guide” for digital justice⁸ that “offers insights and ideas for bringing about ecological and social justice, human rights, and democracy wherever digital communication touches our lives.” Its understanding of digital justice is rooted in a social justice and communications rights perspective (it refers to the former as a “sacred value”) and aligned with other global campaigns for justice in different fields of activity: “Digital justice requires, at the same time, gender justice, climate justice, economic justice, racial justice, and so much more.”

WACC builds its discussion of digital justice in five broad areas: human and civil rights (which are seen to provide a framework for action for digital justice); communication rights; inclusion and participation; critiquing and resisting power; and building a transformative movement in alliance with those working on “social and ecological justice”, thereby foregrounding the cross-field movement-building dynamic of an expanded understanding of what digital justice entails. The WACC definition more explicitly calls out the power of global corporations (“This power serves profit and seeks to control people, leading to the exploitation of humanity and the earth”), including their impact on the environment (“Mining for components, the manufacture of devices, planned obsolescence, and tech waste devastate ecosystems”). Something of this challenge to the exploitative business models of tech corporations can also be read in the Detroit Coalition’s definition through its call for technology to be “demystified” and appropriated and even created by communities (“Digital justice demystifies technology to the point where we can not only use it, but create our own technologies”).

The Global Digital Justice Forum⁹ is a “multisectoral group of development organizations, digital rights networks, trade unions, feminist groups, corporate watchdogs, and communication rights campaigners”, and includes organisations based in or working in the global South such as IT for Change, ETC Group, Third World Network, Oxfam International, Social Watch, Public Services International, Open Knowledge Foundation, Latin American Information Agency (ALAI) and Just Net Coalition. It has defined its advocacy for “practical action” in several areas which can be summarised as: democratising governance; decentralising digital systems; promoting the internet as a global

commons, emphasising among other things the sustainability of local economies and democratic participation; taking on what it calls “corporate impunity” (in its submission to the Global Digital Compact it “rejects the ‘multistakeholder model’ that has dominated digital cooperation processes, leading to an entrenchment of corporate power”);¹⁰ promoting people-led technology models that are rooted in “development sovereignty” and are “ecologically responsible, non-extractive, rights-enabling and gender-just”; and developing legal and policy frameworks “grounded in human rights and economic justice” for data, artificial intelligence (AI) and platforms across different fields of activity.

IT for Change has also worked with DAWN, a “network of feminist scholars, researchers and activists from the economic South working for economic and gender justice and sustainable and democratic development”,¹¹ to recently develop a Declaration of Feminist Digital Justice¹² which emphasises the values of individual and collective agency; an ethics of solidarity; community-based participatory democracy; a fair and equitable global economic order; and what it calls a “global digital constitutionalism”, which is “based on a reinvigorated, bottom-up and networked multilateralism for humane governance, enduring peace, thriving reciprocity and universal human rights.” It has an “anti-capitalist” agenda in so far as it rejects “surveillance capitalism” and the “relentless commodification of our intimate lives”, and like the Global Digital Justice Forum it critiques the “digital governance status quo, propped up by self-serving, corporate-controlled discourses of multistakeholderism.”¹³

Both these definitions are also clear in their challenge to the corporate domination of digital technologies and governance models that enable this dominance. Instead, as the Global Digital Justice Forum puts it:

The voices of marginalized communities should guide the processes leading to digital justice. To this end, we advocate for a democratized and meaningful form of participation that enables agile, accountable, and people- and planet-centric policies.¹⁴

8 Green, E. (2022). *Digital Justice: A Study and Action Guide*. World Association for Christian Communication & World Council of Churches. <https://waccglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Digital-Justice-DIGITAL-compressed.pdf>

9 <https://globaldigitaljusticeforum.net>

10 Global Digital Justice Forum. (2023). *Submission of inputs for the Global Digital Compact*. f1a5177a-afb8-4c40-afe7-d6fb2454419b_GDC-submission_Global-Digital-Justice-Forum_2_.pdf (pop-umbrella.s3.amazonaws.com)

11 <https://www.dawnfeminist.org/about-us>

12 <https://feministdigitaljustice.net>

13 Ibid.

14 <https://globaldigitaljusticeforum.net/about>

What these cursory accounts of different definitions of digital justice show is that within civil society there are narrower and more expansive definitions of what it might entail, and perhaps even contestation between some definitions in terms of their implied analysis of power and the global economic status quo. In the case of the Portland smart city programme, with its particular interest in surveillance technologies and open data, there was an effort to determine how digital justice should be defined so that it could “become a core value in future policies and work on information and technology” in the city,¹⁵ an institutionalisation of the term which some may consider disabling of its potential agency and effect. This is not necessarily a problem, at least in so far as any different interpretations and contradictions are surfaced and acknowledged. It may be, for instance, that the value of the term “digital justice” lies exactly in its resistance to a precise definition, and although it can provide an analytical framework for collective action, it acts as a vehicle for practical action in specific contexts, allowing for different emphases depending on the context in which it is applied.

What may be more problematic is the use of the same term by global institutions and corporations, but with quite different meanings. There are at least two meanings in use: the first refers to the digitalisation of judicial processes to improve the efficiency and transparency of the justice sector, as well as access to justice,¹⁶ also sometimes referred to as “e-justice” (used in this way by the UN, and by corporations such as Microsoft); and the second, as discussed by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2021 in a white paper,¹⁷ concerns itself with providing better judicial remedies for those who are victims of the harms caused by data-driven technologies. Among other things, it considers “key failures in global legal and judicial systems with regard to digital justice issues” and recommends “pathways to digital justice that lawmakers can develop to better protect individuals and communities.” In its paper, digital injustice is seen as: “a matter of corrective justice, which is a way to attain redress for past actions.” In particular, it adds, “corrective justice is ideal for resolving the types of unpredictable harm that tend to come from data-driven and predictive technologies.”

15 Smart City PDX. (2021, 28 January). What does digital justice mean in Portland? <https://www.portland.gov/bps/smart-city-pdx/news/2021/1/28/what-does-digital-justice-mean-portland>

16 <https://www.undp.org/rothr/justice/digitalization-and-e-justice>

17 World Economic Forum. (2021). *Pathways to Digital Justice: White paper*. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Pathways_to_Digital_Justice_2021.pdf

The second definition may be an important part of a civil society conception of “digital justice”, but both are very much narrower conceptualisations of the term, given they are confined to judicial processes and remedy. These articulations, however, are potentially concerning from an advocacy perspective, and place the onus on civil society organisations to be clear about what their definition of digital justice is when engaging in forums, and to be aware that when claims to digital justice are made, there is a risk that these might be misunderstood by other stakeholders, including governments.

Digital justice and global change: Some high-level considerations

Digital justice was discussed at a recent meeting co-organised by the Global Digital Justice Forum, IT for Change, Third World Network and APC. Activists from diverse fields participated in the meeting, including those working on food security, climate justice, labour rights, intellectual property (IP) law, community access networks, and digital rights. The aim of the meeting was to identify areas of common and cross-cutting concern in order to develop an agenda for collective action. Important forums where activists needed to engage on issues to do with digital justice were also identified. While the best practical advocacy approaches and areas for intervention are still being determined and refined,¹⁸ several points about digital justice emerged during the meeting which offer a useful starting point for others who want to develop their own approach to digital justice.

Digital justice offers a historical analysis

History is a site of struggle and is constantly reframed and reinterpreted. Vigilance is required by digital justice activists so that history is not told or retold with important omissions, and used to define and frame the present with these omissions intact. Attempts to de-link the present from the past need to be challenged. For example, the origins of the development of internet infrastructure in the global South needs to inform global narratives of the development of the internet; how WSIS emerged, was negotiated, and civil society positions in 2003 need to inform the WSIS +20 process, including, for instance, the original meaning and intention of inclusive notions of multistakeholder engagement; myths that current innovations in technology, such

18 This report respects the request for anonymity made at the meeting.

as AI, mean that we are entering a totally new world with no reference to the past also need to be challenged. With respect to digital rights, many historical struggles and debates of the ICT-for-development and internet rights community, as well as the communications rights movement, need to be resurfaced in the present to inform and contextualise governance deliberations. The same historical considerations are necessary to account for the current geopolitical and economic status quo.

Digital justice anchors itself in economic, social and cultural rights

This is a necessary emphasis, a rebalancing. It doesn't mean digital justice ignores civil and political rights, which are equally core, but that digital justice insists that human rights are indivisible and interdependent and that analysis of the challenges and the solutions take all human rights into consideration. The danger is that without this emphasis, a narrower band of rights are focused on, such as privacy, freedom of expression and security, which are often the terrain of "digital rights", leading some organisations to prefer to identify their advocacy with "internet rights", which offers a more grounded account of rights, including a concern with enabling grassroots internet access and the socioeconomic and cultural implications of this access.

Digital justice is about people

Justice is about people, and digital justice is about the direct or indirect impact of technologies on people. Digital justice recentres the claim of ordinary people over technologies, rather than technologies over people. The usefulness of digital technologies needs to be defined by people, who are situated in specific contexts, not according to the needs of corporations and governments. The rights-based claims of people exist and are foregrounded ahead of the claims of corporations and governments, the latter of whom nevertheless have a duty to manage and implement programmes to realise or enable these rights. This inverts the current paradigm where technologies are imposed on people by corporations and governments without consent. Digital justice is therefore about participatory governance in practice.

Digital justice is about the environment

Digital justice means being aware (and doing something about) the impact of technologies on the environment that we depend on to survive.

This includes how minerals for the production of technology are sourced, and how technology is produced, used and disposed of in ways that pollute and deplete the Earth's natural resources, and displace and endanger local communities.

Digital justice offers an analysis of power

If justice is about people, governance is about power.¹⁹ In its historical analysis, digital justice accounts for the status quo in terms of the power of corporations, governments, institutions and people. It situates this analysis within an understanding of the global economic order, and the ramifications of this at the regional, national and local level. It identifies systemic levers that keep unjust power structures intact – whether in institutions, processes, multilateral arrangements such as trade deals, laws, etc. – to focus its advocacy efforts for change.

Digital justice contests and reclaims language, and where necessary reframes dominant paradigms laid down by the powerful

Language by its very nature is a site of contestation and evolution and a struggle for power. Digital justice analyses this contestation and where necessary reclaims and reinvigorates radical meaning for language and terms. It pushes back against the dominant myths created through market capitalism and by governments, and resists attempts to whitewash the historical resonance of definitions and understandings that dilute their significance in policy documents, agreements and governance discussions. An example of this is the word "development", which has in many contexts been washed of the proactive, rights-affirming obligation it imposes on governments. The Declaration of Feminist Digital Justice reclaims the word through referring to the "right to development", and states that "the inalienable right of all peoples to full sovereignty over their natural wealth, enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development, should extend to their data resources."²⁰ Another example is "multistakeholder", which has in many instances been washed of the spirit of its original commitment.

¹⁹ A direct quote from one of the participants at the workshop.

²⁰ <https://feministdigitaljustice.net>

Digital justice is about the fair redistribution of global resources

Digital justice analyses and responds to the political economy. It seeks a much more equal share of local and global resources for the powerless, including technological resources and capital. One expression of this might be understanding digital technologies as global digital public goods,²¹ and regulating them in this way. Another might look for significant taxation of rich tech corporations and the redistribution of this money to affected communities and in the public interest. Some might state the case more strongly: that digital justice is anti-capitalist. Whatever the model of economic justice preferred, or the ways to achieve economic justice are determined, digital justice seeks a rebalancing of economic power and agency, beyond token gestures of institutional reform, piecemeal trade concessions, or blind faith in the “trickle-down” effect.

Digital justice is advocacy distributed

Digitalisation and datafication across all or most fields of activity and the intensity and pace of these digitally driven changes, which are often unregulated and rights-infringing, means that civil society organisations from across different fields need to work together towards similar advocacy goals. This is necessary given the multiplicity of forums where digital issues and rights are discussed, often in a fragmented and uncoordinated way; the specialisations and networks required to be effective in these forums; and the capacity, including historical experience, to influence these forums. To be effective, a digital justice agenda means building bridges across fields that may be well outside the usual terrain of digital rights activists, as well as between the grassroots, the local, the national, the regional and the global levels.

Digital justice is not without its ironies, potential contradictions and internal conflicts

The idea of “digital justice” is likely to be messy, with points of confusion, misalignment and contradiction, and perhaps even contested within civil society itself. As one participant at the meeting put it, the idea of “climate justice” took years to concretise into a common advocacy agenda and can still be applied and understood differently by

different constituencies and actors. More worrying would be a situation where no ironies, grey areas, contradictions and contestations existed. Digital justice is about finding our way out of the current status quo, so that a better world becomes possible. The map may not always be crystal clear. Because it responds to rapid change, the meaning of digital justice is perhaps necessarily unsettled.

Conclusion

“Digital justice”, as used in this report, has been specifically and generally defined by civil society groups with advocacy concerns in the global North and in the global South, and in at least one instance by a local government. There are common elements in these definitions, such as the distribution of resources and ownership of infrastructures, participatory governance, transparency, and of course an emphasis on digital technologies; although, with respect to the latter, while some focus on “information and technologies” or “media and technologies”, others take a much broader field of concern with respect to what “the digital” entails. For instance, at the meeting organised by the Global Digital Justice Forum, IT for Change, Third World Network and APC, geoeengineering, agtech²² and its impact on local farmers and food security, AI in war, and even the pollution of outer space from dead satellites and other debris were amongst what we should think about when discussing “digital justice”.

By implication, “digital justice” is aligned with collective global advocacy causes such as “climate justice”, “environmental justice”, “economic justice” and “food justice”, and, at their root, “social justice”, which all have their own history of deliberation, contestation and accrued meanings in their respective fields of activism. However, these linkages are not made explicit by all definitions of digital justice considered here.

There is also, tentatively, some contestation over the use of the term which is differently defined by the UN and corporations such as Microsoft, as well as the WEF, which refers to mechanisms for corrective justice for infringements of rights due to data-driven technologies. Activists need to at least be aware of these alternative definitions as they are used in forums such as WSIS+20, or appear in

²¹ See, for instance, Alison Gillwald’s report in this edition of GISWatch.

²² “[A] newly developing industry that combines several sectors – agribusiness, biotechnology, digital/software technology, and financial technology.” ETC Group. (2023, 8 November). *Autonomy in the Face of Agtech*. <https://www.etcgroup.org/content/autonomy-face-agtech>

policy and other documents. The latter definition may also prove useful within a digital justice framework as defined by activists.

The points on digital justice made following the meeting are broad. They offer perspectives that may or may not agree with different ideas of digital justice as defined by others – even some participating in the workshop may not agree with them. They do, however, emphasise that digital rights activists need to work across multiple fields of activity in order to oppose unbridled (or unregulated or poorly regulated) power within these fields, and need to create alliances and cross-field understandings to do this collaboratively. Engaging grassroots organisations and those with specialisations in areas such as trade contracts, IP law, AI, robotics and geoengineering, among other areas, is also necessary. They also suggest that in order to increase their influence, digital rights organisations need to work with constituency-based groups such as those who are part of the labour, climate and food justice movements. Working in this way allows digital rights organisations to connect their advocacy agendas with fields that digital technologies are impacting, but which are often less explored by them. Given the context of rapid, mass digitalisation and datafication across multiple areas of activity, and the powerful corporate interests in these areas, this cross-field collaboration is increasingly necessary.

Many digital rights organisations have been working in this way already. Particularly at the grassroots level in the global South, there are examples of organisations that may define themselves as internet or digital rights organisations and that work at the intersection of internet access and water rights, or farmer and land rights, etc. Work on community-centred connectivity initiatives by APC and Rhizomatica also seeks to strengthen communities in areas that are important to them, which may cut across economic, social or environmental concerns.²³ A number of organisations in the global South also have their roots in the 1990s when they provided internet connectivity and services to social and environmental justice organisations, among others.

However, the rapid pace of mass digitalisation and datafication across multiple fields of activity, and the myriad forums where “the digital” is discussed, calls for a form of movement building across sectors to effect change. “Digital justice”

– although troubled by alternative uses of the term – appears to offer a way for digital rights organisations to align with other constituency-based advocacy causes, and to collectively leverage the specialisations in these areas for cross-field policy advocacy, engagement, and pushing for wide-reaching systemic change.

Action steps

The following recommendations for governments and civil society organisations in the context of WSIS+20 and other processes such as the Global Digital Compact can be made based on this report:

For governments:

- Digitalisation and datafication imply structural changes to communities and to people’s lives, with many clear empirical benefits that have been widely researched and documented and are evident in everyday experiences, but also negative consequences because of these changes. These consequences are also not only about issues such as privacy, security, freedom of expression and forms of online violence. They include but are in no way limited to the increased vulnerability and marginalisation of the poor, systemic inequalities and biases, the rapid dilution of cultures and knowledge, psychosocial dislocation, the precarity of work and an alienated labour force, severe health risks, insecurity of food and livelihoods, a loss of biodiversity, water stress from the location of server farms and the pollution of water systems with hazardous chemicals from e-waste, the depletion of the Earth’s resources through mining for minerals used in technologies, displaced communities in these territories, the exploitation of women and children and targeted killings, the pollution of outer space, and more efficient ways of causing mass destruction and death during wars. Due to the uneven global distribution of the effects of the production and use of digital infrastructures and technologies, these consequences may not be felt locally but will nevertheless be felt locally elsewhere, and some inevitably have global ramifications, such as the increase in CO₂ emissions due to our use of technology, the worsening precarity of those already marginalised, or the impact of digital labour on workers’ rights, among others.
- While *some* new vulnerabilities *may* be a consequence of changes that all major technological transformations bring, the

²³ See the report on meaningful connectivity by APC and Rhizomatica in this edition of GISWatch.

power structures implicit in the current pace of digitalisation and datafication, with the extractivist business models used by the corporate tech sector and other big businesses at the centre, and on which governments often rely, undermine the potential benefits that digital technologies and new data capabilities can bring to the world's majority.

- Alternative models of governing and regulating digital technologies need to be developed, and the experimental use of digital technologies needs to be properly mediated. Implementation needs to support the agency and life-worlds of the people most affected, and a global and local understanding of the impact of technologies on individuals, communities and the environment needs to be properly articulated in all instances of digital technologies being used.
- Digital justice seeks to empower ordinary people so that they can participate in the governance of digital technologies across different fields, and so that they are made meaningful and useful to them and their ways of being, rather than imposed on them without clear or rights-affirming consideration of their impact. In this respect, any digital justice movement should be seen as an ally in the struggle to build equality and just and sustainable societies, especially for the most marginalised and vulnerable.

For civil society organisations:

- Workshop the idea of “digital justice” within your organisation and with your allies and partners. Engage actors in fields such as food security, climate justice, economic justice and gender justice. Test how relevant the term “digital justice” is to them. Include actors with specialisations in areas such as trade, IP law, labour, agriculture and the environment, and experience in high-level forums where these are discussed. Include grassroots communities and their advocacy representatives.
- Map how the digital “plays out” in different fields and sectors. Who are the main corporations and institutions involved? Where are the forums where digital technology and data issues are discussed? What are the mechanisms for engagement, and what skills and experience are required to engage these forums?
- Familiarise yourself with alternative conceptions of digital justice, such as those used by the UN and WEF, as well as what other organisations might mean when they refer to “digital justice”.
- Consider building a common digital justice advocacy agenda that cuts across different fields based on points of intersection in advocacy aims.
- Link up with those who are already doing this.

WSIS+20: REIMAGINING HORIZONS OF DIGNITY, EQUITY AND JUSTICE FOR OUR DIGITAL FUTURE

Twenty years ago, stakeholders gathered in Geneva at the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and affirmed a “common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society.”

This special edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) considers the importance of WSIS as an inclusive policy and governance mechanism, and what, from a civil society perspective, needs to change for it to meet the challenges of today and to meaningfully shape our digital future.

Expert reports consider issues such as the importance of the historical legacy of WSIS, the failing multistakeholder system and how it can be revived, financing mechanisms for local access, the digital inequality paradox, why a digital justice framing matters in the context of mass digitalisation, and feminist priorities in internet governance. While this edition of GISWatch asks: “How can civil society – as well as governments – best respond to the changed context in order to crystallise the WSIS vision?” it carries lessons for other digital governance processes such as the Global Digital Compact and NETmundial+10.

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