Chair's Summary

WSIS Accelerating Vision & Empowerment

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It's been two decades since the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) first began between 2003 and 2005. This year's WSIS+20 High-Level Event 2025 focused on looking back in order to help us look forward. Over 11,000 participants from 169 countries walked through our halls this week with many more online from other countries for the WSIS+20 HLE and AI4G Global Summit, including 59 ministers or ministerial representatives, 56 regulators, over 60 UN representatives, CEOs, civil society, youth, technical experts, and academics. This is a true testament to the enduring power of WSIS as a truly multistakeholder process. Thousands more joined remotely, underscoring the accessibility and global relevance of the platform.

The event is co-organized by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), in collaboration with more than 50 UN entities. This year, I had the pleasure of being acting Chair of the event, taking over from Switzerland, and adding to the concept of WSIS Plus from last year's Chair. For South Africa it is an essential place for open dialogue, collective responsibility, and a forward-looking vision in a time of rapid digital transformation; one that remembers the successes of the past as we gauge the challenges before us and look to opportunities of the future.

WSIS Review by UNGA on 16-17 December 2025

The WSIS+20 Overall Review by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), scheduled for 16–17 December 2025, represents a pivotal moment for the global digital cooperation agenda. As the highest political body of the UN, the General Assembly's review will reaffirm international commitment to the WSIS process and provide strategic direction for the next phase of its implementation. Crucially, the review aims to strengthen and evolve the WSIS architecture, ensuring coherence across digital development efforts. This year's WSIS+20 High-Level Event helped lay the groundwork, with inclusive "Knowledge Café" dialogues where stakeholders collectively explored pathways to enhance institutional coordination, bridge implementation gaps, and shape a shared vision for a people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society beyond 2025. The UNGA review offers the opportunity to

anchor that vision at the highest level and chart a course for the next two decades of digital transformation guided by multistakeholder collaboration and the global goals.

Digital Implementation Framework Through the WSIS Action Lines

Over the past twenty years, WSIS has evolved into a cornerstone of global digital cooperation grounded in the principles of inclusivity, development, and shared responsibility. From its beginnings in Geneva and Tunis, WSIS has offered a trusted architecture for advancing ICTs in support of sustainable development. With the Geneva Plan of Action and the Tunis Agenda as its foundation, the WSIS architecture has guided national and international efforts to expand connectivity, empower users, and bridge digital divides.

At this critical juncture, the 2025 event provided a platform not only to reflect on the progress made, but to recalibrate our strategies for the future. Across more than 200 sessions, including regulator and ministerial roundtables, UN leaders' dialogues, and thematic workshops, among others, participants looked at the impact of WSIS over the years. But this was done with a view towards the future, and how to continue supporting governance, inclusion, security, development, and human rights, particularly within the context of digital rights and personal data.

With growing momentum around emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum and space technologies, renewed commitments to implementing the framework of the WSIS Action Lines, and the recent adoption of the Global Digital Compact (GDC), this year's event served as a space to reaffirm the WSIS architecture as the implementation platform for a shared digital future.

This year's gathering took place at a time of significant digital progress and growing global disparity. Two decades on, the WSIS architecture continues to support and accelerate digital development. The rapid evolution of digital technologies has transformed societies, economies, and governance, but this growth has also widened gaps between developed and developing countries, creating inequality that requires urgent attention and coordinated actions.

Today, 5.5 billion people, or 68% [1] of the global population, are online. This is up from fewer than 1 billion in 2005. Notably, 79% of youth aged 15–24 are connected, and 65% of women now use the internet, marking substantial progress in bridging gender and generational divides. Global efforts like the Giga initiative have connected over 280,000 schools, laying the groundwork for more inclusive access to knowledge. These achievements were made possible through sustained engagement across the WSIS process, including the WSIS Forum, the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), and coordinated UN efforts through the United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS), which exemplifies cross-cutting digital cooperation in action.

However, progress remains uneven as 2.6 billion people remain excluded from the opportunities provided by meaningful connectivity. Many of them are in developing and least developed countries, small island developing states, and marginalized communities. This is particularly relevant across the continent of Africa, which reinforces the urgent need to sustain and accelerate digital growth while addressing regional disparities in connectivity, affordability, and digital literacy. The WSIS architecture provides the global

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[1] ITU facts and figures 2024: https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/facts-figures-2024/

mechanisms to coordinate such efforts, supporting an equitable and people-centered digital transformation.

Digital Governance in an Age of Unpredictable Progress

Given the rapid pace of technological change, digital governance is no longer a future issue; it is something that needs to be continually addressed, particularly as we look towards the next 20 years and beyond. So, to build on years of work across the UN system, we must offer sustained perspectives on the role of emerging technology as they relate to governance, labour, and education with a view towards social and economic development. Held in conjunction with the WSIS Forum, the AI for Good Global Summit offered an in-depth look at how AI is being applied to address SDGs and other global goals, as well as the importance of standards in supporting this aim.

Stakeholders sounded the alarm that many countries, especially developing ones, remain on the sidelines of leading technological developments. Capacity gaps, lack of local data, and insufficient access to infrastructure prevent many communities and groups from meaningfully engaging in building the digital future. In this context, the WSIS architecture can play a central role in democratizing development in emerging tech by supporting capacity building, governance dialogue, and standardization efforts across regions. Achieving this requires that we reflect on how we achieve true inclusivity in our multistakeholder engagements.

Throughout the week, discussions around digital governance converged on the need for functional governance models focused on fostering innovation, maximizing societal benefit, managing risk, and ensuring ethical use. Experts emphasized that effective governance of digital technologies requires interoperability among standards bodies, coordination across UN agencies, and consistent alignment with the SDGs and other global goals, as well as human rights perspectives.

Digital governance is not only about regulation, but also about inclusion, culture, context and innovation. Models and systems must reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of our world and ensure that developing countries can contribute to and benefit from AI on equal footing. The WSIS Action Lines offer a pathway to ensure that digital and AI transformations remain anchored in shared values and global development objectives.

Cultural Diversity and Identity, Linguistic Diversity and Local Content

Sessions throughout the week reaffirmed the role of the WSIS Forum as complementary multistakeholder spaces where issues of cultural, linguistic, and Indigenous knowledge are championed. This platform is vital in the context of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) and in shaping ethical and inclusive digital ecosystems. WSIS implementation activities have supported digital transformation in the cultural sector, with a call for greater support for "digital diversity", especially as data-hungry technologies like AI risk reinforcing exclusion if trained on non-representative content.

An Emphasis on the Importance of Youth

The WSIS+20 Youth Special Track brought together 280 youth participants for intergenerational dialogue and youth-led sessions. Activities included high-level dialogues, thematic workshops, a Youth Outcome Session, and a side event, all aimed at amplifying youth voices in shaping the future digital landscape. The track emphasized the need for structured, sustained youth engagement in WSIS processes, proposing youth co-leadership roles and permanent representation in decision-making spaces.

Participants highlighted the importance of ethical, inclusive, and locally rooted AI, showcasing innovations such as AI tools in African languages and climate-focused tech. The idea of net-positive technology was advanced, stressing ethical audits, circular design, and alignment with sustainability goals. Digital capacity building remained a top priority, with calls for a permanent WSIS Youth Programme focused on training and mentorship in AI and green tech.

Youth also advocated for greater local engagement with WSIS, proposing a WSIS Youth Grassroots Fund to support community-led initiatives, open data networks, and rights-based digital inclusion. Outcomes from the Track fed into the WSIS+20 Youth Outcome Report, contributing to the UNGA review and shaping a more inclusive WSIS beyond 2025.

Building Infrastructure for a More Connected, Inclusive and Resilient Future

Since its inception, the WSIS architecture has recognized the foundational role of ICT infrastructure in enabling sustainable development. Today, digital networks are not only economic drivers but also a critical element for social development through connectivity. This is something we are beginning to understand is a fundamental human right across all levels of government.

Technical standardization has become increasingly significant, linking technology to human rights, e-commerce, and cybersecurity. Stakeholders called for the WSIS process to further strengthen its role as a convening interface between relevant stakeholders, ensuring standards are geared towards supporting inclusive and resilient digital societies.

Inclusion has been central to the WSIS Action Lines from the outset; 2025's High-Level Event further underscored the idea that inclusion must go beyond access to encompass affordability, meaningful connectivity, digital skills, and the ability for individuals to fully participate in society. Moreover, digital transformation must empower individuals and communities to exercise their rights (both human rights as well as digital rights) and expand opportunities at every level, from national to local, as well as across gender, generational, and income gaps.

Emerging technologies have raised new challenges for digital inclusion. These relate to resilient infrastructure, capacity building, ethics, language, regulation, and access. As such, communities need to be represented for their cultures, perspectives, and languages to be actively included in future digital ecosystems. As such the WSIS will be a key factor in anticipating, and indeed mitigating, these risks and biases by providing coordinated mechanisms in digital systems.

Enabling Environment

Sessions across the week acknowledged the growing role of digital technology as a driver of economic growth. The WSIS architecture has enabled sustained dialogue between governments, the private sector, and civil society, among others, on the intersection of digital economy, data governance, and human rights. At the same time, the rise of platform economies, emerging technology, and automation has introduced new labour challenges.

Given the disparities in technological development, there was a clear need to establish best practices to learn from each other. This would mean involving all stakeholders in governance and policymaking. This must include agile and responsive regulatory frameworks to keep pace with the ever-changing digital landscape. To be sure, cross-sectoral regulation can only be successful through collaboration. What is more, there was also consensus for closed collaboration with the private sector.

Capacity Building

Indeed, capacity development has been a cornerstone of the WSIS architecture and one of its most enduring legacies. Over the past two decades, the WSIS process has contributed to the development of human and institutional capacity through initiatives such as ambassadorships, training programmes, and digital literacy efforts supported by UN agencies, Member States, and civil society partners.

This year's deliberations underscored that while progress has been made in individual skill-building, there remains a significant gap in capacity development. For digital transformation to be meaningful and sustainable, especially in developing and least developed countries, institutions must be equipped with the tools, governance structures, and long-term strategies needed to respond to rapid technological shifts.

WSIS mechanisms should intensify their focus on institutional strengthening, particularly within public administrations, to ensure digital policy implementation is locally grounded, context-sensitive, and future-ready. It was also emphasized that capacity development is a shared responsibility, requiring coordinated action from governments, academia, international organizations, and the private sector.

The WSIS process itself has shaped not only what we govern in the digital age, but how we govern. Even before the global shift brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, WSIS had pioneered the use of remote participation and hybrid formats, enabling inclusive engagement across geographies and stakeholder groups.

Over the years, WSIS processes have encouraged more agile, holistic, and evidence-based policy approaches, supported by a growing community of practice and a rich collection of case studies and success stories. As a result, WSIS has become a collective approach to reducing duplication and accelerating policy development worldwide.

Stakeholders called for enhanced focus on capacity building within WSIS-related dialogues, particularly with respect to the way digital transformation affects job quality, social protections, and workers' skills, especially for marginalized groups. Going forward, the WSIS architecture can serve as a bridge across sectors and regions by micro-targeting the needs of communities through WSIS and tackle environmental challenges according to the needs of each region.

ICT Applications

Over the past twenty years, WSIS Action Lines have provided a unifying framework to advance this digital—development nexus. From e-agriculture and telemedicine to distance learning and smart cities, digital technologies have become essential enablers across sectors. The WSIS-SDG Matrix, developed collaboratively by WSIS UN co-organizers, has helped align and track the contribution of WSIS implementation activities toward achieving global goals. WSIS Stocktaking has recorded 15,000+ projects globally, many of which contribute directly to SDG progress, demonstrating how ICTs can drive inclusive and sustainable development.

A growing emphasis is now placed on the dual imperative of accelerating digitalization while addressing its environmental footprint. Participants stressed that a just and sustainable digital transformation requires continued attention to green digital solutions, responsible consumption, and climate-resilient infrastructure. These conversations further solidified the role of the WSIS architecture as a trusted multistakeholder mechanism for linking digital innovation with human development and planetary sustainability.

Media and the Future of WSIS

Since 2003–2005, the media landscape has undergone a profound transformation. Social media and digital platforms have democratized content creation and dissemination, empowering new voices and expanding local and cultural content online. However, this democratization has been accompanied by new risks, particularly disinformation and hate speech.

This year's WSIS+20 High-Level Event reaffirmed the value of the WSIS Forum and the Internet Governance Forum as global platforms to deliberate on information integrity, trustworthy content, and the future of the public sphere. These issues are increasingly urgent as AI tools are now widely used to generate and amplify content, raising complex questions around source verification, copyright, bias, data rights, and governance.

Discussions called for new governance models that preserve freedom of expression while protecting democratic institutions and the public interest. The evolving digital content landscape must remain rooted in UN values, while ensuring that multilingualism, diversity, and inclusion remain central pillars of the WSIS framework.

Empowering Communities through Access

Participants emphasized the need for the WSIS architecture to reinvigorate the conceptual linkages between data, information, and knowledge. In a time when AI systems are trained on vast quantities of data, much of which lacks transparency and provenance, questions around ethical data use, consent, and cultural sensitivity are gaining prominence.

Calls were made to integrate the Digital Public Goods (DPG) concept more deeply into WSIS implementation—particularly as DPGs offer a critical path toward equitable access to digital resources and knowledge systems. This includes open-source software, open data, and inclusive content

repositories that can help developing countries build capacity and engage meaningfully in the digital economy.

Ethics for an Ever-Evolving Future

Human rights and ethics have long been central to the WSIS architecture, with dedicated attention through WSIS Action Lines and reinforced by multistakeholder dialogue spaces such as the WSIS Forum and the IGF. As digital technologies become more deeply embedded in our societies, the call for human-rights-based and ethical conduct has grown more urgent.

Present frameworks focused on AI aim to safeguard human dignity, autonomy, privacy, and non-discrimination in the digital era. The High-Level Event highlighted the continued importance of integrating ethical and rights-based approaches into technology design and deployment, especially as AI systems become more pervasive. The WSIS architecture, with its legacy of inclusive and anticipatory governance, provides an essential foundation for addressing such cross-cutting human rights challenges.

Roundtable discussions emphasized the growing complexity and urgency of cybersecurity concerns. Continued investment in mitigation strategies is essential to safeguard users and systems, particularly in light of emerging technologies that present both new risks and vulnerabilities. Special attention was given to child online protection and the need to address threats such as AI-powered cyberattacks, deepfakes, and digital fraud. There was a strong call for international cooperation to establish shared standards and protections, recognizing that digital threats transcend borders and require a coordinated global response.

Emerging Technologies Require International Cooperation

Participating delegates called for a balanced and collaborative approach to emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence. While recognizing the transformative potential of AI for economic growth, cultural preservation, and language diversity, ministers stressed the importance of skills development, infrastructure investment, and knowledge sharing to ensure that all countries can benefit equitably. They supported a draft recommendation that clearly outlines the role of the ITU in coordinating strengthened cooperation among governments and other stakeholders, underlining the need for inclusive, global engagement in navigating the complexities of emerging digital trends.

These institutions must be further empowered through political support, financial investment, and inclusive engagement to serve as implementation engines for the next chapter of WSIS partnerships. Together, through these mechanisms and guided by UNGIS' coordination, we can realize a shared vision of people-centered, inclusive, and sustainable digital societies that benefit all regions and all people, especially in the face of AI and emerging technologies.

Ensuring Confidence in ICTs and Their Future

Since it began, the WSIS process has emphasized the foundational role of trust and security in building an inclusive Information Society. These principles remain as vital today as they were twenty years ago, if not more so. WSIS Action Line C5 has served as a key pillar in promoting confidence, safety, and resilience in

the use of ICTs. Today's digital threats are increasingly complex, from cybercrime and infrastructure vulnerabilities to online harms like disinformation. At this year's event, stakeholders reiterated the need to strengthen national and regional cybersecurity capacities, especially in developing countries, and to empower regulators to manage evolving risks across digital ecosystems.

WSIS mechanisms can help bridge conversations between human rights, data protection, network resilience including submarine cables and space communications, and technical standardization. They are also uniquely positioned to complement the peace and security frameworks emerging within the wider UN system. Ensuring digital trust requires not only secure technology, but also inclusive norms, strong institutions, shared accountability across all sectors, and capacity building.

From Global to Local Cooperation

The institutional architecture established by WSIS in 2003 and 2005 has proven to be both robust and agile, enabling the global community to navigate two decades of accelerating digital transformation. It has built the foundation for today's inclusive and coordinated international digital cooperation, bringing together UN agencies, governments, civil society, academia, the private sector, and the technical community.

At the heart of this architecture lies the UNGIS, which coordinates the implementation of WSIS outcomes across the UN system. As a clear demonstration of cross-cutting UN digital cooperation in action, UNGIS brings coherence to agency-specific mandates and supports interagency synergies that benefit all regions. Importantly, the WSIS mechanisms have demonstrated that multistakeholder and multilateral governance are not opposing approaches, but complementary forces that must evolve together to be more transparent, accountable, and inclusive.

The WSIS Stocktaking platform acts as a rich well of resources. It is simultaneously a repository database that showcases projects that successfully and meaningfully connect the Action Lines with the global goals, as well as the with the GDC, which ITU continues to maintain and strengthen. Additionally, the WSIS Prizes continue to stand as a successful platform for recognizing those very implementation efforts of projects on the ground.

Outcomes and Commitments

The WSIS outcomes continue to provide a reliable and adaptable roadmap for addressing the opportunities and challenges of digital transformation. Their emphasis on people-centered, development-oriented digital societies is more relevant than ever in an age shaped by AI, big data, and emerging ethical questions around digital use and governance.

This year's discussions highlighted the enduring success of WSIS multistakeholder mechanisms, such as the IGF and WSIS Forum, in addition to the adopted GDC. These platforms have successfully adapted their agendas and modalities in response to both long-standing challenges and new technological frontiers, ensuring that no issue is too new or too complex to be addressed inclusively.

The WSIS+20 High-Level Event 2025 has made it clear that the future of digital cooperation must be informed by the past, not constrained by it. As we look towards the WSIS Review in December 2025, WSIS+20 participants reaffirmed the need for flexible, anticipatory, and inclusive governance that reflects diverse regional realities, stakeholder perspectives, and evolving technological capacities.

There was strong consensus that *existing mechanisms*, including the WSIS Forum and the IGF, as well as initiatives like the AI for Good Global Summit, are not only relevant but indispensable. Their UN legitimacy, proven multistakeholder methodologies, and global reach make them ideal platforms to implement the GDC and translate its principles into measurable action.

WSIS To Guide Digital Development Beyond 2025

There was broad agreement that the WSIS process should continue to be the central platform for advancing digital cooperation. Ministers reaffirmed the ITU's leading role and emphasized the importance of multistakeholder collaboration – particularly on complex issues like cybersecurity and digital inclusion. Language preservation and cultural diversity were highlighted as areas where international cooperation can play a vital role. In discussing WSIS beyond 2025, participants strongly advocated for a clearer articulation that the GDC must align with and reinforce the WSIS process, avoiding duplication and ensuring coherence in global digital governance.

The Vision Going Forward

At its core, WSIS is about inclusion. Over twenty years, the WSIS architecture has enabled governments, the private sector, civil society, the technical community, and youth to engage in shaping digital policy in ways that reflect their priorities, perspectives, and realities.

WSIS helped place digital transformation on the global agenda in 2005 – and since then, has made it possible for countless actors to participate in global discussions. But much remains to be done. Many marginalized communities, developing countries, and vulnerable groups still lack the resources or recognition to make their voices heard.

Looking ahead, the WSIS architecture must continue working to close gaps, particularly with respect to creating a robust monitoring system, establishing clear targets for the Action Lines, and incorporating these into the existing WSIS framework to track progress in an ever-changing landscape. This would help establish a clear way to measure progress and gauge needs. As such, the WSIS Forum must continue to provide this proven, effective multistakeholder platform for consultations, sharing, and partnerships, which is an important mechanism for planning the work of the WSIS Action Lines. Beyond this, as we step into the next phase, WSIS Action Lines facilitators will prove essential as they look to produce roadmaps in line with the existing Action Line Roadmaps C2, C4, C5, and C6 at the annual WSIS Forum.

Stakeholders reaffirmed that the WSIS Forum and the IGF, as inclusive, multistakeholder spaces, should serve as convergence points to streamline global digital governance that makes it easier for local authorities to implement those frameworks. To be sure, since local and regional governments are at the forefront of the implementation of concrete actions, coordination for how to apply global frameworks to a local context is vital in ensuring success.

Above all, participants agreed that true inclusion is not only about being present, but about being heard, and that inevitably requires that we do more to include those that are not yet included. Given the necessary relationship needed between global and local approaches, it is clear that the focus must be on reflecting diverse experiences and needs. This remains essential to delivering on the WSIS vision of an inclusive, people-centered information society, by doing so right in our cities and communities.

The challenge now is to scale what works, fix what does not, and deepen what matters. The spirit of Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005 lives on in more than just declarations, but in the actions of millions of WSIS stakeholders working every day to build digital societies that leave no one behind. Let us now step into the next 20 years of WSIS with hope and determination to further deepen our resolve to a more equitable digital world.