

SUMMARY

Charting the Path Forward for the WSIS+20 Review: A conversation with the WSIS+20 Co-Facilitators

Friday, 11 July 2025, 15:00–15:30 (UTC+02:00)

Room C, Palexpo and remote

<https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2025/Agenda/Session/539>

The session was co-moderated by Mr. Thomas Schneider, Ambassador and Director of International Affairs, Office Fédéral de la Communication (OFCOM), Switzerland and Ms. Cynthia Lesufi, Minister Counsellor and Chair of ITU Council Working Group on WSIS&SDG, South Africa. The session was an interactive dialogue with H.E. Mr. Ekitela Lokaale, Permanent Representative of Kenya to the United Nations, and H.E. Ms. Suela Janina, Permanent Representative of Albania to the United Nations, who serve as co-facilitators guiding the comprehensive review of the implementation of the World Summit on the Information Society outcomes by the UN General Assembly (WSIS+20).

Opening Remarks and Session Objective

In his opening remarks, Amb. Mr. Thomas Schneider highlighted that the WSIS process has been ongoing for over 20 years and has significantly shaping global digital policy. This session aimed to discuss WSIS's current status, future direction, and the crucial role of global digital cooperation in advancing the information society.

Ms. Cynthia Lesufi emphasized that the digital divide remains one of the biggest global challenges. Despite progress, many regions still lack access to digital infrastructure, education, and affordable internet. She raised the question of what steps should be taken to ensure the next phase of the WSIS process focuses on digital inclusion, making sure no country or community is left behind in the evolving digital era.

Perspectives from the WSIS+20 Co-Facilitators

H.E. Ms. Suela Janina expressed appreciation for everyone involved in the productive WSIS Forum week, particularly ITU for organizing it. She emphasized the importance of reviewing progress and identifying challenges amid new technologies. She noted significant progress in connectivity—from 700 million people connected in 2003 to over 5 billion now—but highlighted that 2.6 billion remain unconnected. Beyond connectivity, affordability is a barrier, as many connected people lack meaningful access.

She also raised concerns about the widening gender divide, noting that many unconnected individuals are women and girls, primarily in the Global South. Addressing this divide required international cooperation, investments in technology, and efforts to improve digital literacy for marginalized groups. She emphasized the need to build upon the successful multistakeholder model to overcome current and future challenges.

H.E. Mr. Ekitela Lokaale thanked the moderators and participants for the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions. He reaffirmed that the original WSIS vision—a people-centered, inclusive Information Society—remained highly relevant. This vision had driven remarkable progress, with

nearly 70% of the global population connected today, compared to just 20 years ago. He noted that the focus must now shift to the 2.6 billion people still unconnected, ensuring they are not left behind.

He stressed the importance of returning to fundamentals to extend connectivity and highlighted deliberate efforts to create inclusive spaces for all stakeholders to participate in the current WSIS review. He encouraged contributions from diverse groups, including youth, women, and Indigenous communities, so their voices and aspirations would be reflected in the final outcome document.

Reflections and Interactive Feedback

Amb. Mr. Thomas Schneider shared reflections from his recent experiences with the WSIS+20 Co-Facilitators, having spent a week at the IGF in Norway and another week in Geneva attending two major events: the WSIS+20 High-Level Event and the AI for Good Summit. He noted the diversity of stakeholders met—around 11,000 people from all over the world—highlighting how New York, Oslo, and Geneva each represent distinct traditions and focuses within the broader WSIS framework.

He invited participants to share their main takeaways and encouraged brief interactive feedback. The floor was opened for questions and comments.

Participant Contributions

There were several questions and interventions from the floor.

Discussions focused on the need to re-establish national multistakeholder processes to renew commitment to the WSIS Action Lines. These processes were viewed as essential for broadening participation and ensuring that diverse perspectives are reflected—particularly on topics such as e-learning and lifelong learning in the context of advancing AI.

Concerns were raised that many government officials may be unfamiliar with the WSIS Process, highlighting the importance of education and engagement across all sectors of society. It was suggested that efforts should not focus solely on governments but also include wider public awareness to ensure shared understanding and participation.

The need for more national and multinational multistakeholder dialogues was emphasized as a way to mobilize collective action.

The discussion also highlighted a gap between the work of UN Resident Coordinators at the national level—particularly in peace-related areas—and WSIS and IGF processes. Strengthening this connection was recommended to improve collaboration and the effectiveness of WSIS and IGF efforts at the country level. There were also calls for a stronger, permanently supported WSIS and IGF Secretariat, with adequate resources at both headquarters and national levels.

Another point raised was that in some contexts, basic needs such as energy and water must be addressed before digital connectivity can be meaningfully pursued. Stakeholders were encouraged to consider how to support fundamental infrastructure and improve overall quality of life as part of broader digital development strategies.

Responses from WSIS+20 Co-Facilitators

H.E. Mr. Ekitela Lokaale acknowledged the inputs and stressed the strong recommendation to strengthen and make the IGF permanent, including national and regional IGFs, with sustainable funding.

He also agreed that the issue of 2.6 billion unconnected people is not solely a WSIS challenge but linked to deeper structural problems such as economic systems, sovereign debt, poverty, and population growth. He emphasized that WSIS discussions should be integrated into broader development, human rights, peace, and security conversations, given their interconnected nature.

H.E. Ms. Suela Janina concurred with her colleague's points and added that everyone has a role to play in addressing current challenges. She highlighted the effectiveness of the multistakeholder approach internationally but acknowledged that more effort is needed at the country level. She underscored the importance of integrating UN mechanisms like resident coordinators and capacity-building efforts locally. Governments and communities must actively support and adapt multistakeholder models.

She acknowledged the harsh realities many people face and highlighted that, in difficult situations across various parts of the world, connectivity may not be the immediate priority or primary aspiration. She emphasized that sustainable development and digital inclusion are deeply interconnected, with technology serving as an enabler for sustainable development. She concluded by noting that the period until December presents a valuable opportunity to build processes that advance the Sustainable Development Goals and benefit everyone globally.

Closing Reflections

Ms. Cynthia Lesufi thanked the participants and invited the Co-Facilitators to share their perspectives on the achievements of the WSIS process to date. She asked how the WSIS+20 Review is viewed in terms of reflecting on these achievements and building on past successes.

H.E. Mr. Ekitela Lokaale observed the strong engagement within the WSIS community—including civil society, technical groups, the private sector, and member states—highlighting their passion and energy. He outlined the WSIS+20 Review process: the release of the elements paper on June 20 as a conversation starter, the extension of the deadline for written submissions to July 25 to allow broader participation, and plans to produce a zero draft outcome document by late August.

He mentioned an upcoming informal virtual consultation for all stakeholders shortly after the submission deadline to facilitate open dialogue between member states and multistakeholders. Formal negotiations would then begin, with consultations continuing through October and November. The goal was to reach a consensual outcome document for adoption at the high-level meeting in New York on December 16–17. He encouraged all participants to submit written contributions for consideration in drafting the zero draft.

H.E. Ms. Suela Janina agreed that WSIS has proven successful as a global platform fostering dialogue and collaboration toward a people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society. However, she emphasized the need to revisit WSIS's foundational goals to build on this success and avoid stagnation. Despite progress, significant challenges remain—such as bridging the digital divide, ensuring equal participation, and leveraging ICTs for sustainable development. She called for collective commitment at this crucial moment: "Let's walk this talk together."

In closing, the co-moderators thanked the WSIS+20 Co-Facilitators for their insights and the participants for their contributions and takeaways. The WSIS Forum continues to serve as a platform for multistakeholder dialogue, fostering collaboration and shared commitment towards advancing the WSIS Action Lines and shaping an inclusive digital future.

