WSIS FORUM 2026

6-10 July 2026
Geneva, Switzerland

Session Outcome Document

Sustainable financing for digital development: Evidence building and experience sharing on mobilising domestic public resources and community-led partnerships

https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2026/Agenda/Session/116 - **ROOM G, 15.00-15.45, 22 June 2026**

Key Issues discussed

1. The WSIS financing gap is structural and long-standing
Financing for digital development has been under-addressed since the original WSIS process in 2003, and was one of the most contested and least-resolved issues in the WSIS+20 negotiations.

2. Two competing paradigms shaped (and continue to shape) the debate – the UNGIS Task Force has to choose
The original WSIS (2003 and 2005) framing was oriented towards a development-impact (financing for *sustainable* development enabled by technology) and most developing countries persisted with this approach during the WSIS+20 process. Most developed countries tended to frame the issue around the financing of digital governance and infrastructure. This leaves the UNGIS Task Force with a choice as to which paradigm to adopt for its work. The choice seems obvious if one is to honour the WSIS vision and most speakers repeatedly stressed that the conversation should be people-centred and development-led, not technology-led.

3. The traditional blended finance model has largely failed to deliver
Referred to as 'public-private partnerships' during and after the WSIS the assumption has been that concessional public finance would leverage significant private capital (the "multiplier effect"). But this has not materialised in practice. Evidence suggests public concessional finance has more often leveraged further public finance rather than de-risking private investment at scale. And the flow of private sector investment very rarely, if ever, reached poor countries and underserved regions where investment is most needed. This points to the importance of mobilising public resources, but this is challenging as outlined below.

4. Domestic public resource mobilisation faces compounding structural constraints
Two constraints stand out: The inability of Global South governments to tax the virtualised operations of multinational corporations, and, historically high debt-servicing burdens that outweigh digital/ICT budgets in several African countries. Debt servicing exceeds health and food-security spending in 25 of 54 countries in Africa studied by one of the speakers. Examples cited included external debt servicing at 18x Nigeria's Ministry of Digital Economy budget, 45x Kenya's ICT sector budget, 54x Uganda's digital transformation budget, and 64x Tanzania's ICT ministry budget.

5. A significant gap exists between large-scale infrastructure investment and financing for last/middle mile connectivity. Development finance is structurally biased toward large transactions (e.g., large telecom operators, fibre backhaul, data centres) because they carry lower relative transaction costs, leaving local access and community-centred connectivity models — which could serve the estimated 2+ billion people still unconnected — poorly matched to existing financing architecture.

6. Institutional investors and existing African financial architecture remain significantly under-leveraged for digital development

This includes pension funds, insurance companies, sovereign wealth funds, and the continent's 11 multilateral financial institutions (combined balance sheet of ~US$70 billion).

Key Outcomes of the session

Key insights and findings that present useful considerations for the UNGIS Inter-agency Task Force on Financing Digital Development as it starts its work

- Development actors (not only the digital/technology community) need to lead financing discussions, to ensure digital financing is understood within the broader development finance context rather than as a standalone technology agenda.
- National autonomy and sovereignty over investment priorities emerged as a cross-cutting concern, particularly given growing power asymmetries in the AI-driven digital economy.
- A "financing bridge" — rather than a micro/macro trade-off — is needed to channel macro-level capital toward community-led, locally rooted connectivity solutions.
- Ministries of ICT/Digital Economy generally have weaker familiarity with development finance institutions and mechanisms than Ministries of Finance, creating a capacity and navigation gap.
- There is a capacity gap at the level of donor-countries, agencies and investors who often lack an understanding of development challenges faced by those most in need of financial support
- Blended-financing solutions are not an easy fix. They have failed to deliver in many cases. Public resources remain a key source of support, but faces structural constraints.

Announcements, launches, or new initiatives presented

- **Proposed WSIS Help Desk** (presented by OFCOM/Switzerland): a liaison and signposting mechanism — not a new institution or parallel policy body — to connect Member States and stakeholders to existing, currently fragmented financing mechanisms. Builds on a recommendation from the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation and on two OFCOM non-papers (June 2025 and March 2026) proposing an integrated WSIS implementation architecture (IGF → UNGIS → WSIS Forum → SG biennial report → CSTD/ECOSOC → back to IGF).
- **Proposed multistakeholer advisory group to complement UNGIS**, grounded in the São Paulo Multistakeholder Guidelines, already beginning to take shape through UNGIS's multistakeholder collaboration groups.
- **ITU/UNCTAD Digital Infrastructure Investment Catalyzer**, launched at the 2025 Financing for Development Forum in Seville as part of the Seville Platform for Action — an open working group connecting MDBs, DFIs, private tech companies, and civil society to share tools, templates, data, and capacity-building resources, and to help structure investable projects.
- **ITU exploration of the role of Universal Service Funds (USFs)** for the provision of the non-returnable capital in blended finance mechanisms.
- **APC's work on micro-level blended finance intermediaries** (with FCDO and Sida support) exploring how capital can be channelled through specialised intermediaries to community connectivity initiatives, distinct from the macro-level blended finance models critiqued elsewhere in the session.
- **UNGIS Inter-Agency Task Force on Financing** confirmed as formally established (mandated under para. 67 of the WSIS+20 Outcome Document, coordinated by ITU as UNGIS Secretariat), though its first meeting has not yet taken place.

Agreements, collaborations, or commitments made

- Recognition that approaches to financing ICT enabled development remains a key and not effectively addressed challenge
- Broad convergence that the Task Force should build on existing mechanisms rather than create new institutions ("integration rather than proliferation").
- Task Force (via UNDESA) committed to three working priorities: (1) disaggregating evidence on financing gaps by country/context, (2) building on and mapping existing mechanisms rather than duplicating them, and (3) producing practical, actionable recommendations for the CSTD in 2027.
- Speakers welcomed continued dialogue between the Task Force and session participants, with APC and ACET specifically offering to contribute ongoing evidence and field experience.

Key Recommendations and Forward-Looking Actions

- **Ground the Task Force's work in David Souter's four framing questions** — (1) what is the actual goal (sustainable development vs. digital development for its own sake); (2) what is the right starting point (development challenges vs. technological possibilities); (3) who should lead (development community vs. digital community, ideally jointly, with development actors at the forefront); and (4) how to protect national autonomy and sovereignty over the priorities of investors.
- **Pursue reform of the global financial architecture in parallel with WSIS-specific financing work**, including sovereign debt relief and the ongoing UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation negotiations, rather than treating digital financing as separable from broader development finance reform.
- **Mobilise under-utilised domestic and regional capital pools** — e.g., African pension/insurance/sovereign wealth fund allocations to alternative assets (currently far below prudential limits, as in Ghana's ~1% vs. 25% allowable), and better coordination across Africa's 11 multilateral financial institutions — as a more immediately actionable lever than new external financing instruments.
- **Advance the proposed WSIS Help Desk as the practical "front door"** to whatever financing map the Task Force produces, prioritising support for Ministries of ICT/Digital Economy, which typically have less development-finance fluency than Ministries of Finance.
- **Build a dedicated financing bridge mechanism for community-centred connectivity**, using domestic public resources (e.g. universal service funds) as a concessional layer to leverage private and DFI co-investment around nationally defined priorities — distinct from, and correcting the failures of, prior large-scale blended finance approaches.