WSIS FORUM REMARKS

Thank you, Peter, for that introduction and your invitation to open the session. It's always a pleasure to work with CSTD.

It's fifteen years since WSIS ended; twenty since preparatory meetings started. I've spent a lot of that time participating in WSIS and its successors like the WSIS Forum and the IGF, and thinking and writing about its impact – including the five and ten year reviews by CSTD, the review of WSIS targets by the ITU, and the ten year review by the General Assembly.

I'm often asked about WSIS' legacy, and I say that it's significant though hard to disentangle from the extraordinary changes there've been in information and communications since the Summit.

So what's been achieved? I'll start with the scale of change.

First, the technology's advanced beyond all expectations. The capabilities of digital devices and networks today are a thousand times and more what they were during the Summit. We've gone from analogue to digital, fixed to mobile, narrowband to broadband, 2G to 5G. We've seen the dawn of cloud computing, big data, the internet of things. We're watching the deployment of artificial intelligence.

Technology's accelerating. We're seeing an emergent digital society. We're always on the threshold of the new.

The uses of technology have also changed enormously.

I remember walking into Geneva during WSIS with a friend excitedly using her mobile phone to find the restaurant we sought. It was the dawn of mobile internet and wasn't easy. Today, our phones are multipurpose digital devices, far more capable than PCs back then. Other devices, apps and services are central to many people's lives: social media, audio and video streaming, smart speakers, e-commerce, the gig economy, in future, maybe soon, self-driving vehicles.

Third, users, too, have changed. Digital technologies now serve mass markets. Most people worldwide have a mobile phone, and more than half the global population goes online. That's faster growth by far than we've seen in other sectors such as electricity.

The businesses that serve digital demand have turned, meanwhile, from quirky start-ups into data corporations at the highest levels of global economic power, with the political and social power that goes with that.

And, finally, the impact of this new technology has changed. At WSIS we aspired to the digital delivering development. There've been successes here and failures, but digital technology now affects the ways in which economies, societies and cultures evolve profoundly, presenting new opportunities for health and education, commerce and governance. If we think today about sustainable development, we have to think about its digital dimensions; they're inextricable.

These changes have been driven by the pace of innovation. But WSIS played an important part in focusing governments' attention on potential, enhancing the role of digital technology in economic policy, facilitating international discussion and agreement. It marked a step change in our thinking, not least in recognising the value of multistakeholder cooperation.

Rapid change has also meant that the targets set at WSIS now seem very dated. Telecentres were the big deal then; now the goal's broadband for all. Setting those targets was valuable, but WSIS' lasting legacy lies in its vision of a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society.

I've been positive so far, but we also need to think about what hasn't been achieved and recognise that problems have arisen alongside these achievements.

We were concerned about digital divides at WSIS and they've not gone away. Yes, most people worldwide now have a mobile phone, and half the global population goes online. But many people don't. Connectivity's still inaccessible or unaffordable for many, restricted by income, language or skill shortages. We're a long way from the Sustainable Development Goal of universal access. These inequalities don't just affect individuals, they're also inequalities of development and geopolitics, of global North and South.

We're more aware today of how these digital divides relate to other inequalities: between countries and within them, including inequalities of gender, ethnicity and social class. Innovation's changing economies, but it's changing wealthier economies faster than those of LDCs. Mobile phones and the internet have empowered individuals, but they've empowered those with higher incomes, better jobs and further education more than those without.

And we've identified new challenges arising from the digitalisation in economies, societies and cultures. Risks as well as opportunities. Cybersecurity. Threats to human rights, particularly privacy. The spread, alongside information, of misinformation and disinformation. Fears of surveillance. Risks posed by automation to employment. Impacts on the environment. Fears of economic dependency.

Fifteen years on from WSIS, in short, we have seen wonders, but we also wonder where we're headed. We've surpassed the aspirations for technology we had at WSIS and are moving into unmarked territory where impact's concerned. Digitalisation's advancing at a pace our institutions find it hard to manage.

It's here that the WSIS vision's crucial: that of a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society, respecting human rights, supporting sustainable development. This can't be delivered by technology alone. If we're to shape the future in a way that delivers global goals, we need partnership between governments and technology, business and civil society.

To build upon that vision, we need to do three things:

- preserve what we value in today's economies, societies and cultures;
- promote the changes that we want technology to bring;
- and prevent the things we fear.

I'll say a word about today.

This has been an extraordinary year: one that's demonstrated how we are threatened by forces outside our control.

The COVID crisis has shown our vulnerabilities. It's demonstrated the potential and the limitations of today's technology. We've adapted much better than we could have done at the time of WSIS – but not enough to prevent lasting economic damage. Digital technology has shown itself transformative in many ways, but has a way to go before it can transform the outcomes of a crisis such as this.

In five years' time the United Nations will review the twenty years since WSIS. Now's a good time to consider what the focus for that review should be. I'll suggest four things: that it should

- consider the digital society holistically and realistically, both opportunities and risks;
- relate it to other challenges facing the world community, including security, inequality and climate change;
- look at what's ahead rather than what's behind;
- and ask what we should do to shape the digital society, preserve what we value, promote what we desire and prevent what we fear from happening.

That's a challenge that is central to the purpose of CSTD in both its mandates: that to review the WSIS outcomes and that to understand and support the role of science and technology and development.

Thank you for listening.