

WSIS Forum 2020
“15 Years & Beyond: Building the Information Society of the Future”

Statement by
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*Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,*

First of all, on behalf of UNCTAD, I would like to thank our keynote speaker Mr. David Souter, our moderator Mr. Peter Major, Chair of the CSTD, our colleagues from UN Regional Commissions, the WSIS Forum 2020 organizers at ITU and all the participants calling into this workshop from all over the world.

The follow up to the World Summit on the Information Society is a crucial part of UNCTAD’s work in support of the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development, the body that was mandated by member States to do the system-wide follow up to the Summit. Over the years this has resulted in a considerable body of knowledge about the developmental implications of the information society, much of it thanks to the involvement of experts like those joining us today. That is why, as the WSIS process reaches its 15 year milestone, we thought that it could be useful to share some reflections about the dramatic changes that the information society has experienced and the pathways that it could take for the future.

We have tried to do that with our new publication “Fifteen Years Since the World Summit on the Information Society” that we are presenting today and is now

available on the UNCTAD website. Mr. David Souter, who helped us greatly in writing it has given us his perspectives on the achievements and challenges of the evolving information society. I would like to focus my own brief remarks on four trends and three related challenges that are emerging as we progress towards WSIS+20.

The first trend is the explosive growth of data. The fantastic accumulation of digital data about all aspects of human and natural life lies at the core of digitalization and underpins the development of the technologies that drive the fourth industrial revolution.

Second, the ICT business environment is changing. Today, seven of the eight largest corporations worldwide are Internet and data management businesses with most of them based in the United States and China. Due to the winner-takes-all dynamics of digital markets, the dominance of a handful of platforms poses a challenge to businesses especially those in smaller and less developed countries.

Third, the pace and unpredictability of change in the Internet Society is remarkable. The speed of technological change in some areas now exceeds the capacity of governments and citizens to adapt, exploit opportunities, minimize risks and introduce appropriate governance mechanisms.

Fourth, ICT increasingly influences the course of sustainable development. For example, digitalization opens for developing countries the opportunity to enter new value chains and diversify their productive structures, but persistent digital divides could deprive many of this opportunity. The “gig-economy” could create new jobs

in developing countries, but it could also bring uncertainty in labour markets and aggravate inequality.

Let me turn now to the three major challenges that I mentioned:

First, cybersecurity has become a top priority for governments, businesses and citizens around the world. Governments and businesses have faced threats to the integrity of their digital systems, including attacks originating from sources outside their territory. Digital security is now synonymous with national security. Also, lack of confidence in the security and trustworthiness of online services is a significant barrier to Internet use by many people, reducing the potential developmental value of online services and resources.

Second, the rapid increase of online content has raised new challenges concerning freedom of expression and the governance of harmful content. In addition to banning clearly illegal content there are attempts to address other forms of malicious content. There is growing concern over the spread of misinformation and disinformation and perceived polarization of public opinion online with potential negative effects on social and political systems and which can be partly attributed to the use of algorithms.

Third, privacy rights and data protection have drawn increased attention. Personal data and metadata, including data on personal behaviour, are now gathered by default through online activity rather than having to be sought directly from individuals. The business models of online corporations rely on the exploitation of such data to target advertising and maximize revenue, while both governments and businesses are beginning to deploy algorithms that can make life-

changing decisions. The next generation of digital technologies will greatly increase the scope and scale of exploitation of personal data and have led to growing concern in many societies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we move forward towards WSIS+20, addressing these challenges will be critical to achieve progress towards the WSIS vision. Many aspects of digital governance transcend national and international boundaries. The transnational character of leading data corporations and the non-physical character of online services and transactions raise complex questions about data ownership, jurisdiction and regulation. Different legal frameworks governing content, criminality and privacy and data protection have created opportunities to bypass national jurisdictions in ways and for purposes that may be harmful. It is also widely recognized that issues of cybersecurity require global cooperation if they are to be addressed effectively. For all these challenges, some national and regional jurisdictions have introduced frameworks to address issues, but many developing countries still lack adequate legislation. Capacity-building and the sharing of good practices are needed. But beyond individual national efforts we need to uphold and strengthen global dialogues and cooperation on digital issues.

One of the most significant governance impacts of WSIS was the importance of multistakeholder engagement in developing the discourse about the Information Society. Now we need more than ever a widespread engagement and a meaningful framework for dialogue and cooperation in tackling the challenges of digitalization so that we can “connect, respect and protect all people in the digital age” as Secretary-General Guterres calls for in his Roadmap for Digital Cooperation. The

United Nations enjoys a unique moral and political legitimacy, as well as a strong case from the pragmatic point of view, to be the central arena where that engagement takes place and policies and instruments to address those needs are adopted. The Commission on Science and Technology for Development, in particular, has supported some seminal work towards those ends, but the agenda is long and much effort remains ahead for the WSIS community. In the end, as UNCTAD has insisted in many recent documents, accelerating technological change will affect everyone but not everyone is participating in setting the pace or the direction of change. It is vital that a diversity of stakeholders become actively involved and heard if effective policies and programmes are to be developed and deployed.

As I conclude, I look forward to hearing from our colleagues from the UN Regional Commissions about their specific perspectives and experiences that without which any vision of the present and future of the Information Society could not be meaningful or lead to real development impact.

Thank you for your attention.