

Template – Session Outcome Document

(2 pages max)

Summary of Session: Reimagining the Interface between Digital Tech and the Physical Environment (Session 204)

Royal Holloway, University of London, on behalf of DESC

17 March 2023; 10.00-10.50

<https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2023/en/Agenda/Session/204>

See also: <https://ict4d2004.files.wordpress.com/2023/03/desc-sessions-wsis-2023.pdf>

Key Issues discussed (5- 8 bullet points)

This session was convened by DESC (the Digital Environment System Coalition - Secretariat provided by the UNESCO Chair in ICT4D at Royal Holloway, University of London), in association with [INIT](#) (the Inter-Islamic Network on IT), the [WWRF](#) (Wireless World Research Forum), [ICT4D.AT](#), and [RC-DISC](#) (the Research Cluster for Digital Inequality and Social Change at the University of Canberra). It built on the outcomes of [Session 403](#) the previous day, which was a walk through Geneva to discuss the interactions between the physical environment and digital technologies.

The session had three main aims:

- to share an updated overview of DESC's emerging model that challenges much existing work being undertaken on digital tech and climate change;
- to provide an update on its ongoing activities since WSIS 2022; and
- to do this in a lively and interactive way.

It was structured as follows:

- Introduction to DESC, highlighting the need to adopt a holistic approach focusing on the interaction between digital technologies and the totality of the physical environment (including the lithosphere, hydrosphere, biosphere and atmosphere – see diagram below) rather than just climate change. Indeed, a focus primarily on human-induced climate change is likely to lead to seriously adverse impacts on other dimensions of the physical environment.
- Summaries of the key points of discussion explored during the DESC walk ([WSIS Session 403](#)) the previous day, presented by the five discussion moderators (including the YouthDESC session).
- Highlights of two examples from the activities of DESC's Working Groups emphasizing why these issues matter:
 - The indigenous DESC Working Group (Poline Bala's slides were presented by Tim Unwin). This highlighted that indigenous peoples are insufficiently represented at events such as WSIS, and that they can contribute significantly to new ways of addressing the interface between digital tech and the physical environment
 - A [video presentation](#) by James Crabbe on the importance of omics for informing policy on deep sea mining.
- This was followed by an introduction to the toolkit being developed by DESC for all those who have pledged to the ITU-led Partner2Connect initiative to enable them to consider and address the environmental impact of their proposed interventions.

- The final element was a lively discussion around the issues raised, that included new commitments from participants to explore collaboration on implementing the DESC toolkit

Towards WSIS+20 and WSIS beyond 2025, please share your views on the emerging trends, challenges, achievements, and opportunities in the implementation of the WSIS Action Lines to date (5-8 bullets)

Participants agreed that the DESC framework provides a useful way of developing a holistic cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary approach to understanding the environmental impacts (both positive and negative) of digital tech on the environment (<https://ict4d.org.uk/desc/>). WSIS provides an excellent forum where these issues can be discussed because it engages many UN agencies and governments, along with researchers, civil society organisations and companies (although few of the latter were present). Such issues are insufficiently addressed explicitly in the WSIS Action Lines, although are implicit in many of them. They are also directly relevant to many of the SDGs

Tangible outcomes (such as key achievements, announcements, launches, agreements, and commitments (3-5 bullet points))

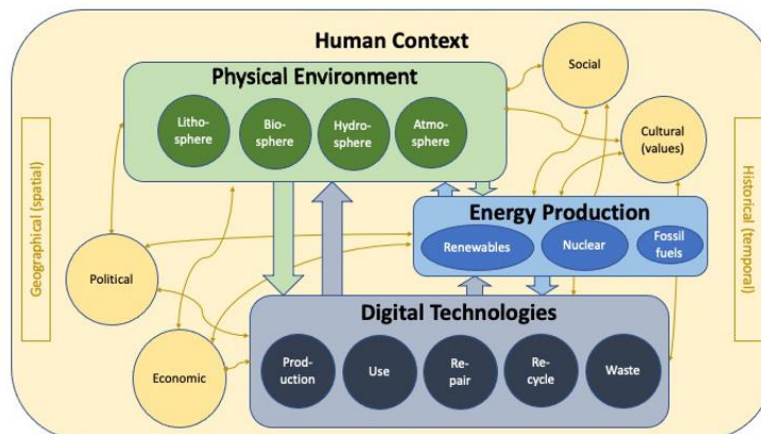
- Confirmation that the DESC provides a useful way of conceptualizing the intersections between digital tech and the environment that goes well beyond the current dominant focus on climate change and e-waste.
- Agreement to continue to work together to develop this framework and use it to shape policy

Actionable plan (2-5 points)

- The discussions have already fed directly into DESC’s emerging framework, and will help ensure a more nuanced approach to DESC’s pledges to the ITU-led Partner2Connect initiative over the coming months.
- xWe will report back to the WSIS Annual Forum in 2024, and seek to gain further traction for the initiative and its approach.

Suggestions for thematic aspects that might be included in the WSIS Forum 2024 (WSIS+20 Forum High-Level Event) (one paragraph)

Developing a comprehensive and holistic framework to understanding interactions between the physical environment and digital tech upon which sound policies at global and national scales can be implemented is essential for the survival of the human species. This would be an important HL theme for WSIS 2024



The DESC Conceptual Framework