Session Outcome Document

Towards a better understanding of the interface between digital tech and the physical environment

Organisers: The Digital Environment System Coalition (DESC), ICT4D.at and TaC-Together/YouthIGF

Thursday, 30 May 2024 16:00–16:45 (UTC+02:00)

https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2024/Agenda/Session/332

Key Issues discussed (5- 8 bullet points)
This interactive session follows commitments made at WSIS 2022 and 2023 to provide updates on recent developments in research and practice at the interface between digital tech and environmental issues. It also provided a summary of DESC's contributions to the ITU's Partner2Connect (P2C) digital coalition, which focus on a basic toolkit that companies and organisations can use and thereby change the impact that their contributions to P2C will have on the physical environment.

- The session began with an overview of DESC's mission to change perspectives on the interactions between digital tech and the environment
- Examples of ongoing work in four areas were given:
  - ICT4D.at's Regenerative Ideas Contest
  - Deep Sea Mining environmental impact
  - How complex system and AI might help towards a better understanding of the interface between digital tech and the physical environment
  - YouthDESC

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)
We recognise that WSIS plays an important role in bringing together people from many different sectors and backgrounds around a common agenda. However, to date there has been a dearth of rigorous attention in its discussions to understanding the balance between the positive and negative impacts of digital tech in a holisitic and comprehensive manner.

- The focus of the international community largely on climate change (and how digital tech can reduce carbon emissions) and more recently on e-waste is deeply problematic since it ignores many other significant harmful impacts of the use ofdigital tech on the environment
- DESC's holistic model provides a framework for understanding both the positive and negative impacts of digital tech on nature. DESC is committed to working collaboratively together with members of the ITU's Partner2Connect initiative to use this framework to examine and improve the environmental impact of initiatives developed within its orbit.

- Key areas where urgent research is required to examine the environmental impact of digital tech include outer space, deep sea mining, indigenous understandings, unusustaniable business models.
- We urgently need to start working on a new framework for understanding and evaluating the environmental impact of digital tech after 2030, and we commit to supporting initiatives through the WSIS process to achieve this.

Tangible outcomes (such as key achievements, announcements, launches, agreements, commitments, figures, and success stories (3-5 bullet points))
- Progress has been made: we now have a framework through which countries, companies and organisations can rethink their impact on the physical environment (https://ict4d.org.uk/desc)
- We welcome contributions to a book we are developing that exemplifies the full range of issues considered by DESC that we are crafting in partnership with other organisations to provide the basis for a post-2030 agenda for digital tech and the environment.

Actionable plan and key recommendations (2-5 points)
- We are committed to driving forward this crucial agenda on a day-by-day basis; failure to do so will have immense negative impact on the nature of the world in which we live.
- Our urgent request is that everyone involved in thinking about, crafting, building, selling, using and disposing of digital tech does so with their environmental impact uppermost in mind.
- We are currently seeking a new lead for @YouthDESC that we hope to have in place by September 2024 to drive forward our support for young people.

Suggestions for thematic aspects that might be included in the WSIS Forum 2025 (one paragraph)
- The environmental impact of digital tech is a critical issue for the future of humanity, but it is one that has largely been ignored within the WSIS framework to date. It would be good to consider "nature" and the "physical environment" as a key theme for next year's WSIS. We would be delighted to help the ITU and other UN agencies convene a series of sessions under this theme.