Chair's Summary

From 27 to 31 May 2024, the WSIS+20 Forum High-Level Event 2024 was held in Geneva, Switzerland, together with the AI for Good Global Summit 2024, including the UN's first AI Governance Day held on 29 May. It addressed our digital present and future by reflecting on the impact of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS), which took place twenty years ago in two phases in Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005). During this week more than 8000 participants[1] from 160 countries attended both events with thousands more joining in online.

The High-Level Event 2024 was co-hosted by the Swiss Confederation and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and co-organized by ITU, UNESCO, UNDP and UNCTAD. It was chaired by the Swiss Confederation, represented by Federal Councillor Albert Rösti, Head of the Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications (DETEC).

Anniversaries are moments for celebration but also critical reflection. Open and realistic reflections are crucial for ensuring the continuing relevance of WSIS in the coming years of profound changes driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other new and emerging technologies. Not surprisingly, therefore, the underlying question this week has been if the "WSIS glass" is half full or half empty.

The High-Level Event 2024 covered a broad spectrum of topics, including cybersecurity and trust, artificial intelligence, emerging technologies, meaningful access to infrastructure as well as content, and the digital divides. You can find enclosed the main points distilled from nearly 200 sessions, including fourteen high-level talks and a Ministerial Roundtable, summarizing the discussions as objectively as possible from the Chair's perspective.

Sustaining digital growth

Throughout the week, there were many references to the fast digital growth we have experienced over the last two decades: In 2005, when WSIS concluded, there were 972 million people online. According to the ITU, there are now approximately 67 per cent of the world's population, or 5.4 billion people, connected. However, it is estimated that 2.6 billion people still remain offline.[2] The 17-fold growth of the number of internet users between 2005 and 2024 has been spectacular. Yet, digital divides are still a reality. The digital growth must be sustained and accelerated in the coming years, if we are to realise the aim of connecting all humanity. A diverse digital growth and inclusion speed can widen existing digital and societal gaps. *Digital for the benefit of all* remains the main goal of the WSIS

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[1] 6000 physical and 2,000 remote; 500 High-Levels, including CEOs, Ministers, Heads of Organizations, Ambassadors, etc.; Gender Participation 58% male, 41% female.

[2] ITU report "Measuring digital development: Faces and Figures 2023". Available at https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/facts-figures-2023/

processes[3] and their contribution to the realisation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Cultural and linguistic diversity

Diversity, for example in language and culture, echoed in a wide range of contexts during the High-Level Event 2024. With ICTs being an enabler in all sectors of society, WSIS processes and structures offer a robust mechanism to address digitalisation across a spectrum of socio-economic issues. The digital policy landscape has become much more diverse and inclusive over the years and the UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF) as well as the annual WSIS Forum continue to offer complementary global multistakeholder platforms to discuss these matters in a holistic manner.

Twenty years ago, WSIS emphasised the importance of multilingualism and cultural diversity in the then-emerging information society. Over the years, efforts have been made to support local content creation, preserve cultural heritage online, and provide multilingual content to address digital content disparities. Moving forward, AI and digital developments should be more supportive of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032), as declared by the UN General Assembly.

WSIS implementation activities have also proven their worth in driving digital transformation in the cultural sector. There is a recognition and call for action within the WSIS community that much more must be done to foster 'digital diversity', especially in the AI era, where diversity of data and knowledge inputs will be critical for dealing with biases and adjusting AI platforms to local and cultural specificities, in particular where only limited data is available in digital form.

Infrastructure and standardisation

Since WSIS 2003–2005, ICT development has been central to the global digital conversation. The fast digital growth brought more users and more services online and made digital infrastructures part of critical infrastructures at national and international levels. The vulnerability of digital infrastructure is the vulnerability of modern society. For example, disruptions of submarine cables could leave countries in communication darkness. The expansion of satellites created a new infrastructural layer with many governance and policy issues. Advancements in mobile connectivity (e.g. around 5G and the upcoming 6G) and the fast growth of the Internet of Things sector have also raised issues of resilience, security, but also availability and accessibility.

As critical shapers of infrastructure and the overall digital realm, technical standards have constantly increased in importance. Policy communities have been focusing on non-technical aspects of standardisation, including the impact of standards on human rights, e-commerce, and cybersecurity. The WSIS processes should play a critical role as the future interfaces between technical standardisation and broader digital policy dynamics.

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[3] In this summary, the term 'WSIS' is used to refer to the whole architecture that has been set up to follow-up and implement the results of the Summits, including the UN Internet Governance Forum, the WSIS Forum, which grew out of WSIS Action Lines facilitators' meetings, and the overall UN system-wide follow-up by the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development and all other processes that work on implementing the WSIS consensus.

Inclusion

WSIS increased awareness that inclusion is much more than simple access to infrastructure. Digital technologies and services must be affordable and meaningful by providing users with digital tools to advance their well-being and prosperity as well as to exercise their fundamental rights. A holistic approach to inclusion underpins WSIS Action Lines from education to issues like health and other key areas of everyday life.

AI has brought new aspects to the discussion on digital inclusion. By not being included in the training of AI models, the cultural and societal heritage of peoples and communities can be excluded from global knowledge codified by AI. WSIS mechanisms should continue addressing the impact of emerging technologies on inclusion in the digital realm.

Economy and labour

E-commerce is an engine of digital growth. WSIS mechanisms have brought together actors who discuss economic and trade issues in the wider digital policy context of human rights, security, and data governance. Labour issues acquired additional importance with the uptake of the platform economy and the challenges brought by AI and automation for the world of work. Moving forward, WSIS processes could benefit from placing higher emphasis on labour issues in the economic context and in relation to other digital policy issues.

Digital technology and sustainable development

In 2003-2005, WSIS key outcomes were drafted in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) shaped a new societal context for digital growth. Although there is no specific SDG on digital matters, digital technologies have a cross-cutting dimension: they can serve as an enabler for achieving all SDGs, effectively becoming (as they are sometimes called) the 'invisible,18th SDG'. Over the years, we have seen digital technologies used in areas such as sustainable agriculture, accessible healthcare systems, education, and more.

The relevance of digital technologies will continue to increase with the pressure to accelerate progress in implementing SDGs. The interplay between digital and the environment remains of particular importance: while relying on technology to accelerate development and growth, the world also needs more concerted and consistent efforts to protect the environment meaningfully and sustainably for current and future generations. Using the Geneva Plan of Action and its action lines framework, the WSIS community has mapped[4] and continuously strengthened the linkages between WSIS and SDG processes in fostering faster progress towards addressing global challenges and ensuring a more inclusive, sustainable, and equitable digital society and economy.

Media and content

Since WSIS 2003-2005, the media ecosystem and the public sphere have drastically changed. Social media platforms have significantly reduced the cost of content production and dissemination, facilitating diverse voices, perspectives, and local content that contribute to more inclusive and diverse digital spaces. This has reduced the "definition power" of

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[4] In 2015, a WSIS and SDG Matrix was developed by the UN agencies involved to highlight the importance of WSIS Action Lines in accelerating the achievement of the SDGs. Available at https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/sdg

legacy media on the public discussion. At the same time, the scaling effects of platformisation have not only allowed a few companies to become big economic powers, but have also enabled the emergence of new gatekeepers for information dissemination and media consumption. The reduction of editorial responsibility and the laws of the so-called "attention economy" have facilitated the spread of extremist voices and hate speech as well as the distribution of mis- and disinformation. The evolution of the debates about media and content in the IGF and WSIS Forum over the years clearly reflect these developments.

With the increasing use of AI and data in the creation and dissemination of content and information, new issues have emerged that require dialogue but also decisions. The notions of information integrity and trustworthy content have become key issues, in particular in a year with important elections in many parts of the world. New governance models need to be found not only for platforms and AI-driven services, but also in traditional fields such as copyright verifiability and protection of sources of information.

Knowledge, information, and data

The terminological trinity of digital content - data, information and knowledge - has changed substantially since 2005. In the Tunis Agenda, information was referred to 12 times and knowledge 9 times. Data was not mentioned at all in 2003 and 2005, but it dominates the digital policy language today. AI-driven services use data as well as information and knowledge from books, videos and other forms of content to create new content in ways that are often not transparent. Therefore, WSIS mechanisms should revitalise the relevance of the concepts of data, information and knowledge to ensure transparent, fair, and inclusive AI developments.

The concept of digital public goods (DPGs) is central for managing data, information, and knowledge and accelerating realisation of SDGs.

Artificial intelligence

Generative AI (genAI) tools have accelerated the focus on AI within national, regional, and international digital governance processes. AI, however, is more than just genAI, and work on the broader policy implications of this technology has been ongoing for several years now, by a number of the UN agencies, under coordination of such mechanisms as the UN Interagency Working Group on Artificial Intelligence (IAWG-AI), and standards-setting bodies, especially under the umbrella of the World Standards Cooperation (WSC).

AI, if harnessed responsibly and in an inclusive manner, can contribute to the achievement of all 17 SDGs. This was demonstrated through a wide range of use cases over the week at the WSIS Forum and also at the AI for Good Global Summit.

In this regard, AI governance discussions have recently been centred around the management of risks, from long-term ones to immediate risks related to divides and inequalities, jobs, teaching, and market monopolies (among others).

The echoing point from the past week is that there is no lack of AI governance initiatives at the regional and international levels but there should be a continued emphasis on inclusiveness, multistakeholderism and UN core values.

The exchanges at the High-Level Event 2024 and at the AI Governance Day, organised on May 29 in conjunction with the AI for Good Global Summit, which was held in parallel, have shown that discussions on the governance of AI – often framed as something 'new' – are omnipresent in all WSIS processes.

This week's gatherings in Geneva have shown that experts from UN specialised agencies are working in their fields of competence to use the potential and minimise the risks of AI in order to achieve the 17 SDGs. The AI for Good platform - which includes the annual AI for Good Global Summit, held since 2017 – is organized by ITU with more than 40 UN partners. The latest edition of the UN Activities Report, released at the 2024 Summit, comprehensively highlights more than 400 UN use cases on AI. Many of these are the product of collaboration among UN agencies. This is key to understanding our collective toolkit and keep building on our successes.

It also has become clear and visible that all relevant international organisations mandated with technical standardisation already cooperate not only among each other, but together with experts in the field of social and economic development, human rights and inclusion so that new technologies like AI are not merely seen as technical issues, but that technology is part of all digital policies.

Moving forward, a useful approach would be to relate governance approaches to the functions they should perform, including maximizing benefits by dealing with AI risks, protecting data, and reducing the misuse of AI. And we should find ways to ensure that AI governance debates and mechanisms are more prominently anchored in the SDGs and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, for instance through placing more focus on issues of capacity building and empowering communities and groups around the world to truly leverage AI for their own development. AI should reflect cultural, linguistic, and societal traditions, especially of developing countries that do not currently have enough capacity to develop AI models based on their data and knowledge.

Human Rights and ethical considerations

Human rights based and ethical conduct and decision-making have become top priorities as technology becomes more pervasive. Building on the WSIS call (through a dedicated Action Line) for consideration to be given to the ethical dimension of the information society, ethical and human rights-based guidelines and principles have been or are being put in place for the development and use of emerging and advanced digital technologies, including AI.

UN agencies, such as OHCHR and UNESCO, have developed ethical and human rights frameworks for AI and advanced global dialogues in this regard, whereas dialogue platforms like the IGF and the WSIS Forum have enabled multistakeholder and multidisciplinary discussions on the ethical implications of digital technologies. A more careful reflection to the interplay between AI and other fast-advancing fields such as neurotechnology – and the implications of this interplay for human autonomy, dignity, and other core values – is worth pursuing with a stronger sense of urgency.

Trust and security in the digital space

WSIS documents described confidence, trust and security as key pillars of the information society, and subsequent mechanisms and discussions have addressed various related

issues, from information and network security to cybercrime, spam, and child safety online. In addition, WSIS implementation activities have contributed to building and strengthening capacities at a national and regional level to tackle various types of cyber risks. The role of regulators in digital-related sectors should be further strengthened.

Cybersecurity has been also mainstreamed into existing peace and security policy frameworks within the UN System. WSIS mechanisms through WSIS Action Line C5 (Building confidence in the use of ICTs) facilitated by ITU can foster exchanges within the UN System and between them and other spaces in which issues of an interdependent nature are tackled (e.g. data protection, human rights, standardisation).

Capacity development

WSIS mechanisms have helped many countries to develop their capacities to address digital policy issues. Government officials, business people, engineers and civil society activists participated in a wide range of ambassadorship and fellowship programmes provided by the United Nations, Member States, and various organisations within the digital governance ecosystem.

The development of digital skills is a collective responsibility involving governments, industry, educational institutions, international organisations, and donor agencies.

While individual capacity development and training has considerably evolved in the WSIS processes, there is a major gap in institutional capacity development, which is critical for the sustainability of digital processes and initiatives.

Innovative governance and working

Internet and digital policies have incubated new working methods in international policy making. The WSIS "digital community" has promoted remote online meetings since the inception of the WSIS process, facilitating global stakeholder inclusion, which was proven critical when the world had to shift to online interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

WSIS processes have also strengthened the following governance features: a holistic approach, agility, and evidence-based policymaking. They have also become a 'collective memory' of digitalisation by collecting hundreds of stories and best practices that can speed up successes and reduce waste of funds and time in digital transformation projects and activities.

As pioneers in conference and dialogue innovation, the WSIS community should continue to be cutting-edge by using AI for reporting and organisation of events, as well as emerging virtual reality tools.

Inclusivity and meaningful participation in digital governance processes

The processes stemming from WSIS have led to the emergence of a policy framework that supports innovation and digital growth and have triggered dialogue about ethical and social responsibilities of all stakeholders. One of the big successes of the WSIS cooperation and dialogue processes are their broad impact on the global governance of the digital space.

In 2005, WSIS placed digital issues on the global policy agenda, paving the way for all subsequent international processes and initiatives. WSIS processes have enabled many

more voices to express themselves in the digital space. Governments have developed capacities to deal with digital issues. Non-state actors, from businesses to academia and the technical community, have become active participants in relevant processes. But still, many voices are not heard, especially from developing and least developed countries and from marginalized or vulnerable groups from all around the world. As we aim to strengthen international digital cooperation, we should ensure that these voices are indeed heard by leveraging the multistakeholder spaces emanating from WSIS; they are crucial for incorporating diverse perspectives and ensuring that digital policies meet the needs of global users.

In the coming years, WSIS mechanisms should address the following to encourage even greater participation:

- Identifying and mitigating risks of miscommunication among diverse professional, national, and cultural communities as AI developments extend policy debates beyond traditional digital/internet spaces.
- Dealing with possible power asymmetries between, as well as within, different stakeholder groups.
- Continuing to assist stakeholders to participate meaningfully given their respective needs, capabilities, realities, and vulnerabilities.
- Avoid creating too many AI and digital governance processes and initiatives. The growing number of initiatives and processes could have a detrimental effect on policy inclusion and quality of policy deliberation. In particular, governance inflation would impact actors from small and developing countries who do not have the financial and human resources to participate meaningfully in a high number of digital processes. The WSIS Forum and the IGF could play critical roles as convergence points that simplify access to diverse policy spaces and processes.

Institutional frameworks

Based on the WSIS outcomes of 2003 and 2005, a robust and agile institutional framework for dealing with digital issues has been created. The implementation of the WSIS mandate for the UN System is coordinated by the United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS); UN specialised agencies take a prominent role in the WSIS processes.

The IGF, as the platform for governance discussions under the Tunis Agenda, the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) serving as the reporting mechanism and supporting ECOSOC in overseeing the UN system-wide follow-up of WSIS outcomes, and with WSIS Action Lines follow-up under the umbrella of the WSIS Forum, offer comprehensive platforms for conversations on digital issues. The IGF has inspired and supported many national and regional IGF initiatives worldwide. These are examples of impactful developments that form a robust and solid basis for bringing digital policy debates to local communities worldwide.

The WSIS Stocktaking process provides a repository of activities – including projects, programs, training initiatives, conferences, websites, guidelines, toolkits, etc. – carried out by governments, international organizations, the private sector, civil society and other entities. The principal role of the WSIS Stocktaking exercise is to leverage the activities of stakeholders working on the implementation of WSIS outcomes and share knowledge and experience of projects by replicating successful models designed to achieve the SDGs of

the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Projects from the ground are recognized and rewarded by the WSIS Prizes contest annually.

The Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development is an international, multi-stakeholder initiative that was launched in 2004 to improve the availability and quality of ICT data and indicators, particularly in developing countries. The Partnership has guided policy makers in producing ICT statistics that are crucial to informed decision-making, including through the identification of a core list of ICT indicators and methodologies to collect these indicators.

And importantly: The WSIS mechanisms have facilitated a functional interplay between multilateral and multistakeholder governance. These different approaches to governance should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but as complementary. And both types need to further develop to become more transparent, inclusive and accountable to all people in the world. In this regard, the São Paulo Multistakeholder Guidelines, adopted at the Netmundial+10 conference in April this year, can serve as a blueprint for more trustworthy, inclusive and accountable governance in multilateral as well as multistakeholder processes.

Continuous relevance of WSIS outcomes

Twenty years ago, the overarching goal of WSIS was to create a path towards an inclusive, people-centred and development-centred information and digital society. Although much has changed since then, WSIS outcomes remain highly relevant, particularly the Geneva Plan of Action, providing a comprehensive roadmap for leveraging ICTs for sustainable development and social inclusion. The WSIS Principles and Action Lines continue to serve as a pertinent framework for discussions on digital policy and governance issues. WSIS values and principles have been referenced in many policy documents over the years, and they have been further developed in the framework of instruments, such as UNESCO's R.O.A.M. principles[5], ITU's Global Cybersecurity Agenda, and others across the UN system.

Multistakeholder mechanisms emanating from WSIS – the IGF and the WSIS Forum – have stood the test of time and adapted their focus to reflect the fast-evolving digital space and the opportunities and challenges associated with both 'old' and 'new' digital technologies.

Global digital cooperation mechanisms should maintain the formula of 'variable governance geometry' of being close enough to foster a framework for digital growth and far enough to leave space for the innovation and creativity that underpins digitalisation. The main challenge will be getting this formula right for the AI era, where numerous delicate trade-offs need to be struck between opportunities and risks triggered by AI.

The anniversary year of WSIS in 2025 will provide the context for further improving our approaches to digital cooperation while relying on rich experience and wisdom gathered since 2005. The time has come to think boldly and widely about a "*WSIS Plus*", a strengthened and further developed inclusive framework for digital governance and cooperation which will be fit-for-purpose and serve us well as we enter an era of fast and uncertain AI and digital developments.

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[5] UNESCO developed the concept of Internet Universality, which includes the four fundamental R.O.A.M principles: The Internet should be human Rights-based, Open, Accessible to all and nurtured by Multi-stakeholder participation. For more information, see https://www.unesco.org/en/internet-universality-indicators

Towards the Summit of the Future and beyond

The Summit of the Future should facilitate many futures and various perspectives as it was highlighted during the Forum discussions. Past achievements should guide future progress, with WSIS outcomes providing a comprehensive roadmap for leveraging ICTs - now digital technologies - for sustainable development and social inclusion. The need for multistakeholder collaboration and innovation was highlighted.

There was a broad agreement not only that existing structures, including the WSIS Forum and AI for Good Global Summit, which were held in conjunction in Geneva this week, as well as the IGF, should be the basis to further implementing the WSIS vision, but also that they should be further strengthened and leveraged through the Global Digital Compact and in support of its implementation. All these processes have the legitimacy and the experience needed to continue to serve as inclusive spaces where UN agencies (through UNGIS), international and regional organisations, governments, the private sector, the technical community and civil society come together to address their digital issues in inclusive, informed, and impactful ways.

Moving forward, they should serve the shared goal of further developing inclusive, people-centred and development-oriented digital information and knowledge societies which enable all people in the world to benefit from new technologies, including AI, so that no one is left behind.

Done at Geneva, 31 May 2024.