



Statement at High-Level Policy Session Inclusiveness – Access to Information and Knowledge for All WSIS Forum 2017

**Deborah Brown, Global Advocacy Lead
Association for Progressive Communications**

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Access to information and knowledge has been recognised as a key principle for achieving the WSIS vision since 2003. Information and knowledge for all are key for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) because they link to empowerment and mobility, enabling people to improve their lives.

Access to information supports development by empowering people, especially marginalised people and those living in poverty, to:

- Exercise their human rights, beyond freedom of expression, which is of course essential for self-actualisation and empowerment. Access to information enables people to exercise a wide range of rights that are integral to sustainable development: the right to health, education, work, etc.
- Be economically active, productive and innovative.
- Learn and apply new skills.
- Enrich cultural identity and expression.
- Take part in decision making and participate in an active and engaged civil society.
- Create community-based solutions to development challenges.
- Ensure accountability, transparency, good governance, participation and empowerment.
- Measure progress on public and private commitments on sustainable development.

Improving access to information and knowledge is not a new goal. It was also recognised as essential for achieving the information society in the Geneva Declaration at the first phase of WSIS in 2003. In the last 14 years, there has not been nearly enough progress in this area.

Challenges come in many forms. In today's world, access to information and knowledge increasingly requires access to the internet. APC sees six major barriers to meaningful access to the internet today:

1. It's about cost. High internet access costs, due to lack of competitive open markets, continue to be among the biggest factors stopping "the rest" from getting connected. The main reason that the internet is still poorly dispersed and unaffordable for many is the poor distribution of basic telecommunications infrastructure and limited access to radio spectrum.
2. It's about data. In order to solve access inequalities, we need disaggregated data to better meet the needs of disadvantaged groups – particularly women, the poor, rural populations and the less abled.
3. It's about rights. Restricted and filtered access is not real access. Real access should be free of censorship, surveillance, discrimination, harassment, and any other form of violation of human rights.
4. It's about more than mobile. Expansion of mobile broadband by itself will not meet the connectivity needs of "the rest". It is necessary to improve the affordability and coverage of both fixed and mobile services, along with the technical and human capacity to ensure reliability, the ability to deploy low-cost locally owned networks, and the ability to use the applications and content effectively.
5. It's about content. There is a lack of investment in local content creation; most initiatives to bridge the digital divide are still very supply-driven.
6. It's not only about infrastructure. Increased access to infrastructure should be coupled with efforts to address political, economic, social and cultural barriers that prevent people from fully accessing the internet.

The final challenge is that conversations like this one about improving access to information and knowledge through ICTs at the WSIS Forum are very disconnected from the main discussions at the UN on sustainable development. WSIS is largely unknown by the SDG community. However, with SDG 9 on industry, innovation, and infrastructure and SDG 5 on gender equality – which both include a target on ICTs – in focus this year at the High Level Political Forum in New York, we have the chance to change that.

Since the theme for this session is inclusiveness, we would like to recommend several inclusive approaches to improve access to information and knowledge for all.

Inclusiveness is a key pillar of a human rights-based framework and should be part of efforts to bridge the digital divide. It is critical that any action taken in response to issues of access to the internet and ICTs be guided by international human rights norms and principles, especially equality, non-discrimination, inclusion, participation and the provision of effective remedies.

When deployed without an inclusive and human rights-based approach, technology reinforces or deepens inequalities and discrimination in society. This is because social norms and structural inequalities tend to determine how people interact with technology. Therefore, when underlying socio-cultural and economic barriers to internet access are not being addressed, the result is often digital exclusion.

This is especially true when we look at the impact of the internet on economic, social and cultural rights. For example, communities that are in most need of mobile health initiatives are also the ones who do not have affordable and reliable access to the internet; people who could most benefit from online learning are more likely to have access to mobile devices rather than large-format screens, which are better suited for educational purposes, such as online courses; women, who can use mobile phones to run businesses, or facilitate more flexible working arrangements that fit into their other responsibilities, are less likely than men to own or have access to such devices.

Inclusive approaches are key to overcoming such barriers and leveraging technology to improve people's lives. Community-based local access networks embody such approaches by encouraging entire villages to work together to establish their own communications infrastructure. This model has great promise, not only for helping to ensure everyone is connected, but also by setting an example of how those in underserved areas can collaborate together to meet their own needs. This type of empowerment can help build the capacity of communities to address other local development challenges. APC and our members are developing community-based local access networks in India, Brazil, Mexico, Spain and Nigeria, among other places, and examining the type of policy and regulatory environments needed to support such initiatives.

Today at the Human Rights Council, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is presenting a report on bridging the gender digital divide that asserts that states should look at expanding access to the internet as part of their obligations to promote, protect, and fulfil human rights, and calls on states in particular remove barriers that prevent politically, economically and socially marginalised groups from gaining access. We see community-based local access networks as a promising approach, and encourage governments to develop policy and regulatory environments that support such initiatives, as well as other inclusive approaches. Otherwise, the internet will not improve access to information and knowledge for all, and will deepen offline inequalities, create new divides, and result in digital exclusion.