Introduction: Reclaiming a radically changed context

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Twenty years ago, stakeholders gathered in Geneva at the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and affirmed a **"common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society."**[2] This is considered a "first-ever, clear statement of political will on establishing digitally-connected societies for the benefit of all and harnessing information communication technologies (ICTs) to support development objectives."[3] Since the framework for cooperation was set out in the Geneva Plan of Action (2003),[4] much has changed in the global digital context, while many recognised challenges still remain.

Some of these changes and ongoing challenges include the following:

The capabilities of digital technologies[5]

The capabilities of global digital resources are significantly greater than they were 20 years ago. These include the levels of bandwidth available, the transition from fixed to mobile connectivity, the scale of data that can be handled by devices and by networks, and the range of services that are now available. The ways in which these capabilities

have expanded the scope and range of services and applications is far beyond what was anticipated at WSIS when it first started. For example, mobile phones are hardly mentioned in the WSIS outcome documents, social media platforms barely existed two decades ago, cloud computing and the internet of things were in their infancy, and e-commerce was a fraction of what it has become. This has impacted on our understanding of digital inequality, its causes, and what it entails.

More people are online

Substantially more people across the world now have the opportunity to access the internet – from around 10% of the global population 20 years ago to about 70% now. However, easy access to high-speed internet is significantly biased in favour of developed countries. In many countries in the global South, the majority of people remain either unconnected or lack meaningful connectivity because they cannot afford to access the internet in a way that meets their needs, or do not have access to a stable internet connection.

Access has reinforced social inequalities

Barriers to internet access such as high data costs or education tend to mirror social inequalities in that they impact primarily the poor, in particular those in rural areas and women, with the result that the current pace and intensity of digitalisation has the potential to increase inequalities (referred to by Alison Gillwald as the "digital inequality paradox").[6] This is the opposite of the narrative 20 years ago, which persists until today, that digitalisation and infrastructure roll-out would automatically result in greater socioeconomic opportunities and equalities for most people – a narrative that has turned out not to be true. Linked to this is the perspective that economic growth on its own results in social development and a reduction in inequalities and poverty, which undermines the

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1   The introduction is based on the concept note developed for this special edition of GISWatch. The concept note was compiled through invaluable input from several people, including Anita Gurumurthy, Anriette Esterhuysen and David Souter, as well as a number of APC staff members. In some instances, contributors allowed us to use their input and comments verbatim, and this is gratefully acknowledged here.

2   Internet Governance Forum. (n/d). WSIS+20 and IGF+20 Review by the UN General Assembly (2025). https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/wsis20-and-igf20-review-by-the-un-general-assembly-2025

3   Ibid.

4   International Telecommunication Union. (2003) World Summit on the Information Society Plan of Action. https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/poa.html

5   The succinct observations in this paragraph were made by David Souter, and his contribution to the concept note and in this introduction are used verbatim with permission.

6   See Gillwald's report in this edition of GISWatch.

development and social equity imperatives to act underpinning the WSIS goals.

Digitalisation is a cross-sector concern

Digitalisation and the impacts of digital growth are no longer a concern of information and communications technology (ICT) policy makers, digital rights actors or expert technical communities alone, but have cross-field and widespread societal ramifications. This has introduced new cross-sectoral dynamics for consideration and analysis, and raised questions about who should be involved in deliberations. However, the aim of mainstreaming the use of ICTs across sectors envisaged in the WSIS Action Plan has also been uneven due to a lack of political will, low technological capacities and resources, poor inter-ministerial coordination, and poor programme design and follow-through, among other factors. In many areas (e.g. education), tech corporations, through well-resourced lobbying, have crowded out initiatives that respond to public interest concerns.

More people are aware of digital rights issues than before

Many digital and internet rights issues have become mainstreamed, such as those concerned with freedom of expression online, internet shutdowns, privacy, disinformation and online security. While this broad public awareness and concern is critical to the development and use of digital resources, in many instances it has also led to a preoccupation with the social harms that digitalisation can produce, rather than a foregrounding of the opportunities that ICTs can enable for social good. This preoccupation has impacted negatively on policy making, has been used to justify authoritarian measures, and has resulted in restrictions being imposed on access – which has created further barriers for unconnected communities to get meaningfully online.

The complexity of governance frameworks

The governance frameworks for internet access and digital technologies have become much more complex compared to 20 years ago, with multiple forums and processes that are often difficult for civil society actors, particularly from the global South, to access, understand and influence. The task of building effective governance norms and standards has in many respects also become more complex due to innovation in areas such as artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing and

robotics, and, for instance, the need to harmonise regional regulations in areas critical for countries to benefit from digitalisation and datafication (e.g. for taxation, or cross-border data flows).

A flagging commitment to multistakeholder participation

WSIS as a process was strongly shaped by the voices of governments and non-state actors from developing countries. Contributions from the global South were strengthened through regional preparatory events that saw collaborations emerge between governments and civil society that were essential to the WSIS outcomes, and also between global civil society and businesses (for their part, big tech companies had limited influence at WSIS 20 years ago). The multistakeholder approach was fundamental to the development of the WSIS Action Plan, and a formative approach for many subsequent governance deliberations, including at the national level in some countries. However, a commitment to this approach appears to be faltering. In particular, the influence of the big tech sector has significantly strengthened. Civil society participation in governance spaces, meanwhile, is becoming increasingly difficult, and the voices of civil society marginalised. This includes when it comes to proposing effective ways to further the multistakeholder approach as the basis for consensus building, decision making and the democratic governance of digital policy issues.

A much more powerful big tech sector

The structural role big tech firms play in multiple spaces and areas of service provision, and the dependency of markets on the corporate tech sector, suggest that the impact of any regulation is likely to be limited and compromised in curbing big tech's influence and power. That governments often use private sector platforms to deliver public services, and depend on the use of these platforms for surveillance and other mechanisms of control, has also aligned the market needs of the private sector with the desire of governments to manage their citizens and peoples. However, there are often few mechanisms ensuring transparency and accountability with respect to privacy, data use and algorithms, or on the nature of the arrangements reached with the platforms. In this context, there is a pressing need to push for the adoption of global principles or frameworks in multilateral forums to regulate big tech and to set parameters for the state use of platforms in the global governance of digital technologies.

An unsustainable internet

The environmental footprint of digital technologies and infrastructures has multiplied exponentially, is likely to continue to grow exponentially with the intensification of data economies and the widespread use of AI, and is environmentally unsustainable due to resource scarcity, a substantial increase in emissions due to our use of technology, and linear rather than circular economic development. A paradox has emerged where technologies are often presented as a panacea for mitigating or adapting to climate change, but the development and use of technologies themselves contribute substantially to climate change, as well as environmental and social harms for marginalised communities most immediately affected by the climate crisis.

In 2003, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) together with the Campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) published *Involving civil society in ICT policy: The World Summit on the Information Society*.[7] The publication was designed to build awareness among civil society organisations of the nascent WSIS process, and their capacity to engage in WSIS.

This was followed by a GISWatch special report in 2013 called *Communication rights ten years after the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS): Civil society perceptions*,[8] in response to the WSIS+10 review. The report, which was the result of a survey and interviews, discussed a number of areas such as freedom of expression and public debate, access to technology and cultural rights in communication, as well as the fragmentation of the communications rights movement.

This special edition, published at the time of the WSIS+20 review process, is driven by at least three framing questions:

- What should the role of WSIS be in the future in the midst of other processes shaping the digital terrain and its governance?

- What are its key and unique strengths?

- How can civil society – as well as governments – best respond to the changed context in order to crystallise the WSIS vision?

While the reports published here may not answer these questions directly, in different ways they inform further consideration of the questions by civil society organisations and governments.

In its interaction with other key ongoing processes, such as the Pact for the Future and the Global Digital Compact (GDC), and the need to build synergies among these processes, WSIS+20 is an opportunity to contribute to and reinterpret the WSIS vision. This needs to respond to the fact that internet governance and digital cooperation are interlinked, and that both need to take into account the realities of the constantly changing digital societies that we live in today. Moreover, as the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) mandate beyond 2025 will be considered by the review, WSIS+20, like the GDC, is key to strengthening and expanding the mandate of the IGF. The IGF remains at the heart of the internet governance and global digital cooperation ecosystems – there is no equivalent space for enabling public participation and shared learning on the positive and negative impacts of the internet and internet policies in a multidisciplinary and multistakeholder way.

As it stands, there is a danger that the architecture of digital governance emerging, fragmented as it is, is likely to reinforce the structural inequalities that are being amplified by digitalisation, rather than recognising these inequalities and their causes as unjust, and collectively committing to address these.

Ultimately, WSIS+20 needs to reflect the type of digital future we want and identify what we need to do to build this future. It could be a unique opportunity to place global digital cooperation – working towards both global and contextual responses – at the top of political agendas to address the persistent and emerging challenges in the digital age, including the environmental crisis. It could be used to ensure that the lessons learned from years of multistakeholder engagement feed into future governance processes and set the parameters for safeguarding inclusive dialogue, transparency and accountability. It could also renew and strengthen the mandate of the IGF and bridge the gaps between deliberative spaces and decision-making processes. As many of these reports suggest, the extent to which this will happen remains to be seen.

7   APC & CRIS. (2003) *Involving civil society in ICT policy: The World Summit on the Information Society*. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/InvolvingCivilSociety_EN.pdf

8   Finlay, A. (2013). *Communication rights ten years after the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS): Civil society perceptions*. APC. https://www.giswatch.org/sites/default/files/apc_surveywsis_en-2013.pdf