

Non paper on WSIS plus: what are we talking about and what should we be aiming for?

1. Introduction

This non-paper outlines ideas to contribute to discussions on the WSIS+20 review to strengthen and update the current architecture into a “WSIS Plus”. The review should build on existing structures, address their shortcomings, integrate the Global Digital Compact (GDC) follow-up, ensure inclusivity, avoid process proliferation, and foster cost-efficiency.

2. WSIS: what is it?

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is an UN-led initiative launched in 2003 to address the challenges and opportunities associated with the development of ICTs. Held in two phases in Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005), it produced the Geneva Plan of Action and the Tunis Agenda, establishing an architecture to bridge digital divides, promote sustainable development, and foster a people-centred information society. The WSIS Action Lines cover critical areas such as infrastructure, health, education, security, knowledge, and ethics; multiple UN agencies act as facilitators for the action lines to ensure follow-up actions. In addition, UNGIS (UN Group on the Information Society) serves as an inter-agency mechanism to coordinate substantive issues related to the implementation of WSIS outcomes, and the annual WSIS Forum serves as a platform to discuss progress made towards achieving the goals set in WSIS outcome documents. The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) play key roles in reviewing WSIS outcomes implementation, with annual discussions, reports, and resolutions dedicated to this issue. WSIS also recognizes a multistakeholder approach to digital governance, engaging governments, the private sector, civil society, technical community, academia, and international organizations, chiefly through the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) tasked, among other functions, with discussing Internet-related public policy issues and identifying emerging issues as set out in §72 from the Tunis Agenda.

3. WSIS+20 review: what’s at stake?

The WSIS+20 Review, scheduled for 2025, marks the 20th anniversary of the Tunis Agenda. It presents a critical opportunity to assess the progress made since 2005 and provide a path forward for addressing the challenges in the digital landscape. The review will evaluate the implementation of WSIS outcomes and its Action Lines in the context of rapid technological advances, including artificial intelligence (AI), data governance, and the platform economy, as well as persistent challenges like the ever-evolving digital divides, as 2.6 billion people remain offline in 2024¹ a majority of whom are women and girls in the Global South, and disparities in access to digital infrastructure, skills, and content continue to hinder global progress. Additionally, better integrating WSIS with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should emphasize the role of digital technologies in advancing the 2030 Agenda, as already highlighted in the WSIS+10 outcome document². The Review will also have to consider the extent to which the current WSIS architecture is fit for purpose, what changes are needed, and whether and how the mandate of the IGF should be extended. Furthermore, the interplay between WSIS and the GDC implementation will be examined. This includes exploring how the WSIS architecture may play a role in the implementation of the GDC. (See point 5 below).

- More detailed information on the Review can be found in the slides prepared by Sorina Teleanu from Diplo Foundation under [WSIS+20 and AI negotiations | April 2025 | Diplo/GIP](#)

¹ Global Internet use continues to rise but disparities remain, especially in low-income regions, [link](#).

² [A/70/125](#) §5, §12 and §27 on gender divides

4. Towards a “WSIS Plus”

“WSIS Plus” aims at a strengthened and further developed inclusive architecture for digital governance and cooperation which will be fit-for-purpose and serve us well as we navigate an era of fast and uncertain digital developments. It would incorporate updates from the GDC and other relevant processes, while fostering a fair digital deal that ensures benefits for all stakeholders, addressing the challenges set out above. Any advancement in implementing and updating the WSIS architecture must reflect inclusive multistakeholder engagement that has defined WSIS since its inception, ensuring meaningful participation from all stakeholders. This approach should be guided by principles of true openness and inclusivity, strengthening the complementarity of multilateral and multistakeholder collaboration, as described in the Sao Paulo Multistakeholder Guidelines, which provide a framework for equitable stakeholder engagement in digital governance processes.

A key focus is reinforcing a human-centric approach, ensuring technology serves humanity and upholds human rights. Building on the GDC, WSIS Plus would strengthen commitments on human rights, Internet shutdowns, and data governance, while also prioritizing meaningful connectivity and bridging the digital divides to ensure equitable digital access.

5. WSIS and GDC: strengthening existing structures

The GDC was adopted as part of the Pact for the Future. It aims to establish a renewed political commitment for digital cooperation, focusing on inclusivity, human rights, and sustainable development. As the GDC and WSIS share similar goals, there is a risk of overlap and duplication of efforts, which could strain resources and dilute the impact of both initiatives as well as the impact of the UN. Both initiatives require significant resources, and overlapping mandates could lead to inefficiencies, particularly for countries and stakeholders with limited capacity to engage in multiple processes at once.

Bringing together the GDC and WSIS is organic, as WSIS action lines and GDC commitments share the overarching goal of advancing the vision of an inclusive, safe, secure, and human-centred digital society. Streamlining processes would help avoid duplication of efforts and better use resources (both within the UN and at the level of member states and other stakeholders) while allowing concentrated efforts to focus on addressing critical digital governance issues.

GDC commitments could be integrated under an updated WSIS architecture. WSIS’s proven multistakeholder approach could enhance the GDC’s implementation by ensuring broad participation from all stakeholders. In this sense, a **joint implementation roadmap** could be mandated to be developed by an updated UNGIS (as per 7.1. below) and presented at CSTD, in order to integrate the WSIS Action Lines and GDC commitments within a unified architecture. UNGIS is already working on a matrix putting WSIS action lines, GDC commitments, and SDGs next to each other (see [WSIS Process and 2030 Agenda– Draft GDC Matrix](#)). This matrix could serve as the starting point for said roadmap.³ Furthermore, some of the proposed functions foreseen by the GDC, such as the AI Global Dialogue, may be performed in full or in part by WSIS structures, notably the IGF.

In addition, a new, integrated **follow-up and review process** to look at the progress made in advancing the joint WSIS/GDC implementation roadmap outlined above should be established. Such a process would include:

- Periodic (e.g. annual, biannual) implementation reports (outlining both progress made and areas requiring strengthened efforts), based on input from UN agencies, member states, and other stakeholders (following the model of the current annual report on WSIS outcomes implementation).

³ 2025 CSTD draft resolution on WSIS paras: 7b, 14b, 127quiq, 131, 131b, 131g

- CSTD and ECOSOC current roles in WSIS follow-up to be expanded to also cover GDC follow-up. Furthermore, the UN IGF would also be an integral part of such review and follow-up processes.
- Every five years, a high-level process could be convened at the UNGA level to review progress made in implementing the WSIS action lines and GDC commitments, as aligned in the joint implementation roadmap. The first such high-level meeting could be convened in 2030, to also coincide with the Agenda 2030 milestone.
- The GDC review in 2027, could serve as a first midterm review, providing an opportunity to review progress on the joint implementation roadmap and hold multistakeholder discussions thereon, in line with para 74 of the GDC.

6. Main subject-matter related gaps in WSIS

While WSIS has been successful in addressing various digital governance challenges with a technology-neutral approach, several subject-matter gaps are becoming apparent as the terminology and the technological landscape evolve. This calls for a review of how the WSIS architecture adapts to the current landscape, inter alia, in the following areas:

6.1. Digital divides

Digital divides remain a persistent and evolving challenge, requiring continuous attention across different areas, highlighting that connectivity (Action Line C2) is an inescapable precondition for addressing other divides. Leveraging the WSIS architecture can help accelerate efforts to bridge these gaps effectively. A robust response must address the challenges, particularly the critical need for capacity building (Action Line C4). The WSIS architecture is uniquely positioned to support these efforts, as demonstrated by existing initiatives, like the WSIS Forum (7.4), which could be further enhanced by a “WSIS Help Desk” as discussed below (7.3).

6.2. Artificial Intelligence

The WSIS outcomes currently lack explicit references to AI, however the technology-neutral approach of WSIS Action Lines (e.g. C10 on ethics and C4 on capacity building) provides a sound foundation for addressing AI governance. Capacity-building initiatives under Action Line C4 should explicitly include AI-related training, particularly for the Global South, such training could focus both on the development and deployment of AI technologies across economies and societies (e.g. developing skills, creating enabling policy environment), and on ensuring equitable participation in global AI policymaking and implementation. This aligns with the UNGA resolution on AI capacity-building (A/RES/78/311) and both WSIS and the GDC’s emphasis on bridging digital divides.

6.3. Information integrity

The proliferation of social media and AI-driven content creation has intensified the spread of misinformation and disinformation and other harmful content. This includes the targeted dissemination of technology-facilitated gender-based violence that systematically discourages women from participation in the digital public sphere. These evolving challenges are not yet adequately addressed within the existing WSIS Action Lines but could be integrated, inter alia, in the implementation of Action Line C5 which focuses on building confidence and security in the use of ICTs.

6.4. Data Governance

The growing importance of data as a critical resource for AI and other technologies underscores the need for a more comprehensive approach to data governance under the WSIS architecture, building on agreed language from the GDC. Also important in this context will be to bring back more focus on the relevance of capacity development focused on local data policies addressing local needs, and the need to protect

knowledge (in addition to data), as well as linguistic and cultural diversity, as highlighted in WSIS outcomes (see Action Lines C3 and C5).

6.5. Digital Public Infrastructure (DPIs)

The concept of DPIs, which are essential for achieving the SDGs, is not yet fully integrated into WSIS architecture. Strengthening the role of DPIs within WSIS could enhance their contribution to global development efforts.

6.6. Human Rights and Gender Inclusion

While WSIS acknowledges human rights and gender perspectives, there is room for greater inclusivity. This could be strengthened by explicitly incorporating agreed language from the GDC, such as the one that calls on the private sector to apply the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the application of human rights due diligence and impact assessments throughout the technology life cycle. Expanding on gender-inclusive language and integrating robust human rights connections into WSIS architecture would further foster equitable digital governance.

6.7. Better integration with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Although the WSIS Action Lines have been mapped to the SDGs, the connection between digitalization and sustainable development could be strengthened. Questions remain about how this will evolve post-2030, highlighting the need for a more explicit and actionable integration of digital advancements including an SDG component. The outcome of the WSIS+20 review will serve as an input into the 2030 Agenda review process, as already foreseen in the WSIS+10 outcome document. It is to be considered during the HLPF in 2026 and the SDG Summit in 2027.

Possible measures:

The existing Action Lines are flexible enough to encompass new challenges. Rather than introducing new Action Lines or deleting existing ones, updates should be made to the current implementation architecture. This approach ensures continuity and tech neutrality while addressing emerging issues and integrating GDC commitments. This update should consider the findings of the CSTD Report on the 20-year WSIS Review as well as other relevant UN documents. Many of the abovementioned gaps have been considered by the GDC – hence, the joint implementation roadmap further elaborated below would address the need of better taking into account these issues under an updated and joint WSIS/GDC architecture.

7. Main architectural gaps in WSIS and potential measures

In addition to subject-matter gaps, the WSIS architecture faces several structural and operational challenges that hinder its effectiveness, inter alia the following:

- Lack of a strategic and holistic governance of the WSIS architecture
- Limited synergies between different parts of the WSIS architecture
- Limited responsiveness to emerging developments
- Limited political visibility, impact and funding of the IGF

Possible measures:

To achieve the vision of WSIS Plus and address the gaps in the current WSIS architecture, while also creating concrete synergies with GDC implementation and follow-up, the following measures could be considered:

7.1. Enhanced UNGIS: updating day-to-day stewardship of the WSIS architecture and integrating GDC

The day-to-day stewardship of the WSIS and GDC implementation activities could be entrusted to an updated UNGIS building on (a) the existing UNGIS and (b) the working group on digital technologies created as part of the follow-up on the Summit of the Future (and currently co-led by ODET and ITU), hence integrating ODET and other relevant UN bodies (e.g. OHCHR) into UNGIS and its activities.⁴

The updated UNGIS indicated above would:

- Ensure coordination and cooperation in developing and implementing the afore-mentioned joint implementation roadmap across the UN (see 5).
- Direct the creation of a one-stop-shop space within the UN system where relevant information about the implementation and follow-up of WSIS action lines and GDC commitments could be easily accessed in one place.
- Be co-chaired by two UN entities on a rotation basis (following the UNGIS experience).

7.2. Improving the overall stewardship of the WSIS architecture by establishing a Strategic Multistakeholder Steering Group complementing the updated UNGIS

Establishing a Strategic Multistakeholder Steering Group (MSG) to complement UNGIS could significantly enhance the implementation of WSIS and GDC commitments. This MSG would include a small set of representatives from governments, the private sector, civil society, academia, and technical communities, ensuring equitable gender and geographical representation. In its establishment, the Sao Paulo Multistakeholder Guidelines would be considered. The role of the MSG would be as a strategic advisory body which would offer guidance to UNGIS in the implementation of the joint WSIS-GDC implementation roadmap, monitor progress, and provide recommendations for addressing emerging challenges. To maintain transparency and accountability, the Steering Group would provide regular updates and reports, including as an input to the annual SG Report on Progress in Implementation of the WSIS outcomes.

7.3. WSIS Plus Helpdesk

Building on recommendations by the UN Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation, a ‘help desk’ function should be operationalised within the WSIS architecture to ‘*direct requests for help on digital policy (such as dealing with crises, drafting legislation, or advising on policy) to appropriate entities.*’ Such function would especially be focused on addressing the needs of governments and stakeholders from developing countries and could be performed by an enhanced UNGIS. The helpdesk would not provide advice itself on specific policy issues, but act as a liaison to the corresponding Offices and Departments coordinated through UNGIS. Furthermore, it could offer information and guidance on capacity development opportunities on digital governance offered within and outside the WSIS architecture, as well as on available funding mechanisms.

7.4. More focused role for the WSIS-Forum

The WSIS-Forum has evolved during the last years in a positive fashion, becoming more inclusive and multistakeholder in its programming. At the same time, sometimes its discussions seem to duplicate debates had within the IGF framework. It could be worthwhile to sharpen the WSIS-Forum’s scope and function, focusing it more clearly on showcasing activities in the implementation of the WSIS Action Lines, implemented, as mentioned above, by the integration of GDC commitments.

7.5. Enhanced cooperation and multistakeholder collaboration within CSTD

⁴ CSTD draft resolution, PP131g: “Highlights the role of UNGIS in coordinating the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit, and *recommends* as an outcome of the WSIS+20 Review to strengthen its functioning by including further UN offices with responsibilities in matters of digital cooperation, as well as multistakeholder advice to its work as appropriate”

The CSTD (and consequently ECOSOC) would be more clearly established as the main instance for receiving periodic reporting from the UN agencies through UNGIS and offering guidance and stewardship to the overall joint WSIS-GDC implementation architecture. The CSTD would periodically set strategic priorities, coordinate overall WSIS activities, and foster coherence across different workstreams. By assigning to the CSTD the periodic follow-up and review of the integrated implementation work of WSIS and GDC, Member States' role to periodically offer strategic guidance to the UN system in the area of digital governance and cooperation would be bolstered. This would be in line with the spirit of the provisions on enhanced cooperation contained in WSIS.

At the same time, the multistakeholder approach within CSTD should be equally strengthened by complementing its current governmental composition with a multistakeholder set of members nominated by the different stakeholder groups and rotated similarly to the current IGF MAG. Such a move would build on the experience gained through the practice of multistakeholder exchanges within the CSTD, notably with several multistakeholder CSTD working groups that have existed over the years.

7.6. Enhanced IGF, better interconnected with the rest of the WSIS architecture

The IGF is a key part of the WSIS architecture, but some concerns have been raised over the years regarding issues such as the nature of IGF outcomes, the forum's limited visibility among certain actors, as well as the need for broader participation (e.g. from governments from the Global South or communities traditionally less represented in digital governance spaces), which needs to be addressed. Additionally, its role within the broader WSIS architecture needs to be strengthened to ensure greater interconnectedness with other WSIS mechanisms.

7.6.1. Permanent mandate

The IGF has demonstrated its key role within WSIS and the digital governance space. Accordingly, its mandate should be made permanent, without prejudice to subjecting its performance to periodic WSIS reviews.

7.6.2. Sustainable funding

The IGF must be enabled to fulfil its full mandate. This can only be done if the IGF is backed by a secure and stable funding, combining a mix of core UN funding and voluntary contributions.

7.6.3. Improved inclusion of Governments

Appropriate funding could allow for the establishment of a dedicated capacity within the IGF Secretariat to liaise with Governments, particularly from developing countries, in a more effective fashion. Indeed, to respond to certain concerns during the GDC process that governments need a space to exchange on digital governance and policy issues, and that the IGF did not yet attract sufficient governmental participation, a new governmental program space could be established within the forum. This could also serve as a follow-up to the provisions on enhanced cooperation in the WSIS outcome documents. Such a space would be an addition to other tracks that the IGF has created or considered over the years (e.g. the parliamentary track).

7.6.4. Strengthening inclusion, especially from Global South, under-represented communities and citizens

Additionally, the IGF would be enabled to foster greater participation from under-represented groups, such as small and medium enterprises, representatives from less tech-advanced economies, and marginalized communities. This can be done by strengthening the provision of travel grants or virtual participation options (as already set in place) to ensure broader inclusivity.

To further strengthen its inclusivity and to ensure that policy discussions reflect diverse needs and experiences, the IGF could explore the integration of citizen deliberation methods⁵. These contributions could complement existing stakeholder inputs and enrich the IGF's capacity to reflect the full spectrum of perspectives in digital governance.

7.6.5. More tangible outcomes and impact

The IGF discussions could be better summarized in more concise, forward-looking "Messages" that would outline actionable action points and even recommendations, while avoiding the forum's transformation into a negotiation space. The process to elaborate such Messages as well as outputs from the intersessional work from Policy Networks, Best Practice Fora and Dynamic Coalitions should be open and inclusive, drawing inspiration from the process steps and guidelines defined in the São Paulo Multistakeholder Guidelines. These messages would be presented as a periodic input to feed into UNGIS proceedings and should also be duly taken into account by the other component parts of the WSIS architecture, such as CSTD and WSIS-Forum (see respectively 7.5 and 7.4 above).

7.6.6. Rebranding

One further measure should be to strengthen the IGF by rebranding it into a **Digital Governance Forum (DGF)** or Digital Cooperation Forum (DCF), reflecting and better showcasing the fact that its mandate and practice already cover all aspects of digital governance, not just matters related to the technical governance of the Internet.⁶ This rebranding, which may be implemented without re-opening up the Tunis Agenda mandate of the IGF, would reflect the evolving nature of digital challenges and ensure that the IGF remains the primary platform for multi-stakeholder policy dialogue on digital governance and digital policy issues.

7.6.7. Recognition of IGF improvements, intersessional, national and regional structures

The WSIS+20 Review would be a good opportunity to formally recognize the rich intersessional work undertaken by the IGF ecosystem, its global network of national and regional IGFs (NRIs), as well as the IGF Leadership Panel as a key element of the IGF structure, building on language already agreed at the level of ECOSOC WSIS Resolutions.⁷

7.6.8. Enhancing the interconnectedness with the overall WSIS architecture

The discussions and outcomes from the IGF should be proactively leveraged as valuable inputs by the other component parts of the WSIS architecture, including leading UN departments and agencies and other stakeholders. This would render IGF outputs more tangible, action-oriented and effective. The IGF is uniquely placed to identify emerging topics, bringing key issues to the forefront and placing them on the global agenda, harnessing the wide range of inputs from its multistakeholder community. This issue-spotting is complemented by initial conversations during the annual meetings as well as network-building and intersessional work, which allow to develop and shape common approaches to addressing digital governance issues, sharing best practices and potentially developing non-binding recommendations. Such work is crucial to constantly evolving the field work under the WSIS Action Lines, which in turn are considered every year during the WSIS-Forum, with their work and relevant developments being subject to review and consideration by the CSTD in its annual reporting to ECOSOC and UNGA. A means to foster such impact would be to reserve a seat for IGF Leadership Panel representative(s) within the multistakeholder complements to UNGIS and CSTD described under

⁵ See e.g. examples of citizen deliberation projects on Internet Governance matters held in past years [here](#)

⁶ Consistent with the Tunis agenda, see e.g. §72.

⁷ [E/2024/13](#), para 95: "Notes, in that context, the establishment of the Leadership Panel of the Internet Governance Forum, as a step in implementing the Internet Governance Forum Plus proposal presented in the report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation"

7.2. and 7.5. Additionally, as mentioned above, the annual IGF “Messages” should be duly considered by the other mechanisms of WSIS, most notably by UNGIS, the CSTD and the WSIS-Forum.

8. Overall Conclusion

The WSIS+20 Review presents a unique opportunity to reimagine global digital governance, addressing emerging challenges, harnessing and building on existing structures and delivering on an updated WSIS architecture fit-for-purpose to address ever-evolving technological developments. By addressing subject-matter and architectural gaps, as well as integrating the implementation of GDC commitments into WSIS, the global international and multistakeholder community can ensure that WSIS remains a relevant and effective architecture for achieving an inclusive, sustainable, and people-centered digital society. The vision of WSIS Plus offers a pathway to strengthen digital cooperation and ensure that no one is left behind in the digital age.