APAC Youth WSIS+20 Series

Youth Statement (Draft 0)

Preamble

On July 2–3, 2025, we convened virtually for the APAC Youth: WSIS+20 Series, a regional gathering to amplify youth perspectives in the lead-up to the WSIS+20 review and the December 2025 UN High-Level Meeting. Organized by NetMission.Asia, with support from the DotAsia Organisation, the Series brought together 34 young digital leaders (62% female, 29% male) from 11 Asia-Pacific countries and beyond.

During two days of expert-led panels, collaborative Miro boards, and open Zoom exchanges, youth participants explored the WSIS+20 Elements Paper and co-developed early input. Key issues raised included the need for culturally relevant AI, transparent and accountable tech infrastructure, equitable access to digital jobs, stronger data protection, and youth leadership in digital governance.

This Draft 0 reflects the insights and recommendations shared by the Series attendees. It is a living document, one that will be further shaped and expanded through engagement with the wider NetMission+ community. As youth across the region, we are stepping up to ensure our voices are meaningfully heard in shaping the future of digital cooperation.

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Regional Reflections and Youth Priorities

We acknowledge the foundational impact of WSIS in expanding digital access and setting global digital development goals. Yet, two decades on, we, ***as digital natives***, see that the challenges have evolved:

1. **Digital divides persist**, especially in rural and under-resourced areas.
    - While WSIS has facilitated major gains in connectivity, youth across the Asia-Pacific region note that digital inclusion remains uneven. As highlighted in the WSIS+20 Zero Draft Elements Paper, ***Bridging Digital Divides*** *(paras. 28-35)*, key barriers such as **affordability**, **lack of localized** and **multilingual content**, **digital literacy gaps**, and **persistent urban-rural disparities** continue to deepen social and economic inequalities. Addressing these issues requires a rights-based, youth-centered approach that tackles not only access but also relevance, affordability, and usability.
2. **AI systems replicate bias**, language exclusion, and regional inequalities.
    - AI has rapidly advanced, particularly in the last five years. However, as highlighted in the WSIS+20 Zero Draft Elements Paper (paras 70-76), the **concentration of AI development** in a few countries has raised **concerns about the growing global digital divide and bias**. Current **global governance of AI is fragmented,** prompting calls for the United Nations to play a central coordinating role in shaping and supporting inclusive AI governance frameworks. Several initiatives, such as the proposed Independent International Scientific Panel on AI, a Global Dialogue on AI Governance, etc., are underway.
3. **Cybersecurity breaches undermine public trust**, particularly in states lacking robust protections.
    - As highlighted in ***Building Confidence and Security in the use of ICTs*** (*paras. 51-56*) of the WSIS+20 Zero Draft Elements Paper, growing cyber threats from data exploitation to gender-based online violence are eroding digital systems. While global frameworks exist, many countries cannot effectively protect users. **Trusts cannot grow without strong, inclusive cybersecurity measures.**
4. **Youth participation remains symbolic**, often limited to consultation without decision-making power.
    - **While youth are engaged in dialogue, our input is not always reflected in decision-making.** This gap is further reflected in the current WSIS+20 Zero Draft Elements Paper, where **"youth" is mentioned only once** in the Introduction and not acknowledged as **a distinct stakeholder group**. This

omission signals a lack of recognition of young people's roles in shaping digital futures. To address this, **youth inclusion should be elevated** either as a standalone section or meaningfully integrated into relevant areas such as ***The Enabling Environment*** *(paras. 36-38)* and ***Internet Governance*** *(paras. 57-64)*, where inclusive policy frameworks and multistakeholder engagement are discussed.

"Youth shouldn't just be in the room—we should co-design the future."
— Bea Guevarra, The Philippines

5. Adopt a **holistic understanding of digital divides** that goes beyond infrastructure to include affordability, digital literacy, gendered barriers, and access for persons with disabilities and marginalized groups.
6. **Promote inclusive AI** by supporting localization, multilingual data, and capacity-building for global participation in AI governance.
7. **Establish inclusive, rights-based cybersecurity frameworks** with adequate technical, legal, and institutional protections.
8. **Mainstream youth representation across documents** like the WSIS+20 outcomes. Youth must be recognized as key stakeholders with decision-making power in national and international digital policy processes.

Human-AI Synergy: Innovation with Equity

AI is shaping economies, identities, and services, but its impacts are not neutral. Across our region, we see both promise and peril.

9. **Localized AI models** for agriculture, education, and healthcare were highlighted as a necessity for underserved communities.
10. Participants discussed the potential of **intranet-hosted AI systems**[1] for privacy in local contexts, though scalability remains a challenge.
11. Ethical AI requires **context-aware governance**, not just imported frameworks.

> ***"AI is nothing but what you feed it. Bias starts with data."***
> **— Soklay Heng, Cambodia**

12. Promote **regionally grounded ethical frameworks** for AI development.
13. Invest in **open-source AI tools** with local language support.
14. Include youth in **national AI governance boards and testing processes**.
15. Ensure that AI policies consider **intergenerational and Indigenous knowledge systems**.

Recommendations on AI, Online Safety, Digital Wellbeing, and Inclusion:

16. Regulate **AI across its entire lifecycle**, not just deployment, by embedding safety and accountability standards from design to deployment
17. Mandate **safety-by-design** in all AI systems, with age-appropriate protections, transparent flagging tools, and culturally relevant content moderation.
18. Invest in **regional capacity-building** to empower low-resourced jurisdictions, particularly in multilingual and low-connectivity areas, to participate meaningfully in AI governance.
19. Promote **interoperable regional AI safety frameworks** that reduce regulatory fragmentation while allowing adaptation to local needs.
20. **Institutionalize youth participation** in AI governance via advisory boards, co-design roles, and digital parliaments.
21. **Center digital wellbeing in AI** development - enabling youth to thrive with dignity, agency, and balance.

[1] AI Systems deployed within a private or local network (e.g., within a school,company, etc), rather than relying on external Internet connections. See: [https://intranet.ai/articles/intranet/ai-intranet/]

Cybersecurity & Trust: Building Systems Worthy of Youth

Trust is not automatic. It must be earned through transparency, accountability, and education. Youth today are expected to trust digital systems, yet are rarely invited to help build them.

22. From the **2016 Philippines voter data leak**[2] to everyday data scraping, our region has experienced breaches that erode public confidence.
23. Cybersecurity must be proactive and **privacy-by-design**, not an afterthought.
24. Trust in data centers and platforms should be backed by standards (e.g., **SOC-2 certification**[3]).

    "Cybersecurity is a life skill, not just a technical one."
    — Dr. Aris Ignacio, The Philippines

25. Establish **youth-led audits and advisory panels** on national digital ID and cybersecurity initiatives.
26. Embed **algorithmic transparency requirements** into public digital services.
27. Integrate **cyber hygiene and rights education** into school curricula.

[2] In 2016, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) of the Philippines suffered a major data breach known as "Comeleak," which exposed the personal data of over 55 million registered voters. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commission_on_Elections_data_breach]
[3] System and Organizations Controls 2 (SOC-2) is a voluntary compliance standard developed by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) that evaluates how organizations manage customer data based on five "trust service criteria": security, availability, processing integrity, confidentiality, and privacy. See: [https://secureframe.com/hub/soc-2/what-is-soc-2]

From Clicks to Careers: Youth in the Digital Economy

The **digital economy** is a **key pillar** of global economic activity, accelerating post pandemic through e-commerce, online platforms, and digital payments.[4] Yet for many young people, especially in the APAC region, barriers to **meaningful employment** remain. While junior roles are abundant, real growth is often inaccessible, limited, without privilege or networks which block youths from reaching higher-value opportunities.

28. Digital platforms have enabled some youth entrepreneurship and innovation, especially through Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMes) and mobile finance. [5]
29. Concerns were raised about **"ghost job postings"** and a lack of transparent hiring processes.
30. Youth face a mismatch between their skills and market expectations, especially in ICT fields.
31. Gender, geographic, and socio-economic gaps remain deeply entrenched.

> ***"There are too many junior candidates, but not enough pathways to senior growth."***
>
> **— Sabrine Dachraoui, Youth Contributor**

32. Expand **public-private upskilling programs** in rural and underserved regions, building long-term pathways for economic participation.[6]
33. Fund **internships, fellowships, and mentorships** for marginalized youth and youth without formal networks.
34. Monitor and regulate **job posting platforms** to ensure ethical practices.
35. Support youth-led enterprises through **microgrants and startup support**.
36. **Close structural gaps** in the digital economy by promoting fair access to financing infrastructure and policy support for young people and small enterprises.[7]

[4] WSIS+20 Zero Draft Elements Paper, Paragraph 17
[5] WSIS+20 Zero Draft Elements Paper, Paragraph 18
[6] WSIS+20 Zero Draft Elements Paper, Paragraph 19
[7] WSIS+20 Zero Draft Elements Paper, Paragraph 20

Youth Participation in Digital Governance: From Tokenism to Leadership

Youth are organizing locally and regionally, through initiatives like APAC yIGF, Cambodia yIGF, Philippines yIGF, yIGF India, and many others, yet our input is often seen as optional. For governance to be sustainable, youth must be **involved at every stage**.

37. Participants emphasized the need for **co-design roles** rather than symbolic panels.
38. Questions were raised about the **future of the IGF if WSIS becomes more multilateral**.
39. Requests for Miro access, Zoom collaboration, and real-time input illustrated the desire for **active involvement, not passive attendance**. As well as a transparent track on how to proceed and consolidate inputs into a collective output
40. Institutionalize **youth delegate roles** in WSIS+20 and Internet Governance processes.
41. Ensure **funding and logistical support** for youth IGFs and national dialogues.
42. Recognize and credit youth as **co-authors or contributors** in formal policy outputs.
43. Introduce **monetary support mechanisms** (grants, stipends, or honoraria) for youth-led submissions, research, and digital governance interventions.
44. Establish a **Youth Connectivity Fund or embed youth financial support** within WSIS+20 participation mechanisms to reduce structural barriers.
45. Create a **WSIS Youth Advisory Council (YAC)** to support action line facilitators, the IGF, and WSIS-related programs, with explicit and flexible age brackets.
46. Clarify youth inclusion in online safety tracks, expanding to cover **rights, agency, privacy, and mental health**, not just harm mitigation.
47. Recognize youth from **underrepresented or marginalized groups** in high-income contexts (e.g., Indigenous, LGBTQIA+, racialized, or disabled) and support their meaningful participation.

Universal and Meaningful Connectivity

In a digital world shaped by AI, misinformation, and platform dependency, universal and meaningful connectivity is not a luxury; it's a prerequisite for youth participation, opportunity, and protection.

48. **Coverage does not equal Connectivity;** reported coverage often hides gaps in affordability, quality, or usability, especially in underserved regions.
49. **Relying on voluntary self-reporting is insufficient**, since data submitted by governments or providers can be selective and inconsistent.
50. Address **affordability and service quality,** as binary maps miss key barriers like high costs or poor service.
51. **Youth and communities are left out,** with few channels to report real connectivity issues.
52. Monitoring **Internet shutdowns** lacks true accountability. Transparency and trust in **data reporting remain weak**, as the absence of independent verification or crowd-sourced input reduces credibility and hinders action.
53. **Broaden the definition of coverage** to include speed, latency, affordability, and competition, not just on/off access.
54. Use **user-centered metrics** that reflect real experiences, not just infrastructure presence.
55. **Standardize connectivity reporting** with global templates requiring clear, disaggregated data on cost, access, and quality.
56. **Incentivize equitable participation** by tying reporting to funding, technical support, and ITU programs.
57. **Center youth and community feedback** via multilingual, open-source tools to report real connectivity challenges.
58. **Independently monitor Internet shutdowns** using real-time data and civil society inputs instead of government self-reporting.

Cross-Cutting Principles

As Asia-Pacific youth, **we are already leading**, from developing AI tools in local languages to advocating for privacy rights in our countries. **But we cannot lead alone.**

These values must inform all WSIS+20 outcomes:

59. **Digital inclusion and linguistic justice**
60. **Gender equity and intersectionality**
61. **Climate-aware and sustainable digital infrastructure**[8]
62. **Youth empowerment beyond representation**

We call on WSIS+20 stakeholders to:

63. Embed **meaningful youth representation** in decision-making
64. Design systems that **earn trust**, not demand it
65. Support **youth-led innovation**, research, and governance capacity

[8] WSIS+20 Zero Draft Elements Paper, Paragraphs 25-27. These paragraphs highlight the environmental impact of ICTs, including increased energy use, emissions, e-waste, and the need for sustainability standards and circular economy approaches.