United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD)

Questionnaire for 20-year review of WSIS implementation.

Response from Telecommunities Canada
Jan. 30, 2024

1. **To what extent, in your experience, has the "people - centred, inclusive and development - oriented Information Society", envisaged in the opening paragraph of the WSIS Geneva Declaration of Principles, developed within the 20 years since WSIS?**

Over the past 20 years, we suggest that the Information Society envisioned has actually moved away from a people-centered, inclusive, development-oriented society towards a corporate-centered profit-oriented society. The Information Society is still about people but, in the shift from people in a community context to people in a market context, we have allowed market values to drive human values, leaving out a broad spectrum of human values that exist in communities. There is an urgent need to move to a more balanced society in which communities represent the organizational capacity, identity and form that can countervail some of the impacts of market-driven policies.

2. **How has the implementation of WSIS outcomes contributed towards the development of a "people - centred, inclusive and development - oriented Information Society"?**

Digital equity is a goal that remains elusive in the Information Society. Access, affordability, useability, local support, education programs – all the things that are needed to be a participating citizen in the 21st century – are still not ubiquitous, although they are certainly much improved from even 5 years ago. We do not know to what extent implementation of WSIS outcomes contributed to this improvement, but we do know that the job is far from completed and that digital equity needs to head any future list of priorities.

Fundamentally, this is about fairness – the ability for everyone to participate in the benefits the Internet can offer. The corporate/market centered society is focussed on profitability, not fairness. This is a public policy issue that requires immediate attention and investment. Citizens and governments at all levels must prioritize social values in the Information Society. See Question #5 for more specific comments on access issues.

3. **How much progress do you believe has been made in implementing specific WSIS outcomes?**

Uses of ICTs and as a result, implementation of some WSIS outcomes, rapidly accelerated as the world adjusted to a pandemic and moved online for work, school and play. The impact of this cannot be overestimated. Small and under-resourced groups seamlessly pivoted to the Internet to connect internally and externally. A local art gallery could provide courses for people with intellectual and physical disabilities which culminated in a gallery show; a local theatre group could organize plays that were later presented live; music students could continue their studies during lockdown and present recitals which were now attended by family near and far. This has positively affected and expanded the lives of communities and citizens around the world.

Economic benefits also accrued. The current work from home movement has changed urban/rural work possibilities which has had a direct impact on development in less affluent areas. In the area of international development, people in refugee camps who could not leave those camps have been able to use remote work tools to generate income. An on-line program linking up sexual health advocates with youth in North, South and Central America was able to stretch 3 years of funding over 4 years, using funds previously allocated to travel, accommodation, etc. In addition, participants could be offered a per diem to participate from their locality – something which made a considerable difference to students in developing areas.

It was the existence of the Internet that enabled these programs. It would be very difficult to say how much these and similar outcomes could be attributed to WSIS. From 2020 to 2022, the world was responding to the pandemic using the tools that enabled them to communicate and grow and these new patterns have become part of daily life around the world. The Internet has become, more than ever before, an essential tool for participation in the public and private lives of citizens everywhere.

4. **What are the challenges to the implementation of WSIS outcomes?**

1. Digital literacy and media literacy will continue to be overarching issues whose challenges seem to be constantly outstripping society's ability to address them. Without adequate knowledge, people are easily exploited. In a world of endlessly repeated misinformation and disinformation, citizens need much more knowledge and support about the negative aspects of the online world. We support the following WSIS priority as one of the ways of meeting this crucial need **but much more is required**:

"22. Supporting providers of public access in the local communities such as libraries to help people access information resources they need and develop information literacy skills to improve their lives." (Priority areas to be addressed in the implementation of WSIS beyond 2015)

2. Jurisdictional issues that have arisen in the last 20 years could not have been foreseen. The changing geopolitical landscape and security issues are now impacting the Internet in multiple ways. And the use of the Internet for warfare is a threat that has stepped out

of the pages of sci-fi novels and into the real world. See also extraplanetary issues – Question 6.

3. The power and influence of the corporate sector, and the need to rebalance with the needs of communities, as outlined in our response to Question 1 is another major challenge. We note that the early spirit of collaboration and cooperation at the individual and community level that led to the rapid deployment of the Internet are no longer easy to find. Reliance on market forces is nothing new but the power imbalance between citizens or citizen groups and sometimes even governments vs. major global corporations that now control much of the Internet traffic globally has become the struggle of the 21st century. How the world responds to the ongoing issues that have evolved during this recent period of expansion while still preserving the interoperability of the Internet will be crucial.

4. Due to the power of vertical marketing practiced by large corporate interests, structural separation between carrier and content delivery on the Internet is not a reality in most jurisdictions. However, treating Internet access as a basic utility like water and hydro, would be a positive step forward for carriers and content providers, as well as users. Some communities in Canada, especially First Nations communities, have succeeded in developing community owned infrastructure. Currently there are some large corporate interests in the U.S. experimenting with open access through partnerships at the community level. Such activities should be encouraged and supported. We would like to see more government money designed to enhance internet access end up in the hands of the communities who wish to own their infrastructure.

   The fact is even the simplest tasks in modern life, like looking for a job, an apartment, or filling out a government form require Internet connectivity today. There is no incentive for government or industry to build open access fiber data utilities, which is the new benchmark for economic activities, in areas where there is no current market case. These are the very areas that need to attract new businesses. Citizens and communities need to take ownership of such local issues and take responsibility for their own economic future, rather than wait for various levels of government/business to step in. If Internet access were considered a basic utility, this could be managed at the local/regional level like water and hydro.

We support priority #5: *"Expanding access to and use of ICTs to all, including broadband and mobile services, particularly to vulnerable and marginalised people who must have a variety of opportunities to strengthen their social position through ICTs and e#services, through continued and increasing practical measures of inclusion, while at the same time taking steps to enhance trust in the use of ICTs."* (Priority areas to be addressed in the implementation of WSIS beyond 2015)

5. **How are these challenges being addressed? What approaches have proved to be effective in your experience?**

1. Erosion of trust is an overarching issue. We are just discovering the many ways information pathways can be abused – misinformation, disinformation, spam, Internet scams, deep fakes, etc. Originally bad actors were faking domain names to enable spams and scams. Now they are faking voices and circulating fake videos of unsuspecting people. The question is now "who do you trust, how do you trust, how do you verify what you can trust?" Within what was originally a very trusting internet infrastructure with all its positive potential, it has now become necessary to use every educational platform possible to teach users how to spot harmful content.

   To deal with this issue, digital and media literacy education (discussed in Quest. 4) must be a priority. We also suggest that some of the negative outcomes outlined might be addressed more vigorously by the technical community.

2. International cooperation - We have seen the emergence of a number of organizations attempting to address cross-jurisdictional issues, cyber-threats and security issues – e.g. Internet and Jurisdiction Policy Network.

3. Community emphasis/community control – More emphasis on community and community development in the next iteration of WSIS and more focus on this issue at the IGF level is necessary. We note that the IGF's Dynamic Coalition on Community Connectivity (DC3) presented its report at the 2023 IGF meeting in Kyoto. It concluded that community owned broadband was essential to socio-economic development. We applaud this but look for a follow-up. How are these ideas moved forward out of IGF and into practice? See also Question 4 re: the Internet as a utility.

6. **What do you consider the most important trends in technology and other aspects of ICTs which have affected implementation of WSIS outcomes since the Summit? What has been their impact?**

1. Internet gatekeepers – A dwindling number of international Internet gatekeepers are a significant threat to community participation and the ability of people to fulfill their desires to create and share content. Youtube can arbitrarily put up and take down videos using opaque rules. Facebook, through the Internet.org initiative, offered free access to limited services in underdeveloped areas – leading human rights organizations to accuse Facebook of offering the world's poorest people a "walled garden". The ability of a platform like Facebook to make policy decisions like delinking traditional media as a retaliatory move against impending national legislation, clearly shows the power international gatekeepers have over information flow and their ability to control that flow. Although there are now some examples of individuals and groups moving away from the major private gatekeeper platforms and the problems they represent, there need to be many more alternatives, especially non-profit alternatives, available to users.

2. Social media – although it has offered many ways for users to interact, there is mounting concern about the algorithms used in social media platforms fueling harmful and hateful content.

3. Privacy – Although some legislation attempting to protect user privacy has emerged in the last few years (GDPR), it has been a long time coming and remains a struggle to implement

4. Extraplanetary developments - Satellite internet, ubiquitous and on a very large scale, is also very costly. In addition, since satellites operate outside any national or international jurisdiction, there are no rules for decisions concerning who is served, how and with what. There is a valid concern about the ability of satellite owners to become power brokers. The fact that this is not already a top concern around the world points to the lack of capacity of our society to respond to such a substantive issue that affects everyone's future around the globe. Whether it is happening on the national scale or the international scale, the world seems to be watching these things unfold without much ability to address it.

5. State sponsored cyber attacks - There are an increasing number of governments that have been using the Internet to conduct surveillance, engage in censorship and spread misinformation and propaganda. There is increasing evidence of interference with democratic elections. Cyberattacks, often ransomware attacks. are regularly hitting public institutions and private enterprises including hospitals and schools. There is an ever present danger that this kind of attack will soon be targeting essential infrastructure like electricity grids

7. **What should be the priorities for stakeholders seeking to achieve WSIS outcomes and progress towards the Information Society, taking into account ongoing and emerging trends?**

1. Multistakeholder Internet Governance – Inclusive governance models and mechanisms, as indicated below, are crucial to the idea that there should only be a single Internet and that it must be interoperable and accessible to all citizens around the world. (see also Internet Governance Forum below)

   We support the following priorities:
   #2 Encouraging and facilitating people-centered and inclusive governance models and mechanisms.
   #3: Strengthening open, democratic, transparent and inclusive WSIS multistakeholder approach, enabling all stakeholders to participate according to their respective roles and responsibilities, in the implementation of the Geneva Plan of Action.
   (Priority areas to be addressed in the implementation of WSIS beyond 2015)

2. End users as stakeholders – The definition of stakeholders in the WSIS process needs to be expanded to include an end user category separate from the civil society category as the interests of these two groups do not always align.

   We note that member driven associations exist in many forms and serve many interests. They are a way to bring users into a discussion about how they are impacted by particular policy decisions. The largest of these in the Internet world is ISOC with chapters around the world, but there are untold numbers of national and regional groups also seeking to have their voices heard. An end user category would serve as a natural home for such groups within the WSIS categories of stakeholders and offer a much stronger representation of this presently underrepresented stakeholder group.

3. Internet Governance Forum – The IGF should be supported and improved. It should be better resourced and more results oriented. The IGF should explore various models of multistakeholder governance as it is practiced in ICANN, IETF, the Netmundial model, etc. Some of these models now have some experience and their strengths and weaknesses have become more apparent. Others, like the Netmundial model, look promising but need to be tested. The multistakeholder model of Internet Governance is still in its infancy and the IGF should be playing a major role in developing workable models of this new governance structure.

We support the following priority: #5 The WSIS multistakeholder approach which is essential in building the information society should be harnessed emphasising its benefits, recognising that it has worked well in some areas; and that it should be improved, strengthened and applied in some other areas. (Priority areas to be addressed in the implementation of WSIS beyond 2015)

4. Responsibility/accountability: We have arrived at a place in history where we no longer know where the responsibility lies when it comes to addressing many of the issues that plague the Internet. We urge the WSIS+20 process to begin a discussion on where the responsibility lies to resolve the issues listed. There appears to be a deep reluctance on the part of our entire society to actually take on this issue of responsibility and that issue is missing from public discourse. But if we don't understand the evolving issues around our use of the Internet and don't make any attempt to do so, then we are contributing to the fact that it is causing harm in untold ways. (See responses to Question 4 re digital/media literacy)

8. **How will ongoing trends and new developments in technology, especially in the deployment, access, and use of ICTs, impact future progress toward human development, specifically in relation to the SDGs?**

The issue of climate change is now a dominant trend in the world which will affect SDGs and make equitable deployment, access and use of ICTs even more crucial in the future.

9. Please add any other comments that you wish to make on the subject of the review that you believe would be helpful.

The Internet has become essential to enable the interconnectivity of all our activities on every level and it is important to make a separation between how people are using the Internet and the Internet itself. We are conscious of the fact that most of the negative trends listed are at the level of the uses of the Internet, not the Internet itself. However, some solutions could be found at the technical level, and we encourage such investigations.

These comments are the result of a zoom-enabled focus group discussion on January 18, 2024 organized by Telecommunities Canada (tc.ca). TC's mandate is: *to ensure that all Canadians are able to participate in community-based communications and electronic information services by promoting and supporting local community network initiatives and to represent and promote the Canadian community networking movement at the national and international level.*