

# United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development

## Twenty years in the implementation of outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

### WSIS+20 Reporting Template

Name of organization: Global Partners Digital

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Role of respondent: Policy and Advocacy Leads

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#### **I. What is your organisation's formal role and responsibilities concerning WSIS implementation?**

##### **a. Mandates of your organization relevant to the WSIS implementation**

Global Partners Digital (GPD) is a human rights organisation which works to ensure that human rights underpin the development, use and governance of digital technologies. As a civil society organisation, GPD undertakes its mandate under the Tunis Agenda by contributing to the realisation of a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society through “the development and application of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the Internet” (paragraph 34) and related technologies through a human rights-based approach.

This includes ensuring that frameworks, norms, and standards that govern digital technologies are rights respecting and are developed in an open, inclusive and transparent way; analysing the compliance of international, regional and national laws and policies with states' obligations under international human rights law; undertaking human rights-based capacity building for government officials and civil society; monitoring and research of trends and developments in digital policy-making; facilitating multidisciplinary networks; and supporting direct engagement by diverse civil society actors in international, regional and national digital policymaking processes, including those processes emanating from the WSIS.

##### **b. Brief History of your organization's contribution to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)**

GPD has been actively engaged with the WSIS since the ten-year review process (WSIS+10) with the aim of achieving the WSIS vision of a people-centred Information Society through a rights-based approach. In the context of the ten-year Review, GPD undertook research and led a global coalition of civil society groups who coordinated their advocacy efforts to jointly shape the outcomes of the Review, as well as facilitating cross stakeholder coordination efforts with other communities. Specifically, GPD alongside country researchers [analysed](#) the perspectives of fifteen countries on key issues pertaining to the

ten-year Review, and [evaluated](#) the engagement of civil society in the Review, based on survey data from civil society participants and qualitative analysis of civil society positions, making recommendations aimed at ensuring more effective participation by the civil society community.

In the period following the ten-year Review, GPD has supported the implementation in practice of the multistakeholder approach of Internet Governance, committed to as part of the outcomes of the Tunis Agenda (paragraph 34), and to realising the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) as the principal multistakeholder forum for dialogue on public policy matters related to the Internet and related technologies. GPD has contributed to the implementation of the multistakeholder approach in practice through our own direct engagement in public policy discussions and through capacity building and supporting direct engagement by civil society. As described in further detail under question I(c), GPD has produced a [framework](#) and worked with other stakeholders to operationalise the principles behind the multistakeholder approach in practice in different policy environments, in particular in cybersecurity discussions and in the development and implementation of national cybersecurity strategies.

GPD has engaged regularly at the IGF and our staff members have served on two terms of the IGF's Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG), and acted as co-facilitators of the Best Practice Forum on Cybersecurity and the Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation, including in 2023 and 2024. GPD has also served as civil society representatives in the Commission for Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) Working Group on Enhanced Cooperation from 2016 to 2018. GPD has engaged and has supported the sustained engagement of other civil society actors in the regional and national IGFs (NRIs).

Further details of our research, capacity building and project activities supporting the implementation of the WSIS outcomes are provided in response to question II.

**c. Implementation processes and initiatives within your organization and/or in partnership with other organisations**

Further details of our research, capacity building and project activities supporting the implementation of the WSIS outcomes are provided in response to question two.

**II. What have been your organization's main contributions to the direct implementation of the WSIS outcomes and related areas of digital development since the Summit, particularly since 2015?**

**a. WSIS Action Lines (as lead, co-facilitator or supporting participant)**

**b. WSIS-related projects**

**c. Indicators used to measure the impact of ICT in the achievement of the SDGs in your organization's area of work**

**d. What assessment has your organization made of its engagement in WSIS related work and digital development in its areas of responsibility?**

As a member of civil society, GPD has executed its responsibilities under the Tunis Agenda (paragraphs 34 and 35) by contributing to research and capacity building initiatives to

support the implementation of the WSIS outcomes and related areas of digital development with a people-centred and rights-based approach.

Since 2015, GPD has supported the development of numerous research outputs focused on the substance and implementation of the multistakeholder approach in the context of public policy processes related to the Internet. Specifically, GPD has published a number of outputs relating to the implementation of a multistakeholder approach in the context of the development of national cybersecurity strategy development. The effective design and operationalisation of a national cybersecurity strategy is relevant to each of the action lines and to the achievement of a people-centred Information Society, but particularly relates to action line C2 (Information and communication infrastructure).

As earlier noted, GPD has produced a [framework](#) and worked with other stakeholders to operationalise the principles behind the multistakeholder approach in practice in different policy environments, in particular in cybersecurity discussions and in the development and implementation of national cybersecurity strategies. For example, GPD contributed to the development of the second edition of the [Guide to developing a National Cybersecurity Strategy](#), co-produced by twenty partners including intergovernmental bodies, international Organisations, the private sector, academia and civil society. GPD has also produced its own guidance on multistakeholder approaches to cyber policymaking, including a [framework](#) (2018), [guide](#) (2018), [guidance for policymakers](#) (2020), an [assessment of national cybersecurity strategies in the Americas and other regions](#) (2022), and a [guide on inclusive cyber norm policymaking](#) (2023).

GPD has also initiated numerous, multi-year capacity building projects supporting the implementation of the multistakeholder approach through facilitating the engagement of civil society in digital policymaking processes to shape human rights-based and people-centred outcomes. Since 2013, GPD has led projects supporting the sustained engagement of civil society in the global IGF and in national and regional IGFs (NRIs). Overall, since 2015, GPD's projects have funded direct engagement by civil society organisations on 73 different occasions in the global IGF. GPD has further supported a significant number of additional organisations to attend or even organise national and regional IGFs through our projects. Through sustained capacity building and direct funding, these projects have resulted in ensuring increased engagement and greater diversity of engagement by civil society in the WSIS outcomes and discussions of digital development, and therefore contributing positively to the overall quality of discussions and furtherance of the multistakeholder approach.

Furthermore, GPD has continued to engage directly in “the development and application of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the Internet” (paragraph 34) at the international, regional and national levels and to provide advice and guidance to mainstream a human rights-based and people-centred approach. Most recently, for example, GPD has engaged on a sustained basis in negotiations of the Open-ended Working Group on ICTs (2021-2025), the draft United Nations Convention against Cybercrime, and the elaboration of the Council of Europe Convention on AI, to mitigate risks to human rights and ensure compliance with international human rights law standards. In addition to GPD's engagement with the global IGF, NRIs and IGF intersessional work, we have also engaged actively in related international processes

including the Pact for the Future and the Global Digital Compact, and the NETmundial ten-year review process.

### **III. What does your organization see as the main achievements, problems and emerging issues arising from WSIS and from digital development in its areas of responsibility since the Summit, particularly since 2015?**

#### **a. What have been the main achievements of WSIS and digital development?**

The WSIS process is committed to a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, use and share information to fully promote sustainable development and improve their quality of life. We understand the people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society as one which is respectful of human rights, promotes gender equality and empowers vulnerable and marginalised groups including minority groups. It is also a society where ICTs contribute to sustainable socio-economic development including through open, inclusive and transparent governance structures.

The original WSIS vision produced in 2003 was firm in its commitment to human rights, anchoring the Action Plan in the values and obligations of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This vision was further supported during the WSIS+10 review process, with the *Outcome document of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the overall review of the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society* (WSIS+10 Outcome Document) adopted in 2015 recognising that “the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online”. This is reflected in other processes within the UN, for example, UN General Assembly resolutions in 2013 and 2014 on the right to privacy in the digital age. This recognition that human rights apply online and offline in several key UN resolutions is a key achievement of WSIS, although, as discussed below, this has not always been realised in implementation.

Another key success and achievement of the WSIS process and outcomes is its strong commitment to the multistakeholder approach in Internet governance. The Tunis Agenda, in particular, recognises the roles played by different stakeholders in implementing the Action Lines and in shaping conversations about digital and public policy issues. This approach has become a foundational principle for digital technology governance discussions and underpins the work of global forums like the IETF and ICANN. The participation of all stakeholders is a prerequisite and enabler of people-centred digital development. In particular, civil society plays a key role in discussions on governance of digital technologies by bringing underrepresented perspectives and human rights expertise to inform discussions and raise awareness of the impacts on at-risk groups.

This multistakeholder approach has helped to maintain the global, open, and interoperable nature of the Internet, which is a key enabler of human rights in the digital age. Threats to the open, interoperable and global internet are likely to impact a broad range of rights, including but not limited to creating and sharing information, freedom of expression, freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and privacy.

While, in reality, the full participation of all stakeholders from both developed and developing countries in discussions on internet governance has remained an aspiration, the WSIS process has furthered the multistakeholder approach through institutional outcomes including the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). Through the establishment of the IGF, the WSIS has helped to create an open, inclusive space to discuss the governance of digital technologies, with stakeholders throughout the ecosystem having the opportunity to shape conversations on an equal footing. Additionally, the creation of over 100 national and regional IGF initiatives (NRIs) has established a robust mechanism to bring issues from the grassroots into international discussions and attracted participants from around the globe. While the IGF has a number of issues in implementation, discussed below, it has become the principal forum for multistakeholder and multidisciplinary dialogue on Internet-related public policy related issues.

### **b. What problems, obstacles and constraints have been encountered?**

Between WSIS+10 and WSIS+20, threats to human rights - particularly free expression, access to information and privacy - have increased rather than decreased. The free flow of information is being impeded by laws and policies which limit access and connectivity, limiting connectivity and access, and scaling the potential for increased state control and surveillance digital technologies. The elaboration of rights-restricting laws and policies adversely impacts the fulfilment of the objectives captured by the WSIS. This trend underscores the need for an explicitly human rights-based approach to achieving digital development goals.

Against this backdrop, there have been challenges in ensuring that human rights underpin the implementation of the Action Lines and their monitoring. This is reflected by a lack of coordination with UN human rights bodies including the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR). This has led to insufficient emphasis on rights-respecting and holistic approaches to digital technologies. To realise the people-centred Information Society envisaged by the WSIS, there is an ongoing need for those agencies charged with the implementation of the Action Lines to ensure a human rights-based approach to their application and to reviewing the progress in achieving them.

WSIS has not always enabled the participation of all stakeholders as a prerequisite and enabler of people-centred digital development. The WSIS+10 review process had a limited timeframe, with civil society only having six months to coordinate engagement. The consultations were primarily located in New York, which created practical issues for participation, and ultimate decision-making power over the final content of the resolution was given to states.

Meaningful participation of stakeholders could be further improved across the Internet governance ecosystem. For example, locations for the IGF may not be accessible to all stakeholders, with this being particularly critical if a location is not characterised by the rule of law and protection for the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression. In addition, technical forums and discussions can be complex and, at times, overwhelming venues for engagement. The voices of those who are most critical to a discussion, particularly those of the rights-holders themselves, may be excluded as they lack the technical expertise to participate meaningfully.

At the same time, more state-centric visions of governance of digital technologies (explored further in the response to question III(c) have narrowed the civic space. This drift to multilateralism undermines the ability of stakeholders to realise the roles laid out in the WSIS outcomes and processes, ultimately threatening the achievement of the goals of WSIS.

### **c. What new opportunities and challenges have emerged over the years since WSIS which need to be addressed?**

Technology and society has evolved significantly since the original WSIS process. Digital technologies are now ubiquitous and pervade most aspects of our lives, which means they are essential for the enjoyment of human rights; enabling individuals to digitally assemble, express themselves and access information.

Over the past decade, we have witnessed shrinking civic space and a steady decline in Internet freedom, marked by censorship, network disruptions, and the misuse of cybersecurity and cybercrime frameworks to target human rights defenders. These trends are compounded by a greater consolidation of market actors, fast technological changes (particularly relating to faster and more sophisticated data processes such as those which underlie generative AI) and greater use of digital technologies across public and private sectors.

In response to these trends, the governance of digital technologies at national, regional, and global levels has become increasingly complex. The WSIS+20 review is taking place within a broader constellation of key multilateral negotiations on digital cooperation – including the Summit of the Future (SOTF), the GDC, NETmundial+10, the High-Level Advisory Body on AI (HLAB-AI), and the Open-Ended Working Group on Information and Communication Technologies 2021-2025 (OEWG on ICTs). This can create challenges for civil society organisations, particularly in Global Majority countries. This threatens participation and weakens the role of civil society in raising the perspectives of the people most impacted by decisions and from monitoring and shaping conversations to ensure they remain focused on human rights.

Multilateral discussions on digital governance in particular have become geopolitical battlefields, raising concerns about attempts to shape the digital environment to suit individual countries' visions, often to the detriment of communities that are most affected by the development and use of these technologies.

In parallel, the desire to centralise control over technology governance has fomented efforts to migrate Internet governance to more closed spaces, without civil society and other expert engagement with ensuing impacts on human rights.

This changing context requires an adaptation of the way that the commitments and principles in the WSIS framework are operationalized. We discuss further in the answers to questions IV and V.

## **IV. Lessons learned in the implementation of the Summit outcomes in your organisation's specific areas of responsibility**

In our response, we focus on lessons learned in the implementation of the Summit outcomes insofar as they have contributed to the realisation of a people-centred, development-oriented and inclusive Information Society. As noted above, we understand this as one which is respectful of human rights, promotes gender equality and empowers vulnerable and marginalised groups.

As noted above, it is our view that the original WSIS outcomes contain many positive elements to facilitate the realisation of a people-centred and rights-based Information Society. In particular, the emphasis on ensuring the full participation of all stakeholders as a prerequisite and enabler of people-centred digital development, is crucial. However, as earlier noted, there have been clear challenges in ensuring that human rights and the work of the UN human rights bodies are fully integrated into actions to implement the Action Lines and in the review of their implementation.

In respect to the institutional outcomes of the WSIS, the IGF has provided an effective forum for multistakeholder dialogue on Internet governance and digital public policy issues and to further evolve and put into practice multistakeholder approaches. While acknowledging successes, our experience indicates there is a need to strengthen digital technology governance processes in general and specifically the IGF to ensure that it can be consolidated as a space for multistakeholder dialogue and support increased monitoring of the implementation of the Summit outcomes with a human rights-based approach.

#### **1. The need to ensure greater normative coordination:**

Over the past 20 years, as technologies have rapidly evolved, there is a wide body of interpretive work to apply the international human rights framework to the Internet and digital technologies. The UN human rights mechanisms, including the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) through initiatives including the B-Tech Project, have published considerable guidance for states and companies to carry out their respective obligations and responsibilities to promote human rights online.

Our review of the WSIS+10 Outcome Document indicates there is greater opportunity to ensure a human rights-based approach to the implementation of the Action Lines and to the review of their implementation. We provide recommendations for how to ensure this increased normative coordination under section V.

#### **2. The need to better embed multistakeholder principles:**

Our experience in the digital policy field indicates a need to better integrate multistakeholder principles. The implementation and evolution of multistakeholder approaches is a prerequisite to ensure the continued and effective participation of all stakeholders, and especially those who are less resourced like civil society and rights-holders themselves. It is necessary to increase the diversity of participation, especially from civil society and the human rights community, as they play a critical role in bringing underrepresented perspectives, raising awareness of the impacts on at-risk groups, contributing human rights expertise to inform discussions, and monitoring compliance with human rights standards. This oversight and representation is essential to ensure continuous review of the implementation of the WSIS outcomes by UN agencies and institutions from the perspective of human rights, as well as to monitor activities by governments to ensure compliance with their obligations under international human rights law.

In section V, we provide guidance to operationalise multistakeholder approaches in the context of the future of the WSIS and the outcomes of the Summit of the Future.

### **3. The need to strengthen the IGF and ensure it remains people-centric:**

As one of the principal institutional outcomes of the WSIS, the IGF has increasingly played an important role as the primary venue for multistakeholder dialogue on public policy matters related to the Internet. However, it faces continued challenges, these include the need to ensure more sustainable financial resources to fulfil its mandate; better cohesion between the IGF's intersessional work streams and outcomes at the global level; more diverse representation, particularly of underrepresented countries and marginalised communities; and for improved procedures to guarantee principles of openness, inclusivity, transparency and accountability. The need for strengthened procedures is particularly relevant to the selection of host countries for the global IGF to ensure that the IGF through its procedures and activities does not undermine the effective participation of stakeholders or exclude structurally marginalised groups.

In section V, we provide recommendations for how to better embed multistakeholder principles to ensure that the IGF can better realise the people-centred and rights-based society envisaged by the WSIS outcome documents.

## **V. Observations or recommendations concerning the future of WSIS and digital development, taking into account the outcomes of the Summit of the Future in September 2024**

The WSIS+20 review process as well as other digital governance processes including the outcomes of the Summit of the Future present an opportunity to better embed international human rights standards, implement and evolve multistakeholder approaches in the governance of technologies, and articulate a holistic and inclusive agenda for digital development. A holistic agenda would incorporate the role that digital technologies and their regulation can play in enabling and undermining the enjoyment of all human rights, including the right to development.

### **1. Increase normative coordination:**

As noted above, there is now a wide body of interpretive work to apply the international human rights framework to the Internet and digital technologies. To realise the people-centred Information Society envisaged by the WSIS, there is a need for those agencies charged with the implementation of the action lines to ensure a human rights-based approach to their application and to reviewing the progress in achieving them. At the institutional level, this requires ensuring greater coordination and coherence with the UN human rights bodies, in particular the OHCHR. More consideration should be given to how to deploy existing expertise and resources of the UN human rights bodies to ensure a rights-based approach to implementation and review.

The Global Digital Compact positively reinforces the need for enhanced normative coordination, referencing the need for digital technology companies and developers to respect international human rights and principles, including through the application of human



rights due diligence and impact assessments throughout the technology life cycle (paragraph 23(b)), and acknowledging OHCHR's ongoing efforts to provide, through an advisory service on human rights in the digital space, expert advice and practical guidance on human rights and technology issues (paragraph 24). As noted below, a strengthened IGF mandate with a dedicated, multistakeholder IGF track, dedicated to monitoring human rights compliance with GDC implementation, could help to ensure closer coordination and normative harmonisation.

## **2. Better embed multistakeholder approaches in processes including the WSIS:**

The NETmundial+10 Multistakeholder Statement, negotiated and agreed through a multistakeholder process, provides a set of guidelines and related process steps ("São Paulo Multistakeholder Guidelines") in Internet governance and digital policy processes at the international, regional and national levels, based upon existing foundational documents and best practice. It reinforces the benefits of approaches to governance which allow for inclusive and democratic participation of all stakeholders, and provides clear recommendations for how institutions including the IGF can better integrate multistakeholder principles.

The Multistakeholder Statement highlights the need to improve participation including by ensuring transparent and accessible processes or through funding and capacity building to support participation from a diverse range of stakeholders in a range of processes at all levels. These Principles demonstrate the evolution of thinking about how multistakeholderism can be integrated within multilateral processes and in the context of international public policy issues relating to the Internet.

## **3. Strengthen and ensure a people-centred IGF mandate:**

As earlier mentioned, there is a need to consider how the IGF can be strengthened as a vehicle for people-centred and inclusive discussions of the Internet and digital policy issues.

As a first step, it is our view that a permanent IGF mandate would provide a long-term, stable forum for discussion of digital policy topics in an inclusive and multistakeholder manner. A permanent mandate will ensure that the IGF as a multistakeholder structure is safeguarded, while allowing additional time for the community to consider how its model may be further refined.

It is also necessary to review the IGF's policies and procedures from a human rights perspective to ensure that principles of openness, inclusivity, transparency and accountability are upheld. Specifically, it is necessary to ensure that host country selection for the global IGF is founded upon an open, community-involved selection process, based on human rights considerations, in adherence with principles of openness, accountability and inclusivity.

In addition to the above, issues including the sustainability of financial resources, cohesion of the IGF's intersessional workstreams with outcomes at the global level, follow-up and monitoring of commitments, and increased financial support to facilitate more diverse participation, should all be considered.

## **4. Ensure coordination between different forums and processes:**

In view of the increasing number of forums and processes relating to digital governance, there is a need to ensure greater harmonisation and facilitate coordination. This is necessary in order that lesser resourced stakeholders like civil society are able to engage effectively. In this respect, the GDC's commitment to the outcomes of WSIS and to working within existing structures is welcome.

One way to ensure increased coordination between the WSIS and the outcomes of the Summit of the Future is for the IGF to play a key role in monitoring and overseeing the implementation of the GDC. This could be achieved through a multistakeholder IGF track, dedicated to monitoring human rights compliance with GDC implementation. Such a track would support stakeholders to fulfil their responsibility as laid out by the WSIS outcomes, could help to ensure closer coordination between UN agencies and institutions, and foster enhanced normative harmonisation with international human rights standards.

**VI. Please identify publications, reports and other documents by your organisation which you consider can contribute to the work of the review.**

Relevant work by GPD is highlighted in response to question II(b).