



Access Now's Submission for the WSIS+20 Stakeholder Consultations on Inputs to the WSIS+20 Elements Paper

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Introduction

Access Now welcomes the opportunity to provide its input to the WSIS+20 Stakeholder Consultations: Inputs to the Elements Paper.¹ As an ECOSOC accredited organization, Access Now routinely engages with the United Nations (UN) in support of our mission to extend and defend the digital rights of people and communities at risk around the world.²

Access Now is a member of the Global Digital Rights Coalition for WSIS, a collective of civil society organisations from the Global Majority and Global North offering our shared expertise to advance human rights and multistakeholderism in the WSIS+20 review process.³ The following submission therefore supports and builds upon the initiatives of the GDRC-WSIS coalition and other related WSIS+20 coalition initiatives.

What are the most important achievements arising from WSIS that should be highlighted in the Zero Draft?

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) marked the initial process where diverse stakeholders from academia, civil society, the technical community, international organizations, government, and the private sector convened to foster discussions for a "people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society." We identify three main achievements arising from WSIS that should be highlighted in the Zero Draft. First, WSIS secured widespread support for the multistakeholder approach to internet governance. Specifically, WSIS established the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), which was recently affirmed in the Global Digital Compact (GDC) as "the primary multistakeholder platform for discussion of Internet governance issues."⁴ WSIS embraced a broad definition of internet governance that extends beyond "naming and addressing" to include a wide range of "significant public policy issues," an affirmation that rings truer each year as the Internet

¹ Co-Facilitators of the United Nations WSIS+20 Review Process, (2025), *WSIS+20 Stakeholder Consultations: Inputs to the Elements Paper*, available at:

[https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=2zWeD09UYE-9zF6kFubccA9MLsbciY9FuR_t2RxbPZ1UN1c1RVdMV09EQUg0VjdCTTZB Mk1KMFowVC4u](https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=2zWeD09UYE-9zF6kFubccA9MLsbciY9FuR_t2RxbPZ1UN1c1RVdMV09EQUg0VjdCTTZB Mk1KMFowVC4u;); Elements Paper (2025), available at:
https://publicadministration.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/2025/WSIS%2B20_ElementsPaper_20June.pdf

² Access Now, (2025), *About Us*, available at <https://www.accessnow.org/>.

³ Global Partners Digital, (2025) *Global Digital Rights Coalition for WSIS (GDRC-WSIS)*, available at:

<https://www.gp-digital.org/global-digital-rights-coalition-for-wsis/>; See also, Global Partners Digital, (2025), *Global Digital Rights Coalition for WSIS (GDRC-WSIS)*, *GDRC-WSIS Joint submission to the WSIS twenty-year review process (WSIS+20)*, available at:

<https://www.gp-digital.org/news/gdrc-wsis-joint-submission-to-the-wsis-twenty-year-review-process-wsis20/>. See specific submission available at: <https://www.gp-digital.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/GDRC-WSIS-Written-Input-to-Elements-Paper-Jul-2025.pdf>

⁴ United Nations, (2024), *Global Digital Compact*, UN Doc. A/79/L.2, available at:

https://www.un.org/global-digital-compact/sites/default/files/2024-09/Global%20Digital%20Compact%20-%20English_0.pdf at paragraphs 28, 29, 68.

becomes more essential to our social, political, economic, and cultural systems. Second, the WSIS process, particularly the Geneva Declaration of Principles, reaffirmed fundamental human rights, particularly freedom of opinion and expression and access to information.⁵ The rapid digital development stemming from WSIS, namely information and communication technologies (ICTs) has transformed societies and enabled the enjoyment of human rights, including freedom of opinion and expression, access to information, as well as the progressive realization of other human rights, such as the right to education and the right to health. These commitments, in principle, ensure that everyone can access, share, and use information, and together develop and build knowledge societies, therefore promoting overall digital inclusion and development. Third, WSIS is closely aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) therefore recognizing the vital role of ICTs in achieving the SDGs. Extending universal, free, open, secure, interoperable, and reliable access to the internet is essential to exercise human rights in the digital age and to reach the SDGs.⁶

What are the most important challenges to the achievement of WSIS outcomes to date and in the future that need to be addressed in the Zero Draft?

Despite being included in the WSIS outcomes, human rights implementation has often been shallow in part because there are no specific processes to support the implementation of measures for integrating human rights. A review of the progress made on the vision of a “people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented information society” since WSIS must take into account how ICTs have advanced human rights and also put individuals and communities at risk over the last twenty years.

While the diffusion of digital technologies, including ICTs, has created many opportunities, it has also been accompanied by severe risks. Unlawful surveillance by government authorities undermines the security of communications, while imposing chilling effects on expression.⁷ Meanwhile, governments allow the proliferation of powerful and invasive tools sold by the private surveillance industry to both states and private actors, who use them to facilitate transnational repression and abuses with impunity. Participation in the information society diminishes when individuals cannot trust that their data (now largely collected and processed by artificial intelligence) — whether it holds financial and health information or details about their political beliefs — will be protected online. Any interference with the right to privacy must be strictly necessary and proportionate, prescribed by law, and undertaken in pursuit of a legitimate aim, whether within or across borders. Likewise, government restrictions on online expression often do not respect international standards. Unfortunately, beyond filtering content online, governments continue to impose internet shutdowns, intentionally disrupting access to networks, applications, and services, particularly during times of crisis.⁸ Disinformation

⁵ World Summit on the Information Society, (2023), *The Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action*, available at: <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/promotional/brochure-dop-poa.pdf> see page 4 paragraph 3.

⁶ Access Now, (2020), *Digital Rights are Vital for Sustainable Development*, available at: <https://www.accessnow.org/digital-rights-are-vital-for-sustainable-development/>

⁷ Access Now, (2023), *Joint Statement: States must take immediate action to stop spyware threatening press freedom*, available at: <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/spyware-press-freedom-statement/>

⁸ Access Now, (2025), *#KeptOn; Fighting internet shutdowns around the world*, available at: <https://www.accessnow.org/campaign/keepiton/>

continues to degrade information integrity, interfering with human rights, democratic processes, and the digital economy, while overly broad legal responses to disinformation also pose risks to human rights and stifle digital development.⁹ Finally, the growing concentration of corporate power has created challenges to advance human rights and sustainable development. Addressing these persistent and emerging challenges in the digital landscape requires identifying current opportunities with case studies and concrete examples centered on the diverse lived experiences of persons and communities at risk, particularly those from the Global Majority.

What are the most important priorities for action to achieve the WSIS vision of a ‘people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society’ in the future, taking into account emerging trends?

In light of the emerging trends, the Zero Draft should undertake two main actions. First, express a commitment to human rights in the digital environment, building on the Geneva Declaration of Principles and the WSIS+10 review.¹⁰ More importantly, the Zero Draft should be grounded in — and include explicit references to — international human rights law, such as the International Bill of Human Rights, thematic human rights treaties, and the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs).¹¹ It should underscore the universality, interdependence, and indivisibility of all human rights as affirmed by the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action.¹² The Zero Draft should further ensure a formal role of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), who has led research and initiatives at the intersection of technology and human rights for over a decade.¹³ The OHCHR’s leadership role in digital governance was recognised in the GDC, including the

⁹ Access Now, (2023), *What is disinformation, why it spreads, and how to stop it*, available at:

<https://www.accessnow.org/publication/what-is-disinformation-how-to-stop-it/>

¹⁰ Namely, that “the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online” and that the “progress towards the WSIS vision should be considered not only as a function of economic development and the spreading of [ICTs] but also as a function of progress with respect to the realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms.” See United Nations General Assembly (2016), *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*, UN Doc. A/Res/70/125, at paragraphs 9, 43; See also, World Summit on the Information Society, (2023), *The Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action*, available at: <https://www.itu.int/net/osis/docs/promotional/brochure-dop-poa.pdf> see page 4 paragraph 3.

¹¹ United Nations General Assembly, (1948), *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, available at:

www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/; United Nations General Assembly (1966), *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (entered into force 23 March 1976) available at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>; United Nations General Assembly, (1966), *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (entered into force 3 January 1976) available at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>; United Nations Human Rights Council, (2011), *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations “Protect, Respect and Remedy” Framework*, UN Doc. HR/PUB/11/04, available at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/guiding-principles-business-and-human-rights>; See also, Global Partners Digital, (2025), Global Digital Rights Coalition for WSIS (GDRC-WSIS), *GDRC-WSIS Joint submission to the WSIS twenty-year review process (WSIS+20)*, available at: <https://www.gp-digital.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/GDRC-WSIS-Written-Input-to-Elements-Paper-Jul-2025.pdf>

¹² United Nations, (1993), *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action*, World Conference on Human Rights, UN Doc. A/CONF.157/23, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/vienna-declaration-and-programme-action>

¹³ See for e.g. establishment of the OHCHR B-Tech Project, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, (2025), *About the B-Tech Project*, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/business-and-human-rights/b-tech-project>; See also, Global Partners Digital, (2025), Global Digital Rights Coalition for WSIS (GDRC-WSIS), *GDRC-WSIS Joint submission to the WSIS twenty-year review process (WSIS+20)*, available at: <https://www.gp-digital.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/GDRC-WSIS-Written-Input-to-Elements-Paper-Jul-2025.pdf>

voluntary Digital Human Rights Advisory Service.¹⁴ The OHCHR has developed significant expertise on the intersection of human rights and digital technologies, making it accessible to all stakeholders,¹⁵ and has worked to ensure the UN's own practices align with human rights law and norms in the digital age.¹⁶ We therefore echo the recommendation to ensure a formal recognition of the role of the OHCHR as an implementing entity by assigning it a role as a co-facilitator of Action Line 10, on Human Rights and Ethics, thereby securing its place in the future implementation and review of the WSIS framework.¹⁷

Second, the Zero Draft should endorse a multistakeholder approach to internet governance and include all stakeholder groups – civil society, academia, the technical community, international organizations, government and the private sector. Specifically, the Zero Draft should revert to the original definition of internet governance as stated in paragraph 34 of the WSIS Tunis Agenda.¹⁸ The Zero Draft should ground multistakeholder participation in the São Paulo Multistakeholder Guidelines agreed at NetMundial+10.¹⁹

What additional themes/issues, if any, should be included in the Elements Paper?

The Zero Draft should guarantee protection against unlawful or arbitrary restrictions on access to and use of the internet and digital technologies, including internet shutdowns, online censorship, surveillance, spyware, and harassment.²⁰ The Zero Draft should reinforce calls for all stakeholders to refrain from using technologies that are fundamentally incompatible with human rights.²¹

¹⁴ United Nations, (2024), *Global Digital Compact*, UN Doc. A/79/L.2, available at: https://www.un.org/global-digital-compact/sites/default/files/2024-09/Global%20Digital%20Compact%20-%20English_0.pdf at paragraphs 24 and 69.

¹⁵ See, e.g., the OHCHR Human Rights and Digital Technology Resource Hub, available at: <https://www.digitalhub.ohchr.org>.

¹⁶ See, e.g. Guidance on Human Rights Due Diligence for Digital Technology Use, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/digital-technology-use-guidance-sg-1-en.pdf>

¹⁷ Global Partners Digital, (2025), Global Digital Rights Coalition for WSIS (GDRC-WSIS), *GDRC-WSIS Joint submission to the WSIS twenty-year review process (WSIS+20)*, available at: <https://www.gp-digital.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/GDRC-WSIS-Written-Input-to-Elements-Paper-Jul-2025.pdf>

¹⁸ Defined as: “the development and application by governments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the Internet” see World Summit on the Information Society, (2005), *Tunis Agenda for the Information Society*, UN Doc. WSIS-05/TUNIS/DOC/6 (Rev.1)-E, available at: <https://www.itu.int/net/wws/docs2/tunis/off/6rev1.html> at paragraph 34; see also, Global Partners Digital, (2025), Global Digital Rights Coalition for WSIS (GDRC-WSIS), *GDRC-WSIS Joint submission to the WSIS twenty-year review process (WSIS+20)*, available at: <https://www.gp-digital.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/GDRC-WSIS-Written-Input-to-Elements-Paper-Jul-2025.pdf>.

¹⁹ CGI.br, NETmundial+10, (2024), *NETmundial+10 Multistakeholder Statement: São Paulo Multistakeholder Guidelines*, available at: <https://netmundial.br/pdf/NETmundial10-MultistakeholderStatement-2024.pdf>

²⁰ Global Partners Digital, (2025), Global Digital Rights Coalition for WSIS (GDRC-WSIS), *GDRC-WSIS Joint submission to the WSIS twenty-year review process (WSIS+20)*, available at: <https://www.gp-digital.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/GDRC-WSIS-Written-Input-to-Elements-Paper-Jul-2025.pdf>

²¹ United Nations General Assembly, (2024), *Seizing the opportunities of safe, secure and trustworthy artificial intelligence systems for sustainable development*, UN Doc. A/RES/78/265, available at: <https://docs.un.org/A/RES/78/265> at paragraph 5; United Nations Human Rights Council, (2025), *Human rights defenders and new and emerging technologies: protecting human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in the digital age*, UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/58/23, available at: <https://docs.un.org/A/HRC/RES/58/23> at paragraph 9(m); see also, Global Partners Digital, (2025), Global Digital Rights Coalition for WSIS (GDRC-WSIS), *GDRC-WSIS Joint submission to the WSIS twenty-year review process (WSIS+20)*, available at: <https://www.gp-digital.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/GDRC-WSIS-Written-Input-to-Elements-Paper-Jul-2025.pdf>.

The Zero Draft should recognize the structural barriers and risks that hinder meaningful connectivity and disproportionately impact specific individuals and communities.²² In particular, the Zero Draft should expand language on gender equality and inclusion, acknowledging the differential impact that technologies have on women, girls, and people of diverse genders and sexualities. Reinforcing the work of the UN Human Rights Council in asserting the importance of network neutrality, the Zero Draft should call on the telecommunications operators and regulators to eliminate arbitrary and exploitative network management practices in the provision of internet access and services. The emergence of alternatives to traditional infrastructure, including through community networks, satellite, and mesh connectivity solutions, should be encouraged along with emphasis on human rights-respecting regulation and democratic, community-led governance. The Zero Draft should renew commitments on the application of human rights due diligence and impact assessments from an intersectional perspective throughout the technology lifecycle.²³

While the Elements Paper acknowledges platform accountability, stronger attention should be paid to the issue of the concentrated power and impunity of private actors over digital spaces, and a clear call for mandatory transparency and human rights due diligence in the Zero Draft. We echo calls for a strengthened focus on the role of platforms in shaping access to information, content distribution and media viability, including addressing the impact of generative AI on information integrity and the overall trustworthiness of media independence and communications.²⁴

Do you wish to comment on particular themes/issues/paragraphs in the Elements Paper?

The Elements Paper makes reference to the need for enhanced cooperation without a clear definition of what “enhanced cooperation” entails, nor recognizing past coordinated efforts on enhanced cooperation, particularly that of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD).²⁵ Enhanced cooperation should be recognized as a continuous process to enable inclusive and equitable participation, particularly from stakeholders in the Global Majority. Enhanced cooperation must not be seen neither as separate nor as an alternative to the multistakeholder approach in internet governance. The Zero Draft should not attempt to continue to solicit definitions of enhanced cooperation or create new frameworks and proposals, particularly given resource constraints.

What suggestions do you have to support the development of the WSIS framework (WSIS Action Lines, IGF, WSIS Forum, UNGIS etc.)?

²² Global Partners Digital, (2025), Global Digital Rights Coalition for WSIS (GDRC-WSIS), *GDRC-WSIS Joint submission to the WSIS twenty-year review process (WSIS+20)*, available at:

<https://www.gp-digital.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/GDRC-WSIS-Written-Input-to-Elements-Paper-Jul-2025.pdf>

²³ United Nations, (2024), *Global Digital Compact*, UN Doc. A/79/L.2, available at:

https://www.un.org/global-digital-compact/sites/default/files/2024-09/Global%20Digital%20Compact%20-%20English_0.pdf at paragraphs 23(b) and 25(a).

²⁴ Global Partners Digital, (2025), Global Digital Rights Coalition for WSIS (GDRC-WSIS), *GDRC-WSIS Joint submission to the WSIS twenty-year review process (WSIS+20)*, available at:

<https://www.gp-digital.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/GDRC-WSIS-Written-Input-to-Elements-Paper-Jul-2025.pdf>

²⁵ CSTD Working Groups on Enhanced Cooperation (2013-2014) and (2016-2018).

The Zero Draft should recognize that the mandate of the IGF has evolved into the world's most inclusive forum for broader digital governance. The Zero Draft should therefore renew the IGF and make it permanent with adequate funding. It should also include a recognition of the role of the national and regional IGFs and make explicit calls for the need to strengthen the IGF. The continued existence, and stability, of the IGF is crucial for its future as a multistakeholder platform which bridges stakeholder communities and regions, and connects different internet and digital policy processes. To strengthen the IGF, particular attention should be paid to the need to encourage broader participation from stakeholders from the Global Majority.²⁶

The Zero Draft should include a clear path forward of how the GDC will be integrated with WSIS in practice. We echo support for the proposal by Switzerland to develop a joint implementation roadmap and to establish a multistakeholder advisory body to support UNGIS in their work to implement the GDC and the WSIS.²⁷

Do you have any other comments?

Future consultations in the WSIS+20 Review Process should bring all stakeholders together to enable a more robust and diverse dialogue. In particular, the WSIS+20 review process should continue to implement the recommendations developed by cross-stakeholder coalitions, including the Five-Point Plan for an Inclusive WSIS+20 Review and WSIS+20 Five-Point Plan Follow-up: Eight Practical Recommendations for an inclusive WSIS+20 review process, as well as the recommendations in the Freedom Online Coalition's Joint Statement on the Future of the Multistakeholder Approach at the UN.²⁸

²⁶ Global Partners Digital, (2025), Global Digital Rights Coalition for WSIS (GDRC-WSIS), *GDRC-WSIS Joint submission to the WSIS twenty-year review process (WSIS+20)*, available at:

<https://www.gp-digital.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/GDRC-WSIS-Written-Input-to-Elements-Paper-Jul-2025.pdf>

²⁷ Government of Switzerland, (2025), *Non paper on WSIS plus: what are we talking about and what should we be aiming for?* available at:

https://mail.intgovforum.org/pipermail/wg-strategy_intgovforum.org/attachments/20250603/ce8d178e/attachment-0001.pdf See also, Global Partners Digital, (2025), Global Digital Rights Coalition for WSIS (GDRC-WSIS), *GDRC-WSIS Joint submission to the WSIS twenty-year review process (WSIS+20)*, available at:

<https://www.gp-digital.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/GDRC-WSIS-Written-Input-to-Elements-Paper-Jul-2025.pdf>

²⁸ Global Partners Digital, (2025), *Five-Point Plan for an Inclusive WSIS+20 Review*, available at:

<https://www.gp-digital.org/five-point-plan-for-an-inclusive-wsis20-review/>; Global Partners Digital, (2025), *WSIS+20 Five-Point Plan Follow-up: Eight Practical Recommendations*, available at:

<https://www.gp-digital.org/wsis20-five-point-plan-follow-up-eight-practical-recommendations/>; Freedom Online Coalition, (2024), *Joint Statement on the Future of the Multistakeholder Approach at the United Nations*, available at:

<https://freedomonlinecoalition.com/joint-statement-on-the-future-of-the-multistakeholder-approach-at-the-united-nations/>



Access Now (<https://www.accessnow.org>) defends and extends the digital rights of individuals and communities around the world. As a grassroots-to-global organization, we partner with local actors to bring a human rights agenda to the use, development, and governance of digital technologies, and to intervene where technologies adversely impact our human rights. By combining direct technical support, strategic advocacy, grassroots grantmaking, and convenings such as RightsCon, we fight for human rights in the digital age.

For more information, please contact: un@accessnow.org