

Shaping information societies for human needs: The relevance of the WSIS civil society declaration, 20 years on

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The global future of our information societies is again in debate in the United Nations (UN), in the lead-up to the 20-year revision of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS+20), due to take place in Geneva in 2025. The vision constructed in the framework of the international community at WSIS two decades ago – “to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life”² – is still far from becoming a reality. However, there is broader awareness today of the importance and urgency of defining what information societies we need and identifying the steps to achieve them.

WSIS+20 will involve evaluating progress regarding fulfilment of the original WSIS agreements, as well as readjusting priorities for the future, given the rapid advances in technology and the information society itself. Over the coming months, governments, civil society organisations and private enterprise will be fine-tuning and updating their respective proposals and priorities. But much wider public debate and involvement will also be needed if we are to redress the present imbalance between private and public interests in the digital realm.

Civil society WSIS contributions

The first UN summit on these issues, held in two phases (2003 in Geneva and 2005 in Tunis), set a precedent by establishing a “multistakeholder” dynamic, where both civil society organisations and private enterprise, supposedly on an equal footing, were given a formal space as “observers”. This allowed for participation in certain official debates, though the final decisions remained in the hands of governments.

At that time, civil society participation led to several significant contributions to the official outcomes, in particular broadening the focus and vision of the summit to encompass human rights and principles of social inclusion, in contrast to the original proposal of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) – the main WSIS organising body – in collusion with private enterprise, which was basically technocratic, and centred on removing barriers to investment in internet infrastructure, services and e-commerce.

A number of other civil society inputs were also included in the Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action,³ such as the principle of universal access to information and communications technologies (ICTs), development of the public domain of information, support for “free” software,⁴ and promoting capacity for ICT research and development in developing countries. While UN declarations are not binding on governments, they do express a collective commitment and provide social actors with justification and leverage to press for their implementation.

Nonetheless, many other civil society proposals were side-lined in the process, and as civil society organisations, formally the third actor invited to the

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2 WSIS Declaration of Principles, Geneva 2003: <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>

3 WSIS Plan of Action, Geneva 2003: <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/poa.html>

4 “Free software” refers to software that respects users’ freedom and community, for example, the freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software. Thus, “free software” is a matter of liberty, rather than gratuity; for this reason, it is often referred to as “free/libre”.

table, we had to fight at every stage to make our positions heard. The achievements were largely possible due to the collective will to develop civil society consensus proposals in order to make a greater impact on the outcomes. A key actor contributing to this dynamic was the campaign on Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS), of which APC was an active participant. The CRIS Campaign was a global coalition of civil society organisations, launched at the first World Social Forum, in 2001, in the lead-up to WSIS. It had the goals of deepening the debate on the information society, promoting the democratisation of access to communications, and strengthening commitments to communications in the service of sustainable development.

At the second WSIS “PrepCom” (preparatory event), held in September 2002, the civil society plenary took the initiative of creating a “Content and Themes Group”, as a space for facilitating agreement and taking decisions by consensus on content-related issues, in order to have greater chances of input to the official summit process.

The Content and Themes Group, which met twice daily during preparatory events, facilitated speaking slots at the official events for the different thematic caucuses formed by civil society participants, organised monitoring and reports of the official sessions, compiled consensus documents, and coordinated strategic actions such as lobbying governments. The official WSIS organisers recognised that the degree of unity among civil society organisations was unprecedented in a UN conference, as well as our determination to make quality contributions and achieve impact on the summit outcomes. In the final days, the president of the summit even invited the Content and Themes Group to summarise the civil society “red lines” regarding inclusion of content we considered non-negotiable.

The civil society declaration in Geneva

Despite these successes, many of the civil society proposals were absent or not adequately reflected in the final official summit documents. In response, towards the end of the Geneva process, the civil society plenary decided to draw up its own declaration as a complement to the official document, with the aim of providing input for future discussion in the UN process, as well as contributing to more inclusive public debate on the issues.

This declaration, titled “Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs” and adopted by consensus at the final civil society plenary on 8 December 2003 (just over 20 years ago), was

presented to the final Geneva WSIS session and posted on the summit website,⁵ thus creating another precedent for a UN conference. Today, most of its standpoints are still valid – and their implementation still pending – and many of the action points outlined continue to be defended by civil society organisations, or are being updated to respond to the rapid technological evolution.

Throughout its 23 pages, the civil society declaration refers to “information and communication societies”, rather than *the* information society, recognising that there are possible future societies at the local, national and global levels, and considering communication as a critical aspect of any information society. Among its main emphases, it develops in greater depth the concept of people-centred, inclusive and equitable information and communication societies (which had achieved a brief mention in the summit’s official declaration), situating it within a framework of social justice, sustainable development and human rights, where developments in this field should be oriented towards solving people’s vital needs. This vision is then translated into policy and action proposals, many of which were excluded from the official outcomes.

For example, while the summit declaration refers to human rights simply by quoting the Universal Declaration, the civil society document reaffirms the full comprehensiveness of human rights, detailing the particular relevance of specific rights to the information society, such as freedom of expression, the right to privacy, the right to participate in public affairs, and the rights of workers, Indigenous peoples, women, children and persons with disabilities, also calling for their effective implementation.

The civil society declaration reaffirms that:

[C]ommunication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and a foundation of all social organisation. Everyone, everywhere, at any time should have the opportunity to participate in communication processes and no one should be excluded from their benefits.

Consequent with this vision, the document emphasises as priorities the development and non-privatisation of knowledge, diversity, communication rights and the public domain:

Human knowledge is the heritage of all humankind and the reservoir from which all

⁵ WSIS Civil Society Plenary. (2003). “*Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs*”: *Civil Society Declaration to the World Summit on the Information Society*. <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/civil-society-declaration.pdf>

new knowledge is created. The preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity, the freedom of the media and the defence and extension of the public domain of global knowledge are as essential, for information and communication societies, as the diversity of our natural environment.

It also underlines that:

The regulatory and legal framework in all information and communication societies must be strengthened to support broad-based sharing of technologies, information, and knowledge, and to foster community control, respectful of human rights and freedoms.

It maintains that “[k]nowledge creation and acquisition should be nurtured as a participatory and collective process and not considered a one-way flow or confined to one section of capacity building.” And it urges attention to both “the potential positive and negative impacts of ICTs on the issues of illiteracy in regional, national and international languages of the great majority of the world’s peoples.”

While the official outcomes barely include references to media, an issue that faced fierce debate, the civil society declaration calls for legislation to prevent excessive media concentration and underlines the importance of promoting both public service media and, in particular, community media, since the latter can be “vital enablers of information, voice and capacities for dialogue”. It adds that “[l]egal and regulatory frameworks that protect and enhance community media are especially critical for ensuring vulnerable groups access to information and communication.”

Recognising that no technology is neutral with respect to its social impacts, the civil society declaration considers that so-called “technology-neutral” decision-making processes are a fallacy. It therefore defends greater participation of citizens and communities in the design and use of technologies, and encourages the promotion of collective innovation and cooperative work in the information society.

To ensure effective community involvement in developing solutions using ICTs, the civil society declaration states that:

[Communities] must be empowered to develop their own productive forces and control the means of production within information societies. This must include the right to participate fully in the development and sustenance of ICT-based projects through democratic processes, including decision making with respect to economic, cultural, environmental, and other issues.

The document also recalls that “[c]ivil society actors have been key innovators and shapers of the technology, culture and content of information and communication societies, and will continue to be in the future.”

Also included is a critique of the concept of “intellectual property rights”, which civil society organisations prefer to call “limited intellectual monopolies”. Intellectual property rights should be granted “only for the benefit of society, most notably to encourage creativity and innovation.” The declaration goes on to state:

The benchmark against which they must be reviewed and adjusted regularly is how well they fulfill this purpose. Today, the vast majority of humankind has no access to the public domain of global knowledge, a situation that is contributing to the growth of inequality and exploitation of the poorest peoples and communities.

Free software is especially recommended, for its freedom of use, for the fact that its code is open for study, modification and redistribution for any purpose, and for its “unique social, educational, scientific, political and economic benefits and opportunities” as well as its special advantages for developing countries. Governments are encouraged to promote the use of free software in schools and higher education and in public administration.

The document expresses concern regarding the deployment of “information warfare” technologies and techniques, including:

[T]he purposeful jamming, blocking, or destruction of civilian communication systems during conflict situations; the use of “embedded” journalists coupled with the targeting of non-embedded journalists; the use of media and communication systems to promote hatred and genocide [...] by military, police, or other security forces, be they governmental, privately owned, or non-state actors, during conflict situations.

To this end, it calls for a future convention against information warfare, as well as the active promotion of media and communication for peace.

It also stresses the need to guarantee the right to privacy, recalling that the power of the private sector and of governments over personal data increases the risk of abuse, including monitoring and surveillance:

Such activities must be kept to a legally legitimised minimum in a democratic society, and must remain accountable. The collection, retention, processing, use and disclosure of personal

data, no matter by whom, should remain under the control of and determined by the individual concerned.

With respect to global governance of ICT and communications, recalling that governments have liberalised international regulatory regimes in areas such as telecommunications and trade, while business groups have established a variety of “self-regulatory” arrangements, the civil society declaration affirms:

[I]t is not acceptable for these and related global governance frameworks to be designed by and for small groups of powerful governments and companies and then exported to the world as *faits accomplis*. Instead, they must reflect the diverse views and interests of the international community as a whole. This overarching principle has both procedural and substantive dimensions.

Therefore, procedurally, decision-making processes should be based on such values as inclusive participation, transparency and democratic accountability, ensuring adequate participation of marginalised partners in ICT governance mechanisms, such as developing countries, civil society organisations and small and medium-sized enterprises. Substantively, “global governance frameworks must promote a more equitable distribution of benefits across nations and social groups,” and “[t]o do so, they must strike a better balance between commercial considerations and other legitimate social objectives.”

New challenges

Building on the experience of the first phase of the WSIS Summit, for the second phase, which culminated in Tunis in 2005, the Content and Themes Group was reactivated, and produced a new joint civil society statement, titled “Much more could have been achieved”,⁶ with the character of an evaluation of the official outcomes of the summit, recognising certain advances and criticising notable omissions.

Today, as the WSIS+20 evaluation approaches, while digital inclusion is still an important issue to resolve for much of the world, there is now also much greater awareness of the need to regulate significant areas of the internet and digital technologies. However, the panorama is far more complex

than 20 years ago. Particular concerns relate to issues such as artificial intelligence (AI), especially the implications of generative AI and large language models; the environmental impact of these technologies; priorities of digital development and how these are decided, by whom; how to regulate the large digital corporations at the national and international level and make the regulation enforceable; implications of robotisation and AI on employment; positive and negative implications for health, education and democracy; and many other areas.

Many civil society actors are already working on these issues, formulating proposals and fighting for their rights. For example, there is a growing consensus that it is not sufficient, nor often feasible, to ensure individual control over one’s data (though that is indispensable in the case of intimate personal data), but that collective data should be under the control of the communities concerned.

Nonetheless, such initiatives are still often disconnected. Given the convergent nature of the digital realm and the overarching reach of the mega-corporations that control our data, the platforms we use and the AI we are increasingly dependent on, it is fundamental today, more than ever, to build bridges between these different initiatives, seek broader consensus and coordinate actions in order to achieve our goals.

Moreover, the international model for internet governance is still unresolved after 20 years. The WSIS outcomes anticipated two processes, one the multistakeholder road in the form of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), and the other a multilateral-driven approach called “enhanced cooperation”. As the digital corporations grew in power and reach, they came to extend major influence over the IGF, even funding some of the civil society inputs and decisively influencing its processes and structure, though it remains useful as a forum to share and debate ideas. At the same time, efforts to promote enhanced cooperation, which if done effectively offer a real opportunity for governments of the South to exert some significant influence, became bogged down in acrimonious discussions, deliberately engineered by countries opposing the approach, and has in effect been in abeyance since 2018 when the Working Group established to bring it forward last met.

Yet the UN’s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has maintained its support for the idea of enhanced cooperation and a stronger role for multilateral processes. In July 2021, in an assessment of the process of the WSIS outcomes, it strongly reaffirmed the importance of enhanced cooperation “to enable Governments, on an equal footing, to carry

6 Civil Society Content and Themes Group. (2005). “Much more could have been achieved”: Civil society statement on the World Summit on the Information Society. <https://www.itu.int/net/ws/is/docs2/tunis/contributions/co13.pdf>

out their roles and responsibilities in international public policy issues pertaining to the Internet,” noting that it and the IGF are “distinct processes [that] may be complementary.”⁷

WSIS+20 faces the challenge of building towards a binding global governance framework in relation to digital human rights. Such a process can be reinforced through revisiting the enhanced cooperation mechanism. It offers civil society a clear opportunity, acting collectively nationally and internationally, to support those governments that are committed to building a binding framework relevant to the global South and to civil society everywhere – and to lobby those governments that are reticent. In the lead-up to WSIS+ 20 in 2025, other opportunities for civil society to refine its positions, build coalitions and exert influence include the IGF, but more significantly, the Global Digital Compact (in the framework of the Summit of the Future – convened by the UN Secretary General for September 2024) and arenas such as NETmundial+10 (Sao Paulo, April 2024) and the G20, currently chaired by Brazil, due to meet in Rio de Janeiro in November 2024. The G20 agenda includes “information integrity on the internet”, for which Brazil is inviting civil society input.

Given the enormous and rapidly increasing impact that digital technologies are already having on our societies, and the prevalence of the corporate model of digital development, the challenge to build information societies designed for human needs, rather than corporate gain, will require mobilising the peoples of our planet to take an active part in these debates and to demand decisive action from our governments.

Action steps

Based on the discussion above, the following are some key advocacy priorities for civil society in the context of WSIS+20:

- Build alliances and seek consensus on key issues among civil society actors and organisations that are already undertaking advocacy in this field, as well as with others, such as people’s organisations that are seeking how to intervene and defend their rights in the digital sphere.
- Work towards a binding global governance framework for digital rights, responsive to the interests and concerns of the global South and the peoples of our planet. This includes the rights of workers in algorithmic work environments and the right of communities to share the benefits of their collective data and control its use.
- Encourage governments to define basic internet connectivity, whether under public, private or community management, as an essential public service, that must be regulated to ensure equity and quality.
- Prioritise the establishment of clear obligations for digital corporations, particularly concerning user rights, the collection, use and protection of data, and transparent algorithms. Such regulations should put the onus of compliance on the corporations themselves (as a condition for their operation), rather than depending only on the effectiveness of regulatory scrutiny and audits.
- Support the call for a global pact against digital warfare and autonomous weapons.

⁷ UN Economic and Social Council. (2021). *Assessment of the progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society*. E/RES/2021/28. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ecosoc_res_2021d28_en.pdf