

KEY MESSAGES FROM ROUNDTABLE ON WSIS+20:

A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER DELIBERATION ON INDIA'S PRIORITIES

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What is the World Summit on Information Society?

The World Summit on Information Society (‘WSIS’) originated with two summits in 2003 and 2005 which resulted in the Geneva Declaration of Principles, the Geneva Plan of Action, and the Tunis Agenda. It envisioned building a ‘people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society.’ and promoting sustainable development. It also led to the foundation of the Internet Governance Forum (‘IGF’). The Geneva Plan of Action (commonly, also referred to as the WSIS Action Lines) established 11 broad lines of action that included, promotion of ICTs for development through involvement of all stakeholders; access to information and knowledge; capacity building and enabling environment; cultural, identity and linguistic diversity; media; and international and regional cooperation.

While WSIS is held annually, WSIS review meetings are held every 10 years since its inception to evaluate the progress made on the WSIS Action Lines by various countries and provide an opportunity for any necessary amendments to the Action Lines to keep it up to date. The last WSIS review, known as WSIS+10 happened in 2015. 2025 marks the 20-year review of WSIS or the WSIS+20. The review will be held at the ‘WSIS+20 Forum High-level Event,’ to be held in Geneva in 2025, and culminates in the General Assembly Meeting in December 2025 in Geneva. The mandate of the IGF is also considered for renewal in the review process.

About this Document

On 21 May 2025, the Centre for Communication Governance at the National Law University Delhi, organised a closed-door multi-stakeholder deliberation on WSIS+20 and India’s priorities (‘WSIS+20 India Deliberation’ or ‘the deliberation’). It brought together stakeholders from various sectors, including policymakers, industry, academia, the technical community, and civil society, to facilitate stakeholder engagement and inform India’s priorities and perspectives at the WSIS+20 review process.

The deliberation was held over two sessions. Session 1 focussed on building India's priorities, and identified issues and challenges in the context of the Geneva Plan of Action, Tunis Agenda and the Geneva Declaration of Principles. Session 2 focussed on discussing the future of WSIS and issues related to the multi-stakeholder nature of internet governance, and its relevance in the contemporary time, with new and emerging technologies. It also invited insights on ways to strengthen global majority voices in internet governance.

The deliberation received inputs on India's priorities at WSIS+20, the success and failures of WSIS, revitalising the multi-stakeholder approach, need to reform the Tunis agenda in the context of challenges associated with privatisation and climate change, challenges of emerging tech, and its impact of information age, and reflections on the importance of WSIS and multi-stakeholder processes in the context of the Global Digital Compact ('GDC'). This document provides an overview of the key themes of discussions at this deliberation, and key messages and recommendations received in the context of WSIS and India.

Overview of the WSIS+20 India Deliberation:

Participants noted the rapid process of digitisation in India. India has been focussed on the development of digital infrastructure as a core utility, while working to ensure that digital infrastructure is fair and inclusive by design. It has made strides in the realm of adopting Digital Public Infrastructure ('DPI'). Acknowledging its many forms of prevailing economic and social disparities, India has been working to empower communities through digital connectivity and access, and capacity building. The Supreme Court of India, in a recent judgement,¹ recognised inclusive digital access as a fundamental right. Similarly, the potential of open-source technologies and ensuring shared development and innovation was also highlighted.

¹ AMAR JAIN v UNION F INDIA AND ORS. [W.P.(C) No. 49/2025]

However, one participant highlighted that last mile connectivity continues to remain a challenge and there is a need to utilise existing infrastructure and resources to bridge the gap. Another participant raised concern that there is a lack of demographic data on marginalised communities such as persons with disabilities which can hinder empowerment in certain sections of the society. They also highlighted the need for developing access-enabling empowerment metrics to measure such gaps in society.

Given India's unique challenges associated with socio-economic and geopolitical constraints in ensuring technological development and innovation, one participant raised the need to think about accounting for Indian realities and the unique local conditions and challenges in the use of technology in a sector like health.

Another comment suggested that India should encourage a democratic international order by forging a path of digital non-alignment. This could include inculcating digital self-reliance and decolonisation on the global stage without allowing geopolitical fault lines to dominate the digital governance space. It would also imply that India should not align itself with any particular block or ideology in its approach to global digital governance. Additionally, it was suggested that as a member on the UN Committee of Experts on Big Data and Data Science for Official Statistics,² and with GDC giving a new impetus to internet governance, India should utilise this opportunity to emphasise on social, economic and cultural rights and contribute to shaping global digital governance discourses.

² 'India Joins the UN Committee of Experts on Big Data and Data Science for Official Statistics', 11 JAN 2025, Press Information Bureau, available at <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetailm.aspx?PRID=2092024>

Key Themes & Recommendations

WSIS Process

The discourse at the time of the Geneva Declaration and the Tunis Agenda set the norm for future internet governance. It acknowledged the need for shared knowledge, for information in the public domain and for duties. One speaker, who had participated in the discourse at the time of the first WSIS declarations noted that the Tunis Agenda focussed on financing the internet infrastructure, bridging the innovation gap and enhancing cooperation, all of which continue to remain concerns for the present. Therefore, it was suggested that WSIS Action Lines should be updated, as they have been the same for many years, to reflect the use of open source and emerging technologies for bridging digital divides. It was suggested that while the GDC offers recognition of many of these challenges and opportunities, WSIS can offer a forum for putting GDC's vision into action.

Regarding the practical nuances of the WSIS process, speakers noted that there is a need for improvement in its manner of conduct and financing and a need to assess funding constraints, manpower, and how messages and dialogues may be made sharper, transparent and participative. It was suggested that WSIS discourse should include concerns of common importance but with diverse perspectives, such as the otherwise universally agreed upon theme of accessibility. E.g., while AI regulation and bias in AI is a common concern, there are different prevailing opinions surrounding the subject.

Multi-stakeholderism and Multilateralism

Participants agreed that multi-stakeholderism and multilateralism are both critical to the future of global digital governance, and looking at them as binary or opposing processes is unproductive and risks overshadowing the shared need for democratisation within both models. One participant drew attention to paragraphs 59

to 61 of the Tunis Agenda, to show that the two approaches were not seen as mutually exclusive. We must recognize the importance of enhancing both processes—making multilateralism more inclusive and democratic, and multi-stakeholderism more representative, particularly by increasing the participation of civil society, technical community, and voices from the Global Majority. A participant noted that while multilateral forums like the Paris AI Action Summit aim to establish global consensus, their limitations are evident—such as the failure of several countries to sign key declarations—highlighting that multilateralism alone is not delivering results. Similarly, many multi stakeholder processes fall short when stakeholders are offered only minimal space, revealing a superficial commitment to inclusivity. Meanwhile, bilateral agreements on key issues like computing infrastructure are on the rise, reflecting a fragmentation in global governance.

In this context, frameworks like the NETmundial+10 São Paulo Guidelines offer timely and meaningful reference points for improving both approaches. As the WSIS review milestone approaches, it is crucial to reaffirm our commitment to the internet as a global resource that should be managed in the public interest, in accordance with international law and international human rights law. Civil society must continue to engage critically both inside and outside the UN system, which remains inherently state-centric, to ensure that internet governance reflects broad, inclusive, and transparent global consensus.



Renewal of IGF

The Internet Governance Forum is the only UN backed bottom-up institution that plays an important role in internet governance. It continues to provide a critical space for diverse stakeholders to convene and articulate their challenges and priorities. Its various Dynamic Coalitions and special procedures for youth participation make it a unique convening space that must be nurtured and strengthened. However, there is a need for sustained and independent funding that can drive more outcome driven

conversations. The WSIS+20 Summit must discuss ways of improving and strengthening the IGF instead of just debating its renewal. IGF must not only be renewed but also made permanent and provided with a sustained funding commitment by the UN.

Governance of Emerging Technologies

Given the boom in Artificial Intelligence and India's push for DPIs around the world, challenges in governance of emerging technologies was one of the significant themes of discussion. Concerns were raised around four aspects - resource gaps for development and innovation; corporate monopolisation and extraction; power imbalances in world legal regimes; and the policy and governance challenges for regulating emerging tech.

One participant raised the need for obtaining clarity on what constitutes public infrastructure. It was also submitted that while India should continue leadership in DPIs, there needs to be a consideration of the concept of public control for DPIs. For instance, it was pointed out that, we need to think about what are the rubrics for DPI and who are they accountable to? Others alluded to the need for privacy and data protection for DPIs and AI, particularly with governments' primary involvement, interest in, and deployment of both these technologies, and how governments can remain accountable to privacy and data protection mandates.

Recent years have seen rising power concentration and monopolisation in the tech sector, as Big Tech has entrenched itself more. Concerns were raised about power disparities not just in the context of market concentration but also disparities in control of resources between the Global Minority and Majority regions, such as in access to computation and chips. This leads to more pronounced marginalisation of the Global Majority countries. Calls were made to create an accountable digital economy by following an instinct based on justice and digital egalitarianism. One speaker recognised the need for India to exercise influence at the UN in global trade,

taxation and intellectual property rights regimes in the digital space, similar to the way India ensured its role in access to medicines during COVID-19. It was emphasised that India should argue for an international economic regime that serves everybody in an egalitarian manner. Additionally, with the growth in AI and large data centres and compute required to run AI systems, concerns were raised around the environmental and ecological consequences of digitalisation.

Regarding developing governance measures for emerging technologies, participants raised a need to ensure public literacy and capacity building, such as for understanding what is AI and what may constitute AI-generated content, and to be mindful of the implications of launching DPI enmasse without public awareness. Additionally, it was highlighted that there is a need to find a way to generate interest for the private players to address challenges associated with the technologies developed by them.



GDC and WSIS

The GDC is an important instrument for taking forward the future governance of the internet. However, the multi-stakeholder process built around WSIS and the IGF remain equally critical to dealing with the complicated challenges of digital and internet governance. The immediate challenge will be to ensure that the different layers and processes of internet governance do not lead to duplication and confusion. In this context, it is important to underline the alignment in terms of principles and values that is evident in both the GDC and WSIS processes. The WSIS+20 must look for ways to align with the GDC on implementing Action Lines based on common guiding principles.

Information Integrity

The current digital landscape has changed rapidly in the two decades since adoption of the Tunis Agenda. Many of these challenges pose risks to the health of the information ecosystem created by the internet. For instance, the emergence of generative AI alongside the new economy of digital content creation has created issues related to intellectual property and copyright, and has entrenched marginalisation of local artists and forms of arts. Artists and content creators have limited bargaining power against tech companies that host their content as well as those that are using them to train AI models. The vulnerability becomes even more acute for artists and public interest content creators coming from marginalised communities. Another challenge related to the integrity of the information ecosystem comes from the increasing capacity for bad actors to deploy misinformation and hate speech. WSIS+20 must take steps to address these challenges while also protecting freedom of speech on the internet.