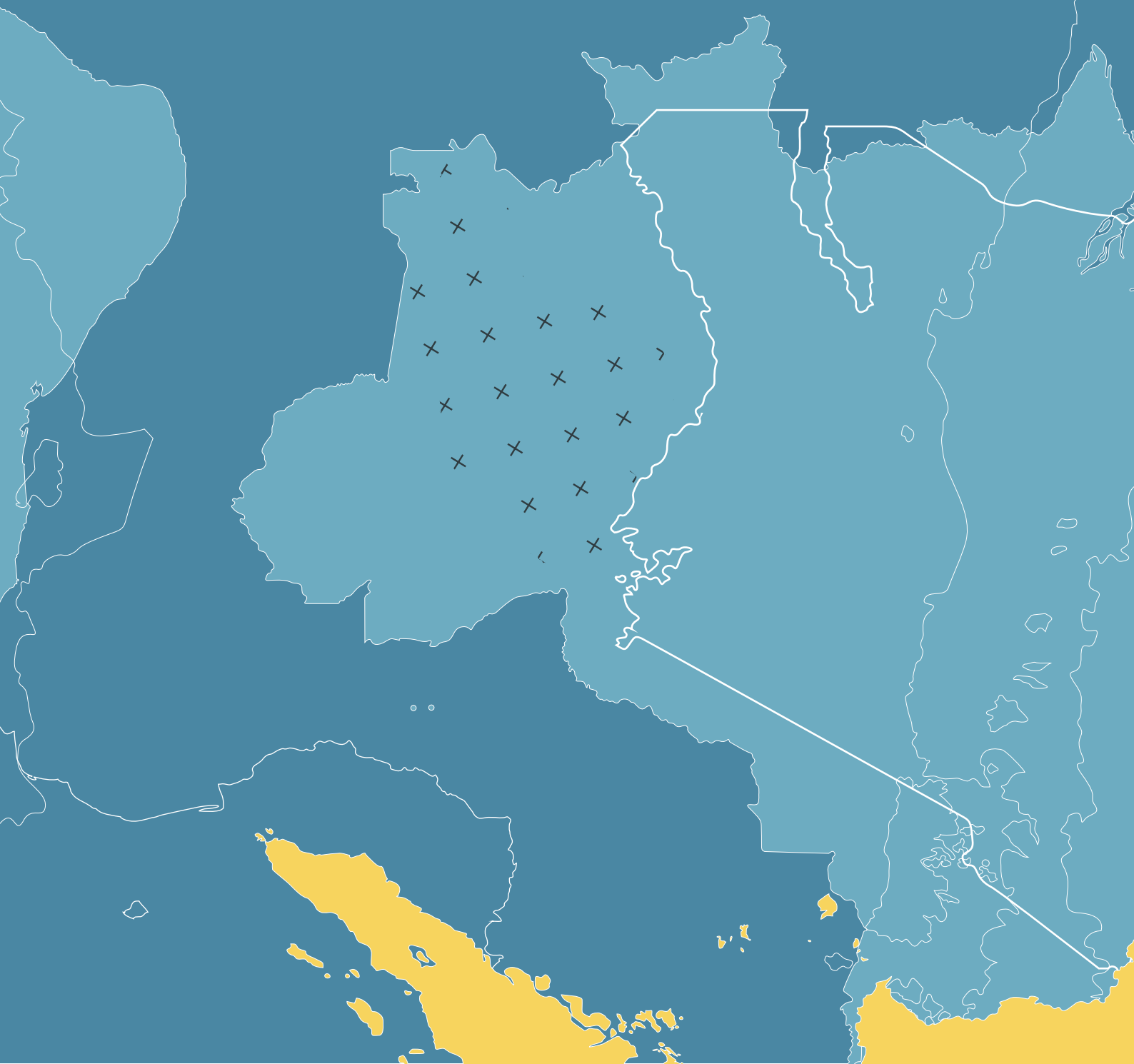


The Road to WSIS+20:

Key Country Perspectives in the
Twenty-Year Review of the World
Summit on the Information Society



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India

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OVERVIEW

India has consistently supported the multistakeholder model of digital governance since the WSIS process began. It hosted the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in 2008 and has continued to participate in subsequent reviews, advocating for affordable access, development-oriented policies, and more inclusive management of critical internet resources.¹⁵⁷

While reaffirming support for multistakeholderism, India also highlighted the lack of progress on enhanced cooperation.¹⁵⁸ Based on its historical position, India continues to support the multistakeholder model of internet governance, support for IGF, and development-oriented digital governance. In recent years, India has been undergoing a rapid process of digitisation that is geared towards transformation of governance, capacity building, and promotion of technological innovation. India has also been positioning itself as a global technology leader, particularly through its emphasis on building Digital Public Infrastructure ('DPI') and by articulating Global Majority concerns at various international fora.¹⁵⁹

As the WSIS+20 progresses, India is seeking to leverage the potential of AI to drive the next phase of technology driven development and is likely to stress the importance of promoting multilingualism on the internet, and to focus on balancing multistakeholderism with digital sovereignty in matters of cybersecurity and national security.

POSITION ON KEY ISSUES

Development

In the last 10 years, India has primarily focused on digital connectivity and access. In the past, India has expressed support for the 'formulation of public policies aimed at bridging the digital divide'¹⁶⁰ through expansion of telecom and broadband connectivity. In his statement at the 2024 WSIS+20 Forum High Level Event,¹⁶¹ the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) chairman emphasised India's cheap data tariffs, high fintech adoption rate, and highlighted several DPI initiatives including Aadhaar, the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing), Co-WIN and ESanjeevani. The Indian Delegation emphasised the need to ensure inclusive, accessible and affordable technologies bridge the sustainability gap.¹⁶²

AI development and governance has become central to discussions on development in India, with the IndiaAI Mission,¹⁶³ launched in March 2024,

aiming to further develop India's AI innovation ecosystem for social good. More recently, India has focused on open AI and open data development, alongside building of Indic language models.¹⁶⁴ India is likely to focus on AI governance at the WSIS+20 review, prioritising domestic AI innovation, mitigating the resource gap and new digital divides arising from AI.

India has also emphasised on the use of technology to promote Sustainable Development Goals ('SDGs')¹⁶⁵ in its participation at recent multilateral declarations, such as at the G20. In the context of technology driven development, the government has been focused on building ICT infrastructure (Action Line C2)¹⁶⁶; capacity building (Action Line C4), such as under the Digital India initiative,¹⁶⁷ IndiaAI Mission¹⁶⁸, and through capacity building support to other countries; and promoting technological applications in different aspects of life such as agriculture,¹⁶⁹ health¹⁷⁰, education,¹⁷¹ and governance (Action Line C7).¹⁷²

Human Rights

India recognises the need for protecting human rights on the internet while also giving due consideration to national security priorities. In recent years, India's human rights priorities have largely centred on inclusive development, improving digital access by bridging the gender gap in cyberspace, and multilingualism. India has also linked its push for DPIs to achieving inclusive development through digital transformation. The rapid scale of the digital transformation of essential services was noted by the Supreme Court of India in a recent judgement,¹⁷³ which recognised the right to digital access as a component of the right to life and liberty.

Recently, the TRAI has highlighted Indian initiatives that leverage digital technologies to promote inclusive development,¹⁷⁴ including improving accessibility through digital transformation in the fields of healthcare, disaster management and agriculture. Promoting multilingualism on the internet has been a key part of India's push for a more inclusive and accessible internet.¹⁷⁵

Internet Governance

India has continued to maintain its support for the multistakeholder approach to internet governance,¹⁷⁶ while stressing the need to respect sovereignty in matters of cybersecurity and national security.¹⁷⁷ Since 2021, it has been conducting the India IGF as a "a multi stakeholder platform bringing together representatives from various groups, considering all to be at par to discuss public policy issues related to the Internet."

India has been positioning itself as the leading Global South voice in internet governance.¹⁷⁸ For the past few years, India has been holding the 'Voice of Global South Summit', with the latest edition held under the theme 'An empowered Global South for a Sustainable Future.'¹⁷⁹ The summit was a platform for sharing perspectives and priorities on complex issues affecting developing nations. India has also announced its ambitions to lead international telecom supply chains and enable digital connectivity in emerging economies.¹⁸⁰ In its participation at the High-Level Event, India highlighted its efforts to develop the standards for responsible and trustworthy AI.¹⁸¹

Approaching the WSIS+20 Summit, various stakeholders in India have voiced concerns for the future of the multistakeholder model of internet governance. With the emergence of the GDC and challenges related to emerging technologies like AI, multilateral and bilateral forums have come to occupy a more prominent space. At the same time, India has also noted the need to ensure that the forthcoming WSIS+20 maintains global support for and enhances the multi-stakeholder model of internet governance.¹⁸²

Review Modalities

India has historically supported inclusion of different stakeholders in the review processes. However, stakeholders in India have suggested a need to improve the way the review of WSIS outcomes is conducted. For instance, stakeholders have suggested the need for greater clarity on timelines connected to the review, as well as the modalities for commenting on outcome documents to enable more effective participation. There is also a need to assess funding and other resource constraints to ensure that the articulation of India's positions may be made sharper, more transparent and participative through stakeholder engagement.

WSIS and the GDC

India has welcomed the GDC as a critical instrument for advancing the future governance of the internet while remaining focused on the WSIS as a key process which advances the multistakeholder model of internet governance. While the adoption of the GDC as an international legal instrument signals the move towards a more multilateral approach all over the world, India has also continued to show vocal support for the WSIS process, as well as forums like the IGF.¹⁸⁴ This must also be viewed in the context of India's support for technology-driven growth at platforms like BRICS and the G20. For instance, during its presidency of the G20, India stressed on the need to leverage DPIs augmented by AI in order to make progress towards achieving SDGs.¹⁸⁵ India relies on multistakeholder

processes to shape the future of the internet and is concerned around the fragmentation of different international processes around internet governance.

India is likely to support the continuation of the WSIS process, as well as renewal of the IGF's mandate. However, this might be accompanied by a call for greater financial support for the IGF by the UN, to reduce its dependence on voluntary contributions by private entities and strengthen the credibility of the IGF as an independent space for diverse stakeholders to convene and take forward critical conversations around internet governance.

MAIN ACTORS

India's involvement in the WSIS process is overseen by the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) and the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology ('MeitY'), with aspects concerning international relations being coordinated by the Ministry of External Affairs ('MEA'). Other agencies like the TRAI and the National Internet Exchange of India, also contribute to the process.

Among non-governmental actors, civil society and academic groups play the most active role at the domestic level. They play a critical role in bringing together different stakeholders to host conversations and convene multistakeholder deliberations, given the lack of formal government-led processes. While industry stakeholders are not very active domestically, some industry bodies like the Communication Multimedia and Infrastructure Association of India regularly participate at the WSIS forum and related meetings.

UNDERLYING MOTIVATIONS

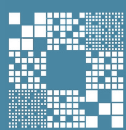
India's approach to digital sovereignty is characterised by a push for domestic technological and resource development, alongside support for Global Majority concerns in digital governance conversations. It has recently been at the forefront of international conventions for digital governance, particularly focussing on AI and DPI, chairing the GPAI,¹⁸⁶ G20, Global Digital Compact ('GDC') Asia Consultations,¹⁸⁷ and upcoming the AI Summit.¹⁸⁸ These summits have generally concluded with outcomes aim to advance safe, secure, ethical trustworthy AI; drive DPI adoption towards achieving SDGs;¹⁸⁹ capacity building; and ensuring access, especially in the Global South.¹⁹⁰

India's approach to digital sovereignty is reflected in initiatives such as Make in India or Digital India, and most recently, in its approach

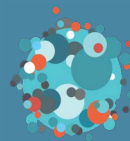
to AI development.¹⁹¹ It has been pushing for furthering indigenous AI capabilities. It is also leveraging its AI agenda towards establishing leadership in the Global South. At the same time, it has also seen participation in multilateral convenings on internet governance and has used those opportunities towards advancing DPI adoption in other countries and developing AI capabilities. The latter has also led the government to enter public-private partnerships to account for the resource constraints for AI development, such as compute power.¹⁹² It has also tried to assert digital sovereignty through incorporating provisions on data localization in the yet to be enforced Draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules released for consultation under the DPDP Act, 2023.¹⁹³ Additionally, cyber security as a means of protecting national security, shaped by its long history of complex geopolitical relations with U.S., China, Russia and Pakistan, continues to be a major arena for exercise of digital sovereignty for India.¹⁹⁴

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

While MEA and other government stakeholders do engage with civil society and participate in multi-stakeholder conversations, there are no formal organised processes in place. Different stakeholders engage informally before events and discussions to understand country position including civil society, academia, and independent experts. Stakeholders from different government departments have been open to engage in civil society-led conversations, as well as bi-lateral meetings with other stakeholders when requested. In the lead-up to WSIS+20 review, there have been at least two conversations organised by academic and industry groups which were attended by a cross section of stakeholders from government, industry, and academia. However, these conversations are mostly ad hoc and in response to specific events, such as the upcoming WSIS+20 review.



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