

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT

UNCTAD



# FIFTEEN YEARS SINCE THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY



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UNITED NATIONS  
Geneva, 2020

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This publication has not been formally edited.

United Nations publication issued by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

**UNCTAD/DTL/STICT/2020/1**

ISBN: 978-92-1-112972-4  
eISBN: 978-92-1-004909-2  
Sales No. E.20.II.D.12

## Acknowledgments

This study was prepared with the overall guidance of Shamika N. Sirimanne, Director of the Division on Technology and Logistics, based on an input written by David Souter (consultant) and coordinated by Claudia Contreras under the supervision of Dong Wu.

The publication benefited significantly from discussions during the Intersessional Panel of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (November 2019).

Magali Studer designed the cover. Malou Pasinos provided administrative support.

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## 1. Introduction

In November 2005, the international community gathered in Tunis for the second and final session of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). That gathering concluded a process, begun in 1998,<sup>1</sup> to build global understanding of the growing importance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in many aspects of economy and society.

WSIS established a vision for the international multistakeholder community of ‘a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge,’ to promote sustainable development in their communities and improve their quality of life.<sup>2</sup>

Enormous change has taken place in ICTs since then. Technologies which were in their infancy at the beginning of this century have become mainstream, and in some cases already been displaced by later innovations. Mobile telephony has become geographically pervasive, while the Internet and online social networks have become important to the lives of majorities in many countries. Digitalisation has had major impacts on economies, public services and governance. Successive waves of new technologies have emerged, offering new opportunities and posing unexpected challenges for governments, businesses and individuals as expectations of the Information Society have rapidly evolved. The pace of technological development and the scope and scale of its impact on economy, society, culture and governance are accelerating.

There have been important developments in other international priorities alongside this, particularly the adoption by the United Nations (UN) of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). ICTs will play a substantial role in delivering the SDGs.<sup>3</sup>

The General Assembly (UNGA) reviewed progress towards achieving WSIS’ goals after ten years in 2015, and committed to review them further, through a high-level meeting involving all stakeholders, after twenty years in 2025.

This report briefly summarises developments halfway between UNGA’s ten- and twenty-year reviews and suggests priorities for the assessment to be made in five years’ time.

- Section 2 summarises outcomes from the WSIS meetings.
- Section 3 describes the current state of access and connectivity.
- Section 4 describes the changing world of digital technology and services.
- Section 5 comments on underlying trends affecting Information Society development.
- Section 6 reviews developments concerning governance and human rights.
- Section 7 summarises challenges and priorities for UNGA’s twenty-year review.

## 2. WSIS outcomes

WSIS was held in two phases, in Geneva in November 2003 and Tunis in December 2005. The first phase adopted the *Geneva Declaration of Principles* and the *Geneva Plan of Action*, which focused on the development potential of ICTs, while the second adopted the *Tunis Commitment* and *Tunis Agenda for the Information Society*, which focused on financing mechanisms, Internet governance and the monitoring and assessment of WSIS outcomes.<sup>4</sup> The *Geneva Declaration* identified ten targets for connectivity over the period to 2015, progress towards which was assessed in the *Final WSIS Targets Review*, published by the Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development that year.<sup>5</sup>

These outcome documents established a framework for annual review and discussion of progress in different areas of ICT development involving all stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, civil society and relevant professional communities. Action Lines concerned with eleven areas of ICT policy and development are reviewed at the annual WSIS Forum, organised by ITU, while the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) provides an important space for discussion of Internet-related issues. Both are multistakeholder gatherings.

These outcomes form part of a much wider, rapidly evolving ecosystem of policymaking, standard-setting and discussion fora concerned with digital development and its intersection with other aspects of economy, society, culture and governance. ICTs now feature prominently in international discourse and negotiations concerned with almost every aspect of human development.

The United Nations and other international agencies have a crucial role to play, alongside governments, businesses and other stakeholders, in efforts to achieve the WSIS outcomes, integrate them with the SDGs, maximise their potential value and minimise potential risks.

### 3. Access and connectivity

Access and connectivity are necessary, but not sufficient, preconditions for the development of an Information Society. SDG9 commits the international community to ‘significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020.’<sup>16</sup>

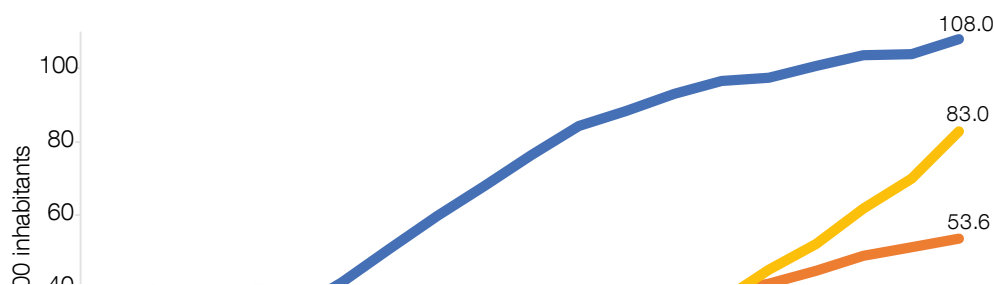
The period since WSIS has seen impressive growth in access to ICTs, particularly mobile cellular and mobile broadband networks, but there remain persistent digital divides between and within countries that constrain their value to many people. These divides represent the greatest single challenge inhibiting fulfilment of the WSIS vision.

The spread of ICTs, particularly mobile telephony has been more rapid than that of earlier generations of communication technology (Figure 1). The years since WSIS have seen rapid transition towards mobile networks and devices as the principal means of telecommunication, including Internet access, for many people. Mobile networks now extend to more than 95% of the world’s population, while mobile broadband networks, offering much better Internet connectivity, extend to around 80% – while the challenge of connecting more remote communities has led to renewed interest in alternative technologies and community networks.

In the case of mobile telephony, the global rate of growth in access has decelerated since 2010 as mobile ownership has become close to ubiquitous for adults in many countries (though these data are affected by widespread dual ownership). The trajectory of access to the Internet has been less rapid but remained steady, reaching to over 53% in 2019.

These global trends, however, mask persistent differences in the experience of different regions, countries and population groups. Figure 2 show the extent of difference in internet usage in 2019 between the ITU’s geographic regions and between countries with different developmental

Figure 1 – Global ICT developments, 2001-2019



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