



**High-level Policy Session Statement
WSIS Forum 2016
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The WSIS+10 review process culminated in December 2015 with a renewed commitment to the WSIS vision as essential to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We are in a new phase of the WSIS process and it is a unique opportunity to focus on the interaction between technology and the various aspects of development, recognising that technology alone cannot resolve development challenges and that the information society is primarily a matter of human development.

The Outcome Document of the High-Level Meeting of the UNGA on the Overall Review of the Implementation of the WSIS Outcomes points out that there is still a need to strengthen enabling policy environments to “improve affordability, access, education, capacity building, multilingualism, cultural preservation, investment and appropriate financing.” It acknowledges that “a gender divide exists as part of the digital divides,” and underscores the need to “ensure the full participation of women in the information society.”

We see all those aspects in line with the vision of our Association for Progressive Communications network, which comprises dozens of organisations and individuals, mostly in the global South, who work for all people to “have easy and affordable access to a free and open internet to improve their lives and create a more just world,” and to ensure that everyone can create, access, use and share information to fully promote sustainable development and improve their quality of life.

However, there are some key persistent challenges that must be overcome to create and strengthen conducive enabling environments so that all people, worldwide, are able to use ICTs to their advantage. They include, among others:

- Ensuring continued extension of access for all to ICTs.
- Maintenance of the openness and multistakeholder character of ICTs and of internet standards, development and governance.
- Protecting and reinforcing human rights online, including women’s rights in particular.
- Reaching consensus on how to govern and regulate the internet and internet-related activity.

For decades, our research and our partnerships with local communities working towards an enabling environment have highlighted several key points that should be considered when supporting policy and initiatives that aim to end digital exclusion.

First, disaggregate the digital divide. Make access inequalities more visible by disaggregating them by disadvantaged groups – particularly women, the poor, rural populations and the less able.

Mobile alone is not enough. Expansion of mobile broadband by itself will not meet the connectivity needs of “the rest”. It is necessary to improve the affordability and coverage of both fixed and mobile services, along with the technical and human capacity to ensure reliability, the ability to deploy low-cost locally owned networks, and the ability to use the applications and content effectively.

It’s about cost. High internet access costs, due to lack of competitive open markets, continue to be among the biggest factors stopping the rest from getting connected. The main reason the internet is still poorly dispersed and unaffordable for many is the poor distribution of basic telecommunications infrastructure and limited access to radio spectrum.

Raise the bar. Implementing policies to connect the unconnected will also vastly improve the connectivity of those who are already connected but are constrained in their use of the internet by slow speeds, high costs or other barriers, including limited access to content based on zero-rating strategies.

Focusing on infrastructure alone is not the solution. Increased access to infrastructure should be coupled with efforts to address political, economic, social and cultural barriers that prevent people from fully accessing the internet.

Enhance public space. Public access facilities are also an important means of addressing the connectivity needs of the rest, but there is limited investment in libraries, telecentres and multi-purpose community centres.

Policy is interdependent. Indirect factors also limit access to the internet, including limited energy supply, lack of basic ICT literacy, insufficient applications and content of local relevance, and high import duties or other taxes on ICT services.

Make a plan. Comprehensive and up-to-date national broadband strategies must address policy barriers, promote infrastructure sharing, focus on human development, and promote bottom-up approaches to solving connectivity problems.

Restricted and filtered access is not real access. Real access should be free of censorship, surveillance, harassment, and any other form of violation of human rights.

And finally, set goals. Clear targets and monitoring ensure that the effectiveness of policies can be measured.

Additionally, we believe that transparent and accountable institutions and citizen participation are critical to achieving the WSIS vision which states that ICTs should be used as an important tool for good governance. It is essential for all stakeholders to renew their commitment to the use of ICTs for good governance at national, regional and global levels in this new phase of WSIS and to effectively integrate the WSIS principle of multistakeholder participation not just into internet policy making, but into all policy making. In this regard, civil society has a key role to play in protecting the interests of marginalised and disadvantaged groups, and incorporating rights-based and development-oriented approaches into internet policy matters. Civil society, particularly from the global South, therefore needs to be given a greater voice and influence at the global, regional and national level. The internet belongs to no one; everyone can use it, and everyone can improve it. That also applies to its governance.

As the former UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue, has observed, "the internet is one of the most powerful instruments of the 21st century for increasing transparency in the conduct of the powerful, access to information, and for facilitating active citizen participation in building democratic societies."