World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Forum Input to the United Nations High-level Political Forum (HLPF) 2021

2021 Theme: *"Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development".*

SDGs under review: The HLPF in 2021 will discuss Sustainable Development **Goal 1** on no poverty, **Goal 2** on zero hunger, **Goal 3** on good health and well-being, **Goal 8** on decent work and economic growth, **Goal 10** on reduced inequalities, **Goal 12** on responsible consumption and production, **Goal 13** on climate action, **Goal 16** on peace, justice and strong institutions, and **Goal 17** on partnerships in depth.

Introduction

About WSIS

The UN General Assembly Resolution 56/183 (21 December 2001) endorsed the holding of the **World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)** in two phases. The first phase took place in Geneva from 10 to 12 December 2003 and the second phase took place in Tunis, from 16 to 18 November 2005. The goal of WSIS is to achieve a common vision, desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information.

Through the Summit's first phase in 2003, a framework for an inclusive information society was created as set out in the Geneva Plan of Action[1]. Since 2015, the WSIS Process and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are being aligned by stakeholders to integrate information and communication technologies (ICTs) into their approaches in implementing the activities/initiatives to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

About WSIS Forum

The WSIS Forum represents the world's largest annual gathering of the 'ICT for development' community. The Forum is co-organized by ITU, UNESCO, UNDP and UNCTAD, in close collaboration with all WSIS Action Line Facilitators/co-facilitators. The WSIS Forum has proven to be an efficient medium for coordination of multistakeholder implementation activities, information exchange, creation of knowledge, sharing of best practices and continues to provide

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[1] The Plan of Action sets forth a clear commitment to translate these principles into practice and to meet concrete and tangible targets with the aim of promoting sustainable development. https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/promotional/brochure-dop-poa.pdf

assistance in developing multistakeholder and public/private partnerships to advance development goals.

The WSIS Forum 2021 has started with a series of virtual activities from January onwards and will be concluded in the final week from 17 to 21 May 2021. The theme of the Forum is "ICTs for Inclusive, Resilient and Sustainable Societies and Economies (WSIS Action Lines for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals)".

A. Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the SDGs under review in the 2021 HLPF from the vantage point of your intergovernmental body, bearing in mind the interlinkages with other SDGs

As the world continues to grapple with the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to pursue a digital transformation is more conspicuous than ever. The COVID-19 crisis has illustrated the power and promise of ICTs. The WSIS Forum continues towards ensuring a global inclusive platform for multistakeholder collaboration to make ICTs a critical driver of global development.

The WSIS Forum 2020 was initially planned as a physical event, however, in light of the global health crisis and extensive travel restrictions, the co-organisers (ITU, UNESCO, UNDP and UNCTAD) decided to hold the entire Forum in a virtual format for the very first time. The virtual WSIS Forum 2020 was held during the timeframe of twelve weeks, started on 22 June till September and featured a weekly programme, including a series of thematic/country workshops, high-level policy sessions, special tracks on various thematic areas, and a virtual exhibition to address issues that are critical to WSIS implementation and review progress on using ICTs to achieve the SDGs. The final week of the virtual WSIS Forum 2020 took place on 7-10 September 2020, consisted of policy statements, interactive high-level dialogues, a WSIS Prize ceremony, a ministerial round table as well as the closing ceremony.

The virtual WSIS Forum 2020 had accumulative attendance of over 15,000 participants from 150 countries. This illustrates the positive energy and the commitment of the different stakeholders towards the WSIS Process and the strengthening of WSIS implementation activities to achieve the SDGs. Numerous issues were highlighted during the Forum, including bridging the digital divide and connecting the unconnected, in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

A steady path towards digital transformation of the WSIS Forum has given an opportunity to scale the event to a wider community and be even more inclusive. It has resulted in new opportunities and increased participation, including from developing countries and Small Island Developing States. The theme of the WSIS Forum 2020 was "Fostering digital transformation and global partnerships: WSIS Action Lines for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)".

Continuing to bring all stakeholders together to ensure an impactful use of the WSIS Action Lines in advancing the UN SDGs, the WSIS Forum 2021 is addressing the theme of "ICTs for Inclusive, Resilient and Sustainable Societies and Economies (WSIS Action Lines for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals)".

B. Actions, policy guidance, progress, challenges and areas requiring urgent attention in relation to the SDGs and to the theme within the area under the purview of your intergovernmental body

The WSIS process has reached its 15-year milestone and continues to strengthen the implementation of the WSIS Action Lines to help accelerate progress in achieving the SDGs. The Geneva Plan of Action provided a framework of 11 WSIS Action Lines that are the key principles for progress on the achievement of the SDGs. In line with Resolution A/70/1 and Resolution A/70/125, the WSIS process implementation activities have been aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, thereby highlighting the direct linkages between WSIS Action Lines and SDGs.

The WSIS process emphasises multistakeholder collaboration and cooperation across all regions and sectors, and is strengthened at the international, regional and national level by three main pillars - the WSIS Forum and its regional reviews, WSIS Prizes and WSIS Stocktaking.

The WSIS Forum provides meaningful connections to the information society and ensures that ICTs remain high on the political agenda. The annual WSIS Forum has grown over the years in terms of its participants, outcomes, and impact. Various activities and initiatives were organised throughout the years to highlight global issues on ICTs, emerging trends, challenges as well as to showcase innovative solutions.

The essence of the WSIS process lies in a multistakeholder approach with a plurality of voices and ideas. The agenda and programme of the WSIS Forum are designed in collaboration with the multistakeholder community based on official submissions received during the Open Consultation Process (OCP). This process actively engages governments, civil society, the private sector, academia, the technical community and intergovernmental organizations in the preparatory process to ensure broad ownership and further improvements of the Forum. Recognizing and honouring the good work at the grassroot level, the WSIS Stocktaking database and the WSIS Prizes show what this multistakeholder effort can achieve on the ground in practical terms.

Each activity at the WSIS Forum is aligned with the WSIS Action Lines and the SDGs, highlighting the contributions and impact of ICTs to achieve the SDGs by 2030. The multistakeholder outcomes derived from the WSIS Forum demonstrated how ICTs can foster creativity and innovation to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Stakeholders suggestions through the OCP resulted into several innovations that were featured at the WSIS Forum, including the launch of special tracks in various topics that linked to SDGs, as follows:

- ICTs and Youth: WSIS aims to include youth perspectives and engage young people in discussions about how technology can provide opportunities to address some of the world's most pressing issues and provides a platform where youth can offer their insights and understanding of the information society, its challenges and opportunities, and where they can raise questions but also propose solutions to harvesting the power of ICTs towards equally distributed social impact.

- <u>ICTs and Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities and Specific Needs</u>: the track aims to inform and observe how ICTs can help people living with disabilities whilst focusing on progressing towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

- <u>ICTs and Older Persons</u>: initiated for the first time at the WSIS Forum 2020, the track aims to address the role of technology for elderly people to improve their quality of lives.

- <u>ICTs and Gender Mainstreaming</u>: the track aims to integrate and mainstream a gender equality perspective through the use of ICTs as well as to strive for 50/50 gender balance participation at the WSIS Forum.

- <u>ICTs and Sport</u>: the track aims to encourage the international community to promote sport as an enabler of sustainable development and highlight the social impact of the gaming and e-sport component.

- <u>Extended Reality</u>: the track aims to showcase innovative applications of extended reality on sustainable development.

New addition of special tracks will also be organised at the WSIS Forum 2021, at the request of WSIS stakeholders:

- <u>ICTs for Well-being and Happiness</u>: this new track focuses on efforts and success stories to promote healthy lives and well-being for everyone at all ages, in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

- <u>Emerging Technologies for Sustainable Development (Startups)</u>: this new track explores how frontier technological solutions will address sustainable development challenges and help facilitate innovation in a rapidly changing world.

- <u>Cybersecurity</u>: this new track aligns with the WSIS Action Line C5: Building Confidence and Security in the Use of ICTs. Cybersecurity is crucial to ensuring universal, trustworthy, and equitable access to connectivity.

C. An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of "ensuring that no one is left behind" at the global, regional and national levels against of background of the COVID-19 pandemic in achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, within the respective area addressed by your intergovernmental bodies

Building on the guiding principle of the SDGs of "leaving no one behind", there is a need to bridge the digital divide in access to and usage of ICTs. Notable types include digital gender divide and digital generation divide. ICTs have given billions of people around the world the ability to continue with ways of organising work, studies, care of others and remain connected to loved ones. On another challenge, 3.6 billion people around the world are still not connected to the Internet. It is pivotal to leverage the power of technology as a key part of building back better, for more inclusive healthcare and education, more sustainable business practices, and for the implementation of the SDGs.

Affordable access to ICTs, confidence and security in use of ICTs, capacity building and collaborative ICT policy and regulatory approaches for digital transformation are essential for accelerated action to achieve the SDGs. Increasing access to information and knowledge is critical to implement the 2030 Agenda. Inclusion and participation in all aspects of society is also essential, in particular, inclusion of youth, people with disabilities and special needs, older persons, and women.

The WSIS Forum has evolved into the key worldwide event on ICTs and development, an efficient mechanism for multistakeholder implementation of WSIS Action Lines and the SDGs. The WSIS Forum is a UN process that provides a great example to foster cooperation between all relevant stakeholders leading to further actions. One of the most significant impacts of WSIS was the importance of multistakeholder engagement in developing the discourse about the information and knowledge societies.

The WSIS Forum continues to serve as an open and inclusive platform to ensure the common WSIS goals are met. The transition of the Forum into a virtual format has added more layers that made the event more diverse, accessible, and inclusive.

D. Cooperation, measures and commitments at all levels in promoting sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the need for the WSIS Forum to transform and respond, with digitalisation as a key enabler. As part of the effort, WSIS has been actively engaged in promoting the use of ICTs to support achieving the SDGs as well as to respond to such global crises as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In collaboration and at the request of stakeholders, WSIS initiated some activities to highlight the full power of ICTs to enhance resilience and recover from COVID-19 pandemic, as follows:

1) Virtual WSIS TalkX explored an aspect of the global response to COVID-19, providing WSIS stakeholders with a platform to create partnerships for on-the-ground action. The sessions have been adapted to podcasts and are available to listen and download at WSIS TalkX Podcast.

2) As a part of the WSIS Stocktaking efforts to promote the innovative use of ICTs, the Coronavirus Response - ICT Case Repository collected projects and activities dedicated to responding to the COVID-19 crisis. A draft zero version of the special *ICT Case Repository: The Coronavirus Response* is now available here: http://www.itu.int/go/wsis2020outcomes

3) Workshops at the WSIS Forum 2020, in which more than 70 workshops organised by various stakeholders highlighted issues and efforts related to the topic of COVID-19. Many emphasised the importance of ICTs, in particular internet access and connectivity for all during the COVID-19 pandemic.

WSIS is also working closely with the United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) members to accelerate digital development for all. UNCTAD as the Chair of UNGIS for the period 2020-2021 has initiated the [Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action](#) to raise awareness of both the importance of digitalization in achieving the sustainable development goals and the need for good collaboration between the various UN bodies to achieve maximum sustainable impact.

At the regional level, WSIS is continue working in close collaboration with all the five UN Regional Commissions towards strengthening the implementation of WSIS Action Lines and SDGs.

E. Various measures and policy recommendations on building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development

The annual WSIS Forum has resulted in several outstanding outcomes, which include policy recommendations, achievements, publications, and other measures that shown the positive energy and commitment towards the WSIS process and the strengthening of WSIS implementation activities to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Key outcomes of the WSIS Forum 2020[*] include the following publications that show clear linkages between the WSIS Action Lines and SDGs:

- WSIS Forum 2020: Outcome Document
- WSIS Forum 2020: High Level Track Outcomes and Executive Brief
- WSIS Action Lines Contributing towards accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development
- WSIS Forum 2020 and SDG Matrix
- WSIS Stocktaking Report 2020
- Regional WSIS Stocktaking Report 2019-2020 — Africa
- Regional WSIS Stocktaking Report 2019-2020 — Americas
- Regional WSIS Stocktaking Report 2019-2020 — Arab States
- Regional WSIS Stocktaking Report 2019-2020 — Asia and Pacific
- Regional WSIS Stocktaking Report 2019-2020 — CIS
- Regional WSIS Stocktaking Report 2019-2020 — Europe
- WSIS Stocktaking: Success Stories 2020
- WSIS Stocktaking ICT Case Repository: The Coronavirus Response Special Report
(*all documents are available online at [http://www.itu.int/go/wsis2020outcomes)](http://www.itu.int/go/wsis2020outcomes)

Key messages for inclusion into the Ministerial Declaration of the 2021 HLPF

WSIS would suggest considering the following messages for the inclusion into the Ministerial Declaration of the 2021 HLPF:

- WSIS Forum continues to be a key platform for multistakeholder networking and collaboration to develop inclusive and development-oriented information and knowledge societies. It provides an inclusive platform for stakeholders to address ICT for development issues through a structured and inclusive approach. It is recommended to strengthen the WSIS Forum as a key platform for discussing the role of ICTs as a means of implementation of the SDGs and targets.
- The outcomes of the WSIS Forum clearly highlight the linkages of the WSIS Action Lines with the SDGs and the annual theme of annual HLPF, it is recommended to be used as input in designing the annual HLPFs.
- WSIS Forum promotes and showcases projects and initiatives from the ground that are making social, economic and environmental impact through the annual WSIS Prizes contest and the WSIS Stocktaking publications, it is recommended that these case studies are appropriately used for evidence based policy making highlighting the linkages between WSIS Action Lines and SDGs.
- It is recommended that the discussions and outcomes of the high-level segment of the WSIS Forum is used as an input for cross sectoral discussions by policy makers on strengthening the key role of ICTs in strategies and implementation.
- It is recommended that the convening power of the WSIS Forum, more so the effective collaboration with more than 30 UN Agencies, in particular the UN WSIS Action Line Facilitators to meet and report on their respective WSIS implementation activities and share plans for the future and serves as the mechanism to map, analyze and coordinate the implementation of ICTs as enablers and accelerators of the SDGs.
- Strengthening collaboration with the UN Regional Commissions, regional organizations/ initiatives WSIS Forum provides opportunities to build regional capacities on the WSIS and its alignment with 2030 Agenda.
- Explore better interlinkages at the policy and implementation level between the WSIS Forum and the follow up process for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development, by the respective Secretariats.