

Response to ten year review of WSIS implementation

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7. To what extent, in your experience, has the "people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society", envisaged in the opening paragraph of the WSIS Geneva Declaration of Principles, developed in the ten years since WSIS?

In the past 10 years, much effort has focused on improving internet access globally. In developing countries, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) reports that some 3 in 4 households in the global North have internet access. Yet in the global South, this number decreases to less than 1 in 4, though steadily increasing. The population of these countries dwarf those of developed countries. Between one-third and a half of those populations are children, indicating we are at a tipping point in the growth of the online child population. It is therefore timely to consider children's rights in the digital age.

Often "people-centred" tends to assume a competent and responsible adult 'user' who lacks only access and a little skills training to engage online. As governments promote ICT so that businesses can compete in the global economy, they are formulating policies that rarely consider children's needs explicitly. Children's needs tend to be ignored or left to parents, or considered non-critical because children are supposedly 'digital natives', already more expert than adults. Since the main driver of technological innovation is economic, many emerging legislative and regulatory structures barely mention children. Provision for the general public is assumed to suffice when applied to young users, even though such assumptions are rarely considered sufficient offline.

There is much room for improvement to achieve the 'people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society' for children. Current protection and provision for children are fragmented and unevenly implemented, even in developed countries, and largely non-existent when considered globally.

8. How far do you consider the implementation of specific WSIS outcomes to have been achieved?

In outcome #11, the commitment to "ensuring that the development of ICT applications and operation of services respect the rights of children, especially their protection and well-being" seems well-intentioned, but remains for the most part tokenistic and unrealised. In the global South, children are often left to sort their digital engagement without guidance from parents or teachers and lacking any provision or protection from legislative or regulatory frameworks. Children get caught in structures that have commercial benefits, e.g., lower rates offered by telephone services from midnight-early morning lead to youth using their mobile phones while their parents sleep, or non-educational games offered free of charge with heavy advertising. While of possible economic benefit, these frameworks potentially increase children's vulnerability. In the global South, many children access the internet via public internet cafes or chat spaces that do not have provision for protecting young users. In light of a commitment toward children's protection and well-being, ICT applications and operation of services generally do not prioritise children's needs or rights.

9. How has the implementation of WSIS outcomes contributed towards the development of a "people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society"?

10. What are the challenges to the implementation of WSIS outcomes? What are the challenges that have inhibited the emergence of a "people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society"?

As the primary driver of technological innovations remains economic, it is difficult to foresee the rights and needs of children being prioritised without conscious effort. A firm commitment must be made to safeguarding and empowering young internet users.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), though formulated in the pre-digital era, provides a framework for basic rights that remain equally vital in the digital age. In establishing basic standards that apply without discrimination to all children worldwide, the CRC is addressed to governments. Yet it is characteristic of globalisation in the twenty-first century that the power of national governments is being dispersed upwards to transnational organisations and global companies and, also, downwards to local organisations – as a result of de-regulation, commercialisation and political change.

Many more actors are now charged – more or less convincingly – with the responsibility to implement children's rights in the digital age. These actors face an array of problems.

- (i) It is often said that existing legislation applies equally to the online domain, but in practice this can be difficult to implement enforce.
- (ii) Currently there are many governance structures, with effort to develop international regulatory bodies and forms of internet governance proving somewhat fragile and uneven.
- (iii) Also of concern is that most efforts focus on protection, arguably at the expense of participation, and some countries have used the cover of child protection as a justification for blocking or monitoring public internet access.
- (iv) The fast-changing, highly complex and transnational nature of socio-technological infrastructures also challenges policy makers.
- (v) It is also problematic that the internet is largely blind to age, treating children and adults equivalently and so rarely treating children according to their 'evolving capacities,' as specified in CRC Articles 5 and 14.

The articles of the CRC are commonly organised by the categories of protection, provision and participation, because this helps us to answer the question: why these rights? Broadly, what's being emphasised is the right to protection from harm, the right to provision to meet needs, and the right to participation as an agent, some would say citizen. A challenge for WSIS, then, is to identify where, when and how the internet reconfigures the conditions of harm, need and agency. We can identify many ways in which this seems to be happening, in terms of the various risks and opportunities currently on research, policy and practitioner agendas.

The internet is not the cause of problems in children's lives in any simple sense. And nor can it provide solutions in and of itself. The internet is created by people, controlled by people, used by people – and it's they (we) who can change its consequences for our lives.

11. How are these challenges being addressed? What approaches have proved to be effective in your experience?

To move from recommendations to tangible actions, clear objectives must be established, with measurable outcomes to determine whether the objectives have been met. While raising awareness is a necessary pre-cursor to achieving these goals, in itself, it is a vague goal. For example, is awareness raised by attending an event or reading information on a website, or is it realised when youth are able to participate in decision-making processes that affect them or teach others what they have learned? To ensure children's rights and needs in the digital age are adequately addressed, tangible goals might include more effort to include children's needs in regulatory and legislative frameworks, encourage an increase in staffing for child protection and empowerment efforts, evidence of provision for empowerment, through curricula and support, protections for children from commercial interests.

12. What do you consider the most important emerging trends in technology and other aspects of ICTs which have affected implementation of WSIS outcomes since the Summit? What has been their impact?

As technologies increasingly become a taken-for-granted infrastructure of everyday life, nearly every aspect of children's lives have an online dimension. Most of the available evidence about the contexts and consequences of children's internet use comes from the global North. But the step change in where children go online raises new questions. The meaning of internet use is changing, and these emerging trends potentially affect implementation of WSIS outcomes:

- (i) internet access is increasingly mobile first rather than desktop or workplace first,
- (ii) in many countries access is more community-based (e.g. via cybercafés or various workarounds to gain access) than based at home or school (both more common in the West);
- (iii) schools and parents cannot simply be relied upon to ensure children's rights online because many children lack one or both
- (iv) internet access and content is increasingly commercialised (often with little local, public or own-language provision),
- (v) internet use increasingly occurs in contexts of very low or sometimes-punitive regulation and as-yet insufficient mediation by bodies charged with child welfare or well-being
- (vi) the global North's anxieties about socio-economic, ethnic or gender inequalities and exploitation become much more acute when viewed globally.

13. What should be the priorities for stakeholders seeking to achieve WSIS outcomes and progress towards the Information Society, taking into account emerging trends?

It is imperative to make all stakeholders thoroughly aware that, today, what happens offline will also be manifest online, that what happens online has consequences offline, and that we are witnessing a reconfiguring of risks and opportunities of children's lives. Children's rights in the digital age are presently undermined by a mix of innocence, ignorance and worse. Can we find ways to embed the importance of 'the digital' into the policies and practices of the many organisations concerned with children's well-being? Can we find ways to embed the importance of children's rights into the policies and practices of the many organisations concerned with the digital?

What options are open to WSIS? Past efforts have included the World Programme of Action for Youth and the ITTU Global Youth Summit (2013). While these efforts involved youth and encouraged empowering activities such as civic participation and having a voice in decisions that affect them, they did little to safeguard children's rights globally. Do we to move beyond awareness-raising and promote policy that truly addresses children's needs in the digital age? At the very least, we hope this consultation will stimulate further deliberation and evidence-gathering to guide governments and governance processes around the world.

14. *What role should information and communications play in the implementation of the post-2015 development agenda?*

15. *Please add any other comments that you wish to make on the subject of the review that you believe would be helpful.*

16. *We would also welcome any documents, reports, etc. that you can forward which you think will provide useful evidence for the review. Please send these to cstd-wsis10@unctad.org. It would be helpful if you could list these in this box, together with any URL which enables access to them on the World Wide Web.*

Livingstone, S. (2014). *Digital media and children's rights*. LSE Media Policy Project Blog. Retrieved from <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediapolicyproject/2014/09/12/sonia-livingstone-digital-media-and-childrens-rights/>.

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