PURVIEW OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY HIGH LEVEL MEETING ON THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY +10

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) met in 2003 and in 2005. It is responsible for bridging the global digital divide and improving access to technology across the developing world. The General Assembly High-level Meeting aims to review recommendations from these two meetings and follow up on the progress of bridging digital divides and human rights in the Information Society. The body will serve as a continuation of the 2015 High-level meeting and will draft resolutions proposing future recommendations in the areas of Information Technology. As a special meeting of the General Assembly, its functional mandate is broad, and it may make comprehensive recommendations regarding Information Technology, similar to the General Assembly Plenary.

Website: https://publicadministration.un.org/wsis10/

BRIDGING DIGITAL DIVIDES

With the proliferation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), developed countries have disproportionately benefited, creating a digital divide. The digital divide is the stark disparity that exists between developed and developing countries and their access to ICT and other technological resources. The United Nations has worked to address this disparity and to ensure that developing countries can realize the benefits of that technology. The United Nations often talks about this work as providing digital opportunity or bridging the digital divide. According to a 2014 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS+10) report, more than half of the world's population is still not connected to the Internet. Meanwhile, ICT have grown to play significant roles in economic growth and development. Recognizing these facts, the United Nations is fully committed to overcoming the digital divide for those at risk of being left behind and further marginalized due to a lack of access to ICT.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) first convened in 2003 to make available the opportunities afforded by ICT and support the Millennium Development Goals. At its conclusion, the participants adopted a Declaration of Principles and set out a Plan of Action to bring 50 percent of the world's population online by 2015. More specific objectives included connecting villages with ICT and establishing community access points; connecting schools, scientific and research centers, libraries, hospitals, and government centers with ICT; and facilitating the presence and use of all world languages on the Internet. Although it did not explicitly describe how these goals might be achieved, the WSIS Plan of Action called upon governments, the private sector and civil society to promote the development of ICT around the world.

The second World Summit on the Information Society occurred in 2005 and included a substantial focus on Internet governance. This resulted in the Tunis Commitment, the Tunis Agenda and the creation of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). The Tunis Agenda reaffirmed the goals set by the Geneva Plan of Action, addressed the financial challenges of developing and implementing ICT around the world, defined Internet governance, mandated the creation of the IGF, and laid out a plan for goal execution and follow-up. The body also noted the need for various means of funding to help close the digital divide. Up until that time a large portion of the funding to help close the digital divide had come from public investment. The United Nations continued to call for increased support from the private-sector, coupled with public policy initiatives. Discussions also noted the social responsibilities all parties have to development and bridging the digital divide. A large source of future funding was expected to come from the Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF). The Fund was touted as the best means to enhance development and bridge the digital divide through voluntary public and private contributions. The Fund was largely unsuccessful and was dissolved in 2009.

Since then, the United Nations recognized the growing importance of access to the Internet through mobile devices. The 2016 WSIS Forum acknowledged the growing use of smart technologies in the areas of healthcare, urban planning and the Internet of Things and acknowledged the continued expansion of mobile broadband infrastructures that facilitate this growth. The Forum continues to note the necessity of broadband Internet connections through the developing world and advocates for expansions and upgrades to current networks and technologies to meet this need and increase connectivity in that regard.

Moreover, the WSIS+10 High Level Meeting of the General Assembly produced the Outcome Document of the High Level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Overall Review of the Implementation of WSIS Outcomes. This Outcome Document represents a compilation of inputs from relevant stakeholders on the progress made by the WSIS and the steps and challenges of bridging the digital divide moving forward. It also acts in conjunction with the United Nations' commitment toward meeting and aligning with the newly-adopted Sustainable Development Goals. With swiftly evolving technologies and the ongoing issue of inclusivity, new divides have emerged regarding access to ICT and it is the General Assembly's goal to evaluate and address the new and continuing challenges.

The yearly WSIS Forum continues to meet and discuss both the challenges and opportunities presented by ICT development. The United Nations views ICT as a key tool for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and advancing economic development and human rights. One concern for the United Nations centers on closing the digital divide in education levels and opportunities. The use of digital eLearning platforms is on the rise in public and private entities and is largely viewed as a means to cut costs and provide an affordable education for all. As the field of technology develops at a rapid rate, equal access and connectivity remains another concern. Networks continue to age and public-private partnerships pose opportunities for upgrades and expanded coverage in rural areas. Private sector companies have begun considering zero-rating, in which some provider-selected content

does not count against data caps or incur additional charges, reducing cost and making access more affordable, especially on mobile networks. At risk is the idea of net-neutrality, which argues that content should be treated equally by Internet Service Providers and mobile carriers.

Questions to consider from your government's perspective on this issue include the following:

- How can the international community to ensure that developing countries have access to adequate infrastructure for ICT?
- What mechanisms are best suited to finance ICT development? What roles are appropriate for the international community, governments and the private sector?
- Should the international community support emerging strategies like zero-rating as a means of bridging the digital divide?
- How can the United Nations support increased use of ICT in developing countries?

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Human rights in the Information Society

The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), including the Internet and mobile devices, has become widespread around the world and so ingrained in modern life that it has spawned the modern "Information Society." The transformational power of ICT is wide-reaching, from democratizing access to information and driving economic growth, to aiding in national revolutions. However, the ease of access that makes ICT so powerful is also a threat: ICT also facilitate espionage, domestic surveillance and organization of unlawful activities. The rise of the Information Society has forced the international community to consider how the human rights of ICT users can be protected while still ensuring State safety and the ability to protect those same users from online threats.

In 2001, the General Assembly created the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) to manage the future of ICT and the role of the international community in promoting their spread. The WSIS meetings involved a multi-stakeholder approach including governments, United Nations organizations, civil society, academia and the private sector. The two original WSIS meetings took place in 2003 and 2005 and focused on developing a widespread "Information Society for All" that had universal spread of ICT and protected the human rights of its users.

During the 2003 meeting, WSIS adopted a Declaration of Principles, a guide for achieving equal accessibility to that Information Society for All, and a Plan of Action for taking the first steps toward that goal. However, the Plan of Action offered minimal guidance for how to manage the principle of simultaneously protecting human rights and combatting terrorism and criminal activity. The 2005 meeting largely focused on governance issues, defining Internet governance and establishing the Internet Governance Forum to further address issues of Internet governance, which would come to include protection of human rights.

The Tunisian Revolution of 2010-2011 and subsequent Arab Spring brought the issue of human rights online into new territory. With social media networks being used to coordinate revolutionary activity, several States restricted Internet access within their borders. Some States not threatened with rebellion have also claimed the ability to restrict Internet access in certain cases, such as copyright infringement. However, the Special Rapporteur to the Human Rights Council reported in 2011 that removing access to the Internet is a violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, regardless of the justification. The Special Rapporteur also noted that the right to privacy extends to the Internet as well, making collection of users' online activities possible human rights violations. In 2013, the General Assembly adopted a resolution entitled "The right to privacy in the digital age," which stressed the human right to privacy, accessibility and freedom of expression online. This resolution explicitly supported the right to freedom of expression online by individuals, as well as lawful protection against invasions of privacy. This resolution also calls for Member States to refrain from unlawful surveillance on individuals and to acknowledge that online privacy is of equal importance to offline privacy.

In June 2014, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) hosted a WSIS+10 High-Level Event at its headquarters in Geneva. The High-Level Event was a special, extended version of the WSIS Forum and was intended to provide input to the General Assembly's WSIS+10 High-Level Meeting held in December 2015. At the meeting in Geneva, Member States and attending non-governmental bodies discussed progress on achieving the Information Society for All between 2005 and 2014. The Event produced two documents. The Statement on Implementation of WSIS Outcomes reaffirmed the goals decided upon in 2003 and declared that all actors, including Member States and the private sector, must ensure respect for all human rights online as well as offline. Additionally, the WSIS+10 High-Level Event also produced the WSIS+10 Vision for WSIS Beyond 2015 to guide progress on the Information Society over the succeeding fifteen years. In December 2015, the General Assembly adopted the WSIS+10 High-Level Meeting Outcome Document, incorporating many of the principles from the High-Level Event the year prior. In this document, the General Assembly noted concerns about threats to the freedoms of expression and information, and called on Member States to protect these freedoms, as well as the right to privacy and other human rights.

As ICT becomes more and more widespread, the importance of protecting human rights in the Information Society rises as well. The rise of terrorist and criminal activities online, particularly through social media, tempt governments into violating human rights online to ensure safety offline, however the United Nations has been clear that human rights in the Information Society are no less real than the human rights the Universal Declaration first intended to protect. The effectiveness of ICT relies on public trust in its effectiveness and security, which itself requires users' rights while using ICT to be protected. The rights to privacy and to the freedoms of expression and information are fundamental to the Information Society, and yet governments and private organizations increasingly seek to violate those rights. In 2016, the UN Human Rights Council resolved that Internet access itself should be considered a human right, due to its importance to economic development and in realizing other human rights. The success of an Information Society for All, then, depends not only on the ability of the international community to protect the rights of those within the Society, but also on its ability to protect the right to participate in the Society itself.

Questions to consider from your government's perspective on this issue include the following:
- What steps can Member States take to protect the data of individuals while maintaining country-wide security?
- How can Member States best protect privacy in the Information Society?
- What steps should the international community take to protect the right to freedom of expression and access to impartial information?

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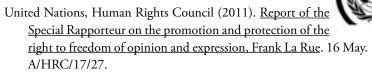
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