

# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2024 SPECIAL EDITION

**WSIS+20: Reimagining horizons of dignity, equity  
and justice for our digital future**



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC),  
IT FOR CHANGE, WACC GLOBAL  
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

## Global Information Society Watch 2024 SPECIAL EDITION

WSIS+20: Reimagining horizons of dignity, equity and justice for our digital future

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# Let's occupy the internet governance processes!

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It is the second quarter of 2024, and the past six months have weakened the international community rapidly. It is evident that the institutions, processes and spaces of action were not capable of preventing what many experts have described as a textbook case of genocide<sup>1</sup> against the Palestinian people. Unsurprisingly, cutting-edge technologies and mobile phones have taken a prominent role in this as tools to attack and massacre civilians.<sup>2</sup> What the commission of the most terrible of all crimes has triggered everywhere is an unprecedented abandonment of the so-called international rules-based order, selectively, on all fronts, including in the use of the internet and adjacent technologies.

The atrocities in Gaza, visible to everyone with an internet connection in real-time, are creating an even more profound divide between what is called the global North and the global South<sup>3</sup> at the government level. At the social level, solidarity demonstrations occur every day in plazas, public forums, and universities across the world. Often, these actions are followed by acts of repression and blatant censorship.

What does it have to do with internet governance and the future rules for our global digital sphere?

Everything.

As the entire system is shaking at its very foundations, it might be a pivotal moment to either fix the current international institutions

and multilateral mechanisms that are not serving their purpose, or revolutionise the way states and citizens cooperate and the norms they observe.

This report calls for a strategy to reclaim a space where citizens have a voice about the future of technology, and to translate into action the spirit and priorities that the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) had at the beginning of the century. It closes with a reflection of promising signs and first steps in the right direction.

## They beat you in the streets and ignore you inside

More than two decades ago, activists, advocates and emerging experts gathered in Geneva to challenge the WSIS process following the spirit of the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) Seattle protests<sup>4</sup> that raised legitimate concerns of a future shaped by superpowers and giant transnational corporations. Activists all over the world were alarmed that technology companies would have a seat at the table – even though their power was nothing like today. They understood, after the unprecedented demonstrations of the previous years, facilitated to a great extent thanks to emerging communication technologies, that the stakes were high. Governments were catching up, assisted by corporations. Soon, police repression would increase, and there would be attempts to block the newly gained ability for people to organise online rapidly.

For some the preparatory meetings for WSIS were an early alert that information and communications technologies (ICTs) would be the next target as a control point, which had already become evident with newly passed laws in countries like the United States. Many saw the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) effort to call for a global conference to shape the future of technology as a warning sign of the awareness among

1 OHCHR. (2024). *Anatomy of a genocide: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967*. Francesca Albanese. A/HRC/55/73.. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session55/advance-versions/a-hrc-55-73-auv.pdf>

2 Abraham, Y. (2024, 3 April). 'Lavender': The AI machine directing Israel's bombing spree in Gaza. *+972 Magazine*. <https://www.972mag.com/lavender-ai-israeli-army-gaza/>

3 Group of 77. (2024). *Third South Summit Outcome Document*. [https://www.g77.org/doc/3southsummit\\_outcome.htm](https://www.g77.org/doc/3southsummit_outcome.htm)

4 For a detailed account of the Seattle protests, see <https://depts.washington.edu/wtohist>

governments of the emerging forms of collaboration and action enabled by technology and connectivity. Others saw it as a blatant attempt to use a multiyear, multilayered, multistakeholder process without a binding outcome or real financial commitment to translating the talk into action, to distract, divert and disrupt these emerging forms of collaboration before they grew into a transformative social movement.

Early digital activists were resisting the foundations on top of which the superstructures that control everything today were built. They understood that digital technologies, their architecture and governance would play a vital role in changing the game, which up until then had enabled activists to shape technology to organise, demonstrate and create alternatives.

In 2003, a collective of activists, artists, lawyers and technologists organised a parallel conference in response to the official programme under the title “WSIS? We Seize!”.<sup>5</sup> It had a public interest agenda and questioned what was happening in the official event. Activists and experts followed both events and provided a critical voice to what unfolded in the official process. The outcome of the alternative process was a robust Civil Society Declaration under the title of “Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs”.<sup>6</sup> It rested on four pillars: Social Justice and People-Centred Sustainable Development, the Centrality of Human Rights, Culture, Knowledge and Public Domain and Enabling Environment. The aim was the accountable and democratic governance of technology, with governance mechanisms properly funded.

The demands remain almost the same today, but the world is not the same. The promise of more technology and connectivity leading to a better society and more development was never fulfilled. That was the effectiveness of a multistakeholder system where corporations were allowed to grow in influence and shape the process inside, while using lobbyists to influence national and regional rules on the outside.

The WSIS process encountered a savvy and well-organised, even if small, civil society. Its analysis – reading old documents and watching the footage available – was sharp.<sup>7</sup>

Activists foresaw the threat of a concentration of wealth, the lockdown of innovation and further commodification of knowledge and science, the concentration of power to inform and in the provision of services to communicate, and the use of technology to police, to control, to divide, to exclude. This would later result in an unprecedented power to extract resources, labour and time, and to exploit people and the planet.

Over two decades since the first WSIS, and in a crucial moment for the future of humanity, we need to stop for a second and recalibrate our strategies and priorities, so that citizen voices are the ones listened to, both in negotiation rooms and in the streets.

### Owning the discourse, dispelling myths

The main narratives in internet governance spaces, as well as its thematic priorities, are often led by the most powerful corporations and the governments that host governance events. Their press and public relations teams get effective press coverage, engage in targeted lobbying, and place their spokespeople and leaders on panels to draw the lines in a debate on any particular topic. Even worse, there is a practice of repeating myths as truths, which inevitably leads to, in the best case, a distraction from more important points that need to be discussed, and in the worst, ineffective and harmful policies. One example of hyped narratives is last year’s debates around the existential threat that general-purpose artificial intelligence (AI) would pose to the future of humanity.<sup>8</sup>

There are at least three reoccurring sets of myths in internet governance spaces.

The first set of myths usually gravitates around ideas of what is “best for the poor” without properly addressing or acknowledging the accelerated socio-economic precarity of marginalised groups and communities through digitalisation, as well as other negative consequences that have a direct link to owning a mobile phone and being online. Instead the sustainable development narrative mostly equates development with simply connecting more people to the internet.<sup>9</sup> Over the last decades,

5 <http://www.noborder.org/archive/www.geneva03.org/display/about.php.html>

6 WSIS Civil Society Plenary. (2003). “*Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs*”: *Civil Society Declaration to the World Summit on the Information Society*. <https://www.itu.int/net/ws/is/docs/geneva/civil-society-declaration.pdf>

7 [https://media.ccc.de/v/20C3-537-WSIS\\_Overview](https://media.ccc.de/v/20C3-537-WSIS_Overview)

8 LaGrandeur, K. (2023, 4 October). The consequences of AI hype. *AI Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-023-00352-y>

9 Reisdorf, B. C., Fernandez, L., Hampton, K. N., Shin, I., & Dutton, W. H. (2022). Mobile Phones Will Not Eliminate Digital and Social Divides: How Variation in Internet Activities Mediates the Relationship Between Type of Internet Access and Local Social Capital in Detroit. *Social Science Computer Review*, 40(2), 288-308. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439320909446>

civil society and academia have collected vast amounts of evidence on the harms against the most vulnerable triggered by technologies, including online threats of violence and being profiled and targeted in mass surveillance. Recent research also suggests how digitalisation is creating a new kind of digital divide with those not having a stable or always-on internet connection not being able to properly participate in the digital economy.<sup>10</sup> All of this leads to more exclusion and discrimination.

The second set of myths seeks to restrain sovereign decisions about the way technology and connectivity are regulated in a particular country, if such regulations are not aligned with the mainstream regulations in the US and/or the European Union (EU). This set of myths often raises hyped-up alarm about the danger that a divided internet would present to humanity and the quasi-obligatory need for poorer nations to either abstain from regulating the internet or, if they regulate, to use the laws and policies found in the US and EU as templates, praising them as “gold standards”. However, this is done without considering the particular needs or challenges faced by specific countries,<sup>11</sup> and can expose them to sanctions. One example of this is the US sanctions on Venezuela in 2019, which impacted the ability of its citizens to use software services, including receiving critical security updates; another is the battle of the US to neutralise China as 5G provider through its Clean Network initiative.<sup>12</sup>

These myths can end up creating an antagonistic relationship between the government trying to implement a change and civil society. An example of this is the recent controversy around restrictions to the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) in Brazil, a particular context with real threats against democracy and a direct conflict of interest between the company’s owner and the democratically elected government in the country.<sup>13</sup> Many online freedom of expression advocates argued against such measures, but without taking into consideration the local context, where jurists and human rights advocates considered the measures legitimate and proportionate. Countries

can and should regulate digital technologies to preserve and enhance the rights of their citizens.

The third set of myths concerns the independence of academia and civil society organisations in their participation as stakeholders in internet governance. Their input should be examined thoroughly, especially when funded by big corporations, to assess whether their input and research priorities are influenced by their funders. Civil society and academia must acknowledge their political biases and limitations because of a funder’s agenda and sphere of action. The lobbying of the tech giants should also be monitored closely.

### Upgrading the insider game, abandoning participation-washing<sup>14</sup>

Recent developments have made it clear that other spheres offer a concrete possibility to achieve local and global results for a more equitable and sustainable digital future for all. This includes engaging the tax justice movement, or advocating for better competition, electoral and consumer protection laws, or better public health frameworks. In the current political configuration, these spheres of engagement offer a shortcut to achieving the outcomes internet governance has failed to achieve.

The internet governance community today has an opportunity to build new knowledge in these and other areas to influence local and regional processes. For example, they can work with local and international consumer protection networks with strong experience in monopolistic practices and competition law, or with public health officials working on the ground. At the same time, following a bottom-up approach, they can push for some harmonisation and norm setting in a fragmented internet governance environment.

What is clear is that processes like WSIS need to be coupled with other processes – such as those where economic and climate justice is being fought for, and are areas which currently have the resources and teeth for real action – instead of continuing the conversation in a disconnected space. If its agenda stays where it is and does not have real implications in spaces where the allocation of resources or the creation of binding rules are made, it can sink into irrelevance or be replaced by an even more closed and captured mechanism. The technology

10 See Alison Gillwald’s report in this edition of GISWatch.

11 See, for example, Sala Weleilakeba’s commentary on the Pacific Islands in this edition of GISWatch.

12 Ortiz Freuler, J. (2023). The weaponization of private corporate infrastructure: Internet fragmentation and coercive diplomacy in the 21st century. *Global Media and China*, 8(1), 6-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364221139729>

13 Mier, B. (2024, 18 April). Brazilian lawyer exposes deceit at heart of “Twitter Files”. *BRASILWIRE*. <https://www.brasilwire.com/brazilian-lawyer-exposes-deceit-at-heart-of-twitter-files/>

14 For the purpose of this report, “participation-washing” is a term to describe the performative participation of people pretending to represent citizens from a country or belonging to specific groups, without a mandate to do so or previous consultation with them.

industry is one of the most concentrated and resourceful industries of all times. The bargaining power of developing countries is minimal, but a broad alliance of movements, and (sometimes) a joint effort by governments and civil society could deliver results.

For example, developing countries really committed to fighting inequality and the role of the tech industry in producing this inequality could focus on taxing tech giants in their jurisdictions. A campaign pushing for tax adherence and proper taxation of the tech companies would create common ground from which to work and a concrete victory for the global South. Similarly, to show a real commitment to digital development, the richest nations in the world could conditionally write off the debts of developing countries so they can prioritise investments in sustainable and inclusive digital financial and development infrastructures as well as digital literacy. If financial inequalities are not addressed, so-called digital development will become, if it is not already, a tool for soft diplomacy and a distraction from the real needs in developing countries, and continue to be a wellspring for the extraction of data and money from the poorest nations to the richest.

Two decades after WSIS 2003, with its very few successes, and a long list of global, regional and local events, with a multitude of conversations between stakeholders and no binding results, the WSIS+20 process and its Internet Governance Forum need to move at an accelerated pace with less dispersed dialogue and more binding actions for the parties involved. Each stakeholder needs to accompany their words with meaningful actions and the policies and resources to make them happen. With the converging crises of climate and inequality, it seems more important than ever to move away from corridors and panels of non-binding conversations.

So two things are clear. We are in something of a stalemate. And a change is necessary.

The moment is now for a broad alliance between those advocating for justice across different fields, including economic and climate justice, and digital rights. The ultimate goal should be to create a digital justice agenda with other movements and rally behind a comprehensive Global Green New Deal built on a bottom-up process of consultation, providing a broad governance framework for a fair and sustainable future. Once the general demands from the digital civil society are integrated with the other demands, it should be activated in all the spaces where a top-down Green New Deal is being discussed.

That would mean bringing up digital issues in the climate conversations, at International Monetary Fund meetings, at the World Trade Organization, etc. – in all the spaces where our future is configured and where the allocation of financial resources is being decided.

### A closing note of hope: Another world is still possible

The internet governance space in recent years is experiencing new dynamics, with alliances being formed between digital activists and social movements. New agendas, focused on climate justice and labour, among other issues, are being developed. This gets us closer to the original spirit of the Geneva Declaration, and to the path of addressing digital issues in other spaces suggested in this report. The interrelated agendas are getting clearer, and the thematic silos are breaking and being replaced by bridges and intersections. It is clear for everyone that systemic changes need to happen, but these will only happen with coordinated efforts and clear targets.

Reclaiming the power of imagination and collective action, as well as the resilience of the locally grown, globally interconnected and trusted networks of the early days of the internet, is now a viable necessity. Using the tactics of our time in a broader, diverse, but united alliance will allow us to start meaningfully influencing ongoing processes, making clear that the technology debate, the environmental debate and the financial and debt justice debates, amongst them, are interrelated and need to be addressed together. Only then can we shape the institutions and infrastructures of a fair and sustainable future for all.

### Action steps

The following action steps should be a priority for civil society:

- Lead the narrative. For optimal results it is important for civil society to lead the narrative on emerging digital issues and refuse to adopt the rhythm and thematic priorities of the big tech companies and most powerful governments. Targeted research, alliances with independent media and constant advocacy, with connected global and local efforts, are necessary. It is important to counter the digital myths with evidence-based arguments and good storytelling. The perfect way to lead the narrative is to craft a global, positive agenda rather than only responding to the constant

threats to the digital future we want. The 2014 Delhi Declaration for a Just and Equitable Internet<sup>15</sup> and the work by the Global Digital Justice Forum<sup>16</sup> are excellent starting points.

- Work closely with broader social justice efforts. Civil society has before their eyes the opportunity to lay the foundations of a new digital social contract, moving towards stronger social protections, low-carbon development and financial sustainability, all integrated and harmonised with just digital policies and rights-enhancing technologies. Civil society working in digital spaces can choose to remain in specialised internet governance forums, or as suggested in this report, contribute from their local bases and through their global networks towards drafting and actioning a comprehensive, citizen-centred Global Green New Deal. Such an integrated green and inclusive vision of the future of digital transformation should influence the next wave of aid, trade and cooperation agreements. For this to happen, active participation is needed outside of internet governance spaces.
- Make stronger alliances with governments on public interest fronts such as competition law and consumer protection law, as well as with respect to investments in digital public infrastructure. When the power is concentrated in a few companies and governments, finding points in common with some government agencies and coordinating common efforts across borders could deliver innovative ways to govern the internet in a decentralised way.
- Preserve spaces for imagination and collective action in parallel to mainstream governance processes. As the early questioning of WSIS ahead of the Geneva summit showed, there is an exponential value in maintaining and nurturing exclusive spaces for civil society to strategise, contest and reimagine the ongoing institutions and processes affecting the digital sphere. Developing trust and intergenerational collaboration outside of the processes and logic of the current internet governance system will be key to take more radical steps towards a possible digital future for and by the people.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.justnetcoalition.org/delhi-declaration>

<sup>16</sup> <https://globaldigitaljusticeforum.net/>

## WSIS+20: REIMAGINING HORIZONS OF DIGNITY, EQUITY AND JUSTICE FOR OUR DIGITAL FUTURE

Twenty years ago, stakeholders gathered in Geneva at the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and affirmed a “common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society.”

This special edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) considers the importance of WSIS as an inclusive policy and governance mechanism, and what, from a civil society perspective, needs to change for it to meet the challenges of today and to meaningfully shape our digital future.

Expert reports consider issues such as the importance of the historical legacy of WSIS, the failing multistakeholder system and how it can be revived, financing mechanisms for local access, the digital inequality paradox, why a digital justice framing matters in the context of mass digitalisation, and feminist priorities in internet governance. While this edition of GISWatch asks: “How can civil society – as well as governments – best respond to the changed context in order to crystallise the WSIS vision?” it carries lessons for other digital governance processes such as the Global Digital Compact and NETmundial+10.

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