

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL
Management Segment

Roundtable discussion on: Unity in Action: Accelerating SDG Implementation
and Building a Better Future for All

Remarks by H.E. Mr. Muhammadou M.O. Kah
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Excellencies, Distinguished delegates, Colleagues

Good afternoon from Geneva.

First and foremost, I wish to express my appreciation to Ambassador Lok Bahadur Thapa, Vice President of the ECOSOC, for his leadership and for calling for this very important discussion. It is also my honour to share with you some thoughts about how the outcomes of the 28th session of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) held last April 2025, which I had the privilege of chairing, could support the ECOSOC's deliberations on the question of accelerating SDG implementation and building a better future for all.

Digitalization is playing a critical role in accelerating SDG implementation. That is why the outcome of the 28th annual session of the CSTD is particularly significant, especially in providing input to the General Assembly's 20-year review of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), which will take place later this year.

First, ministers, high-level delegates and other stakeholders at the Commission have underlined the transformative power of digital technologies in shaping inclusive, resilient national development and economic growth. However, the benefits of digital transformation are not equitably distributed.

Global internet access has increased remarkably in the last 20 years, from 12.4% in 2003 to 64% in 2024, contributing to improved connectivity, digital skills, infrastructure, and inclusivity. Yet, a striking 2.6 billion people remain offline to this day, particularly in the least developed countries and vulnerable groups.

Second, there were strong calls to better align the WSIS process with other UN cooperation processes. In particular, the Commission highlighted the importance of linking the WSIS action lines with the Global Digital Compact and the SDGs to ensure coherence, avoid duplication, and increase global impact. Proposed initiatives include the joint implementation roadmap, enhanced UNGIS roles, and renewing mandate of the Internet Governance Forum.

Finally, the Commission stressed the need to address critical gaps in digital governance, especially in light of the new technological realities such as Artificial Intelligence. According to UNCTAD's Technology and Innovation Report, AI is projected to become a \$4.8 trillion industry over the next 15 years. However, without targeted efforts and partnership to close infrastructure and skills gaps, the digital divide risks evolving into an AI divide, further deepening global inequalities.

To that end, CSTD has established the Working Group on Data Governance as a direct mandate of Article 48 of the Global Digital Compact. This is a truly inclusive platform where governments, private sectors, academia, and other stakeholders come together to formulate practical recommendations on data governance. We will hold our second meeting in early July and aim to submit the group's report to the 81st session of the General Assembly.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to a productive discussion.

1. *How can the Commission help ECOSOC shape an inclusive and human-centered approach to digital transformation, including through data governance and the full implementation of all mandates in the Global Digital Compact?*

Several key points emerged at the CSTD session on this question.

One is the importance of bridging digital divides—particularly in least developed countries and among vulnerable groups—through affordable, meaningful access and culturally relevant digital infrastructure.

There were also strong calls for aligning the WSIS process with other UN digital cooperation processes. In particular, delegates highlighted the importance of linking WSIS action lines with the Global Digital Compact and the SDGs to ensure coherence, avoid duplication, and increase global impact.

The session also saw broad support for renewing the mandate of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), which was recognized as a key platform for inclusive and multistakeholder digital governance.

Let me focus specifically on the question of data for development, which as you know is an important component of the GDC.

Benefiting from data is far from straightforward and demands the satisfaction of numerous prerequisites across various domains. It is crucial to acknowledge that the benefits of the data economy are not automatic or evenly distributed. The disparities in access to, and control of, data resources often exacerbate existing inequalities, disproportionately impacting lower-income nations and hindering equitable participation in the global data economy. This divide not only challenges the fairness of the data economy but also raises critical questions about the concentration of power, accountability, and the protection of human rights in a data-driven world. In light of these challenges, there is a pressing need for international cooperation on data governance. Such collaboration is vital to ensure that the benefits of the data economy are accessible to all, safeguarding against practices that deepen disparities and prioritizing measures that foster inclusivity and equity. Now let me turn to the importance of data governance. We need a balanced approach to effective global data governance, aimed at preventing the fragmentation of data frameworks. These do not necessarily imply a single, unified global data governance regime, an idea that may appear impractical. A more achievable goal can be to advance a global multilateral, multistakeholder and multidisciplinary dialogue on global data governance.

The complexity and unpredictability of technological advancements underscore the need for our regulatory frameworks to be flexible. Effective data governance necessitates the involvement of diverse stakeholders, including civil society, businesses, academia, NGOs, technical communities, and notably, the youth. This ensures that data governance frameworks accommodate a wide range of perspectives and address the needs of future generations. Data governance must navigate a careful path, minimizing risks while simultaneously encouraging innovation. This demands a nuanced, flexible, and inclusive regulatory approach. The principles guiding global data governance should align with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ensuring that our efforts in this domain support and uphold fundamental human rights and freedoms.

The GDC mandated the CSTD, as the UN's focal point for science and technology for Development to establish a multistakeholder Working Group on fundamental principles of data governance at all levels, as relevant for development. The multistakeholder group has already started to work and the richness of the discussions so far augur well for a meaningful outcome that will help the discussion in the UN to move forward.

2. *What are the most important takeaways from the WSIS+20 review for future-proofing our institutions and accelerating SDG progress?*

The CSTD's WSIS+20 review, reflected in its draft resolution on WSIS that has been submitted to the ECOSOC for adoption, was the result of a two year long process of multistakeholder consultation that culminated in a full day of high-level discussion at the 28th annual session of the Commission. The discussion benefited greatly from the WSIS+20 Report by the Secretariat "Implementing World Summit on the Information Society Outcomes: A Twenty-Year Review", which presents a comprehensive analysis of the changes that have taken place since WSIS, particularly since WSIS+10; and a review of stakeholders' perceptions of both the successes and ongoing challenges since WSIS. The CSTD requested that the Report should be transmitted to the GA as a background to its deliberations on WSIS+20.

I would like to highlight four major findings.

- First, technological innovation since WSIS has progressed at an unprecedented pace, moving from early computerization to today's AI and advanced robotics.

- Second, while access to digital infrastructure—especially mobile broadband—has surged globally, significant digital divides persist, particularly in LDCs and among vulnerable groups.
- Third, the integration of digital technologies into public services raises serious concerns around data governance, privacy, and environmental sustainability.
- Fourth, although the digital economy is expanding, its benefits remain unevenly distributed, underscoring the need for inclusive policies and strengthened international cooperation to ensure equitable digital development.

Looking forward, I would stress some strategic priorities to guide the future of the information society. These include:

- Closing all dimensions of the digital divide, especially for marginalized groups; fostering a secure and trusted digital environment;
- Developing governance frameworks for emerging technologies such as AI;
- Ensuring digital transformation aligns with the SDGs; promoting integrated, cross-sectoral digital strategies at the national level; and
- Enhancing international cooperation, particularly to strengthen the voice of developing countries in global digital policymaking.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize that CSTD and the ECOSOC have a responsibility to provide an inclusive platform for addressing both current and future digital challenges and opportunities, and for building consensus around our shared goals. I look forward to deepening and strengthening this collaboration with you during the WSIS+20 review. Thank you.