



Contribution by the Chair

DRAFT OPINION 1: BRIDGING DIGITAL DIVIDES, PARTICULARLY ON GENDER AND AGE AS WELL AS SKILLS AND CONNECTIVITY

Purpose

This document presents interim version of Draft Opinion 1: Bridging digital divides, particularly on gender and age as well as skills and connectivity, for the Seventh World Telecommunication/Information and Communication Technology Policy Forum (WTPF-26). The edits reflect changes agreed by members of the Informal Expert Group during the January 2026 IEG meeting.

Action required

The Informal Expert Group on WTPF-26 is invited to **consider** this document.

References

[IEG-WTPF-26 webpage](#)

DRAFT OPINION 5: Strengthening ICT-centric innovation ecosystems and entrepreneurship

The seventh World Telecommunication/ICT Policy Forum (Geneva, 2026),

recalling

- a)* Resolution 70/1 of the United Nations General Assembly, on transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
- b)* Resolution 70/125 of the United Nations General Assembly, on the outcome document of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the overall review of the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS);
- c)* Resolution 78/311 of the United Nations General Assembly, on enhancing international cooperation on capacity-building of artificial intelligence;
- d)* Resolution 11 (Rev. Kigali, 2022) of the World Telecommunication Development Conference, on telecommunication/information and communication technology (ICT) services in rural, isolated, and poorly served areas;
- e)* Resolution 37 (Rev. Baku, 2025) of the World Telecommunication Development Conference, on bridging the digital divide;
- f)* Resolution 55 (Rev. Baku, 2025) of the World Telecommunication Development Conference, on mainstreaming a gender perspective in the ITU Telecommunication Development Sector and promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls through telecommunications/information and communication technologies;
- g)* Resolution 58 (Rev. Baku, 2025) of the World Telecommunication Development Conference, on Telecommunication/information and communication technology accessibility for persons with disabilities and persons with specific needs;
- h)* Resolution 70 (Rev. Bucharest, 2022) of the Plenipotentiary Conference, on mainstreaming a gender perspective in the ITU and promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls through telecommunications/ICTs;
- i)* Resolution 91 (Rev. Baku, 2025) of the World Telecommunication Development Conference, on artificial intelligence technologies in telecommunication development;
- j)* Resolution 214 (Bucharest, 2022) of the Plenipotentiary Conference, on Artificial intelligence technologies and telecommunications/information and communication technologies;
- k)* Resolution 71 (Rev. Bucharest, 2022) of the Plenipotentiary Conference, on the ITU strategic framework for 2024–2027, aiming to enable and foster universal access to affordable, high-quality, and secure telecommunications/ICTs;
- l)* Resolution 139 (Rev. Bucharest, 2022) of the Plenipotentiary Conference, on the use of telecommunications/information and communication technologies to bridge the digital divide and build an inclusive information society;
- m)* Resolution 175 (Rev. Bucharest, 2022) of the Plenipotentiary Conference, on Telecommunication/information and communication technology accessibility for persons with disabilities and persons with specific needs;
- n)* Resolution 179 (Rev. Bucharest, 2022) of the Plenipotentiary Conference, on ITU's role in child online protection;
- o)* Resolution 198 (Rev. Bucharest, 2022) of the Plenipotentiary Conference, on the empowerment of youth through telecommunication/ICTs;

p) Resolution 200 (Rev. Bucharest, 2022) of the Plenipotentiary Conference, on the Connect 2030 Agenda for global telecommunication/ICT, including broadband, for sustainable development;

q) Opinion 3 (Geneva, 2021) of the World Telecommunication/ICT Policy Forum, on digital literacy and skills for inclusive access;

r) Resolution 77 (Rev. Baku, 2025) of the World Telecommunication Development Conference, on Broadband technology and applications for greater growth and development of telecommunication/information and communication services and broadband connectivity,

considering

a) that achieving universal and meaningful connectivity requires focus on key enablers *inter alia* infrastructure, affordability, devices, digital skills/literacy, user confidence in using telecommunications / ICTs, and evidence-based policy and regulatory frameworks;

b) that universal access to essential digital skills empowers individuals and communities, in particular, women, older persons, persons with disabilities, and underserved communities by providing the knowledge needed to thrive in the digital world, accessibility, fostering inclusion, bridging the digital divide, creating economic opportunities, and enabling broader participation and social advancement in the digital age;

c) that the ITU plays an important role in connecting the unconnected and promoting women's empowerment, particularly through STEM education and careers through initiatives such as Girls in ICTs;

d) that equitable and affordable access for all to telecommunications/ICT and, applications, creates job opportunities and entrepreneurial ventures, particularly for women, marginalized and underserved groups/communities;

e) that Telecommunications/ICT applications and services enhance social connectivity and access for all to vital services, improving quality of life. They enable real-time communication, and bridge gaps for marginalized and underserved groups/communities, ensuring inclusive participation in the digital age;

f) that equitable and affordable access for all to telecommunications/ICTs are essential for political, economic, social, and cultural development, as they play an important role in poverty alleviation, job creation, environmental protection, including the prevention and mitigation of natural and other disasters;

g) that the digital divide is a multi-dimensional and dynamic phenomenon, varying not only between countries, but also within countries creating distinct needs, depending upon geographical, social, economic, demographic and linguistic contexts which differ according to the specific conditions of the country or the region;

h) that ineffective or unmonitored policy measures may unintentionally widen the digital divide,

recognising

a) that without access to reliable identification tools in the digital age, individuals might face significant barriers in utilising telecommunications/ICTs to access essential services such as health and education, and financial services, which could deepen the digital divide;

b) that many people, particularly in rural and low income areas, still lack affordable access to the Internet and telecommunication/ICT services;

- c) that digital skill gaps persist, in particular with women, persons with disabilities and older persons especially in rural and remote area facing limited access to training due to structural inequities. Women are less likely to be online or possess workplace-ready digital skills, while older adults show varied proficiency influenced by education and income. Equipping children and young people with digital skills is vital for bridging digital divides;
- d) that societal norms and stereotypes limit the ability of women, girls, persons with disabilities and older persons to benefit fully from digital transformation;
- e) that civil society plays an invaluable role in reaching unserved and underserved communities fostering public trust and driving community engagement in digital inclusion efforts;
- f) that the unconnected persons include those living in areas with no access to adequate telecommunication/ICT infrastructure, as well as a significantly larger number of persons who live in areas already covered by such infrastructure but do not use it due to barriers inter-alia affordability and lack of digital skills;
- g) that accelerating broadband deployment is a considerable challenge, especially in hard-to-reach, rural, and remote areas where topography and demography make the return on investment challenging;
- h) that developing countries continue to face distinct and unique barriers to achieving universal and meaningful connectivity, including geographic isolation, small market size, limited international bandwidth, and vulnerability to natural disasters, the latter of which increases infrastructure costs and diverts already scarce resources from long-term ICT investment;
- i) that for SIDs and other coastal countries, connectivity in maritime environments is vital for safeguarding lives, supporting economic activities, and promoting sustainable development, especially for vulnerable maritime communities;
- j) that it is necessary to build partnerships with a range of stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, civil society, the technical community, and academia, to address digital divides;
- k) that narrowing the digital divide for all countries and all people is essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and implementing the Global Digital Compact (GDC), especially for women and girls, youth, indigenous peoples, older persons, persons with disabilities, and persons with specific needs;
- l) that leveraging new and emerging telecommunications/ ICTs, can play pivotal roles in enhancing universal and meaningful connectivity, driving innovation, and supporting inclusive growth, enabling smarter solutions and greater accessibility across sectors while taking into account the specific needs of underserved areas and marginalised groups;
- m) that new and emerging technologies including AI can also play a pivotal role in enhancing telecommunications/ICTs and universal and meaningful connectivity, which drives innovation, and supports inclusive growth, enabling smarter solutions and greater accessibility across sectors;
- n) that the rapid development of new and emerging telecommunication/ICTs and new and emerging technologies is impacting the evolution of the digital divide and that developing countries face special challenges in harnessing the associated opportunities,

is of view

- 1 that resilient, secure, inclusive, and interoperable digital public infrastructure facilitates universal and meaningful connectivity, and promotes social and financial inclusion;

2 that governments are encouraged to prioritize investments in expanding the latest broadband infrastructure to unserved and underserved areas to ensure universal access to high-speed Internet at affordable price. By improving infrastructure and updating regulations, these investments help bridge the digital divide, enabling more people to participate in the digital economy, access essential services, and improve their quality of life;

3 that implementing targeted digital literacy and skills training programs can help bridge the skills gap and address the barrier to Internet adoption and use, particularly for women, persons with disabilities, youth, and older persons. These Digital literacy and skills programs may aim to equip individuals with essential skills to navigate and utilize telecommunications/ICT applications and services effectively. These programs may cover computer and other digital skills, and cybersecurity awareness. The benefits of these programmes include enhanced employability, social inclusion, awareness of cybersecurity and continuous learning; [ok]

4 that creating policies which promote equality for communities facing systemic barriers and support the inclusion of marginalised groups of society in the digital economy can help address cultural barriers. These policies should include, equitable and affordable access for all to technology targeted digital literacy programs, careers in STEM for women, and accessible technology for older persons;

5 that digital skills can help leverage telecommunication/ICTs applications and services for sustainable development;

6 that civil society and community groups can make an important contribution to supporting marginalized groups of the society, *inter alia*, women and older persons in accessing and using telecommunications/ICTs;

7 that stakeholders should work together to build progress towards universal access to high-speed Internet;

8 that the ITU within its mandate should continue to collaborate closely with other UN agencies, international organizations, and other stakeholders concerning connectivity and bridging digital divides, particularly on gender and age-related issues;

9 that inclusive regulatory and governance approaches, such as multi-stakeholder universal connectivity roadmaps and community-based regulatory strategies, are essential to ensure responsiveness to underserved populations;

10 that governments pursuing digital transformations by adopting new and emerging telecommunication/ICT services and technologies should also take into account accessibility needs as well as age and gender-related considerations;

11 that collaborations between governments, the private sector, and civil society can drive initiatives to provide affordable digital access. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) can leverage the strengths of government agencies, private companies, and civil society to provide affordable digital access and training. These collaborations may include pooled resources, combining technological innovation with regulatory support, and scaling initiatives effectively. Incentives for the private sector and supportive policy and regulations and updated regulation can further enhance the effectiveness of PPPs in bridging the digital divide;

12 that the ITU plays a critical role in bridging the digital divide by facilitating interoperability, interconnection, and maximising global connectivity of telecommunication networks and services;

13 that it is urgent to bridge digital divides between and within countries and that international collaboration such as capacity building is important to these efforts;

14 that promoting affordable, accessible and inclusive telecommunications/ICTs applications, services and tools for youth, older persons and persons with disabilities is crucial as well as considering their needs during digital transformation; [ok]

15 that it is important to formulate digital inclusion strategies based on disaggregated data and localized analysis to identify digitally excluded groups in each country/region;

16 that policy makers should move beyond regulatory design and ensure mechanisms are in place to observe the actual implementation and impact of regulations over time with mechanisms like independent auditing, periodic reporting, and community feedback loops,

invites Member States

1 to consider establishing resilient, secure, inclusive, and interoperable telecommunication/ICTs networks and applications, including those that enable digital public infrastructure, tailored to national contexts, that facilitate universal and meaningful connectivity, and bridge digital divides;

2 to continue to review and, where appropriate, revise the scope of the relevant policy and regulatory frameworks and consider creating enabling environments for investments in expanding the latest mobile technologies such as IMT-2020, space based, and other broadband infrastructure to unserved and underserved areas including rural, remote and maritime area for benefit of respective communities. Provide incentives to telecom operators for offering mobile and broadband services in underserved and unserved areas;

3 to develop inclusive policies that promote equitable and affordable access for all, gender equality and support the digital inclusion of older persons and persons with disabilities by addressing cultural, structural, and accessibility barriers. These efforts should recognise and reflect national and regional diversity, ensure access for all to technology, provide targeted digital literacy programs, encourage women's participation in STEM, and prioritize the design of accessible technologies for older persons, and persons with disabilities. Furthermore, states are encouraged to mainstream gender and age considerations across ICTs, STEM, and telecommunications strategies to build a more inclusive and equitable digital world;

4 to support research into barriers to accessing ICT/telecommunications and meaningful use of the Internet with a focus on gender and age considerations;

5 to collect high-quality, disaggregated data by gender, age, geography, socio-economic status, Internet access and use, and participation in the telecommunications/ICT sector to enable measurement of the digital divide and to inform inclusive policy responses and development programs;

6 to engage with stakeholders from the private sector, civil society, the technical community, and academia to consider how best to expand meaningful and affordable connectivity and job opportunities in Telecommunications/ICT, provide digital skills and close the gender digital divide;

7 to adopt regional, local, and national strategies, in consultation with stakeholders, for tackling digital divides by ensuring connectivity for all, and by promoting context appropriate and locally relevant digital solutions that address the specific needs of communities and vulnerable groups and that stimulate demand and investment in digital infrastructure;

8 to promote and enhance digital literacy and skills policies, programmes, and mechanisms, and to integrate gender-responsive approaches in national ICT policies, strategies, and regulatory frameworks, in order to help bridge the digital divides, ensure equitable and affordable access for all, skills development, and meaningful participation of women and girls in the digital economy, including through active participation in regional and global collaborative forums;

9 to consider identifying gaps in digital skills curricula in education, apprenticeships, and other youth and adult job skills development programs and consider appropriate methods for addressing these gaps such as funding mechanisms while promoting career pathways and mentorship aligned with future workforce needs and emerging telecommunications/ICTs;

- 10 to consider adopting policy and regulatory measures that facilitate telecommunication/ICT infrastructure deployment and its sharing specially in rural and isolated areas;
- 11 to create an enabling environment for the deployment and adoption of new and emerging telecommunications/ICT leveraging their potential in bridging digital divides;
- 12 to enhance international cooperation including through capacity building, and exchange of best practices, in order to assist developing countries in leveraging new and emerging technologies to enhance telecommunication/ICTs and address the multifaceted challenges related to digital divides;
- 13 to establish policies, strategies, and standards, and provide training courses and guidance to enhance children's digital skills and literacy while ensuring the protection of children online;
- 14 to develop plans and policies, implementing telecommunications/ICT technologies and products that meet the needs of older persons and persons with disabilities, creating an accessible and age-friendly environment;
- 15 to continue implementing policies that facilitate the non-discriminatory deployment of new and emerging telecommunications/ICTs which is affordable and accessible to all, providing incentives to promote telecommunication/ICT infrastructure and services in unserved and underserved areas;
- 16 to strengthen partnerships between governments and stakeholders from the private sector, civil society, the technical community, academia, and development partners, to ensure effective coordination of interventions in skills development, expand meaningful and affordable connectivity and job opportunities in the telecommunications/ICT sector, provide digital skills, close the gender digital divide, and ensure that all groups in society have equitable access for all to training, education, and employment in telecommunications/ICTs, as a means of bridging the digital divides;
- 17 to consider adopting policies to address requirements for specialized skills in new and emerging telecommunication/ ICTs ,and new and emerging technologies;
- 18 to promote device recycling and redistribution to digitally excluded communities;
- 19 to promote telecommunication/ICTs infrastructure and broadband networks/systems, particularly in remote and underserved areas including through complementary access networks and solutions, according to national regulations;
- 20 to upskill private and public-sector workers to deliver inclusive digital services, including skills training, to enhance digital inclusion efforts at the community level including digital skill training;
- 21 to encourage policymakers and regulators to adopt adaptive governance models, implement result-based monitoring, and promote community-informed policymaking to bridge the digital divide,

invites the Secretary-General

- 1 to continue to reinforce the ITU's efforts, within its mandate and in collaboration with Member States, stakeholders, and partner organizations, to bridge digital divides, particularly on gender, age, skills, and connectivity while ensuring that initiatives are responsive to the specific circumstances of developing countries, in line with ITU data and findings on universal and meaningful connectivity;
- 2 to assist in facilitating and sharing of best practices, guidelines, and toolkits among developing Member States for integrating gender equality considerations into ICT policies and strategies.