

## **Bridging the digital divide was the main topic at WTDC-22**

The capital of Rwanda, Kigali, hosted The World Telecommunication Development Conference (WTDC) from 6 to 16 June 2022. Its main topic was “Connecting the unconnected to achieve sustainable development”. A result of the event was the formation and adoption of a forward-looking agenda aimed at bridging the global digital divide and connecting 2.9 billion people worldwide having no access to modern digital services.

The WTDC-agreed digital development action plan is aligned with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations. It is also synced with the forward-looking action plan of the ITU-D until the next WTDC.

### **Specific connectivity commitments**

The main obstacle to universal connectivity is the recognized inequality of ICT development in developed, developing and underdeveloped countries. And, as digital services are progressively introduced, in many ways this inequality is only increasing.

WTDC-22 focused its work on specific actions to eliminate inequality and ensure connectivity for all of the world's population. ITU called on the world community not to use WTDC as a platform for political statements, but to make specific commitments and promises of real action.

On 7-9 June 2022, during a number of the Partner2Connect Digital Development Roundtables, investment commitments of governments, private businesses and public organizations were announced for the development of global communications.

Public-private partnerships were the focus of the Partner2Connect Digital Development Roundtable. In total, the Coalition has raised 418 connectivity commitments totaling over \$25 billion.

### **Kigali Declaration**

The main result of WTDC was the signing of the “*Kigali Declaration*”. This strategic document prescribes to:

- accelerate the implementation of modern digital infrastructures, services and applications;
- mobilize financial resources to build the digital economy and universal connectivity of the unconnected;
- optimize the regulatory environment.

Special attention was paid in the Declaration to the promotion of international cooperation, technology, knowledge and best practices exchange for sustainable development and economic growth. The Declaration is intended to help bridging global digital divide, especially in developing countries, least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs), and small island developing states (SIDS).

Through the performance of the Declaration, it is intended to:

- adopt the Partner2Connect digital coalition as a core platform for the development of partnership relations in the field of full-scale connectivity and digital transformation worldwide;
- ensure Internet connection for every school as part of joint initiative of ITU and UNICEF Giga;
- bring the digital transformation to achieve the SDGs.

### **ITU Global Connectivity Report**

As a supporting document for WTDC ITU has issued a Global Connectivity Report 2022<sup>1</sup>, which assesses the state of global connectivity and offers recommendations to accelerate progress.

According to the Report, universal connectivity, the ability for everyone to enjoy a secure, productive and affordable online experience, has become the new imperative of the 2020-2030 decade.

The Report stated that depriving large segments of society of the opportunities offered by the Internet was slowing down economic development and exacerbating inequalities, so this situation is regarded as unacceptable. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic increase in use of the Internet for those who has access to it, but for many others, the pandemic has exacerbated the costs of digital isolation.

Besides that, a number of other documents pivotal for global ICT development have been addressed at the Conference.

### **Global Digital Compact**

In September 2023, the **Global Digital Compact** will be negotiated between key digital players at the United Nations. ITU will be the forum for discussing this document by all stakeholders.

The draft compact contains a mandatory provision: to connect all inhabitants of the planet by 2030. And now, in the establishment of the Compact, it is necessary to set achievable goals, determine the necessary investments and begin concrete work.

### **Doha Programme of Action**

The **Doha Programme of Action** is designed to help the least developed countries (LDCs) achieve universal connectivity and interconnectedness. Commitments made by stakeholders

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/global-connectivity-report-2022/>

through Partner2Connect will help accelerate the digital transformation of LDCs and contribute to building the digital economy as envisioned in the programme.

### **New financing arrangements**

It will take \$40 trillion to completely close the digital divide. The World Bank, which has already implemented several communication projects with USAID (United States Agency for International Development) in difficult regions, sees its task in attracting investments, streamlining regulations and market mechanisms, and working with governments to improve the regulatory framework. The private sector in such areas can be attracted by government-guaranteed income.

Such initiatives — grants, state guarantees and optimal regulation — will release growth potential and create conditions for investment.

Traditional ways will no longer suffice; to seek funding for this project, it is necessary to actively introduce innovative methods, for example, use cryptocurrency and NFT.

### **Global Youth Summit**

On 2-4 June 2022, just before the World Telecommunication Development Conference, ITU held the Generation Connect Global Youth Summit, which discussed the access of young people to online education and digital skills, the digital gender divide, online security, e-waste management, employment prospects, digital entrepreneurship and the role of technology in climate change.

The youth summit formulated one of the priority tasks: to connect all young people to the Internet. Digital technologies are becoming a factor that shapes the collective future. Therefore, it is necessary to involve more young people in global conferences, in particular at WTDC.

An ITU-UNICEF joint initiative, GIGA, aims to connect all schools and all students by 2030. Since 2013, GIGA has already connected 1.3 billion students. Switzerland has undertaken a commitment to open the GIGA headquarters in Geneva, which should become a platform for organizing cooperation between public organizations and business structures.

Connection is an important, but not the only tool for the development of education. First of all, if a school is not connected to electricity, it will not have an access to the Internet. If students do not have the necessary devices and teachers do not have the necessary digitized educational materials, the Internet at school is useless.

### **Women in ICTs**

Many speakers at WTDC events noted the growing role of women in the definition and implementation of global policy in the field of infocommunication technologies. Their number is growing in national delegations and state structures.

The Network of Women (NoW) for ITU-D supported at the conference the participation and professional growth of women, and empowering women to take on more responsible roles as leaders of working groups and committees.

### **Universal connectivity and satellite technologies**

One of the active participants in the WTDC business program was the Global Satellite Operators Association (GSOA). As GSOA Secretary General noted, global problems require a global approach and the involvement of all players, that is why the regional community of satellite operators has become global<sup>2</sup>. Today, overcoming the digital divide is very slow, at such a pace the process can drag on for a hundred years, which is unacceptable. Satellite technology is one of those factors that can speed up the process. Therefore, GSOA is committed to increasing satellite access by 250% by 2030.

At WTDC, GSOA signed a preliminary agreement with the Rwandan Space Agency to support the deployment of satellite communications in rural areas.

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The World Telecommunication Development Conferences are held every four years to discuss the latest trends in ICT development and define priorities for the work of the relevant ITU departments for the next four years. The adoption of the Kigali Declaration at WTDC-22 was a milestone in the implementation of universal connectivity, as it sets priorities and reaffirms the overall political support for ITU's mission to bridge the digital divide.

For the first time, the WTDC outlined specific ways to achieve universal connectivity and close the digital divide. Particular emphasis has been placed on overcoming the effects of inequalities in connectivity — geographic, political, economic, gender, and age-related. WTDC roundtables made it possible to voice specific commitments of state institutions, public international organizations and businesses to connect all the unconnected. Importantly, those were not just commitments of financial, political, regulatory, and educational nature made by individual entities. And there is every reason to believe that the results of the WTDC, including the overall coordination, the focus on cooperation and sharing of experience, will be a new key factor on a planetary scale in achieving universal connectivity.

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<sup>2</sup> Initially, the association was called ESOA – EMEA Satellite Operators Association, and its activities were focused on Europe, the Middle East and Africa. However, in January 2022, the Association announced the expansion of the geography of its activities in order to bring together new members from among satellite operators from all regions of the world. Thus, ESOA has transformed from a regional organization to a global one. GSOA includes the following companies in addition to Intersputnik: Airbus Defence and Space, Amazon, Amos Spacecom, APT, Arabsat, Arianespace, Arsat, Astroscale, Avanti, Azercosmos, Echostar-Hughes, HellasSat, Hispasat, Inmarsat, Intelsat, Lockheed Martin, Mansat, Nigcomsat, Nilesat, Omnispace, OneWeb, Rascomstar, SES, SSI-Monacosat, ST Engineering iDirect, Star One, Telenor, Telesat, Telespazio, Thales Alenia Space, Thuraya, Turksat, Viasat, and Yahsat.