Strengthening UNGIS

1) Reframe UNGIS's *purpose* — from coordinator to systemic enabler

Traditional view: UNGIS = inter-agency coordination table.

Stronger view: UNGIS should function as a UN-system enabler that (a) operationalizes WSIS action lines into measurable SDG accelerators, (b) incubates regional digital public goods and policy toolkits, and (c) acts as a neutral convenor and rapid learning hub for crises (disinformation waves, national network shutdowns, humanitarian connectivity). This requires moving beyond periodic meetings to a small, continuous delivery capability.

Why that matters for the Global South: a delivery focus shifts resources into capacity building, public-goods development, and measurable development outcomes (not just policy papers).

2) Make UNGIS *architectural* — a network of hubs + a light central secretariat

Instead of a single monolithic Geneva secretariat, build a **federated UNGIS**:

- A small central secretariat (administrative anchor) and multiple regional UNGIS hubs hosted within existing regional UN or multilateral institutions in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and Arab States.
- Each hub runs regionally-prioritized programmes (data commons, national IGF support, DPI pilots) and reports into the central UNGIS for coherence.
  This decentralization increases local ownership, reduces North/West bias, and makes implementation responsive to regional constraints.

3) Radical inclusivity: legalize Global South majorities in key bodies

Design governance rules so that certain UNGIS bodies (e.g., the Programme Board, Regional Advisory Councils) have structural Global South majorities — for example, require that at least 60% of civil-society/academic seats and a majority of regional chairs come from Global South countries. Combine that with quotas for youth, women, and technical community representation.

4) New operational tools UNGIS can create

- **Regional Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) Incubator.** Seed interoperable identity, payments, and open-source connectivity tools for low-income countries — run as pilots in partnership with regional development banks.
- **Open Policy Lab:** an online sandbox where governments can test draft laws (privacy, data protection, intermediary liability) against model rules, empirical impact simulations, and comparative precedents.
- **Global South Capacity Credits:** a fund that buys participation slots, technical assistance, and travel for civil society/technical experts from low-income countries to join IGF, standard bodies, or UNGIS meetings.
- **Rapid Response Technical Roster:** deployable UN-system technical teams to assist states, CSOs, and operators during network crises (shutdowns, cyber incidents) with protocols that respect human rights and sovereignty.
- **WSIS→SDG Impact Dashboard:** a public, machine-readable dashboard that maps WSIS Action Lines to SDG indicators, showing country-level progress and gaps (drives funding and accountability).

Dr. Konstantinos Komaitis
konstantinos@komaitis.org

5) Funding model — blended, predictable, and South-focused

Relying solely on a single agency's core budget creates dependency. Instead:

- Create a small UNGIS Trust Fund with seed contributions from willing Member States, development banks, and philanthropic partners (with strong conflict-of-interest rules).
- Earmark a percentage of ITU/UN agency project budgets that align with WSIS-SDG results to co-fund UNGIS delivery projects in the Global South.

Secretariat question — stay at ITU or change?

Keep ITU as administrative host, but with *binding* safeguards (pragmatic choice)

Pros: ITU has technical legitimacy, historical role, and infrastructure; keeping ITU avoids disruption. It would be good to introduce *binding* governance safeguards to guard neutrality and inclusion:

- A formal Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between ITU and UNDESA/UN Secretariat that codifies roles, budget transparency, and rotational co-chairs.
- A co-secretariat model: ITU provides admin/meeting support; UNDESA/UNDP/UNESCO rotate responsibility for policy lead on specific WSIS action lines.
- Independent external audit of UNGIS finances and staffing every 2 years.
  (Use this path if member states prefer continuity.)

Mechanisms to keep the secretariat accountable & inclusive

1. **Charter & KPIs** — a short founding charter with explicit KPIs mapped to WSIS action lines and SDGs (e.g., connectivity targets for LDCs, numbers of national IGFs supported, number of policy lab pilots). Annual public reports vs KPIs.
2. **Rotating Co-chairs + Dual Reporting** — co-chairs: one from a technical agency (e.g., ITU) and one from a development agency (e.g., UNDESA/UNDP) rotating every 2 years; secretariat reports administratively to the host but programmatically to a UNGIS Steering Committee with Member State and Global South civil society representation.
3. **Regional Advisory Boards** — regionally anchored advisory boards (majority Global South) that review program priorities and approve regional hub workplans.
4. **Multi-stakeholder Accountability Forum** — an annual, publicly livestreamed "UNGIS Accountability Forum" where secretariat publishes outcomes, audits, beneficiary feedback, and donors/partners can question programs. Publish meeting minutes and budgets.
5. **Open Data & Procurement** — all UNGIS data, meetings, and procurement processes published openly. Require that major contracts over a threshold include at least one Global South supplier or subcontractor.
6. **Independent Evaluation & Citizens' Complaint Mechanism** — every three years an independent evaluation and a simple complaints channel enabling civil society or member states to trigger reviews if operational neutrality or inclusion is breached.

How to ensure tangible benefits for the Global South (practical programming focus)

Dr. Konstantinos Komaitis
konstantinos@komaitis.org

- **Fund participation**: create the Global South Capacity Credits to pay for travel, stipends, and technical support so actors from LDCs and LICs can participate meaningfully.
- **Localize solutions**: mandate that every UNGIS project produce a regional/local handover plan that transfers tools, code, and capacity to regional institutions or ministries.
- **Measure outcomes, not outputs**: instead of counting meetings, measure increases in national broadband access, adoption of open DPI components, number of national policies improved using the Open Policy Lab, or improved SDG indicator scores tied to ICTs.
- **Procure locally**: require that 30–40% of implementation budgets go to local firms, NGOs, or research institutions in beneficiary countries.

Concrete short roadmap (3 pragmatic steps to propose/advocate)

1. **Adopt an UNGIS Charter Addendum** at the next UNGIS/WSIS forum that (a) commits to a federated hub model, (b) establishes the Trust Fund, and (c) mandates the Global South majority in regional advisory boards. (Political ask: resolution or consensus text.)
2. **Pilot a Regional Hub + DPI Incubator**: launch one 12-month pilot in Africa (hosted in a regional UN office or African Union) to demonstrate DPI pilots, policy lab testing, and capacity credits. Use pilot outcomes to justify expansion.
3. **Negotiate a Co-Secretariat MoU**: if keeping ITU as host, push for a signed MoU (ITU + UNDESA/UNDP) that locks in dual reporting, budget transparency, rotating leads and independent audits.

Risks & mitigation

- **Risk:** Agency turf fights (ITU/UNESCO/UNDP vs ODET). **Mitigation**: bind arrangements in MoU, focus on time-limited pilots, and use trust fund incentives for cooperation.
- **Risk:** Fund capture by northern donors. **Mitigation**: governance rules for the Trust Fund requiring regional representation and anti-conflict clauses.
- **Risk:** Over-ambitious scope. **Mitigation**: start with tightly scoped pilots (DPI incubator, policy lab, capacity credits) and expand on evidence.

Roles for UNCTAD and OHCHR

The OHCHR has a unique role to play in the post-WSIS environment as it holds a distinct but complementary role in the post-WSIS environment as digital transformation increasingly shapes human rights protections. The OHCHR safeguards that digital policies, infrastructures, and technologies align with international human rights standards, protecting privacy, freedom of expression, and non-discrimination. It can help ensure that digital progress is rights-respecting, reinforcing a holistic approach to global digital governance.

Role of OHCHR (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights)

OHCHR ensures that digital transformation efforts and governance frameworks are firmly rooted in international human rights standards. Within a strengthened UNGIS, OHCHR would:

- **Provide human-rights-based guidance** across all UNGIS programmes to ensure alignment with international human rights law and rights-based digital governance principles.
- **Lead the development of human rights due diligence standards** for digital public infrastructure, AI systems, and data governance frameworks.

Dr. Konstantinos Komaitis
konstantinos@komaitis.org

- **Oversee rights-respecting protocols for the Rapid Response Technical Roster**, particularly during crises involving shutdowns, surveillance concerns, or restrictions on information flows.
- **Contribute to the Open Policy Lab** by offering structured human rights review mechanisms for draft legislation and regulatory proposals affecting privacy, freedom of expression, non-discrimination, and related fundamental rights.

Closing / elevator summary

A stronger UNGIS is not just a fancier meeting schedule — it's a small, accountable delivery engine that federates regional hubs, prioritizes Global South leadership, funds participation, and turns WSIS Action Lines into measurable SDG accelerators.

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konstantinos@komaitis.org