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Internet

WSIS Forum Participants Endeavor to Bridge Digital Divide

Participants at this year's World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Forum said that collaborative discussion, rather than concrete policy decisions, were the best part of this week's meeting in Geneva.

"To describe this event as a talkfest is probably right," Oleg Logvinov, chairman of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers' (IEEE) Internet Initiative told Bloomberg BNA. "I think that a forum like this is an important component to our evolution as an information society."

During this year's WSIS Forum nearly 2,000 participants from across the globe generally discussed ways to bridge the digital divide between those nations that have and those nations that lack comprehensive connectivity to the Internet. The event was not an official treaty-making negotiation and at its conclusion the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) released a new report on the WSIS stocktaking process, a summary of the meeting's high-level discussions and an outcome document that compiled the discussions of the past week.

The event comes less than six months after global Internet stakeholders agreed to recommit themselves to the WSIS action lines and separately the adoption of the United Nations 2030 sustainable development agenda. The next WSIS Forum will be held next year in Geneva from April 24 to May 5.

'Talkfest,' 'Mixing Bowl.' Participants described the forum as a unique opportunity to meet with Internet stakeholders from across the globe and discuss new ways to bring the benefits of 21st century connectivity to those who need it most.

"Our paths have crossed so many different kinds of organizations and individuals doing great work that if it wasn't for venues like this we probably never would have met up with them," said Karen McCabe, IEEE's senior director of technology policy and international affairs. "That's where the power of this kind of event comes in. It is a really good mixing bowl."

"We're humans—verbal communication is the most common way for us to exchange ideas," Logvinov said. "If we don't come together, if we don't exchange ideas—we don't move this forward—the things we discussed will never happen."

Action Lines, SDGs. Over the course of this week policymakers generally focused on finding linkages and areas for cross-pollination between the WSIS action lines and the 2030 sustainable development goals.

Two specific developments stood out during this week's discussion, said Tomasz Janowski, head of the United Nations University operating unit on policy-driven electronic governance.

Guinea Bissau deployed a new mobile payment services platform that helped commercial banks to offer loans, microsavings accounts and other financial products to the poor, he said. In addition, the Russian Federation's universal service program set an ambitious goal of connecting all small villages and settlements with populations of over 250 people with fiber optic networks in the next five years, he said.

2020 Goal Off Track? Doreen Bogdan-Martin, the ITU's chief of strategic planning, said more must be done to help connect the world's poorest nations to the Internet.

"We have a goal—the 2011 Istanbul plan of action—to get all least developed countries online by 2020," Bogdan-Martin said during a panel discussion. "Regrettably we will see that we are way off track."

The latest ITU measuring the information society report said 16 percent of those citizens residing in LDCs will be using the Internet by 2020, which is 4 percentage points below the target set in the ITU's Connect 2020 Agenda.

"In 2011, 5 percent of LDC people were online; last year it was 10 percent," Bogdan-Martin said. "The time for action is now. We need to get those 4 billion people online."

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