Outcomes Report Summary

Cross-Cutting Session on Digitalization "Digital Transformation for Sustainable Development Goals in the Wake of COVID-19"

15 March 2021, Virtual

The Cross-cutting Session 4.2 on Digitalization, co-led by ITU and UNECE, and supported by 16 UN agencies, was held on 15 March 2021 and provided key recommendations to accelerate cross-sectoral digital transformation as an immediate response to COVID-19. The role of ICTs and services, and the digital infrastructure that countries ride and scale on have become central to maintaining economic and societal activity, thus lessening the pandemic's impact. Increase multistakeholder, cross-sectoral and inter-agency coordination at national and regional level is key to capture the enabling potential of ICTs in achieving the SDGs.

Developing digital skills and building human capacities to empower citizens, strengthen employability, and create new job opportunities is essential to match the needs of the gigabit society. The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, especially amongst migrants, persons with disabilities, women and girls. To ensure universal digital inclusion, policies and programs need to foster the neutral acquisition of digital skills and accessibility to ICT sectors and digital services (such as gender-sensitive educational programs). It is also recommended to establish national strategies and coordination mechanisms for strengthening online safety for children and youth while fostering a multi-stakeholder approach. For this, broadband development is of primary importance. It is the backbone for global supply chain integration, the innovative use of critical health information, an opportunity for citizens to improve their options in the workforce, and the ability of young people to gain skillsets, amongst others. Access to the next generation of infrastructure (fixed, mobile, wireless, satellite) at an affordable price is a key prerequisite for advancing sustainable development.

Digital services are key drivers of economic growth, as well as structural and sectoral resilience. To foster digital agriculture innovation, it is of utmost importance to eliminate country-specific

bottlenecks. EU pre-accession countries should align national regulations with the CAP objectives. To close the rural digital divide and increase technology adoption rates, public and private investments must target both the supply and demand side. Showcasing evidence of the returns of technology investments, promoting public-private partnerships and adopting user-friendly software interfaces for farmers are effective mechanisms to tackle issues such as youth rural-urban migration, an ageing farming population and the low propensity to invest in digital agricultural solutions. Whether through legal, normative or political standards, integrated inter-sectoral frameworks are needed to stimulate the collection, sharing and interoperability of ICT-related data, thus capturing the full potential of ICTs for SDGs and fostering the creation of digital services. This has particular implications for national mobile health solutions, such as digital health identity, which strengthened national capacities in managing the COVID-19 outbreak. Adjustments of legal frameworks together with capacity development are needed to establish a Digital Common Information Platform for Multi-Hazard Early Warning Advisory System, enabling to process warnings in a harmonized manner by national authorities on weather, water and climate data. Said data requires review and adoption of new policy by Governments and States to ensure free open access and greatest societal benefit.

ICTs are a way to make value chains more transparent, traceable, and ultimately more inclusive, sustainable and resilient. Standards, as developed by international organizations through an inclusive multi-stakeholder approach, promote interoperable data exchange, thus increasing the speed of exchanges and reducing the costs of international transactions. This enhances the resilience of economies and make them less prone to inevitable external shocks like pandemics. Standards and digitalization also make international trade greener and safer. Based on harmonized standards and digitalization, governments are implementing electronic risk-based control systems to combat illegal trade in wildlife (in support of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, CITES), and electronic message exchanges, so that transboundary movements of waste and its disposal can be tracked and traced electronically (in support of the Basel Convention). Cross-border digital trade facilitation measures help minimize human contact, thus enhancing safety in the Wake of COVID-19. Fully harnessing the benefit of standardization and digitalization requires addressing several challenges, such as fostering the use of platforms as consensus builders to adopt new technologies for trade facilitation, while addressing competition-related challenges. It is also crucial to avoid the creation of country-specific, tech-related vulnerabilities as part of broader efforts to reduce the digital divide, that can appear due to gender discrimination, financial and technical gaps. An inclusive, multi-stakeholder approach is needed to find common ground in a mutually beneficial manner.

The UN Digital Transformation Group for Europe and Central Asia is a multiagency platform facilitating coordination of the efforts of the UN system in accelerating digitalization across the region to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals. It is co-lead by ITU and UNECE and is part of the United Nations Regional Collaborative Platform.