



UNGIS Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action

Accelerating the achievement of the SDGs
through better collaboration in the UN System



2020, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

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INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Group on the Information Society

In April 2006, the United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) was endorsed by the Chief Executives Board (CEB) of the United Nations (UN) as the new inter-agency mechanism to coordinate substantive and policy issues facing the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

UNGIS' main objective is to develop extensive collaboration and partnerships among the CEB members in order to contribute to the achievement of the WSIS objectives, to help to maintain ICT-related issues as well as science and technology at the top of the UN Agenda and finally to mainstream ICT for Development issues in the mandate of CEB members. To this end, UNGIS seeks to complement and add value to existing programmes and projects by facilitating synergies and joint efforts, so as to maximize coordinated action, coherence and effectiveness of the support to countries in their efforts towards achieving the WSIS goals agreed upon by the international community.

UNGIS is comprised of 31 member agencies.

The Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action

The rapid rise of digital technologies is transforming economic and social activities. Affecting all parts of our societies and economies, digitalization poses both opportunities and challenges for attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is thus of high relevance to the entire UN System. The present crisis related to the COVID-19 virus has made the link between digitalization and development abundantly clear, including by highlighting the significant divides that exist.

In this context, UNGIS has initiated the *Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action* to raise awareness of both the importance of digitalization in achieving the SDGs and of the unique opportunity that UNGIS presents for more effective collaboration in this area within the UN System and beyond.

For this Dialogue, all Heads of UNGIS member agencies were invited to contribute a brief think piece, focusing on the following questions:

- How is digitalization affecting efforts at achieving the SDGs that are the most relevant to your agency?
- How can more effective collaboration in the UN System support your agency in promoting inclusive development outcomes through digitalization?

All contributions to the Dialogue can also be found on the [UNGIS website](#).



MESSAGE FROM THE UNGIS CHAIR

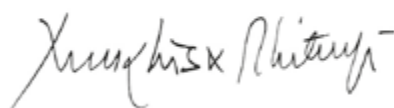
During this global pandemic, the value of digital solutions has become even more evident, as online conferences, remote work, e-commerce and telemedicine are being used to keep society going. At the same time, we are being reminded of the huge divides that exist across countries in terms of the readiness to participate in ever more digitalized economies and societies.

The contributions to the *UNGIS Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action* express a shared view that digital technologies have been critical during the COVID-19 crisis and are essential to speed-up progress in delivering the 2030 Agenda. They show how digitalization affects a myriad of global concerns, such as those related to poverty and hunger, the future of work, global health, gender equality, economic development, access to education and climate change, to name but a few. The think pieces also highlight the importance of international cooperation in harnessing the potential of digitalization in an inclusive, resilient and sustainable way. This calls for a strengthening of the role of UNGIS in supporting and coordinating digital cooperation within the UN System.

Over the course of the Dialogue, UNGIS received contributions from 22 Heads of agencies. Between June and October 2020, all contributions were published online and promoted on social media by UNGIS and its participating agencies. During this period, the Dialogue received over five thousand web visits and about two hundred thousand social media views. On behalf of the Vice-Chairs, I would like to express my gratitude to all the Heads of the participating agencies for their insightful contributions.

New technologies have often spurred social and economic disruption, yet the current wave of technological changes under the “digital revolution” is unprecedented in terms of speed, scope and scale. The urgency of responding to COVID-19 presents us with a unique opportunity to unite in speeding up the development of a global digital society.

I encourage you to read the short think pieces collected in this publication as they stress in more detail the importance of finding suitable policy responses, more international collaboration, more policy dialogue and smarter partnerships in order to leverage digital technologies for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.



Mukhisa Kituyi

Secretary-General

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

UNGIS Chair 2020-21

THE UNGIS DIALOGUE

UNGIS initiated the *Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action* to help ensure that the digital dimension is adequately reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to harness the UNGIS network for digital cooperation. The Dialogue was launched on 15 June 2020 by the UNGIS Chair and Secretary-General of UNCTAD, Mr. Mukhisa Kituyi. Over the course of the following five months, 21 more think pieces by UNGIS Heads of member agency were published online.

With only one decade remaining to meet the 2030 Agenda, the Dialogue shows a shared sense of urgency for the international community to step up its efforts. Especially now that the COVID-19 pandemic is generating an unprecedented crisis that threatens progress towards achieving the sustainable development goals.

The contributions point to the fact that digital transformations have affected all aspects of social and economic organization around the world and acknowledge that digitalization provides many opportunities to accelerate progress towards the SDGs, whether it is in the area of health, tourism, energy, agriculture, cyber security, smart cities or the future of work. In many respects, the COVID-19 pandemic has further stressed this link between digitalization and sustainable development.

At the same time, the contributors acknowledge that digitalization has disrupted economic sectors and public institutions and the continued presence of significant digital divides has exacerbated pre-existing socio-economic inequalities. Providing universal access to affordable and reliable broadband internet has become more urgent than ever before, as has the need for support to make full use of available digital tools and opportunities.

The Dialogue demonstrates that digital solutions are extremely relevant to all parts of the UN System to fulfill their mandates and many agencies have developed digital initiatives. For instance, UNICEF is reaching more children through their digital products, UN-Habitat has been coordinating GIS and data-science based urban and neighborhood profiling, WHO is launching a 'Digital Clearinghouse' to assess digital health solutions and the IAEA is using remote monitoring equipment to keep an eye on nuclear facilities.

All contributions stress the importance of international cooperation to achieve a shared digital future that connects UN agencies, governments, donors, NGOs, the private sector or individuals. The Dialogue highlights many examples, such as the *Connect 2030 Agenda*, the *Generation Equality Action Coalition*, the *United for Smart and Sustainable Cities* initiative or the *eTrade for all* initiative.

Still more can be done, especially in the promotion of inter-agency coordination and support within the UN System. This is why UNGIS has launched the digital transformation repository. This repository of projects by UNGIS members on digital transformation will be used as a reference guide for all UN Agencies on different initiatives showing the direct impact of the WSIS Action Lines on SDGs.

MAKING DIGITAL WORK FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW



By **Mukhisa Kituyi**

Secretary-General, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and UNGIS Chair 2020-21

15 June 2020

Today's rapid pace of digitalization is transforming our economies and societies, creating both opportunities and challenges, both hope and uncertainty. As during previous technological revolutions, it is upon governments, in collaboration with other stakeholders, to formulate and implement national and international policies that help to foster inclusive and sustainable development outcomes. In most developing countries, national efforts will need support from the international community.

Against this background, urgent attention needs to be given to bridging existing and emerging digital divides. If left unaddressed, the yawning gap between under-connected and hyper-digitalized countries will widen and exacerbate existing inequalities. The development challenges of digitalization require a coordinated multilateral response, which can also help countries build resilience and facilitate responses to other cross-cutting challenges, such as climate change and the current COVID-19 pandemic.

As the current Chair of UNGIS, I am pleased to launch this *UNGIS Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action*. It offers a timely opportunity for me and my peers in the United Nations System and beyond to reflect on how digitalization is affecting our efforts at accelerating the achievements of the SDGs and how we, by working better together, can enable more inclusive development outcomes.

As digital technologies are disrupting entire industries, affecting global trade, innovation and investment patterns, they play an important role in the efforts of my own organization, UNCTAD, in helping developing countries to deal with related opportunities and challenges. In this context, close collaboration with different UN agencies and other stakeholders, such as through the [eTrade for all initiative](#), has been essential in addressing existing knowledge gaps, promoting policy dialogue and expanding our technical assistance and capacity-building work related to e-commerce and the digital economy. However, more donor support is needed for us to cope with growing demand from developing countries.

This is a special year. It signifies 75 years since the founding of the United Nations, which was designed to end war and promote peace, justice and better living for all mankind. It is also 15 years since the conclusion of the [World Summit on the Information Society \(WSIS\)](#). This summit raised awareness of the benefits that information and communications technologies (ICTs) can bring to humanity and the manner in which they can transform people's lives.

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Urgent attention needs to be given to bridging existing and emerging digital divides.

The WSIS also led to establishment of the United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) as an inter-agency mechanism for advancing policy coherence and programme coordination within the United Nations on matters related to ICTs in support of internationally agreed development goals. It now comprises 30 international organizations.



With only one decade remaining for us to meet the SDGs, we can do more and better by working together.

With only one decade remaining for us to meet the SDGs, we can do more and better by working together. This includes making full use of existing mechanisms, such as UNGIS, to share good practices and avoiding duplication of efforts. Indeed, finding suitable policy responses requires more international collaboration, more policy dialogue and smarter partnership.

It is my hope that this online Dialogue will bring out good practices, generate new ideas and inspire the overall efforts of the United Nations to leverage digital cooperation in a manner that leaves no one behind.

HERE'S HOW WE ARE ACCELERATING DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL



By **Houlin Zhao**

Secretary-General, International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and UNGIS Vice-Chair

18 June 2020

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been instrumental to keeping economies and societies going during the COVID-19 crisis.

They are helping children continue to learn. They are helping adults continue to work. They are helping people to access critical medical and financial services. They are helping keep the food supply chain moving.

The key role of telecoms networks – and ITU

For 155 years, ITU has helped to steer the progress of ICTs.

Through wars, famines and global pandemics of years past, our members have continued to work together to advance technology to change and improve people's lives.

But never before have telecommunication networks been so vital to our health and safety, and to keep our economy and society working, as during the COVID-19 crisis we are living through today.

That's why ITU is rapidly responding to COVID-19, from our new [Global Network Resiliency \(REG4COVID\) Platform](#) to the [Broadband Commission Agenda for Action](#) to the [All Year, Always Online AI for Good Global Summit](#) to the, virtual [WSIS Forum 2020](#), [WSIS TalkX series](#), [WSIS Stocktaking Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Response ICT Case Repository](#) to the [Digital Financial Services Webinar Series](#) to our common projects with sister UN agencies, including our work with UNESCO on e-learning, with the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF on health messaging, and with the International Labor Organization (ILO) on digital skills for youth, starting with young people in Africa.

ICT industry players – including many of ITU's private-sector members – have highly appreciated the support of public authorities during this crisis, but they also count on their support and expect more favorable investment environments and more flexibility to use limited resources.

A unique opportunity to accelerate digital development

The urgency of responding to COVID-19 presents us with a unique opportunity to unite to speed up the development of digital society. Having a new strategy for ICT development at the national and global level has now become more necessary than ever.

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Never before have telecommunication networks been so vital to our health and safety, and to keep our economy and society working.

ITU's Connect 2030 Agenda is a roadmap for all our members and others to bridge this gap. It lays out a path to create better environments for investment in ICT infrastructure and facilitates the development of new technologies like 5G, and the recently deployed satellite constellations.



We must work together to turn today's digital revolution into a development revolution for all.

With 10 years left to achieve the SDGs, Connect 2030 serves as an accelerator for digital inclusion.

Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, cloud computing and 5G have the capacity to improve the lives of billions of people around the world. But none of this is possible without the necessary infrastructure, which ITU works with its members to provide.

A digital revolution – for all

Bound by the powerful belief that technology can be a source of good in this world, ITU members have stepped up and engaged in activities that have proven essential in saving lives and keeping the economy working.

ITU's membership is growing and becoming ever more diverse, with large and small companies active in different sectors of the economy that keep our organization on the cutting edge of innovation and help strengthen the public-private partnerships critical to delivering on the promise of the digital revolution.

UN Agencies have also been working together across the UN System to achieve maximum sustainable impact through the United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS).

We must seize this moment to accelerate the development of digital society and work together to turn today's digital revolution into a development revolution for all, thereby highlighting the strengthened linkages and alignment of the WSIS Action Lines with the SDGs.

COVID-19 HELPS US UNDERSTAND THE VALUE OF STAYING CONNECTED



By **Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana**

Executive Secretary, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) and UNGIS Vice-Chair

22 June 2020

As the “Decade of Action” for achieving the 17 SDGs began, it was clear that Asia and the Pacific would not be achieving any of the goals by 2030.¹

The largest regression in implementation progress has been in Goal 12: ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Four months later, as COVID-19 lockdowns turned our physical lives into a virtual reality almost overnight, digital connectivity has taken on a compelling new meaning in the region.

For one, in countries such as the Republic of Korea that have shown signs of better combating cluster outbreak, digital innovation has played a central role.

Digital platforms have also helped maintain livelihoods, enabling the effective virtual delivery of high value-added professional services, while e-commerce has boomed.

Moving forward in the “Decade of Action”, this digital reality is a once in a lifetime opportunity to rethink our material-intensive consumption and production patterns and help us transition to a more decarbonized and sustainable economic model.

However, this will be possible only with universal access to affordable and reliable broadband internet all the time. A worrying concern is that Asia and the Pacific remains the most digitally divided region in the world and the divide continues to widen.

More than half of the region’s 4.1 billion people still does not have access to the internet. Even for those that do have access, quality (speed and delays) and affordability often keep the internet out of reach.

A digital future driven by ICT

ESCAP through its Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS), has for a number of years advocated for accelerated investments in ICT infrastructure. Covid-19 and the pressures it has put on congested networks has fast forwarded this need.

¹ ESCAP (2019), SDG Progress Report 2019, available at: https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Executive_Summary_Asia-Pacific_SDG_Progress_Report2019.pdf



...this digital reality is a once in a lifetime opportunity to rethink our material-intensive consumption and production patterns...

The AP-IS initiative aims to increase the availability of broadband infrastructure connectivity by addressing broadband gaps between countries for accelerating implementation of SDGs.

Towards this end, ESCAP is supporting least connected member States in the Pacific and South East Asia respectively, to strengthen subregional internet traffic management for improved internet quality.



Asia and the Pacific remains the most digitally divided region in the world and the divide continues to widen.

In addition, ESCAP is supporting landlocked countries in North and Central Asia that lack direct access to submarine fiber optic cables with policy guidelines for cost-effective co-deployment of fibre optic cable along passive infrastructures such as highway, road, railway, power networks.

Around 80-90% of costs are related to digging/excavation work and obtaining rights of way, so co-deployment or “dig one, use many times” can cost-effectively bringing connectivity to the unconnected.

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is a key partner and the AP-IS initiative is recognized in the ITU’s Development Sector (ITU-D) four-year rolling plan 2020-2023 as a strategic regional cooperation initiative to support.²

ESCAP resolution 73/6 also recognized the call by the UN General Assembly on relevant organizations of the United Nations system to ensure that no one is left behind in its implementation of the World Summit on the Information Society processes.³

In conclusion, COVID-19 has helped us understand the value of staying connected for SDG achievement. Working as one UN family we have to set ambitious and measurable goals for ensuring meaningful universal connectivity as the Broadband Commission thoughtfully underlined in its 2019 report on the State of Broadband.

² https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/TIES_Protected/OP2020-2023.pdf

³ https://www.unescap.org/commission/73/document/E73_RES6E.pdf

DIGITALIZATION CAN HELP TO TACKLE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES



By **Olga Algayerova**

Executive Secretary, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)

25 June 2020

The world is facing significant challenges: climate change; continued threats to social cohesion; unrelenting environmental pressures... These have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exposed existing fragilities, forcing us to devise creative policy responses. This unexpected



Progress has been falling short of what is required, and some past achievements are under threat.

turmoil has opened our eyes to the urgency of anticipating and dealing effectively with risks. A strong preventative dimension goes through the 2030 Agenda, which provides a comprehensive blueprint to guide the necessary transformation. But progress has been falling short of what is required, and some past achievements are under threat.

Digitalization has already radically altered our economies and the way we live. It makes it possible to reduce environmental pressures while delivering efficiency gains and facilitating cross-border interaction. This is very relevant to UNECE's mandate to support economic development and integration in the region. In this regard, I would like to draw attention to three areas:

De-materialisation in border crossings procedures has been useful in the fight against COVID-19. The UN eTIR/eCMR systems allow to exchange electronic information without physical contact and facilitate the flow of goods across borders. Trade facilitation instruments, as those developed by UN/CEFACT, largely rely on the use of electronic tools based

on a common language. Digitalization can offer a way to offset the powerful fragmentation forces that are emerging and reap the benefits of international trade and mobility in support of the 2030 Agenda.

The disruption of supply chains brought by COVID-19 has increased the value of the *circular economy* as a way not only to reduce resource use but also to enhance resilience. Such an approach requires instruments that allow traceability, reduce waste and facilitate concerted action across the lifecycle of products. These instruments can be developed through digitalization and related technologies, thus enabling advances towards a circular economy. UNECE is promoting this promising approach across different sectors, including initiatives in the textile and food industries.



Digitalization has already radically altered our economies and the way we live.

Transforming our cities – fighting pollution, introducing new forms of mobility, lowering resource consumption, avoiding social exclusion... – is essential to deliver on the 2030 Agenda. ICTs can greatly improve the way in which cities are managed, increasing efficiency and facilitating new forms of public participation and services delivery. UNECE, ITU and partner organisations have been fostering sustainable smart cities, an area of activity that will contribute to the achievement of many sustainable development goals.

And this brings me to the final point I would like to make: the role of digital tools in allowing *new forms of collaboration and information sharing* among multiple actors. This has proved critical during the COVID-19 crisis but it will remain essential if we want to make rapid progress in delivering the 2030 Agenda. This spirit of collaboration, which informs the work of the UNGIS, also animates the reform of the UN Development System. The establishment of regional knowledge management hubs as a result of this reform will rely on the use of ICTs, thus facilitating and encouraging coordinated actions.

And, this is, ultimately what we need: actions that deliver transformative, effective change.

INNOVATION, TECHNOLOGY AND DATA BOOST OUR POWER TO HELP THE MOST VULNERABLE



By **David Beasley**

Executive Director, World Food Programme (WFP)

29 June 2020

Speed is the distance travelled per unit of time. For the World Food Programme (WFP), that's the distance we still need to cover to reach our goal of zero hunger and the time left to do it; just ten years and counting. That puts us in a race to save the lives of the most vulnerable people on this planet. We need to move faster. Much faster.

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This isn't about deploying chatbots, drones, biometrics or blockchain because the kit is cool.

shifted up a gear to adapt existing technologies, develop new ones and switch to smarter online working from wherever we are.

Not only could we quickly see the pandemic would double the number of people facing severe hunger this year, but we could also see new ways to deliver life-saving information and assistance, while minimizing the risk to our staff, beneficiaries and host countries.

This is possible also thanks to new breed of pioneering partnerships with leading tech companies that brings our goal a bit closer with each piece of expertise shared. This isn't about deploying chatbots, drones, biometrics or blockchain because the kit is cool.

It's about deploying, connecting and scaling up the practical

Innovation, technology and data boost our power to make that happen by understanding local problems and then scaling up solutions to deliver global progress.

It's an approach that can ramp up efficiency, expand our outreach and let us make better-informed decisions in real time.

And, critically, it can put more of those decisions into the hands of the governments and people most affected, allowing the humanitarian community to cooperate on tailored solutions before, during and long after disaster strikes.

That's why WFP started to embrace digital transformation several years ago and why we could seamlessly secure business continuity when COVID-19 hit. Instead of stopping us, we quickly

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Technology offers the turbo boost [...], but we will only reach our goal of zero hunger by leveraging partnerships to harness its full potential.

solutions with the biggest impact, from tracking the distribution of school meals and medical supplies to bringing local farmers into the supply chain, and providing beneficiaries with online shopping apps to encourage social distancing.

Same time, better roadmap

Everyone contributing to this dialogue is in this same race against time and, while we may have different priorities they are inextricably linked.

Yes, to reach all 17 goals in the next 10 years, each of us must play to our strengths. But we must also join forces with all our partners to accelerate progress towards a common, secure digital ecosystem that connects WFP, donors, governments, NGOs, UN agencies, the private sector and individuals.

The Secretary-General's recently launched *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation* reaffirms the need to urgently strengthen such cohesive collaboration; to connect our efforts through a portfolio of digital services and tools, which everyone can easily access to coordinate more holistic assistance.

Such an ecosystem not only lets us better know and serve the people who count on us, but also empowers them to address their own needs with greater dignity and choice.

So, technology offers the turbo boost we need to cover enough ground by 2030, but we will only reach our goal of zero hunger by leveraging partnerships to harness its full potential.

DIGITAL COOPERATION TO ACCELERATE THE DIGITIZATION TOWARDS THE SDGS



UNITED NATIONS

ECLAC

By **Alicia Bárcena**

Executive Secretary, United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC)

02 July 2020

With a decade left to fulfill the 2030 Agenda, harnessing the great potential of digital technologies is key to opening new pathways for development and to deliver digital solutions for more inclusive and sustainable societies.

The current global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the link between digitalization and development, with the existence of significant digital divides that exacerbate pre-existing socio-economic inequalities and conditioning the exercise of fundamental rights such as work and education.

The COVID-19 pandemic is generating an unprecedented crisis that threatens progress towards achieving the SDGs. The Latin American and Caribbean region will suffer the biggest contraction in economic activity in its history, up to 8% in 2020. Regional exports would fall around 15% this year.

All this would generate almost 12 million more unemployed, on a labor force with 53% informality. This will lead to an increase of 30 million people living in poverty in the already most unequal region in the world.

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We are in a different world, which requires a new development model and new solutions from digitization.

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In the LAC region, a large part of the population cannot take advantage of these solutions.

We are in a different world, which requires a new development model and new solutions from digitization. In the face of a health emergency, different applications aim at disseminating information and monitoring the spread of the virus in near real time. The most developed countries are making use of solutions that combine more sophisticated technologies such as 5G, data analytics, artificial intelligence, drones and robots. Faced with the need for social distancing, while maintaining a certain level of economic activity, remote working, distance education, telehealth and online services in a variety of areas, including carrying out procedures with the government, banking and e-commerce, have acquired a key role in our daily life.

However, in the LAC region, a large part of the population cannot take advantage of these solutions: less than 10% of the population has access to the Internet in rural areas of the least developed countries; 90% of the richest households have

connectivity vs. 10% of the poorest ones; less than 20% of the students belong to a household with an Internet connection in the countries with lower levels of connectivity, affecting to a greater extent the primary students of the poorest quintiles.

This can become a social mobility trap to the extent that the new normality is based on this type of solution, which is highly possible, given the difficulty of returning to classrooms with high density of students in the medium and short term. In addition, the opportunities for remote working are limited by the characteristics of the job they do and by connectivity. Only between 4% to 18% of the population could access this benefit.

UN-ECLAC supports the political dialogue process of the Regional Digital Agenda (eLAC) to address the emerging challenges of the digital revolution taking into considerations regional reality and needs and articulate them with international guidelines. Now is time to accelerate the digital transformation through a reinforced cooperation through existing mechanisms, such as UNGIS, that ensure that technological progress is even across all regions and leaves no one behind.

THE ROLE OF DIGITALIZATION IN THE DECADE OF ACTION



By **Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka**

Executive Director, UN Women

03 July 2020

With the rapid digitalization of work, school and social life, stimulated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of technology and innovation to achieving gender equality and inclusive development has never been clearer nor more urgent.

Apps and online helplines can be a life-saving line of defence for the millions of women vulnerable to a growing shadow pandemic of violence.

Mobile devices can help women suffering from the economic impacts of the pandemic access essential cash transfer programmes. And with sufficient access, online learning programmes can ensure that girls do not drop out of education but are better equipped for a highly digitized future.

Yet this is a major sticking point - around the world 3.6 billion people remain offline; with girls, women and marginalized groups least likely to have access to technology.

The global Internet user gap between women and men has been growing rather than narrowing, standing at 17 per cent globally and 43 per cent in the least developed countries. Women account for 56 per cent of those financially excluded from the digital economy.

Unless women play an equal role in designing and using digital technologies, progress on women's rights could be reversed. Lack of diversity will not only expand gender inequality. It will limit the innovation and scope of new technologies, making them less useful for everyone.

To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and emerge stronger from the current crisis, digital tools must be leveraged, especially for developing countries and underserved groups, so that recovery efforts simultaneously build an inclusive digital infrastructure that would accelerate progress for all.

This will take UN Agencies working together, while also bringing in networks of like-minded Member States, civil society groups and the private sector. UN Women is taking

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Lack of diversity will [...] limit the innovation and scope of new technologies, making them less useful for everyone.

part in four initiatives where we play a leading role in promoting collaboration on digital inclusion and digital equality.

We are a co-champion of the SG's Roadmap for [Digital Cooperation](#), helping to map and organize initiatives, mechanisms and programmes within and beyond the United Nations on digital inclusion. We are also helping to shape recommendations on how to leverage digital finance for gender equality and women's empowerment as part of the [SG's Task Force on Digital Financing of the SDGs](#).

We are the co-founders of [EQUALS](#), a Global Partnership for Gender Equality in the Digital Age. And UN Women's [Generation Equality Action Coalition](#) on technology and innovation is bringing the UN System together with young people, civil society, governments and the private sector to catalyse collective action that provides women and girls with equal access to digital technologies and opportunities to design and influence digital innovations.

More effective collaboration at the UN-level is key to making these initiatives a success and to ensuring that digitalization fully supports and strengthens gender equality and women's empowerment.

Together, we must use the COVID-19 crisis to accelerate change, expand horizons and get millions of girls, women and others who face discrimination online and onto an equal footing, so that everyone can benefit from the digital revolution.

DIGITIZATION: TOWARDS A SAFER, MORE CONNECTED WORLD FOR EVERY CHILD



By **Henrietta H. Fore**

Executive Director, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

08 July 2020

Digitalization holds much promise to realize our shared vision of a better, more sustainable future for all. This includes ensuring that every child has every opportunity to develop, grow, and reach their full potential.

But success is not automatic. Unlocking the full benefits of digitalization requires dramatically expanding the reach of digital technology to children everywhere. It also requires protecting children — and their personal information — every step of the way.

Much of UNICEF's programming is already using the power of digitalization to reach more children with the support they need. Last year alone, we reached more than 50 million children and their families through ICT-supported initiatives in health, education, social protection, and water and sanitation services.

We also research how children use technology, support governments as they develop digital policies to protect and empower children, and invest in digital startups that can improve children's lives.

We generate and analyze data on the impact and potential of digital technology on migration patterns, national disasters and epidemics. This data not only helps us act quickly and effectively to support children — it also provides an opportunity for citizens and frontline workers to report on the quality of services we provide.

Most recently, digitalization has helped us respond to the COVID-19 pandemic — including by spreading messages about how to stay healthy during lockdown and avoid infection.

We are also using digital technology to provide online distance learning to some of the over one billion children whose schools have been closed by the pandemic.

But this work has also revealed how much further we have to go to ensure that every child can benefit from digitization.

Tens of millions of children live in areas without meaningful digital access. Under the pandemic, their education has ground to a halt. If they are connected at all, they are not connected at a fast speed, at an affordable rate, or with useful content provided in their local language. They also lack the opportunity to learn the skills they need to be safe, critical and empowered online.

In short — without access, digital technology is a great divider, not an equalizer.

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Unlocking the full benefits of digitalization requires dramatically expanding the reach of digital technology to children everywhere.

At the same time, digital networks and social platforms can disseminate incorrect or harmful information. They can also put children’s identities at risk, through the digital “footprints” that children leave when using technology.

These challenges demand a co-ordinated, global response. Protecting children in a digital environment, while also helping them benefit from it, requires collaboration — not only within the UN system, but with governments, technology companies, and children and young people themselves. It requires all of us working together.



Together, we can realize their rights and our shared vision of a better, safer and more connected world.

UNICEF has taken this partnership imperative to heart.

With the ITU, we are working to connect every school in the world to the internet by brokering investments with the private sector and governments.

We are working with the public and private sectors to develop guidance and regulations that are child-centered, not child-blind — that open new opportunities for children to benefit from digital technology, while also protecting them and their personal information.

We are working within global alliances — composed of a cross-section of governments, businesses and civil society groups — to protect children from online exploitation and abuse, and end the spread of sexual abuse material.

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals depends on this joint work. As the report of the High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation reminds us: “the rights of children need especially acute attention in the digital age.”

UNICEF is honoured to have been asked by the Secretary-General to co-champion the implementation of the Panel’s recommendations. We look forward to working with our global partners to help every child benefit from the opportunities that digitalization presents.

Together, we can realize their rights *and* our shared vision of a better, safer and more connected world.

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT FOR RECOVERY AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE ARAB REGION



By **Rola Dashti**

Executive Secretary, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA)

10 July 2020

It is now common knowledge that embracing digital development will strengthen the capacity of societies to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to augment its impact on all in an inclusive and equitable manner.

It is also widely recognized that digital development, which aligns the notions of information society and digital economy with those of digital transformation and Internet governance is central to all future inclusive development processes.

Early adoption of digital development and solutions will expedite reaching the outcomes expected of the Decade of Action. The COVID-19 pandemic drove the point home of the centrality of digital technologies in addressing most development challenges.

With only 10 years left until 2030, some countries in the Arab region have made significant strides in adapting digital policies and solutions to their development challenges.

Most, however, still face several hurdles in their efforts to optimally use digital solutions and adapting these to local conditions to meet the commitments to the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. In all countries, adoption and adaptation of digital solutions will be optimal when undertaken as part of overall national development plans.

As a prelude to integrating digital development in national plans, [UN-ESCWA](#) has been supporting Arab countries to conduct national digital development reviews to gauge for progress in building their own information societies and in linking them to the 2030 Agenda (similar to voluntary national reviews) and to formulate their national digital agendas, linking their ICT sector strategies with national development plans.

These national development reviews have been consolidated into a regional Arab digital development report highlighting efforts with regards to digital connectivity, cyberlaws, e-employment and job creation, as well as e-government, within the lens of ensuring inclusivity and citizen empowerment in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

At the regional level, ESCWA is partnering with the League of Arab States, to develop an Arab ICT strategy that is geared towards sustainable development, as part of a proposed wider Arab Digital Agenda recently developed by ESCWA.

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Embracing digital development will strengthen the capacity of societies to realize the 2030 Agenda.

In response to the global quest of the world's aspirations to produce a Global Commitment on Digital Cooperation during the 75th anniversary of the UN, and combining the notion of digital cooperation and global governance with the above notion of digital development, ESCWA has already triggered work to support "Advancing Digital Cooperation and Development - Arab States Action Program (ADCD-ASAP)" at the regional level, timely coinciding with the UN Secretary-General's launch of his Roadmap on Digital Cooperation.

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ESCWA endeavors to accelerate actions of digital development.

Within this project, ESCWA endeavors to accelerate actions of digital development and to bring the region into synchrony with the envisaged Global Commitment for Digital Cooperation. We are committed to do so in coordination with Resident Coordinators, UN Country Teams and UN agencies including ITU, UNESCO and UNCTAD.

As a member of the Chief Executive Board and its United Nations Group on Information Society (UNGIS), I am committed to ensuring that information and communications technologies for development (ICT4D) are promoted as central to transformative pathways in all sectors, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era. I am equally committed to ensuring that all ESCWA support to member states is part of an integrated and well-coordinated UNDS One UN approach.

As the head of a regional commission, I am convinced that action at the national level will be strengthened by regional endeavors that include convening member states around critical digital development issues, regional cooperation and sharing knowledge, good practices and learning tools through several technology-based platforms that have been adopted to better service ESCWA member states.

DIGITALIZATION AND DECENT WORK FOR ALL



International
Labour
Organization

By **Guy Ryder**

Director General, International Labour Organization (ILO)

14 July 2020

New technology has always been a defining feature of the world of work. Many historic moments of innovation and disruptions to the workplace had much to do with ground-breaking technologies.

Yet the current wave of technological changes under the “digital revolution” is unprecedented in terms of speed, scope and scale. It is diffusing much faster than before, affecting all dimensions of the labour market.

Managing this process for everyone’s benefit is crucial in achieving the SDGs, especially SDG 8 to “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”.

While digitalization offers rich opportunities for economic transition and industrial upgrading, the impacts of digitalization on workers and firms can be both positive and negative. Positive effects may include productivity growth, new market opportunities, new jobs, greater work-life balance, and higher pay.

However, these positive effects are often not broadly shared among firms and workers, which can contribute to widening inequality. Some firms are left behind, as are some workers. Our analyses show that women are often more negatively affected as new technology can crowd women out of jobs as productivity and incomes in these jobs rise.

Negative effects of digitalization are associated with income and job insecurity, work intensification, and deterioration of mental well-being. For instance, digital labour platforms provide new sources of jobs and income, but raise serious challenges for workers’ protection, representation and fair treatment. In addition, digitalization generates large amounts of data on workers that can pose risks for workers’ privacy.

This is why the [ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work](#), which was adopted in 2019 after years of analysis and deliberation, proposed a human-centred approach to new technology in the world of work.

While it stressed the critical importance of “harnessing the fullest potential of technological progress and productivity growth, including through social dialogue, to achieve decent work and sustainable development, which ensure dignity, self-fulfilment and a just sharing of the benefits for all”, it specifically

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Positive effects are often not broadly shared among firms and workers, which can contribute to widening inequality.

called for “policies and measures that ensure appropriate privacy and personal data protection, and respond to challenges and opportunities in the world of work relating to the digital transformation of work, including platform work.”



*Coordinated actions
can help both
workers and firms to
benefit fully from the
digital revolution.*

The roles of such policies are even more important in tackling social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Working from home, supported by advanced digital technology, has shown its potential but any positive potential can only be fully realised when supported by effective policies and regulation for worker protection and representation as well as for expanding digital access to all.

The ILO Centenary Declaration also called for all relevant stakeholders to ensure policy coherence in the multilateral system. This means examining and considering all international economic and financial policies and measures in light of the fundamental objective of achieving social justice.

Such coordinated actions within the system will contribute to help both workers and firms to benefit fully from the digital revolution and thus achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES WILL AFFECT THE ENTIRE GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEM – WHAT FAO IS DOING ABOUT IT



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

By **QU Dongyu**

Director-General, Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)

20 July 2020

The United Nations Group on Information Society (UNGIS) dialogue takes place at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is pushing an additional 70-100 million people into extreme poverty according to the World Bank. To date, almost 690 million people are suffering from hunger.

The pandemic has placed a strain on the world's food systems with a greater impact on developing countries. Meanwhile, the year 2020, has been recognized by the UN Secretary-General, as the beginning of the 'Decade of Action' towards expediting the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to affect the achievement of the outputs set for the "Decade of Action", subsequently impacting the attainment of the SDGs by 2030. FAO is working with its Members, UN agencies and other partners to mitigate the effect of COVID-19 on food and agriculture, value chains, food prices and food security across the globe.

The immediate impact of COVID-19 has been on food supply chains, labour shortages, increased challenges for farmers to access local markets and information, logistics challenges and decreasing food imports for import dependent countries. However, as we enter into a new decade, it is abundantly clear that we need to redouble our efforts.

FAO is part of the UNGIS and has been the custodian of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Action Line on E-Agriculture with the support of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Since then, FAO has integrated innovation and digitalization in its approaches in ending hunger and malnutrition.

FAO recognizes that digital technologies are poised to affect the entire global food system and every actor in that system. Digital technologies are also set to bring many opportunities amidst the challenges of poverty and hunger, gender inequality and climate change.

In the Decade of Action, FAO's goal is to drive sustainable digital solutions and innovation, while making space in the agriculture and food sector for rural communities and empowering the youth.

FAO also wants to ensure that no one is left behind in the digital age. For example, during the current COVID-19 pandemic, FAO has been offering policy support, digital solutions such as big data and crop calendars for its Members to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on food systems.

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Digital technologies are poised to affect the entire global food system and every actor in that system.

FAO is also providing a range of tools and knowledge, which governments are using to fight the desert locust outbreak. These tools range from data collection that monitor the presence of locusts to geospatial systems that help predict where the crop-hungry pests will travel to next.



FAO also wants to ensure that no one is left behind in the digital age.

Therefore, in this UNGIS dialogue, FAO will report on some activities and on a number of digital agriculture solutions developed to support Members in different aspects of value chains; brief on policy support regarding the implementation of digital agriculture strategies; highlight some digital solutions developed; and report on the digital capacity development of stakeholders in Member countries. The presentation will highlight the recent organization changes that are likely to promote digitalization in the agriculture and food sectors in the future.

MAKING THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION WORK FOR ALL



UNITED NATIONS
INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION

By **LI Yong**

Director General, United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)

23 July 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the most disruptive in a century, putting an immense strain on societies and economies around the globe, and thereby jeopardizing the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The global drop in consumer demand on the one hand, and decreased outputs and value chain disruptions on the other, have harmed trade, manufacturing and slowed down economic growth. The crisis affects the progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, including the achievement of Goal 9 (“build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation”).

The pandemic and related containment measures have given a strong push for innovation and digital transformation, leading many to consider a structural shift towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). The effects of the experience with the COVID-19 crisis will be long lasting, and the post-pandemic world will increasingly be driven by 4IR technologies and their applications for inclusive and sustainable industrial development.

Unfortunately, the crisis has also shown that not everyone is ready to embrace a more digitized existence. It highlighted inequalities in digital readiness, hampering the ability of many to take advantage of advanced digital production technologies.

The digital divide is still highly visible, and the socioeconomic consequences of the current crisis may have further depressed the capacity to innovate in developing countries, widening the existing gap with high-income countries. Many countries are thus currently assessing how they can access the potential of 4IR given their constraints.

The lack of access to innovation and advanced technologies has implications for advancing digital transformation of industry. In particular, small and medium enterprises are still encountering obstacles in deploying digital solutions due to the lack of resources, skills and interoperability issues. Moreover, women and girls are disproportionately affected by the limited access to digitalization, which suggests a strong need to improve gender equality and inclusive digital skills and investment.

The 4IR offers scope for digital transformation and innovative solutions for maintaining essential services and supply chains, future-proofing industry, enhancing business and societal resilience against unforeseen shocks and building a better future. UNIDO helps Member States address opportunities, challenges and risks stemming from the 4IR.

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The post-pandemic world will increasingly be driven by 4IR technologies and their applications.

The Organization's strategy in this regard rests on two mutually-inclusive pillars: partnerships to accelerate the global response and tailored packages to address country-level issues. UNIDO collaborates closely with its partners in the United Nations system, to maximize synergies for developmental impact worldwide, and to disseminate relevant expertise and lessons learned.

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In particular, small and medium-sized enterprises are still encountering obstacles in deploying digital solutions.

By establishing strategic partnerships with a variety of development stakeholders, UNIDO supports consensus-building, standard-setting and the establishment of open innovation ecosystems that enable innovative solutions and deep technological modernization. Through this cooperation, UNIDO supports countries at different levels of economic development to leverage the necessary investment and to build the required capacities for a smooth transformation towards the 4IR, making digitalization a true enabler of prosperity and ensuring that no one is left behind.

It is only through the creation of these robust partnerships and accounting for varying national industrial development contexts that we can harness the potential of digitalization and the 4IR for sustainable development worldwide.

HOW THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION CAN BUILD A MORE INCLUSIVE POST-COVID WORLD



By **Angel Gurría**

Secretary-General, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

27 July 2020

It is increasingly clear that the systemic shock caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has accelerated the already rapid pace of digital transformation.

Digital technologies have allowed many of our economies to avoid a complete standstill in recent months, as billions of people have been asked to work or study from home. Not surprisingly, some countries have seen up to a 60% increase in Internet traffic since the start of the crisis.

Many governments have turned to digital tools to help fight COVID-19. While apps and biometrics are important to help track and trace the spread of the virus, they also raise new questions around data protection and privacy.

Governments must take steps to ensure that privacy protections are designed in these systems by default, and that personal data is only retained for as long as necessary to fulfil the purpose for which they are collected.

At the same time, malicious actors have been taking advantage of the epidemic. Coronavirus-related scams and phishing campaigns have targeted individuals, businesses and even hospitals.

Deliberate false and misleading information has quickly and widely spread over the Internet and led to what is being called an “infodemic”. The harmful effects of disinformation and misinformation about COVID-19 cannot be overstated and go well beyond health concerns.

Perhaps even more profoundly, the crisis runs the risk of exacerbating the vulnerabilities and inequalities already persistent in our societies – the very inequities that the SDGs are seeking to redress.

In the same way that not every job can be performed remotely, not every individual or business is equipped with the means or the skills to use digital tools. Digital divides persist because of geographical differences, gender, incomes and skills. In many parts of the world, access to electricity remains the first stumbling block.

To tackle these challenges, governments have a unique opportunity to work together with civil society, business, trade unions, the technical community, and other relevant stakeholders towards a digitally-enabled recovery that strengthens the inclusiveness and resilience of our economies, and that puts people’s well-being at the core.

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There has never been a better moment to close the digital divide.

There has never been a better moment to close the digital divide, to invest in infrastructure and skills, and to connect all of humanity so that everyone, regardless of gender, age or race, can benefit from the opportunities enabled by digital technologies.

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*Together we can
help countries
build a better world
enabled by digital
transformation.*

We must also improve data access and sharing, both within and across borders, by addressing the profound issues of digital security, data protection and privacy, and ensure that artificial intelligence systems are designed in a way that respects the rule of law, human rights, democratic values and diversity, and includes appropriate safeguards to ensure a fair and just society as enshrined in the [OECD Principles on AI](#).

We should also build on behavioural changes resulting from the crisis, such as increased teleworking, to harness the digital transformation as a driver of greater environmental sustainability.

Together we can help countries build a better world enabled by digital transformation, with greater inclusiveness, sustainability and the resilience that will be needed to weather future systemic shocks.

DIGITALIZATION FOR INCLUSIVE, SAFE, RESILIENT AND SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND HUMAN SETTLEMENTS



By **Maimunah Mohd Sharif**

Executive Director, United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

30 July 2020

Digitalization, big data, connectivity and Artificial Intelligence are shaping today's cities around the globe. The increasing use of digital technologies in human settlements and cities offers immense opportunities if well governed.

Smart technology can contribute towards sustainable development, by reducing carbon emissions and facilitating the ecological transition, increasing access to affordable housing, enhancing participation in policy making for citizens, and ensuring access to inclusive services for communities.

Our digital future can help to bridge social divides and improve the living conditions for all. The importance of digitalization in managing sustainable urbanisation has been captured in several key guiding documents such as the [2030 Sustainable Development Agenda](#) as well as the [New Urban Agenda](#).

The UN Development System has anchored digitalization and technologies as frontier issues in its [UN System-wide Strategy on Sustainable Urban Development](#), with UN-Habitat taking a coordinating and technical advisory role.

In this regard, UN-Habitat expanded deployment of frontier technologies and innovation as a key outcome area in its Strategic Plan 2020–2023. All documents underline that the benefits of digitalization need to be channelled towards accelerating efforts to reach the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Concrete examples of UN-Habitat's engagement with partners have been in the field of transport planning, service delivery and urban safety monitoring. Moreover, in humanitarian contexts UN-Habitat has been coordinating GIS and data-science based urban and neighbourhood profiling to prioritize short-term humanitarian interventions and longer-term urban recovery efforts.

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates that digitalization has the potential to strengthen cities' resilience in times of crisis. Due to the imposed lockdowns, local governments are providing a series of services online, they are creating digital platforms for neighbourhood assistance and contact tracing apps are being introduced to limit the spread of the pandemic.

UN-Habitat promotes technologies which are used in an inclusive, resilient and sustainable way while mitigating the related risks such as unreasonable surveillance or the invasion of privacy.

The "One-UN" approach and extensive partnerships are vital in order to harness the potential of digitalization in an inclusive, resilient and sustainable way.

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Our digital future can help to bridge social divides and improve the living conditions for all.

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The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates that digitalization has the potential to strengthen cities' resilience in times of crisis.

UN-Habitat ensures a close collaboration with other agencies in accordance with the UN System-Wide Strategic Document (SWSD) to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Partner agencies in the field of digitalization include, among others, ITU and UNECE in the United for Smart and Sustainable Cities (U4SSC) initiative as well as UNDP. These cooperation efforts prevent overlapping and fill capacity as well as knowledge gaps from individual agencies.

Moreover, UN-Habitat partners with external stakeholders such as cities platforms, local and national governments, academia, private sector and civil society entities (such as the Cities for Digital Rights Coalition).

There is an opportunity for UN-Habitat to take a technical advisory and convening role and bring many of these actors together in a coordinated way to ensure a coherent and inclusive approach to tackle the challenges of an increasingly digitalised world while placing people at the centre of smart city approaches.

PROTECTING PEOPLE, SECURING THE BENEFITS OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES FOR THOSE WHO NEED THEM MOST



By **Ghada Waly**

Executive Director, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

03 August 2020

Digital technologies hold the potential to empower people and unleash innovation for inclusive development.

However, without concerted action, new tech may entrench existing inequalities, while leaving the vulnerable exposed to threats of cybercrime and online exploitation.

It is too easily forgotten in our highly connected world that many remain left out of the online conversation.

In the least developed countries only 19 per cent were online last year, according to the Report of the Secretary-General on implementation of the recommendations of the High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation. The Internet user gender gap is growing, standing at 17 per cent globally and 43 per cent in the least developed countries.

As we have seen during the COVID-19 crisis, the digital divide harms the “unconnected” by depriving them of access to information, education and other vital services. It is a bitter irony that the same people stranded on the wrong side of the divide are preyed upon by cybercriminals when they get online.

There are increasing reports of women and children being groomed and exploited via the internet, amid the COVID-19 shutdowns, job cuts and school closures. In a June 2020 study, Europol reported strong indications of an increase in the number of child sexual abuse cases, with referrals from industry and third-party countries reaching record highs in recent months.

A new UNODC [research brief](#) found that the global disruption caused by virus has been quickly exploited by organized criminal groups engaging in phishing and credit card fraud, as well as using pirated websites for fake donations and other online scams.

SDG 16 on justice calls on countries to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children, and to combat all forms of organized crime. In order to protect people and fulfil the promise of digital technology to drive positive change, governments need to do more to achieve these targets, including by preventing and countering cybercrime.

With this objective in mind, UNODC’s work focuses on strengthening international cooperation and building the capacity of police, prosecutors and judges to fight cybercrime and online child sexual abuse. Drawing on our Office’s expertise in countering all forms of organized crime, money laundering

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It is a bitter irony that the same people stranded on the wrong side of the divide are preyed upon by cybercriminals when they get online.

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In order to protect people and fulfil the promise of digital technology [...] governments need to do more.

and corruption, we have helped create cybercrime investigative units to bring offenders to justice and support victims.

UNODC has worked with hundreds of thousands of children, parents and teachers so they understand online threats, stay out of harm's way and reach out for help if they need it. As we have seen so clearly in the COVID crisis, the right information at the right time can save lives.

Looking ahead, we are scaling up partnerships across the UN system as well as with the private sector and civil society to innovate responses in the fight against cybercrime. Together, we can secure the benefits of digital technologies for those who need them most and contribute to achieving the SDGs in the Decade of Action.

COVID-19 AND THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES FOR ACHIEVING THE SDGS



By **Liu Zhenmin**

Under-Secretary-General, United Nations Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)

10 August 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a multi-faceted global crisis with significant loss of life and social and economic impacts.

As the pandemic fuels lockdowns, most countries and municipalities are pursuing digital government strategies, many with innovative initiatives, according to the recently launched [United Nations E-Government Survey 2020](#).

Research by the [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs](#) (UN DESA) demonstrates that digital solutions have played a critical role, not only in scientific research and understanding of the virus itself, but also in enabling continuing economic activities and delivery of essential social services, including education and healthcare.

In responding to the pandemic, governments around the world have been exploring new ways to engage and to provide clear, up-to-date information to the public and to healthcare workers, while working alongside and with stakeholders to reduce the spike in misinformation and disinformation.

They have put in place new tools, such as dedicated COVID-19 information portals, hackathons, e-services for supply of medical goods, virtual medical consultations, and self-diagnosis apps, among others. Many countries were quick to deploy tracking and tracing apps, and apps for working and learning from home.

In more than one way, the COVID-19 pandemic is a multiple stress test of crisis preparedness and resilience of our societies; there are many lessons to be learned from this cascading series of crisis.

Recent experience at country and municipal levels tells us that we need to strengthen national capacities for science-based decision-making in order to enhance public trust in science, share knowledge for more collaborative research, ensure universal access to digital solutions, and act with greater urgency on global scientific cooperation, including on the vaccines.

In this context, governments should build on the momentum of the decade of action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by focusing their post-crisis digital government strategies on improving data protection and digital inclusion policies, as well as on strengthening the policy and technical capabilities of public institutions.

Among such steps are renewed efforts to use digital platforms for accurate and timely information-

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Ultimately, digital technologies and solutions are an implementation tool for the SDGs.

sharing; encourage two-way communication with people for fostering e-participation initiatives; invest in innovative technologies to increase resilience of healthcare economy; and enhance public service delivery.



Not all countries are in a position to leverage digital technologies. Many more are not technologically empowered to identify and address its risks.

However, not all countries are in a position to leverage digital technologies to provide accessible, reliable, and inclusive services for all, especially vulnerable communities, and empower people through open and participatory mechanisms. Many more are not technologically empowered to identify and address the risks associated with digital technologies.

This is where member entities of UNGIS can play a role, by partnering with countries to enhance their capacity building, including through public-private partnerships.

Ultimately, digital technologies and solutions are an implementation tool for the SDGs and a means to improving public service delivery, increasing people's engagement, enhancing transparency, accountability, and inclusion, and making life better for all.

It will be important that Governments in turn, engage with stakeholders, including technology leaders and small and medium-sized enterprises, through effective partnerships. We can accelerate progress, reduce inequalities, and come out of this pandemic stronger only through multi-stakeholder and multilateral cooperation.

UN DESA remains fully committed to raise awareness of both the importance of digitalization in achieving the SDGs, and of the unique opportunity that UNGIS presents for more effective collaboration in this area within the UN System.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY FOR A HEALTHIER WORLD



By **Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus**

Director-General, World Health Organization (WHO)

3 September 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a major challenge to health systems, populations, and economies - stretching some beyond their capacities and elevating the risks faced by already vulnerable populations.

With this global disruption comes an immense opportunity to reimagine the world as it could be; to build a healthier, safer, fairer, greener and more inclusive world; and to reinvigorate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

The pandemic has illustrated that health is not a luxury item; it's the cornerstone of social and economic development, and of global health security. Building strong, resilient health systems is therefore not only an investment in healthier populations, it's also an investment in safer, more stable and more prosperous societies.

Intrinsic to building those strong, resilient health systems is harnessing the power of digital technologies to support a model that puts people and their needs first.

Digital technologies are already transforming health care, from the use of drones to deliver blood products and other medical supplies, to the use of artificial intelligence to give paraplegic patients improved mobility and develop new medicines.

A dizzying array of new health technologies are being developed all the time. One of the challenges countries face – especially low- and middle-income countries – is deciding which ones will deliver the biggest improvements in health for the investment. Other challenges include ethics, cyber security, and data protection.

Governments should prioritise the development, evaluation, implementation, and scale-up of digital technologies that hold proven maturity, like telemedicine.

Digital technologies will play an increasingly important role in health in the years to come, which is why as part of our organization-wide transformation, WHO has created a new Department of Digital Health, and formed a [technical advisory group](#) of more than 20 leading experts to inform and guide the advice we give countries.

Additionally, WHO is developing a [Global Digital Health Strategy](#), which proposes a framework for regulating, benchmarking, and certifying digital health services and devices for countries. It also

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A dizzying array of new health technologies are being developed all the time.

proposes the creation of international health data regulations to protect the safety and privacy of individual health data.

The strategy calls on all digital health stakeholders to align with principles that govern the use of health data, safeguard the anonymity of data providers, mitigate the challenges of interoperability, and ensure universal access for global good.



Not all countries are in a position to leverage digital technologies. Many more are not technologically empowered to identify and address its risks.

To support countries to adopt evidence-based solutions, WHO will also launch a '[Digital Clearinghouse](#)', a web platform to assess digital health solutions and highlight those that are effective, scalable, and can integrate with existing systems.

As countries implement new digital strategies and technologies, it's vital that they monitor their performance through standard, agreed-upon metrics.

But it's clear that WHO cannot achieve this important mission alone. We need individuals, communities, private sector companies, academia, and governments to play their part.

We need an extended and united network that will ensure effective global coordination, create solidarity, and accelerate progress towards the health-related SDGs.

THE ROLE OF DIGITALIZATION IN THE DECADE OF ACTION FOR AFRICA



By **Dr. Vera Songwe**

Executive Secretary, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)

7 September 2020

It is widely recognized that digitalization is one of the most powerful tools for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Africa's Agenda 2063.

Digital applications are already driving socio-economic transformation, increasing efficient production and distribution of goods and services, opening-up new opportunities for income generation for millions of poor people, enhancing connectivity between people, societies, government, and organizations.

In the last fifteen years, the growth of digital technology, mainly driven by the mobile revolution and associated innovations has been one of the bright spots for Africa's development. This progress has also raised hope that we can truly accelerate the implementation of the SDGs.

Today, more than 80 per cent of Africa's population has a mobile phone subscription. In several African countries, the digital economy is becoming one of the main drivers of growth, accounting for more than 5 per cent of GDP.

New and emerging mobile-enabled platforms across the region partly stimulated by the exponential growth of mobile telephony have disrupted traditional value chains in different sectors of the economy across the region.

Similarly, digital trade is rapidly growing, and Fintech services have become a powerful lever for growth and financial inclusion by providing large numbers of services to people excluded from basic financial services. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technology has become an important tool more than at any other time before to facilitate and enable work, business and life across the continent.

However, Africa is still the least connected region compared to other regions of the world with about 28,2 per cent internet coverage and 34 per cent to mobile broadband. Few citizens have digital IDs, businesses adopting digital technologies remain the exception rather than the norm, and few governments are investing strategically in developing digital infrastructure, services, skills, and entrepreneurship.

There is also a need to adapt and harmonize legislations on technology, including intellectual property and data privacy, to truly unleash Africa's digital potential.

To tackle these challenges, ECA, through its Centre of Excellence for Digital Identity, Trade and

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The growth of digital technology, [...] has been one of the bright spots for Africa's development.

Economy, established in 2018, is providing the necessary support to Member States to use digitalization, as catalyst for inclusive and sustainable growth in Africa, contributing significantly to the attainment of the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Together with the African Union Commission, we have developed and started to implement the African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020–2030) as a blueprint and master plan for transforming the continent's economy and societies.



The 'digital identity' goal for all of Africa can help to ensure that development touches everyone and that no one is left behind.

ECA in collaboration with the World Bank and others UN System Agencies is also undertaking country level engagement to support the design and implementation of digital ID programmes, including exploiting linkages with the broader digital economy for achieving SDGs.

Over 60 per cent of men and 75 per cent of women are engaged in informal economic activity in Africa and providing support to this majority has challenged all African Governments in this era of COVID19. The 'digital identity' goal for all of Africa can help to ensure that development touches everyone and that no one is left behind.

ECA has also sought to ensure that African countries can leverage the digital space to respond to the COVID19 crisis more quickly and robustly.

ECA, in collaboration with several telecommunications companies operating on the continent (MTN, Orange, Airtel, Vodafone, etc.) has developed and launched an Africa-wide COVID-19 digital platform to support member States

to enhance their ability to analyse the situation, implement the necessary responses, and direct resources to mitigate and curb the health and economic impacts of the pandemic.

Digitalization is also a critical component to unlock the full potential of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Reinforcing the capacity of African firms and entrepreneurs to trade easily within Africa's borders and reach a global marketplace requires significant progress in Africa's digital infrastructure, as well as a focus on regulations that protect and enhance digital trade.

Investments in digitalization can also be developed through public private partnerships, recognising the multiplier downstream benefits that this investment will bring. Digitalization, leveraging the AfCFTA, can be a tool for reducing inequality significantly, as it can facilitate reaching even the most marginalised and vulnerable.

Finally, our ability to convene and unite around common causes is ever more necessary – even if the reality of the pandemic makes it hard to do so. ECA has aimed to increase spaces for exchange and promotion of knowledge through multi-stakeholder platforms and a series of regional meetings.

ECA has held its annual Africa World Summit on Information Society Regional Review as a key forum for positioning ICTs as a means of implementation of the SDGs, and this has directly contributed to the agenda of the High Level Political Forum for follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development. The latter has included the Africa Science Technology and Innovation Forum, an initiative of the ECA, designed to support member States to leverage science, technology and innovation (STI) for accelerating the implementation of the SDGs.

We have used this forum to also build capacity among young people of our continent, by bringing them together in the format of bootcamps to introduce them to opportunities for design and innovation, and to harness the entrepreneurial opportunities associated with digitalization. By giving these tools to our young people we are equipping ourselves for sustainability and ensuring that we can emerge stronger and more resilient from the global shock of this pandemic.

THE DIGITAL ECONOMY IS A CORNERSTONE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



By **Xiaozhun Yi**

Deputy Director General, World Trade Organization (WTO)

20 September 2020

Digital technologies and the digital economy are now central to the way we work, conduct business, perform international trade and engage our world as individuals and communities in the 21st century.

The health crisis has confirmed that this trend will but intensify the role of digitization in economic growth and sustainable development. Although the impact on trade is pervasive, digitization has gained its utmost visibility in our work on electronic commerce at the WTO.

The pandemic has shown that electronic commerce can be an important tool for consumers. Its global reach has stimulated online activity while at the same time casting harsher light on the challenges.

The lessons we are learning underscore the benefit/importance of greater international cooperation to facilitate the cross-border movement of goods and services, narrow the digital divide, and level the playing field for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) – in short, for our efforts to achieve the SDGs in this decade.

We trust that the crisis will strengthen the resolve our UNGIS partners, governments and the myriad of other stakeholders toward greater cooperation and coordination. Co-operation is needed for building good practice that can foster supportive policy frameworks.

WTO, in collaboration with its partners, can offer a path toward greater predictability, interoperability and trust — and, of course, lower costs for businesses and consumers. Discussions at the WTO have enabled governments to better understand the issues at stake in electronic commerce, as well as for the Information Society, writ large.

The WTO works toward solutions in partnership, for example, with UNCTAD's eTrade4All initiative, as well as its own Aid4Trade mechanism. We conduct Dialogues with the private sector, as well as consumer associations. We collaborate with other of the UNGIS partners on seminars and workshops on topics ranging from E-Health to FinTech.

What are some of the observations we can draw from our experience?

We can envision new and practical e-commerce solutions that could help promote economic recovery and job creation. It is also clear that global communications networks have demonstrated their role in the delivery of essential services and outreach to less connected communities.

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Digital technologies and the digital economy are now central to the way we work.

WTO and its partners have a collective role to play in improving access to communications networks and services. Even more importantly, we need to assist developing countries and LDCs to reduce the digital divide and, thereby, promote economies that can fulfil the SDGs.

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Even more importantly, we need to assist developing countries and LDCs to reduce the digital divide.

The consequences of the pandemic may last for a long time, and the digital economy will need to continue to adapt to the new environment. We need to explore better policies and collaborate on rules of the road for interoperability of legal frameworks and to generate a smoother ride for consumers and businesses who will increasingly engage online.

It is essential for all that progress is made on digital economy issues fundamental to the 21st century. At the same time, we must maintain processes that are open to all, to achieve solutions that are inclusive and of benefit to all, especially the most disadvantaged among us.

BEYOND RECOVERY, TOWARDS 2030: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES FOR CHARTING A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ROADMAP



By **Achim Steiner**

Administrator, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
and UNGIS Vice-Chair

28 September 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic is a health crisis that spares no country. It is also a humanitarian crisis that particularly hits vulnerable people and countries severely and disproportionately.

The pandemic is causing a wave of devastating socio-economic consequences to break across the globe. An estimated 71 million people are expected to be pushed back into extreme poverty in 2020 – the first rise in global poverty since 1998. It has also reversed decades of progress on gender equality and women's rights. As a result, global human development – which can be measured as a combination of the world's education, health and living standards – could decline this year for the first time in a generation. To respond to these socio-economic consequences, we must fully leverage the digital information and communications technologies (ICTs) both strategically and decisively. Doing so will also help to accelerate progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Supporting the critical health response led by the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) mobilized and deployed immediate support to its 170 programme countries – providing vital supplies and equipment, technical support and funds. As a large organization, we also had to quickly find ways to work together wherever the moment found us, including in the global and national epicentres of the pandemic. We repurposed funds and realigned teams according to shifting country needs. Though many of our office doors around the world physically closed during the pandemic, our teams utilized technology to allow us to maintain full business continuity. Too many countries had minimal digital capacities when the pandemic hit – so we extended our own digital assets, technical and funding support, so governments could continue core functions and operations. We helped countries to make effective use of technology and digital disruption to find rapid, much-needed solutions. That included the establishment of a facility to deploy \$500 million to support innovative solutions around the world.

The success of robust response was built on the groundwork laid earlier. In our Strategic Plan 2018-2021, UNDP charted the course for #NextGenUNDP, a four-year transformation that includes leveraging of innovation and technology for development. In early 2019, UNDP launched its Digital Strategy that serves as blueprint for digital transformation -- not only in how we operate, but also in how we address development challenges together with our partners. Guided by these strategies, and a dedicated team led by our Chief Digital Officer, we have been building our capacity, experimenting, and demonstrating results.

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Too many countries had minimal digital capacities when the pandemic hit.

The investments and ongoing transformation enabled us to react quickly when COVID-19 hit. Building on UNDP's global presence and strong field-based work, 75 of our Country Offices have launched nearly 200 digital responses to the COVID-19 crisis to date ([highlighted examples here](#)).

The [UNDP Accelerator Labs](#) that support 78 countries quickly developed and scaled-up innovative solutions -- from [crowdsourcing in Ecuador](#) to connect the most vulnerable people with food, goods and service providers to helping [local governments in Nepal](#) to monitor quarantine data.

We have worked to with local, regional and global partners to find tailored responses. In the Asia-Pacific region, we curated a list of open source [digital solutions](#) for disease monitoring; prevention and containment; and diagnosis and recovery. In Africa, together with the European Investment Bank and Bearing Point, we identified the [most effective digital solutions for fighting COVID-19 in Africa](#). With the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), we strengthened open digital payment ecosystems and used mobile technologies to sustain the [flow of remittances](#) on which many communities and families rely. In Uganda, we have worked with the leading e-commerce platform to [support 1,200 local vendors in Uganda](#) so they can continue their business during lockdown.

Indeed, during the pandemic, electronic cash payments made possible through digital finance proved to be lifesaving to those living in extreme poverty – [from Chile to Thailand to Peru](#). As the UN Secretary-General's Task Force on the Digital Financing of the SDGs points out in its recently released report entitled "[People's Money – Harnessing Digitalization to Finance a Sustainable Future](#)" – we now have an historic opportunity to [accelerate and expand the transformative impact of digitalization in financing the SDGs](#).

The pandemic has demonstrated how digital technologies can help to save lives -- and to fight the multidimensional impacts of the pandemic. The pandemic has also highlighted the cost of digital inequality. As we deploy digital solutions, we need to remember the unequal state of digital access and digital literacy between and within countries. Indeed, look to the fact that online learning is almost impossible for [80 per cent of students in Africa](#) due to lack of reliable internet and electricity access. In follow-up to the [UN Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation](#), UNDP will continue to work closely with other UN agencies and governments to address the digital divide.

The phase-up ahead in the digital sphere will propel global efforts to build forward better from COVID-19 --with the SDGs remaining as our vital compass. To this end -- as the technical lead for the [UN response to the socio-economic impact of the pandemic](#), UNDP has created a global COVID-19 Socio-Economic Recovery Data Insights platform to provide UNDP Country Offices, government decision-makers, and development practitioners a source of actionable, evidence-based insights to inform and advance recovery measures.

We need to redouble efforts and be more strategic and decisive in our actions, starting with intentional and sustained efforts to build the digital capacity of communities and countries lagging behind – and to ensure our digital investments build the digital ecosystem necessary to propel progress across all SDGs. In doing so, UNDP sees a serious need to leverage the collective intellectual capital and resources of the UN Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) to help [avert the worst development crisis of this century](#).

We believe that the digital revolution can not only get countries back on a sustainable development pathway – but it can help countries to rapidly accelerate progress on a range of SDGs with less than ten years now left to achieve the 2030 Agenda.



The pandemic has [...] highlighted the cost of digital inequality.

DIGITALIZATION: ENHANCING CONTRIBUTION TO ATOMS FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT



By **Rafael Mariano Grossi**

Director General, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)

05 October 2020

For more than six decades, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has made a unique contribution to international peace and security, helping to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons while making peaceful nuclear technology available to improve the health, well-being and prosperity of the people of the world.

Embracing the latest technology has long been essential to the IAEA's work, whether it involves using virtual reality techniques to train doctors, scientists and engineers in member States, flying drones to reduce the spread of the Zika virus, trialling robotics as an aid for safeguards inspectors or providing shared data platforms to protect water supplies. Digital technologies make it possible to scale up projects rapidly and deliver maximum impact.

Digital technology plays a very important role in our verification activities, which are aimed at preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Our inspectors use remote monitoring equipment to keep an eye on some nuclear facilities that they would previously have had to visit in person. New communication

channels have greatly speeded up data

transfer and the exchange of information between Member States and the Agency. Our inspectors and analysts have significantly more computer power at their disposal, which helps them to draw soundly-based safeguards conclusions more quickly.

Digital technology also helped the Agency maintain its services to Member States when global travel came to a virtual standstill during the COVID-19 lockdown. We provided webinars to health care personnel and through the Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory (VETLAB) network to veterinary specialists. We launched the COVID-19 Operational Experience Network to enable nuclear power plant operators and related organizations to share information on the impact of the pandemic. An exciting new IAEA project now being rolled out is the Zoonotic Disease Integrated Action (ZODIAC) project, which will establish a global network to help national

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Digital technologies make it possible to scale up projects rapidly and deliver maximum impact.

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We should continue to embrace digitalization and ensure that its benefits are shared as widely as possible.

laboratories in the early detection, diagnosis and control of animal and zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19.

The IAEA is at the heart of global networks of trusted collaborators in all areas of nuclear science and technology. Digital technology is key to connecting communities of nuclear engineers, physicists and chemists, cancer specialists, food scientists and many other experts around the world.

Digital technologies cannot be put to use without proper access to electricity. Global demand for electricity continues to increase steadily. Nuclear power, which supplies one third of the world's low-carbon electricity, is well placed to meet that demand and to help in fighting climate change.

We should continue to embrace digitalization and ensure that its benefits are shared as widely as possible.

TOURISM AND DIGITALIZATION IN THE DECADE OF ACTION



By **Zurab Pololikashvili**

Secretary-General, UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)

08 October 2020

By adopting the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals, the Member States of the United Nations pledged to “leave no one behind” in the journey to build a better world. Moreover, the Agenda also emphasises the importance of “reaching the furthest behind first”.

Ever since mankind first started travelling for leisure, tourism has been a source of employment and of economic opportunity. The sector has grown to support many millions of livelihoods worldwide and to become a pillar of both local and national economies.

However, it is only with the embracing of digitalization can we ensure that the economic and social benefits tourism brings are felt as widely as possible – reaching those “furthest behind first”, including women, youth and those living in rural and marginalised communities.

The digital transformation of tourism disrupts the sector and democratizes the opportunities it makes available. Digitalization, for example, offers a route into the workforce for women living outside of major cities, providing many with economic independence and empowerment for the first time.

Through UNWTO’s Tourism Start-Up competitions, we have seen the strong interest in disrupting the sector and making it fairer, stronger more sustainable, most notably among entrepreneurs and innovators from countries in the developing world.

Similarly, we have seen through the UNWTO Tourism Online Academy, that providing online training enables many to either find jobs in the tourism sector or else further their careers, again providing opportunities for those who may otherwise have been left behind as the workplace continues to evolve.

The COVID-19 pandemic that temporarily brought world tourism to a standstill didn’t just highlight the importance of embracing digital transformation to grow back stronger and better.


It also emphasised both tourism’s importance to the global sustainability agenda and the importance of adopting a collaborative approach to achieving the SDGs. Tourism is the ultimate cross-cutting sector. It affects almost every part of our societies and can, therefore, contribute to the missions of several of UNWTO’s fellow UN agencies.

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Only with the embracing of digitalization can we ensure that the economic and social benefits tourism brings are felt as widely as possible.

This crisis has brought the power of tourism to the fore, and UNWTO has been part of the wider UN response to this unprecedented challenge. Digitization has been a key part of this heightened cooperation and, as we move forward together during the Decade of Action, digitization can help ensure more effective collaboration between agencies with different focuses', but with the same ultimate goals.

Again, just as tourism touches upon almost every section of society, so too can it contribute to most, if not all, of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Digital cooperation can ensure more effective collaboration across the whole of the UN system, maximizing tourism's potential, filling gaps and avoiding overlaps. Since we are now into the Decade of Action, the countdown to achieving the SDGs, the efficient use of resources, tourism included, is more important than ever.



Digitization can help ensure more effective collaboration between agencies with different focuses', but with the same ultimate goals.

Furthermore, entrepreneurship becomes the key ally to accelerate our pace towards sustainable development and UNWTO has launched its [SDGs Global Startup Competition](#) to reach out to the most disruptive solutions for each of our common goals.

We invite you to join us in this journey by taking advantage of the [tourism4sdgs.org](#) platform which can promote stakeholders initiatives for recovery, and brings attention to tourism's contribution to the SDGs and brings together multi-stakeholders for achieving these objectives.

The Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization, spearheaded by UNGIS and drawing on the expertise and abilities of every part of the UN, will help guarantee such efficiency, and UNWTO looks forward to ensuring tourism is part of the conversation and part of the solution as we build towards 2030.

