UNGIS Input to the United Nations High Level Political Forum (HLPF) 2019

Sustainable Development Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

Introduction

The United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) is the United Nations (UN) system's inter-agency mechanism for advancing policy coherence and programme coordination on matters related to information and communications technologies (ICTs) in support of internationally-agreed development goals. Its mandate includes promoting collaboration and partnerships among the members of the Chief Executives Board (CEB) to contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), providing guidance on issues related to inclusive information and knowledge societies, helping maintain issues related to science and technology at the top of the UN Agenda, and mainstreaming ICT for Development in the mandate of CEB members. The UNGIS is comprised of 31 UN entities[1], and this contribution to the HLPF process is framed by their collective experience and expertise.

1. The identification of progress, gaps, areas requiring urgent attention, risks and challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

ICTs are now integral to how people in many parts of the world live and work, transforming societies and economies for good. Their potential to address complex and interconnected development challenges is also now widely recognized. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is a unique two-phase[2] United Nations (UN) summit that was convened to create an evolving multi- stakeholder platform aimed at addressing the issues raised by ICTs through a structured and inclusive approach at the national, regional and international levels. The WSIS Summit in 2003 and 2005 served to galvanize global attention and mobilize action on this potential, and the ICT for Development community that emerged since then had been instrumental in this regard.

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[1] See www.ungis.org

2 The UN General Assembly Resolution 56/183 (21 December 2001) endorsed the holding of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in two phases. The first phase took place in Geneva from 10 to 12 December 2003 and the second phase took place in Tunis, from 16 to 18 November 2005 www.wsis.org.

More needs to be done to fully leverage the potential of ICTs, and new technologies in general, to advance sustainable development in view of the digital transformation of societies and economies. This is particularly pressing as the digital revolution moves forward at an uneven pace around the world, with many developing countries lagging in *digital development.* One of the main challenges is of bridging the digital and knowledge divides, which includes the need to address disparities in both ICT infrastructure and the soft components, such as policy, content and capacity development at the same time, including digital access and capacity building for populations in rural areas. As more advanced economies consider frontier technologies (such as artificial intelligence[3], blockchain, or the Internet of Things), the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) lag in ICT capacities, access, including content in local languages on the Internet, infrastructure and use.[4] This is a challenge that needs to be addressed to achieve the inclusive, more equal world envisioned in the 2030 Agenda, and requires the stepped up cooperation called for the by UN Secretary General.[5]

In this context, cooperation is urgent to achieve universal access and connectivity, to improve security and trust in ICTs, and to increase capacity-building. The integration of efforts across the UN system remains a significant challenge.

2.   Valuable successful experiences and lessons learned on empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality

The annual WSIS Forum is an example of a platform that promotes inclusiveness and equal opportunity among diverse and multiple stakeholders to deliberate and act together on information society trends and issues. Since 2009, the WSIS Forum has evolved to represent the world's largest annual gathering of the 'ICT for development' community facilitating the implementation of the WSIS Action Lines[6] for advancing sustainable development, as well as framing innovative approaches for SDG achievement. It provides an opportunity for information exchange, knowledge creation and sharing of good practices, while identifying emerging trends and fostering partnerships related to the evolving Information and Knowledge Societies.

Within the UN system, UNGIS assisted this evolution by helping frame the discourse in the WSIS Forum and informing efforts beyond the usual WSIS Action Lines. UNGIS contributed to the alignment of the WSIS Action Lines with the SDGs[7], and has offered

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[3] For example see WIPO Technology Trends Report on Artificial Intelligence - https://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo_pub_1055.pdf

[4] https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx

[5] The UN Secretary General, "the scale, spread and speed of change made possible by digital technologies is unprecedented" but "the current means and levels of international cooperation are unequal to the challenge." He called therefore for "cooperation across domains and across borders" to leverage the full potential of digital technologies and manage their "unintended consequences." http://www.un.org/en/digital-cooperation-panel/

[6] 11 WSIS Action Lines: http://www.itu.int/net/wsis/implementation/

[7] See the UNGIS Joint Statement on the Post-2015 Development Agenda at http://www.ungis.org/Portals/0/documents/JointInitiatives/UNGIS.Joint.Statement.pdf

itself as a ready body of partners within the UN system for technical expertise and programming support.

UNGIS offers itself as an example of a cooperation that could be utilized further for efforts supporting Member States in achieving the SDGs. UNGIS can contribute insights and experience of the implementation of WSIS outcomes, and the expert capacities of its members in integrating new technologies in individual mandates. As the body supporting the WSIS Forum, it has the platform to engage a wide range of experts in achieving the ambitious 2030 Agenda. Previous experience shows that the UNGIS knowledge and resource base can help inform and propel progress on global development commitments. For instance, in 2000, UNGIS called attention to the relevant aspects of ICTs and Information Society at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (RIO+20) to help achieve a green economy and sustainable development; in 2011, the UNGIS Open Consultation Process on Overall Review of the Implementation of the WSIS Outcomes (WSIS+10) helped ensure achievement of goals and alignment with evolving priorities; in 2013, UNGIS contributed to the dialogue on the Post-2015 Development Agenda; and, in 2015, it contributed a Joint Statement to the UN General Assembly on the Overall Review of the Implementation of WSIS Outcome. In addition, in 2015 the WSIS-SDGs Matrix mapping exercise[8] described the interfaces between the Action Lines adopted at the WSIS with the SDGs, identifying where the potential for ICTs to promote and realize the development goals is the greatest.

UNGIS and the WSIS Forum demonstrate the progress that the UN system has made to craft a coordinated response equal to the challenge. WSIS Forum has evolved as an efficient mechanism for multi-stakeholder implementation of WSIS action lines and cross-cutting commitments on gender equality, information exchange, knowledge creation and the sharing of good practices. It serves as a key forum for discussing the role of ICTs as a means of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets, with due regard to the global mechanism for follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as set out in General Assembly Resolution A/70/1.

3. <u>Emerging issues likely to affect inclusiveness and equality at various levels</u>

The persistent digital divide is a long-standing challenge that will impede our vision of an inclusive and more equal world by 2030, and it also has roots in development gaps. Digital infrastructure development is crucial, as well as finding strategies to ensure digital inclusion through both access and capacity building in digital literacy and local content production of the vulnerable and marginalized, enabling their participation in their countries' social, economic, and political spheres.

Refugees and forcibly displaced persons are particularly hampered by various barriers to access to and use of ICTs, putting them at serious risk of being left behind. Research shows that refugees in rural areas are half as likely to have access to mobile technology than host community members. While progress is being made between networks of

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[8] Please see http://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/sdg/

partners that include mobile network operators, regulators, international aid and development actors as well as communities themselves, several barriers still remain that span legal and regulatory through to affordability and adoption barriers. This divide is amplified for women and girls within forcibly displaced populations, with research highlighting consistent inequalities in access between male and females surveyed.

Developing countries and their people are being left behind in their ability to leverage frontier technologies for development, and to integrate an increasingly global and digitalized economy.

4.   An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of "ensuring that no one is left behind" at the global, regional and national levels

At the end of 2018, 51.2 per cent of the global population, or 3.9 million people, were reported to be using the Internet. Mobile access to basic telecommunication services is becoming predominant and broadband access continues to grow. But despite the continued increase in overall connectivity, digital inequality remains significant. In developed countries, 80 per cent of people are online, while in developing countries only 45 per cent of individuals use the Internet. In the world's 47 least-developed countries (LDCs), 80 per cent of individuals are not yet using the Internet.

There are higher levels of e-government development,[9] with 40 countries scoring "Very-High" (EGDI values from 0.75 to 1.00) in 2018, as compared to only 10 countries in 2003, and 29 countries in 2016,[10] while since 2014, all 193 Member States have been delivering some form of online presence. But differences persist between and within regions. In Asia and the Pacific, for example, countries with lower access to digital technology show higher levels of inequality in access to basic services such as education, health, nutrition, water and sanitation, energy, information and finance.[11] Policies therefore need to focus on strengthening quality and inclusive education, investing in ICT infrastructure development, investing in the development of public policies that ensure an enabling environment for digital skills and local digital content production focused on promoting the use of local languages in cyberspace, and deepening regional cooperation. Regional cooperation particularly contributes to target 17.6, helping countries with special needs (LDCs, LLDCs, and SIDS) to leverage the dynamism of more developed economies and by exploiting the complementarities in a mutually beneficial manner.

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[9] The 2018 E-Government Development Index (EGDI). Available from https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/portals/egovkb/documents/un/2018-survey/e-government%20survey%202018_final%20for%20web.pdf

[10] E-Government Development Index (EGDI): A composite indicator comprised of three indexes (Online Service Index, Telecommunication Index and Human Capital Index) that are equally weighted. These cover a broad range of areas relevant to e-government.

[11] ESCAP, Inequality in Asia and the Pacific in the era of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2018. Available from: https://www.unescap.org/publications/inequality-asia-and-pacific-era-2030-agenda-sustainable-development

In many areas of the world lagging behind in achieving the SDGs, lack of *relevant public digital services* remains significant. Greater cooperation is needed to address impediments, particularly in developing and least-developed countries, and efforts need to tackle issues related to sustainability and scalability that are crucial to digital services that are inclusive and respond to local needs.

5.   Areas where political guidance by the high-level political forum is required

The HLPF could focus attention to the development roots of challenges framed by SDG 17 Targets, particularly Targets 6, 7 and 8. More cooperation on this front needs to be developed in the areas of increased investments in digital development, particularly in countries and communities lagging behind; in capacity building, with a focus on building the digital skills of groups lagging behind; in enhancing sharing of knowledge and know-how across societies and economies, going beyond advocacy but increasing concrete support for leveraging ICTs and new technologies for practical solutions, notably through the development of inclusive public policies.

The HLPF might wish to consider UNGIS as a useful mechanism to support follow-up to proposals made by the UN High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, based on its report of June 2019.

6.   Policy recommendations on ways to accelerate progress in empowering people, ensuring inclusiveness and equality, and achieving SDGs

UNGIS stands ready to ensure that efforts across the UN System are coherent, connected and coordinated to achieve maximum, sustainable impact. UNGIS offers a valuable knowledge and resource base that has been developed in the past decade on a multi-stakeholder basis focusing on innovative tools and approaches to tackle multiple development challenges. UNGIS can assist through:

- Consultative engagement with the bodies tasked to shepherd and support SDG implementation and processes, including by providing substantive expertise in support of the Open Working Group as it starts to frame proposals to the General Assembly.
- Making experts available to Member States through their Permanent Representatives to the UN, specifically as they reflect on lessons learned in the 15 years since WSIS.
- Making technical advisory services available to Member States, through coordinated UNGIS engagement in development and implementation of SDG roadmaps, specifically as they relate to new technologies for sustainable development.
- Consultative engagement with all relevant groups within the UN system, including at the regional level and within the UN Development Group, to facilitate the effective integration of ICT-enhanced, innovative development solutions in their own frameworks.