



# UNGIS contribution to the 2021 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

ECOSOC Ministerial Segment  
13 to 15 July

The rapid rise of digital technologies is transforming economic and social activities around the world. Affecting all parts of our societies and economies, it poses both opportunities and challenges for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated the link between digitalization and development, both by showing the potential of digital solutions and by laying bare the significant digital divides that still exist.

In this context, the United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) initiated in 2020 the [\*Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action\*](#) to raise awareness of both the importance of digitalization in achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and of the unique opportunity that UNGIS presents for more effective collaboration in this area within the United Nations (UN) System and beyond. These inputs to the 2021 High-level Political Forum, including highlighted statistics and examples, draw on the contributions by the Heads of 22 UNGIS member agencies to the UNGIS Dialogue.

The Dialogue underlines a shared view that digital technologies have the potential to speed-up progress on the SDGs. It highlights the cross-cutting nature of digitalization and shows how it affects a range of global concerns, such as those related to poverty and hunger, the future of work, global health, gender equality, economic development, access to education, climate change, freedom of expression, as well as cultural diversity and indigenous languages. It also draws attention to the urgent need to overcome key challenges, in terms of both access to and use of digital technologies. Despite the many initiatives in this area, UNGIS recognizes that more needs to be done to enhance cooperation and coordination, including within the UN System.

Digital technologies have been critical during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is not only a health crisis that spares no country, but also a humanitarian and socio-economic crisis that has severely and disproportionately hit marginalized sectors of society and threatens progress on the SDGs. They have been crucial in enabling governments to function, in delivering emergency aid, in providing critical services and information, and in supporting remote work and learning, e-commerce and e-payments, telemedicine and other social and economic activities.

UNGIS member agencies have stepped up efforts to develop and roll out digital tools and solutions, including digital platforms for sharing data and responses to the crisis. Regarding the latter, the WHO is launching a Digital Clearinghouse to assess digital health solutions and has developed a Global Digital Health Strategy. ITU has taken the lead in setting up the WSIS Stocktaking Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Response ICT Case Repository, a Global Network Resiliency (REG4COVID) Platform, the GIGA initiative (in partnership with UNICEF), CYB4COVID, and the Digital Transformation Centres Initiative. 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, governments and development practitioners a source of actionable, evidence-based insights to advance recovery measures. UNECA, in collaboration with several telecommunications companies (e.g. MTN, Orange, Airtel, Vodafone), has developed and launched an Africa-wide COVID-19 digital platform to support member States to enhance their ability to analyze the situation, implement the necessary responses and direct resources to mitigate and curb the health and economic impacts of the pandemic. The UNCTAD-led eTrade for all initiative has set up an online COVID-19 repository on relevant knowledge resources linked to e-commerce and development. The WTO Secretariat has compiled online repository of COVID-19 trade-related measures and UN DESA has prepared a compendium of digital government initiatives in response to the pandemic aiming to capture emerging trends in digital responses of UN Member States. With more than 1.5 billion students and youth affected by school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNESCO launched the Global Education Coalition which brings together more than 140 members from the UN family, civil society, academia and the private sector.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 edition of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Forum went virtual. The Forum organized about 160 virtual sessions with 15,000 attendees from all stakeholder groups and around 150 countries to discuss, share experiences, showcase innovation and develop impactful partnerships in strengthening information and communication technologies (ICTs) for sustainable development.

The pandemic has also increased the importance of other digital tools developed by UNGIS member agencies. For instance, in the area of cross-border trade, UNECE's eTIR/eCMR systems allow to exchange electronic information without physical contact and facilitate the flow of goods across borders. UNICEF is reaching more children through their digital products, UN-Habitat has been coordinating GIS and data-science based urban and neighborhood profiling. Embracing the latest technology has also been essential to the work of the IAEA, whether it involves using virtual reality techniques for training, flying drones to reduce the spread of the Zika virus, or using IT tools for zoonotic disease surveillance and analysis. The United Nations E-Government Survey 2020, undertaken by UN DESA, shows that most countries and municipalities are pursuing digital government strategies, as the pandemic fuels lockdowns. In fact, the WFP is already working closely with governments worldwide to scale up safety nets during the pandemic, making digital payments an essential pillar of the response. UNIDO has launched an online handbook providing guidance to micro, small and medium enterprises in the wake of the pandemic.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to digital health solutions and various socio-economic opportunities, it has also accentuated the huge divides that exist across countries in terms of the readiness to participate in ever more digitalized economies and societies.

First and foremost, full benefits from digitalization can only be obtained with universal access to affordable and reliable broadband Internet. It is concerning that the digital divide is still highly visible between and within countries and in some respects actually widening. Internet access and use in developing regions are still significantly lower than that in developed countries, and even for those that do have access, quality and affordability often keep it out of reach. Moreover, the global Internet gender gap has been growing rather than narrowing, standing at 17 per cent globally and 43 per cent in the LDCs. Moreover, women account for 56 per cent of those financially excluded from the digital economy.

The pandemic raises various other concerns related to digitalization. While apps and biometrics are important to help track and trace the spread of the virus, they raise questions around human rights and privacy, data protection and cyber security. Governments are called to take appropriate steps to ensure that privacy protections are by default designed in these systems, and that personal data is only retained for as long as needed. In this context, the WHO has proposed the creation of international regulations to protect the safety and privacy of individual health data. Malicious actors have also been taking advantage of the epidemic, with coronavirus-related scams and phishing campaigns targeting individuals, businesses and even hospitals. At the same time, deliberate false and misleading information has quickly and widely spread online and led to so-called 'infodemics'. Harmful effects of disinformation and misinformation cannot be overstated and go well beyond health concerns.

The digital economy has become ever more central to the way we produce goods and services, perform international trade and engage our world as individuals and communities. However, the lack of skills, access to innovation or advanced technologies has severe implications for advancing inclusive digital transformation. As illustrated by UNIDO's Industrial Development Report 2020, currently just ten economies account for over 90 per cent of the patents and 70 per cent of exports associated with advanced digital production technologies. In particular, small and medium enterprises, notably in developing economies, are still encountering obstacles in deploying digital solutions due to their lower incidence of Internet connectivity, and a lack of resources, and skills. Moreover, women entrepreneurs tend to form small and medium enterprises that are less likely to be able to afford connectivity and digital tools. This suggests a need to improve gender equality and inclusive digital skills and investment.

Concerns around digitalization are also raised as they relate to income and job insecurity, erosion of workers' rights, work intensification, and deterioration of both physical and mental well-being. For instance, digital labour platforms provide new sources of jobs and income, but also raise challenges for workers' protection, representation and fair treatment. In addition, digitalization generates large amounts of data on workers that can pose risks for their privacy. It is against this backdrop that the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, adopted in 2019, proposes a human-centred approach to the future of work.

Digital transformation affects all aspects of social and economic organization around the world and the UNGIS Dialogue acknowledges that digitalization provides many opportunities to accelerate progress towards the SDGs, whether it is in the area of health, tourism, trade, energy, agriculture, cyber security, manufacturing, smart cities or the future of work. In order to promote a sustainable and resilient economic recovery from the pandemic, providing universal access to affordable and reliable broadband Internet will be more urgent than before. In addition, there is a pressing need to promote digital inclusion of those with low education, who lack sufficient digital skills or literacy, including older persons, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and those living in poverty and in rural and remote areas. Efforts should also be made to make digital content more relevant to the local context and to raise awareness of both benefits and risks linked to digital technologies.

The UNGIS Dialogue demonstrates the importance of international cooperation to overcome these challenges and to achieve a shared digital future that connects UN agencies, governments, donors, NGOs, the private sector and individuals, leaving no one behind in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It highlights digital cooperation initiatives covering many different areas, including infrastructure (e.g. the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway), trade (e.g. the eTrade for all initiative and WTO Aid for Trade Initiative), gender (e.g. EQUALS, Generation Equality Action Coalition, eTrade for Women), children (e.g. the WePROTECT Global Alliance), urban development (e.g. United for Smart and Sustainable Cities), or regional development (e.g. the Advancing Digital Cooperation and

Development-Arab States Action Program, eLAC led by UNECLAC or UNECA's Centre of Excellence for Digital Identity, Trade and Economy, the APEC-Privacy initiative, and ECOWAS e-commerce work programme). The Secretary-General's recently launched *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation* reaffirms this need to strengthen collaboration and connect our efforts through a portfolio of digital services and tools, which everyone can easily access.

New technologies have been a basis of all historic moments of social and economic disruption, yet the wave of technological changes taking place in the current 'digital revolution' is unprecedented in terms of speed, scope and scale. The urgency of responding to COVID-19 presents the UN system and beyond with a unique opportunity to unite and to speed up the development of a global digital society for all.

The UNGIS Dialogue highlights the importance of international cooperation in harnessing the potential of digitalization in an inclusive, resilient and sustainable way. It shows 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. At the intergovernmental level, the promotion of inter-agency coordination and support within the UN System will be essential to boost efforts by individual agencies.

We believe that UNGIS, with its partners and networks, represents a valuable mechanism to facilitate inter-agency coordination within the UN System, and to provide technical support that will be essential to boost efforts by individual agencies. UNGIS is committed to harnessing collective expertise to help advance sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and promoting greater understanding of how digitalization can help the global community build "an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development".

For more info on UNGIS, please visit: <https://www.ungis.org/>