



UNITED NATIONS GROUP ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY (UNGIS) CONTRIBUTION TO THE HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (HLPF) 2022

2022 Theme: *"Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development"*

SDGs under review: The HLPF in 2022 will review the SDGs and will also discuss in depth Sustainable Development Goals: 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), 14 (life below water), 15 (life on land), and 17 (partnerships for the Goals).

General Introduction

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. Established in 2006 after the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the UNGIS mandate includes promoting collaboration and partnerships among the members of the Chief Executives Board (CEB) to contribute to the achievement of WSIS goals, 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 more [than 30 UN entities](#) and this contribution to the HLPF process is framed by the collective UNGIS experience and expertise.

As an existing body of interagency digital cooperation, UNGIS stands ready to ensure that efforts across the UN system are coherent, connected and coordinated to achieve maximum, sustainable impact. In the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Decade of Action, UNGIS is a valuable knowledge and resource base that stands ready to support UN Member States and partners in leveraging innovative tools and approaches to accelerate progress towards 2030.

To learn more about UNGIS members activities in the area of COVID-19 response, please visit UNGIS (www.wsis.org/ungis) members' respective website and the [WSIS Forum 2021](#) website with its outcomes.

A. Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the SDGs under review in the 2022 HLPF from the vantage point of your intergovernmental body, bearing in mind the interlinkages with other SDGs

The pandemic has triggered an unprecedented acceleration and mainstreaming of digital technologies. Covid-19 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. ICTs 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.

From your perspective: Please provide brief bullet points on the impact of the pandemic specifically on SDGs 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), 14 (life below water), 15 (life on land), and 17 (partnerships for the Goals):

SDG 4: ICTs enabled continuation of schooling, but lack of access to ICT tools and devices as well as Internet connectivity by many (particularly the poor even in advanced economies) became clear as a serious problem, with implications for reaching our education goals and targets.

SDG 5: Gender equality has been negatively impacted by the pandemic, with women more likely to be the victims of gender based violence and other forms of abuse since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020.

SDG 14: safely managed water & sanitation, including basic handwashing facilities at home, is strongly indicated to reduce virus transmission, according to the [United Nations World Water Development Report 2022](#). 71% of the world population has basic handwashing facilities with soap and water available at home (WHO/UNICEF, 2021).

SDG 17: Given the pronounced digital divide between High Income and Developing Countries, global partnerships for inclusive and sustainable industrial development have become more challenged, with knock-on effects for technical cooperation, outreach initiatives etc. in remote areas.

B. Actions, policy guidance, progress, challenges and areas requiring urgent attention in relation to the SDGs and to the theme within the area under the purview of your intergovernmental body

UNGIS members have expressed the need for accelerated action towards achieving SDGs related to several WSIS Action Lines, including to bridge the digital divide in ICT infrastructure and digital skill and literacy, cybersecurity, on e-government, digital economy, e-agriculture, e-health, e-science, capacity building, enabling environment etc.

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.

Never before have ICTs been so vital to human security, and to keeping our economy and society working, as during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. From teleworking and e-commerce to telemedicine and remote learning, ICT services and technologies are supporting continued access to our critical needs. While always crucial, it is particularly at times like this that we need to ensure that our systems and networks are secure.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by a viral and life threatening ‘disinfodemic’ impeding access to trustworthy sources of information.

UNESCO countered COVID-19 related online disinformation through the #CoronavirusFacts project, funded by the European Union, enabling media to professionally and effectively share lifesaving information and debunk disinformation on COVID-19 and for citizens make-evidence based decisions about their health. A series of massive open online courses for journalists reporting on pandemics and on vaccines, developed together with WHO and the University of Texas at Austin, was made available in 13 languages and reached more than 30,000 participants.

Research about COVID-19 disinformation featured prominently in the 2021/2022 edition of UNESCO’s report on *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development*, whose highlights were presented at the 41st UNESCO General Conference.

As a legacy of The United Nations Decade of Ocean Sciences for Sustainable Development (2021 to 2030), UNESCO’s Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) and partners have pledged that at least 80% of the seabed is mapped by 2030 compared to 20% today.

Interagency dialogues on disinformation and data transparency—co-founded by UNESCO and WHO— bring together more than 20 UN agencies, funds, and programmes and presented discussion papers at a side event to the UN General Assembly in September 2021.

The fourth Global Manufacturing and Industrialisation Summit (GMIS) was held in November 2021, in Dubai. UNIDO and the Ministry of Industry and Advanced Technology of the United Arab Emirates co-chaired this high-profile event under the theme of “Rewiring societies: repurposing digitalization for prosperity”. The six-day event featured over 250 global speakers, including five Heads of State, four Heads of UN entities, 16 ministers and government representatives, and experts from 178 countries. More than 16,000 people registered for the Summit, over 3,170 of them as in-person attendees.

As a long-lasting strategic outcome, UNIDO supports a GMIS legacy initiative after every Summit. To date, four of these initiatives have been initiated, including the Initiative for Global Prosperity (2017), the President’s Challenge (2019), the Green Chain Initiative (2020) and the Global Biomedical Industrial Centre (2021). A Global Initiative on Future Industrial Safety was also launched at GMIS 2021.

C. An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “ensuring that no one is left behind” at the global, regional and national levels against of background of the COVID-19 pandemic in achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, within the respective area addressed by your intergovernmental bodies

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of connectivity and has demonstrated that connecting every person is more important than ever before, but also highlights important digital divides within and between countries:

- 3.6 billion people still have no connectivity at all

- The proportion of women using the Internet globally is 48% compared to 58% of men. Women’s Internet use in developing countries is falling behind.
- Affordability and lack of digital skills remain some of the key barriers to the uptake and effective use of the Internet, especially in the world’s least developed countries.
- Small and Medium Enterprises in developing countries have been disproportionately affected by the shift to digital platforms and means of production, thus increasing the risk of a widening of the digital divide since the outbreak of COVID-19.

With more than 1.5 billion young people having been affected by school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNESCO launched the [Global Education Coalition \(#LearningNeverStops\)](#) to create and support innovative partnerships between its more than [175 members](#) from the UN family, non-profit organizations and civil society, the private sector, and academia. The Coalition is operating in 112 countries, deploying three large cross-country missions: the Global Skills Academy, Global Learning House and Global Teacher Campus. Digital learning is at the centre of Global Education Coalition actions, including online platforms, education resources, digitized curricula and assessments. GEC projects are committed to equity and inclusion in access to quality education and lifelong learning for all, in line with the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4), leaving no one behind.

Under the theme “Media and Information Literacy (MIL) for the Public Good”, UNESCO Global MIL Week 2021 was hosted in South Africa from 24-30 October 2021 to respond to the increasing demand for MIL worldwide and shared interest of all stakeholders in promoting competencies to critically interact with information, media and technology.

As it concerns e-science, the COVID-19 pandemic, and specifically the response of a large segment of the scientific community, has brought significant attention to the Open Science movement and the 2021 UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science, to help accelerate the achievement of scientific solutions for many global challenge and widen universal access to scientific knowledge. Supporting Action Line C7 (e-Science) as well as Action Line C10 (Ethical Implications of the Information Society), the 2021 UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence establishes international normative guidelines on the ethical development and deployment of this frontier technology.

The global agri-food system continues to face considerable challenges in being able to provide enough food of adequate quality to feed an ever-growing, aging, and migrating population. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, hunger continued to increase. In 2019, almost 690 million people – or nearly one in ten people in the world – went hungry. The pandemic may push an additional 130 million people in the world into chronic hunger by the end of 2020. According to the World Bank’s estimates, the pandemic's economic impact could push about 100 million people into extreme poverty.

Activities related to action line C7 (e-business) in 2020 were greatly coloured by the COVID-19 pandemic, which both helped to demonstrate the value of digital solutions for coping with various lockdown measures and travel restrictions, and highlighted the significant digital divides that still remain. Participating agencies conducted several surveys of consumers and businesses to assess the impact of the pandemic on e-commerce. Through various technical assistance work, they replied to requests from countries to build the capacity to leverage e-commerce and the digital economy for sustainable and inclusive development.

ICTs play an essential role as vectors for the creation, dissemination and access to cultural expressions, especially in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic which has accelerated the migration of cultural creation and consumption to digital platforms, while raising new challenges for the diversity of supply and demand. UNESCO mainstreams ICTs in its Culture programme, particularly in the protection and promotion of cultural heritage and the diversity of cultural expressions, in line with Action Line C8.

Free and independent media have played a critical role in the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the beginning of this crisis, UNESCO supported the work of journalists, fact-checkers, governments, civil society, academia and other UN agencies in promoting reliable information.

Journalism delivering fact-based information online has helped societies to adapt and organize responses to the spread of COVID-19, share knowledge and experiences, and counter the increase of rumors and disinformation. At the same time, the spotlight on online disinformation and the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the many crises that threaten the right to freely reported, independent, diverse and reliable information.

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.

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. UNIDO's Industrial Development Report 2022 demonstrates that firms in developing countries have been less able to take advantage of the digital transition set in train by the COVID-19 pandemic. Crucial in helping mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, advanced digital production (ADP) technologies are likely to become a key enabling factor for countries to achieve inclusive and sustainable industrial development (ISID) and the SDGs. However, translating the digitalization opportunity into reality is challenging. The interdependence of different technologies—which characterizes many ADP technologies—means that their adoption is hardly a seamless process. Among firms, differences in size, capabilities and the availability (or lack thereof) of a supporting innovation system account for a large share of today's digital divide. Particularly in developing and emerging industrial economies (DEIE), SMEs tend to lag behind their larger peers.

Evidence collected for this report showed that only a small share of DEIE manufacturing firms is already engaging with ADP technologies. In all three regions covered by UNIDO's Industrial Development Report 2022 survey—Africa, Asia and Latin America—the average share of firms using 4.0 technologies in their production process is still below 2 percent. The vast majority of firms in DEIEs are either not relying on digital technologies or using very outdated ones. Taken together, analog technologies and generation 1.0 technologies account for more than two-thirds of the sample in all regions. This highlights, once again, the extreme digital divide that exists within DEIEs. Such a divide poses a challenge because, not only are there few firms adopting ADP technologies, but lead firms that are already adopting these technologies find it difficult to link backwards and forwards and nurture their supply chain. When the digital capability gap is extreme, as it is in DEIEs in these regions, the diffusion of ADP technologies is thus very limited due to both technological and structural constraints.

Against this backdrop, fostering the diffusion of ADP technologies is an important priority. In DEIEs, ADP technologies are often applied through retrofitting: by, for instance, adding sensors to machines, factories and products. Basic, enterprise-level capabilities in manufacturing production and innovation are therefore key to diffusion. At the same time, the provision of digital infrastructure must take into account digital divides related to enterprise size and gender, as well as consider the needs of other vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

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.

UNIDO has also recently elaborated some technical recommendations for the [adoption of artificial intelligence by SMEs in developing countries](#), in cooperation with ITU and ITC. More information here:

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.

As more advanced economies adopt more advanced digital technologies (such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, or the internet of things), many developing countries fall further behind in the digital economy and society. This challenge needs to be a priority of the international community in order 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. In this context, more and better digital cooperation across the UN system and with other stakeholders is urgently needed.

D. Cooperation, measures and commitments at all levels in promoting sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic

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 2021 edition of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Forum went virtual. The Forum's theme "ICTs for Inclusive, Resilient and Sustainable Societies and Economies (WSIS Action Lines for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals)" created an opportunity for WSIS stakeholders to share their efforts and innovative ideas to leverage the (ICTs). Also, it built momentum to advance action-oriented dialogue on efforts in the context of COVID-19 recovery and initiatives to implement the WSIS Action Lines to advance the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The WSIS Forum 2021 hosted more than 250 sessions, including workshops, live interviews, WSIS TalkX, the high-level track, Hackathon and many more. The WSIS Forum 2021 garnered a lot of interest and excitement worldwide – with a cumulative attendance of over 50,000 attendees (zoom room, zoom recording, Facebook Live videos, YouTube, and other format) over 185 countries from Government, Civil Society, Academia, Private Sector, the UN to exchange discourse on ICTs emerging issues to strengthen information and knowledge societies.

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

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.

Early in the pandemic, UNESCO, in partnership with the Innovation for Policy Foundation (i4Policy), launched the [#DontGoViral](#) online campaign in Africa, inviting artists to amplify life-saving information to combat the COVID-19 pandemic among fans and followers, and to engage with cultural and creative industries in awareness-raising.

Since the pandemic began to spread internationally, ITU has been working even more closely with members from government and industry to convey this urgent call for action, and implement enabling environments to build back better. To address cybersecurity challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and to [support Member States' health infrastructure with timely information on cyber threats](#), the ITU members have provided access to their services for ITU Member States. Cybersecurity resources for COVID-19 by ITU are available [here](#). As the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies, ITU and its stakeholders are more committed than ever to ensuring that people everywhere benefit from the transformative potential of ICTs, including by fostering and enabling environment for ICT development (AL C6).

In order to help the world's most vulnerable, prevent further crises, increase resilience to shocks, and accelerate the rebuilding and sustainable transformation of our food systems, FAO initiated comprehensive and holistic [COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme](#) which is designed to proactively and sustainably address the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. In line with the UN approach to "build back better," and in pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals, it aims to mitigate the immediate impacts of the pandemic while strengthening the long-term resilience of food systems and livelihoods.

ITC continued its work to support SMEs in developing countries to engage in digital entrepreneurship, support women in digital trade, and leverage technology for trade facilitation. UNCTAD hosted multistakeholder discussions at its first virtual eWeek, with more than 2,000 participants from 134 countries. It also convened a series of eTrade for Women Masterclasses, completed several new eTrade Readiness Assessments and increased its focus on ensuring effective follow-up to the implementation of recommendations contained in the assessments. UPU continued its programmes to modernize and transform public postal infrastructure to support the unconnected and introduce new ICT enabled services at the national level that increase digital inclusion, financial inclusion, trade inclusion for citizens and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs).

UNESCO has continued to intensify its efforts to ensure access to reliable and accurate health information in languages understood by indigenous peoples, by compiling relevant health-related resources in and about Indigenous Languages, in cooperation with Member States, other UN Agencies and partners, on the dedicated page "[COVID-19 pandemic: Language Matters](#)". Furthermore, a [UNESCO bulletin](#) focusing on the impact of the current crisis on indigenous peoples was launched on the occasion of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples (9 August 2020). It includes information concerning targeted actions taken by UNESCO to promote, revitalize and support Indigenous Languages in different domains, as well as good practices for the future. In collaboration with UNESCO, the ITU will organise a special track on ICTs for Indigenous Peoples

and Cultures, including a special prize and a Hackathon focused on indigenous languages at the WSIS Forum 2022.

For the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL 2022-2032), the [Global Task Force](#) for Making a Decade of Action for Indigenous Languages ensures the equitable participation of all stakeholders in the International Decade, and provides a strategic framework, outlines major actions and guidelines on implementation, monitoring and evaluation of activities for UN-system entities, national governments, indigenous peoples' organizations, civil society, academia, the private sector and other actors.

In order to mobilize the greatest contribution from global industry (manufacturers, innovators, entrepreneurs, technologists etc.) to alleviate the COVID-19 pandemic, UNIDO in 2020 launched a global call for "innovative ideas and technologies versus COVID-19 and beyond". The Global Call received over 1100 submissions from 108 countries, with four winning entries selected to address the health emergency, energy and environment, food and agriculture and resilient industries and infrastructure dimensions of the pandemic. UNIDO is also currently elaborating a Global Biomedical and Industrial Centre, to monitor and identify potential global crises and to harness solutions from the medical innovation and life sciences sectors; as well as Global Health Industries initiative, to fully deploy the medical manufacturing and innovation sub-sector to improve global health outcomes.

For all WSIS Action Lines initiatives in responding to COVID-19 pandemic, please refer to [WSIS Action Lines document on Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building 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.](#)

E. Various measures and policy recommendations on building 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

Today's unprecedented crisis calls for unprecedented cooperation. Digital connectivity and digital inclusion must be a priority for all governments as to provide affordable access to information technologies. More than ever, there is an urgent need to create an enabling ICT policy and regulatory environment that can guarantee access, connectivity and use for all in a post COVID world.

UNGIS, as an existing interagency body of digital cooperation, stands ready to help ensure that efforts across the UN system are coherent, connected and coordinated to achieve maximum, inclusive and 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 across bodies tasked to shepherd and support SDG implementation and processes, including by providing substantive and thematic 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 and how these can help guide SDG acceleration efforts.
- Making technical advisory services available to Member States, through coordinated UNGIS engagement in development and implementation of SDG roadmaps, specifically as they relate to digital development and transformation as pathway to sustainable development.
- Consultative engagement across relevant groups within the UN system, including at the regional level and within the UN Sustainable Development Group, to support the effective integration of ICT-enabled, innovative development solutions in their own frameworks.