



United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) Input to the United Nations High Level Political Forum (HLPF) 2020 ¹

General introduction

About the UN Group on the Information Society (UNGIS)

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),² its 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 30 UN entities³, 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.

1. Key policies and measures to ensure “accelerated action and transformative pathways” for realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development

ICTs are rapidly transforming societies and economies, with potential to address complex and interconnected development challenges and build a sustainable future for all as envisioned in the 2030 Agenda. This potential however needs to be strategically leveraged to help achieve the SDGs by 2030.

As Member States and partners mobilize around the imperatives of the SDG Decade of Action, the global development community has the opportunity to support key policies and measures that will help move the needle across all SDGs. One critical step forward is ensuring that the use of ICTs, and new technologies more broadly, is systematically integrated in countries' national development and acceleration plans. As technologies quickly evolve alongside rapid global trends (such as climate change, increasing inequality, more frequent and devastating disasters and risks, etc.), countries need to ensure that they have access to relevant technologies and know-how and that significant

¹ All UNGIS members were given the opportunity to provide input on the submission, out of which several responded with substantive inputs.

² The World Summit of the Information Society (WSIS) was held in two phases: the first took place in Geneva from 10 to 12 December 2003 and the second in Tunis from 16 to 18 November 2005. The WSIS Forum convenes each year to coordinate multi-stakeholder implementation of WSIS action lines, exchange information, share best practices, and develop partnerships to advance development goals. See www.wsis.org.

³ See www.ungis.org

investments in technologies are linked to their national development priorities. One specific opportunity lies in the development of United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks⁴ that concretely links the benefits of ICTs to specific priorities and efforts (including poverty reduction strategies), as well as systematically addresses the risks that ICTs bring (e.g., risks posed to loss of specific jobs by increasing automation, increasing inequality due to uneven digital access skills, loss of privacy, etc.).

Another important step to take is enhancing global understanding of “digital development” and “digital transformation” as a pillar of sustainable development in the 21st century – an undertaking that establishes ICT-related efforts (or efforts related to digital and new technologies more broadly) as integral to development policies and programming in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Building on the legacy of “Information and Communication Technologies for Development” (ICTD/ICT4D), digital development and transformation entails policies that not only leverage digital technologies and innovation in development efforts but advance development principles in digital efforts (e.g., principles of inclusion, human rights-based approaches, sustainability, etc.).

Both steps require coordinated efforts among stakeholders, first among the agencies within the UN system whose mandates focus on providing support to Member States. The role of UNGIS is critical in this regard. As a coordination mechanism anchored in supporting ICT and development efforts since the era of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), UNGIS has developed extensive experience, a wide range of expertise, and a network of partners that could be great resources for the Decade of Action. UNGIS has evolved with the evolution of technologies and sees the need 1) to develop a common understanding across sectors and constituencies on, for instance, Knowledge Societies and the digital economy; 2) for addressing issues related to new technologies, such as those related to the Internet; and 3) to ensure sustained progress by aligning digital efforts across globally-agreed development goals (WSIS commitments and the SDGs⁵, climate promise, etc.).

a. Critical gaps in implementing the 2030 Agenda within the area of responsibility of the intergovernmental body (bearing in mind interrelations with other goals and targets)

Though access to advanced technologies has grown at a fast pace in over a decade of WSIS implementation, significant gaps remain. Different levels of ICT access for instance persist (between and within countries, between urban and rural settings, among men and women, and boys and girls) while new ones are emerging. Almost half of the world’s population are still not online⁶, and many live in vulnerable developing nations, which include the least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) and small island developing States (SIDS). UNGIS is fully committed to reinvigorating collaborative action to harness the power of new technologies in promoting sustainable development and making the goal of universal and affordable access to ICTs and knowledge a reality. This should include also a focus on relevant content, skills, capacity building, and an enabling environment, including multilingualism, to empower the implementation of the sustainable development goals, as well as to further freedom of expression and access to information and to promote cultural diversity on the basis of human rights.

More needs to be done to leverage the development potential of digital technologies. Attention must be given equally to seizing opportunities of digitalization and to coping with associated challenges and risks. This is particularly pressing as digitalization moves forward at a rapid but uneven pace around the world, with many developing countries lagging behind in terms of digital readiness. One of the main challenges is bridging the digital and knowledge divides, which include the need to address disparities in ICT infrastructure as well as soft components, such as policy, content and capacity development. As more advanced economies adopt more advanced digital technologies (such

⁴ Formerly known as the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs)

⁵ See the WSIS-SDG matrix at <https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/sdg/>

⁶ See <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

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.

To make digital transformation real and inclusive, it is important to strengthen partnerships and digital cooperation towards achieving goals and targets across the Sustainable Development Agenda, in areas such as improved food security and nutrition, and sustainable agriculture and rural development, empowerment of women, human rights, environmental areas, education, health and economic development.

More efforts are also needed to develop policies ensuring quality, safety and ethical standards with respect to the confidentiality of health data, which absent or weak in many countries⁷. National and international frameworks are needed for countries to regulate safety and use of digital health technologies including AI-based applications. Furthermore, in light of the rapid development of emerging technologies, notably artificial intelligence, the development of ethical frameworks for the development and deployment of these technologies is a matter of urgency. As underlined in the UN Secretary-General's strategy on new technologies⁸ as well as the High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation's report "the age of digital interdependence"⁹, the elaboration of standard-setting instruments in this field, developed using a rights-based, open, accessible, and multi-stakeholder approach is a matter of urgency to ensure that artificial is harnessed to meet the sustainable development goals.

b. Priority measures to:

i. accelerate action

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 literacy, cybersecurity, on e-government, digital economy, e-agriculture, e-health, capacity building, enabling environment etc.

Connecting the unconnected remains a priority to bridge the digital divide. The prospects for widespread use of the Internet remain poor, particularly for LDCs. Nearly 3.6 billion people remain unconnected from the Internet and from the digital products and services that could dramatically improve their lives. Affordable and access to ICTs, confidence and security in use of ICTs, capacity building and collaborative ICT policy and regulatory approaches for digital transformation are essential for accelerated action.

Increasing meaningful access to digital opportunities through the provision of affordable connectivity, digital literacy training, policies that protect children in the digital sphere (not only from harm and sexual abuse, but also from surveillance and behavioral marketing) while also empowering them to fully participate and develop to their full potential. In this regard, technologies showing promise for realizing children's rights, such as artificial intelligence, should be fully explored to maximize their potential while minimizing risks, for example, of increasing inequalities.

Building the digital capacities of the public sector specifically through e-government and e-governance will help establish the digital foundations of public institutions for the 4IR era. It is

⁷ WHO in collaboration with ITU has established a Focus Group on artificial intelligence for health (FG-AI4H) which aims to establish a standardized assessment framework for the evaluation of AI-based methods in health. WHO is also convening a group of international experts to develop guidance for countries on ethics and governance of AI in health.

⁸ <https://www.un.org/en/newtechnologies/>

⁹ <https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/DigitalCooperation-report-for%20web.pdf>

widely agreed that digital development anchored in the principles of good governance is essential for building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, as called for in Goal 16, and for strengthening implementation of Goal 17, both of which underpin achievement of the SDGs as a whole.

Providing guidance and supporting member states in establishing and implementing e- agriculture strategies in order to extend the benefits of digital technologies to family farmers at national policy level and through public-private partnerships; and introducing digital incentives to accelerate the digitalization of agriculture and to facilitate market access. At the regional level, promoting development of digital agriculture and innovation hubs, to strengthen the digital literacy and skills of agri-food actors, and engage youth and women. Promoting digital tools (e.g. mobile apps, blockchain, AI, etc.) and services that are accessible, affordable, and relevant to tackle the challenges that small-scale farmers are facing.

Enhancing the efforts of the development community to support countries that are trailing in the digital economy. For ensuring that digital transformation contributes to more inclusive outcomes, national efforts in developing countries must receive more international support. Development partners urgently need to integrate the digital dimension into their aid policies and strategies. Assistance can aim at strengthening the enabling environment, building capacities in the private and public sectors, and enhancing trust by supporting the adoption and enforcement of relevant laws and regulations to promote value creation and capture in the data-driven digital economy.

Developing national e-health policies (the digital transformation of health systems) may accelerate progress towards the SDGs. While there has been steady progress on the use of digital technologies for health, ensuring effective multisectoral collaboration, available resources (human and financial), and an enabling environment for scalable and interoperable digital health solutions remain as significant challenges in many countries. The workforce capacity building on digital health, more specifically around governance and leadership has been among high priority areas specifically in many low- and middle-income countries.

Elaborating a global standard setting instrument in the field of the ethics of artificial intelligence to guide a rights-based and multi-stakeholder approach to the development of AI so that it is harnessed to meet the sustainable development goals and ensure inclusivity.

ii. ensure transformative pathways to realize the decade of action for achieving the 2030 Agenda

Sustainable development stakeholders need to leverage existing mechanisms to ensure transformative pathways for achieving the 2030 Agenda in Decade of Action. Such mechanisms include:

- *WSIS Forum*

The WSIS Forum, co-organized by ITU, UNDP, UNESCO and UNCTAD, is a key platform for discussing the role of ICTs as a means of implementation of the SDGs and targets. The WSIS Forum has become the world's largest annual gathering of the 'ICT for sustainable development' community. The WSIS Forum 2020 (WSIS+15) will provide an opportunity to track the achievements and implementation of WSIS Action Lines since 2005 in collaboration with the UN Agencies involved. Since 2015, the Agenda and Outcomes of the WSIS Forum are aligned with the WSIS Action lines and the global development goals.

- *Internet Governance Forum (IGF)*

The IGF, which is convened by the Secretary-General, continues to act as a global multi-stakeholder platform that facilitates discussions of public policy issues related to the Internet. It frames multi-stakeholder discussions on the SDGs, increases awareness of SDGs and internet governance

interlinkages, promotes sharing of perspectives and experiences on SDG implementation at national or regional levels with a focus on Internet Governance issues, and identifies how the IGF, through annual events, intercessional work, and National Regional and Youth IGFs (NRIs) work, may be able to contribute to achieving the SDGs.

- *WSIS Regional Implementation*

Implementation of the WSIS process at the regional level has been growing over the years, while at the same time many WSIS process activities are being shaped to include regional needs and objectives. Strengthening the process of implementation of the WSIS outcomes and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in collaboration with the regional/area offices and together with relevant regional telecommunication organizations, UN Economic Regional Commissions and UN Regional Development Groups, as well as all UN Agencies (in particular those acting as facilitators for WSIS Action Lines), is crucial in furthering the regional activities towards alignment of WSIS/SDG processes.

- *UNGIS*

Coherence across the United Nations system in the implementation of multiple goals and commitments is essential. In this regard, the members of UNGIS have reaffirmed its role as the inter-agency coordination mechanism for issues related to the implementation of the outcomes of the WSIS. UNGIS members continue to include in its strategic priority the alignment between WSIS implementation and the implementation of the SDGs. The UNGIS portal is being redesigned to make it more interactive and to add a repository of actions/projects by UNGIS members on digital transformation, showing the direct impact of the WSIS Action Lines on SDGs.

2. Contribution of the UNGIS to accelerated action and transformative pathways and realizing the decade of action and delivery for achieving the 2030 Agenda within its area of responsibility (including its cooperation with ECOSOC and other intergovernmental bodies)

WSIS Action Lines and SDGs Matrix

At its annual gathering in 2015, UNGIS welcomed a new tool developed by a number of United Nations agencies, the WSIS – SDG Matrix.¹⁰ It describes the interfaces between the WSIS Action Lines and the SDGs and identifies areas where ICTs can help advance the development goals. UNGIS encourages all WSIS stakeholders to use the Matrix that serves as an easy reference in shaping the future and help to accelerate progress towards SDG achievement. UNGIS continues to deepen coordination and collaboration across agencies, including by strengthening the alignment between WSIS objectives and the imperatives of the SDG Decade of Action.

UNGIS Contributions to HLPE

In keeping with its mandate to promote policy coherence and programme coordination in the UN system, as well as provide guidance on issues related to ICTs in support of internationally agreed development goals, the 30 members of UNGIS has respectfully submitted its contributions each year to the HLPE.

- [Chief Executives Board \(CEB\) Joint Statement to the United Nations General Assembly on the Overall Review of the Implementation of WSIS Outcomes. The statement aimed to ensure that ICT-related issues are adequately included in the development Agenda and in the mandate of all CEB members.](#)
- UNGIS Contributions to the High-level Political Forum 2018 and 2019

¹⁰ Please see <https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/sdg/>

- [Side Event: “Fostering digital transformation and global partnerships for SDG achievement” \[Aligning WSIS process with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development\], 11 July 2019, New York.](#) The side-event highlighted good practices at the national, regional, and international level in the field of digital transformation and global partnerships to achieve the SDGs.

In 2020, UNGIS will continue this engagement with the aim of enhancing efforts to help commemorate the UN at 75 and support the Decade of Action.

3. Selected recommendations for accelerating progress and moving on transformative pathways for realizing the decade of action, for possible use in drafting the HLPF declaration

Key selected recommendations:

- **Continually enhance understanding of ICT potential as SDG accelerator:** The potential of ICTs and various digital technologies as key enablers of development, and as critical components of innovative development solutions, is fully recognized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. More needs to be done to strategically leverage them to accelerate progress on the SDGs during the Decade of Action. Taking into account the importance of relevant content, skills and an enabling environment, ICTs, including broadband Internet, mobile technologies and relevant ICT applications and services, are recognized for their potential to help empower people, enable wider exercise of human rights including freedom of expression, foster access to information and knowledge, open up employment and decent work opportunities, promote cultural diversity, expand access to learning, scientific knowledge and basic services.
- **Ensure link to SDG acceleration priorities:** The benefits of ICTs are not automatic; to accelerate progress on the SDGs, we need to ensure links of digital investments to SDG acceleration priorities and provide greater support to those at risk of lagging behind. Many developing countries, especially the LDCs, are inadequately prepared to capture the opportunities emerging as a result of digitalization. Moreover, there is a risk that digitalization will widen income inequalities, as productivity gains may accrue mainly to a few, already wealthy and skilled enterprises and individuals. The net impact will depend on the level of development and digital readiness of countries and their stakeholders, as well as on the policies adopted and implemented at national, regional and international levels. The speed at which digital economies and societies are unfolding, and the significant gaps that remain between and across countries, underline the urgency of scaling up global support for capacity-building and technical assistance., as well as for digital governance that ensures the benefits of digital development are evenly shared.
- **More effectively leverage readily available expertise and existing cooperation such as UNGIS:** 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.

Members of UNGIS

Current Chairs: ITU and UNDP

Vice-Chairs: UNESCO, UNCTAD and UNESCAP

1. FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
2. IAEA: International Atomic Energy Agency
3. ILO: International Labour Organization
4. ITU: International Telecommunication Union
5. OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
6. UNCTAD: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
7. UNDESA: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
8. UNDP: United Nations Development Programme
9. UNECA: United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
10. UNECE: United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
11. UNECLAC: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
12. UNESCAP: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
13. UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
14. UNESCWA: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
15. UNHABITAT: United Nations Human Settlements Programme
16. UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
17. UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund
18. UNIDO: United Nations Industrial Development Organization
19. UNITAR: United Nations Institute for training and research
20. UNODC: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
21. UNRWA: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
22. UN Women
23. UNWTO: World Tourism Organization
24. UPU: Universal Postal Union
25. WB: World Bank
26. WFP: World Food Programme
27. WHO: World Health Organization
28. WIPO: World Intellectual Property Organization
29. WMO: World Meteorological Organization
30. WTO: World Trade Organization