



Mapping of Digital-Related Initiatives in the United Nations System, to promote inclusive digital transformations for the SDGs

Concept note

Background

The ongoing digital transformation of human activities holds great promise for sustainable development, yet also poses downside risks and challenges that require addressing. This transformation can further exacerbate existing forms of exclusion while creating new ones, imperiling fundamental aspirations such as ‘leaving no one behind.’ At the same time, the transformation itself is set to accelerate following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, making it urgent that potentially exclusionary aspects be remedied.

Digital technologies are widely used by the UN system and other stakeholders, with a growing number of diverse applications, but there is not yet a comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of their deployment in the context of inclusive digital transformations¹. In particular, there is no comprehensive mapping of the technology and digital parts and functions of the UN system. As such, the Secretary-General’s Roadmap for Digital Cooperation (A/74/821) calls for such an exercise, so as to encourage a more coherent and strategic approach².

Enhanced information-sharing among actors could lead towards useful synergies in practice, given the extensive scope of digital technologies as a general-purpose technology. This concept note thus proposes a mapping and analytic exercise towards this end.

Objective

To systematically map initiatives, mechanisms and programmes on digital technologies, particularly on inclusive digital transformation, with a focus on the efforts of the UN system. The mapping will feed into an analysis of gaps, challenges and opportunities for collaborative action. This will require subsequent updating as technologies and initiatives evolve over time.

1. The “inclusive digital transformations” means that transformation must achieve to have affordable access as well as the required skills and knowledge to adopt and use digital technologies.

2. Passage 75, Page 16, the Secretary-General’s Roadmap for Digital Cooperation (A/74/821)

Organizational arrangements

The mapping will be carried out through the Technology Facilitation Mechanism's (TFM) Inter-Agency Task Team on STI for the SDGs (IATT). Day-to-day activities will be coordinated by the Division for Sustainable Development Goals of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA) and the Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology.

The UN Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM) was launched by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to mobilize the UN system and other stakeholders to harness science, technology and innovation for the SDGs. The IATT, consisting of 45 UN entities, is one of its central components. Other stakeholders in this space are connected through distinct TFM components - the annual global [STI Forum](#), the Secretary-General's [10 member group](#) of external experts and a dedicated on-line platform ([2030Connect](#)) designed to 'carry out a comprehensive mapping of, and serve as a gateway for, information on existing STI initiatives, mechanisms and programmes, within and beyond the UN.' The TFM has been set up and supported by UN-DESA ever since its beginnings in 2015.

A previous [mapping exercise](#) by the IATT collated information across 1,600 activities in the UN system related to STI for the SDGs. Several IATT partners have also undertaken more specialized surveys and compilations of STI activities in the UN system, for example, ITU and UNESCO on artificial intelligence and WHO and UN-ODA on biosecurity. The IATT's dedicated workstream on the impacts of emerging science and technology for the SDGs keeps track of key policy recommendations emanating from the work of the UN system in this space.

The Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology serves as the system's primary focal point and advocate for digital cooperation and coordinates the implementation of the [Secretary-General's Roadmap on Digital Cooperation \(A/74/821\)](#), the Secretary-General's vision for a more open, free and secure digital future for all. The Roadmap's implementation is a multi-stakeholder, collaborative effort that furthers digital cooperation in key areas to reduce digital divides. As mentioned previously, the Roadmap has also called for the mapping of UN functions and activities in the digital space. In implementing these recommendations, the Office will work closely with UN-DESA in leveraging the IATT's interagency process and previous work done for delivering the GA mandates on the dedicated on-line platform ([2030Connect](#)).

Methodology and overall approach

The present project will build on the existing methodology that has been used by the IATT for its wider STI mapping since 2015 but focus specifically on digital technologies. It will leverage the existing capacities in the IATT, and TFM networks, including the expert guidance of the Secretary-General's ten-member advisory group while employing the Partnership for SDG Platform for data collection and results dissemination.

Proposed activities

It is proposed to undertake the mapping in the following phases:

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1. Scoping and initial stock-taking of initiatives, mechanisms and programmes related to digital cooperation and inclusive digitalization in selected IATT member entities, in order to determine the range and format of the exercise. This initial task is to be undertaken by UN-DESA and Office of the Envoy on Technology colleagues and will consider inputs from relevant IATT members through bilateral discussions, as well as guidance from TFM experts/networks as relevant. (by the end of September 2021)
2. Comprehensive survey across the UN system and related international organizations and initiatives based on outcomes of the preceding step. This second stage will include broader discussions with and inputs from the IATT membership. (By January 2022)
3. Mapping of initiatives, mechanisms and programmes based on analysis of the survey results, documented in a data file. This task will be primarily undertaken by the co-leads with inputs from IATT members. (By March 2022)
4. Write-up of a technical report, together with recommendations and dissemination of results. Relevant aspects of the mapping and inputs will be made publicly available on the TFM online platform and the website of the Office of the Envoy on Technology. (From March-May 2022)

Expected outputs

1. Mapping and analysis results (data file), and online publication of aspects of mapping and inputs.
2. A place on the online platform (tbc) for UN agencies to consistently provide updates on digital cooperation related initiatives, mechanisms and programmes, to keep the mapping current.
3. Technical report, including policy recommendations and dissemination of results.
4. Proposed follow-up activities for closer interagency collaboration on inclusive digital transformation for the SDGs (IATT) as well as more coherent and strengthened UN systemwide activities on digital cooperation (Office of the Envoy on Technology).

Timeline: Results will be presented at the STI Forum 2022.