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Remarks

Digitalization to Achieve the SDGs:
Promoting effective and coherent UN support through mapping
and country level initiatives
6 May 2022, 7:30 – 9:00 a.m. New York time via Zoom

Excellencies, distinguished participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,

Let me begin by thanking Her Excellency Ambassador Buenrostro, dear Alicia, for her [reflections on the importance of the UN system strengthening its support to countries on digital.]

As many of you know, I wear two hats at the UN, and it is in both capacities – ASG of DESA and Acting Tech Envoy, that I welcome you to this STI Forum side event, co-organized by the Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

In both my roles, I have been struck by the ever-increasing engagement of the UN system on digital issues. The extent to which so many of the UN entities have been undertaking efforts related to digital technology, across all manner of topics has been truly impressive. This has become even clearer during the COVID-19 pandemic, as so many activities have been transferred online, taking place virtually. Now amidst all of this activity by UN system, it is important that we maintain a sense of strategy and the necessary coordination, so that all this work is undertaken within a broader framework, with the SDGs at its heart. This is why, for instance, in his Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, the Secretary-General committed to mapping the technology and digital parts and functions of the UN system. This is similar to the thinking underlying the mapping functions and mandates of Agenda 2030’s Technology Facilitation Mechanism.

The Office of Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology and DESA’s Division of SDGs have teamed up and embarked on an initiative to survey and map the digital related initiatives within the UN system, through the TFM’s Inter-Agency Task Team. With almost 500 submissions from almost 40 entities across the UN system, our mapping represents an attempt to better understand and bring greater coherence to the vast landscape of UN work in this area. Through our survey, we mapped the UN’s digital programmes and projects, institutional coordination mechanisms, reports and publications and meetings and processes. We also looked at the distribution of these activities across regions, specific SDG targets, areas of the Roadmap, as well as the level of partnership and collaboration they entailed, My colleagues will present the results in greater detail later in this side event, but what I found particularly interesting in the results was the following. One, the UN’s digital-related work has been particularly focused on

capacity-building, two, there is coverage of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals, three, activities concentrate on regions with the greatest need, and four, there is a robust potential for greater partnership.

These findings are aligned with what must be the ultimate goal of the UN's work – to concretely impact and improve the lives of people around the world, in the countries and communities we serve. This must be the same in the digital space as well; when it comes to ensuring coherent UN support. Given variances within and among countries and regions, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Greater understanding is thus needed of which digitalization approaches are most effective, considering political, economic and social contexts. Such decisions must be needs-driven and tailored to national circumstances, on the basis of country-level assessments, and better coordinated globally.

This is why I am especially pleased to have our United Nations Resident Coordinators from Mongolia and Capo Verde here today to share their perspectives and experiences, to ensure that our work is firmly grounded in national realities and experiences. Similarly, we have invited speakers from diverse UN agencies to present their digital initiatives and efforts, focusing on country-level implementation and impact. This sharing of experiences and good practices can provide on-the-ground practical lessons that will then be useful to others with similar challenges.

In short, digital solutions for sustainable development are many and varied; and the UN system is already doing much. But what we need now is more scaled-up, coherent and coordinated global digital capacity-building support. We need to make those possibilities equally open and accessible to all countries and stakeholders, so that the UN can best support digital transformation in an inclusive, trustworthy, secure and ethical manner.

The Joint mapping by the Tech Envoy Office and DESA, which fulfills a key recommendation of the Secretary-General's Digital Cooperation Roadmap, is thus a means to strengthen synergies on digital within the UN and beyond. With this, the continued collaboration and efforts by UN system actors, and greater multistakeholder partnerships, we can work together to realize the Secretary-General's vision of a more open, free and secure digital future for all.

I thank you for your attention.
