THE PRESIDENT
OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

17 July 2017

Excellency,

I am pleased to enclose herewith the summary of the SDG Action Event on Innovation, that took place at United Nations Headquarters, New York, on 17 May 2017.

The summary contains some key messages and recommendations emanating from discussions during the event. Overall, the Event demonstrated the need for UN Member States and the UN system to embrace innovation and connectivity as major tools for scaling up global SDG Implementation efforts.

Please accept the assurances of my highest consideration.

Peter Thomson

All Permanent Representatives and
Permanent Observers to the United Nations
New York

SUMMARY REPORT
SDG Action Event on Innovation and Connectivity – 17 May 2017
Organized by the President of the 71st session of the General Assembly

Background

The 2030 Agenda is being implemented in the face of rapid technological advances in a hyper-connected digital world. Recognizing the need to support UN Member States and the UN System to adapt to this rapidly changing landscape, the President of the UN General Assembly, H.E. Peter Thomson, convened a one-day SDG Action Event on Innovation and Connectivity. The meeting, held on 17 May 2017 in the ECOSOC Chamber, aimed to with Member States and the UN system an opportunity to engage leading innovators, thought-leaders, and technology companies on harnessing innovation for the successful implementation of the SDGs.

Overview of the day

Over 50 CEOs, five government ministers, Member State representatives, the UN system, and civil society attended the event. The day consisted of an opening segment; two panel discussions; an interactive discussion and, a closing session. The PGA, the Deputy Secretary-General, Ms Amina Mohammed, the Chair of XPrize and Singularity University, Dr. Peter Diamandis, the CEO of Google X, Dr. Astro Teller, and the Dean of Computer Science at Carnegie Mellon University, Dr. Justine Cassell, gave keynote addresses.

In support of the SDG Action Event, an informal breakfast dialogue between 25 Permanent Representatives and the CEOs present, was organized by the UN SDG Action Campaign in collaboration with Facebook, Tencent, Google X. The Office of the PGA, the SDG Action Campaign and Tencent also hosted an Innovation Hub throughout the day. In addition, the PGA held a press conference with the keynote speakers.

In keeping with the spirit of innovation, the PGA's office, together with NOVUS, transformed the ECOSOC Chamber by creating a unique space to facilitate dynamic dialogue. Member States and private sector participants commended the format and noted that it enhanced the experience.

Summary of key points

- Today the world is inter-connected and exponential. Significant invention in artificial intelligence, robotics, virtual reality, big data, biotech, drones, 3D printing, FinTech, digital medicine, genetic engineering, and other areas are rapidly changing our lives. This exponential change will not slow down. We therefore need to act with equal urgency.

- The achievement of the SDGs will require a radical shift in the UN's perspective, from linear to exponential thinking. This difference between linear and exponential thinking is the fundamental basis for those who can innovate, and those who are disrupted and displaced.

- The power of technology, once the preserve of big governments and industry, is now being democratized into the hands of ordinary citizens. Technology is helping to bring down the costs of basic services. Connectivity is the single most factor in advancing global innovation. Yet two-thirds of the world still does not have internet access. A number of independent initiatives are underway to connect the entire planet within 6 to 8 years.

- The potential connectivity of over 7 billion people creates unique opportunities to tap into the collective wisdom of the world to solve the challenges of the SDGs. Countries that do not have huge infrastructure in place are at an advantage in skipping straight to exponential technologies. Developing countries can leapfrog into the future.

- Traditional problem-solvers cannot solve today's global challenges alone. We need to leverage the new assert class of innovators to achieve the SDGs. Technology alone, however, is not the answer. It will require all the key people at the table: governments and policy-makers, innovators, academia and research institutes, finance, corporations, non-governmental organizations, and communities.

- The dialogue and partnership between governments and innovators needs to be strengthened. There is a disconnect between the two. Innovators said they are often unsure who in government to talk to and where the entry point is. Technologists said they can help provide solutions, but need receptive governments with whom to partner and try new technologies in a flexible, safe, and rapid manner.

- Participants from the private sector called on governments to create an open environment and positive incentives for innovation to thrive. It is also the duty of innovators to reach out to governments to understand their genuine needs and the context in which inventions will be utilized. Innovators need feedback and clear communication from governments on what their needs are and which problems need solutions.

- The unprecedented acceleration of technology in a hyper-connected world is also catapulting humanity into uncharted terrain, giving rise to anxieties about the societal impact. Discussions centered on the need to increase safety, defining the ethics around emerging technologies, and concern that artificial intelligence will take over jobs. It was suggested that the circular economy might succeed in preventing job loss while increasing productivity and efficiency.

- The UN can play a leading role in matching innovations with global challenges, and in creating do-no-harm principles to guide technological innovations. Speakers reiterated that opportunities invariably come with risks, but when you sum them up, you come out positive. It is therefore much riskier to face the future without technology.

- Regulation is a two-way street. Governments need to enact smart regulation that drives innovation. At the same time innovators have a responsibility to develop safe inventions, and to work on the right problems. The SDGs provide that framework for humanity.

Overarching recommendations

The following major recommendations were made to UN Member States and the UN System:

1) Foster an organizational culture and environment, at the UN and in Government, that supports risk taking, by creating safe places to experiment, fail and learn.
2) Create an ongoing dialogue between governments and innovators/entrepreneurs, and set-up a collaborative platform to facilitate partnership either within, at the edge or outside of the UN.
3) Create a financial system to support innovation hubs in a diversity of countries, and transfer skills from Silicon Valley to the rest of the world and vice versa
4) Enable the UN to play a leadership role in increasing safety and defining ethics around emerging technologies;
5) Circumvent the "immune system" of large organizations and governments, which are not open to new ideas and innovation, by creating edge entities.