Panel Discussion on

Sustainable Development: The Promise of Technology
Accessible Technologies for Persons with Disabilities: Crossing the digital divide

Statement made by

Ms. Daniela Bas, Director,
Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD)

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Excellencies,

Distinguished Representatives,

Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Daniela Bas, and I am the Director of the Division for Social Policy and Development of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs – also known as DESA.

I would like to thank the Singapore and Morocco Permanent Missions to the United Nations for supporting this important event today on "Accessible New Technologies for Persons with Disabilities: Crossing the Digital Divide".

Since the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, social integration continues to be one of the overarching objectives of international development efforts. The Copenhagen Declaration adopted at the Social Summit, recognized that access to and use of technologies by individuals can help in fulfilling social development goals.
The United Nations is committed to promoting sustainable and equitable development and has long taken a lead in promoting equality, inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities through information and communication technologies (ICT).

In the Division for Social Policy and Development we have been working on the issue of persons with disabilities for many years. We work to advance social inclusion and development for the benefit of all members of society, especially those who are most often left out. For persons with disabilities, new technologies hold many further promises.

A key message that I would like to emphasize today is that accessible new technologies are a cross-cutting enabler for sustainable development for all people, with or without a disability. The social development of any society largely depends on the access to information and services.

In 2006, with the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the importance of accessible new technologies has become more critical than ever to ensure that persons with disabilities can participate in societies on an equal basis with others. Without these technologies, persons with disabilities are left behind and are excluded from communities, social networks, employment and even from politics and decision making.

Disability was not clearly mentioned in the MDGs. To address this challenge and promote a disability-inclusive agenda in the new global development agenda that includes the issue of accessibility, the General Assembly convened the High-level Meeting on Disability and Development, in September 2013.

In the Outcome Document, Member States called for urgent action to mainstream disability and accessibility in the global development agenda and stressed the importance of ICT accessibility for inclusive development. All barriers should be removed to achieve the fullest potential throughout the whole life cycle of persons with disabilities.
According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), by the end of 2014, there will be almost 3 billion Internet users and the number of mobile-cellular subscriptions will reach almost 7 billion.

Despite all these achievements - out of approximately one billion people with some form of disability - many are still at risk of being excluded from essential services, social interaction and information sources delivered through new technologies.

Assistive technologies such as voice to text services, screen readers and speech recognition can promote empowerment, inclusiveness and participation of persons with disabilities. These technologies can be used in the education system, rehabilitation and community centres and employment support services.

Mobile accessibility is a powerful tool that offers new opportunities to persons with disabilities to compensate for physical and functional limitations, access knowledge by adapting media to their impairment, and enhance social and economic integration, particularly in accessing education and healthcare, and in providing new employment and opportunities for social interaction.

Social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter empower persons with disabilities to be active participants in society and become more familiar with global issues. They can connect, keep up with the current events and find opportunities to raise their voices and share their ideas.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

New technologies have the potential to become a significant driving force for sustainable and inclusive development.

Technology has been identified as one of key enablers for accelerating MDG progress and for realizing the UN post-2015 agenda. As such, strengthening
the interface between new technologies and disability will be crucial for the achievement of development goals for persons with disabilities in 2015 and beyond.

As developments and innovations emerge in the area of new technologies, these need to be made accessible and available to persons with disabilities. Policymakers, regulators, operators and industry leaders need to work together to make this a reality. As technology evolves all over the world and is increasingly becoming available to people throughout developing countries, it is crucial to ensure the adoption of ‘universal design and assistive technologies’, to ensure that the benefits are evenly distributed within societies as well as to bridge the digital divide.

It is vital that we change attitudes and approaches to persons with disabilities and appreciate accessible new technologies not as a matter of charity or additional expense, but as a necessary and smart investment for development, that would generate opportunities for equal participation by all.

To bridge the digital divide and promote accessible new technologies, we should ensure that infrastructure, including telephony, mobile phones, emergency services, the internet and broadcasting are all accessible in order to empower persons with disabilities to participate more actively and improve the quality of their lives;

We should ensure that assistive technologies become a key element of global, regional and national strategies to remove the remaining barriers faced by persons with disabilities.

We need to foster public and private partnerships to ensure that no one is left behind and that the use of new technologies should not be seen as an end goal by itself, but rather as an important means of empowerment of persons with disabilities, and a way to achieve international goals and commitments.
There is a need to strengthen policies and regulations, and develop new frameworks for accessible and affordable new technologies in close consultation and collaboration with persons with disabilities.

As a final point, we need to ensure that accessible new technologies are included in the UN post-2015 framework and in the realization of the rights of persons with disabilities.

I look forward to hearing examples and experiences from our experts on how accessible new technologies can act as an enabler for sustainable development for all and I wish you a most successful and fruitful discussion.

Thank you for your attention!