27 January 2021

Excellency,

I have the honour to inform you that I will convene a one-day High-level Thematic Debate on Digital Cooperation and Connectivity on Tuesday, 27 April 2021, in the General Assembly Hall, United Nations Headquarters. A preliminary concept note for the event is enclosed.

The thematic debate will be convened in response to calls from Member States to do so, and is held pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 72/313 of 17 September 2018, entitled “Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly”, in which the Assembly ‘recognizes the value of holding interactive inclusive thematic debates on current issues of critical importance to the international community, and calls upon the President of the General Assembly to organize such debates in close consultation with the General Committee and Member States’.

In light of the importance of addressing the digital divide in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Sustainable Development Goals, this High-level Thematic Debate will be convened under the theme “Whole-of-Society Approaches to End the Digital Divide”. The Debate will highlight the importance and urgency of political commitment at the highest levels to address the digital divide in support of COVID-19 adaptation, response and recovery efforts, in alignment with the SDGs. The Debate will also mobilize the international community to strengthen related existing multi-stakeholder initiatives and partnerships, and support the creation of additional partnerships to accelerate implementation efforts. Further updates and a draft programme will be circulated in due course.

For further information, your office may contact my Advisers Ms. Sara Ibrahim Mohammed Al-Ahmad (sara.alahmad@un.org) and Mr. Mohammed Amin Shaker (mohammed.shaker@un.org).

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Volkan BOZKIR

All Permanent Representatives and
Permanent Observers to the United Nations
New York
The COVID-19 pandemic has put a sharp focus on digital connectivity, digital skills and use of digital technologies. The pandemic’s socio-economic impacts have affected nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries, while severely impacting the livelihoods of 1.6 billion workers – nearly half the global workforce – in the global informal economy. Many people around the world have shifted to electronic commerce to adapt to mobility restrictions and social distancing measures – yet the 3.7 billion people who remain digitally disconnected do not have the option to work remotely, or learn and trade online. The poorest and the most vulnerable in developed and developing countries alike, who are the hardest hit by this crisis, are also the farthest behind in terms of access to digital technologies, reflecting and amplifying existing inequalities and hampering socio-economic recoveries. In two out of every three countries, more men and boys use the Internet than women and girls. Access challenges also affect rural populations and indigenous peoples, migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons, older persons and persons with disabilities.

Internet connectivity and digital skills are inextricably linked with more education and job opportunities, and more access to information and services such as healthcare and banking. Adaptation efforts to the COVID-19 impacts are accelerating trends such as digitalization, remote work and education, e-commerce and the virtual delivery of essential services. Societies will need tools to adapt and thrive to contend with these structural changes now. Yet, these shifts risk entrenching the inequalities that disadvantage the digitally disconnected if substantial efforts are not geared to reduce the digital divide.

This realization has provided the much-needed impetus to urgently undertake measures to connect everyone in a safe and meaningful manner, irrespective of location or means, so that all can participate in new and emerging digital growth engines and associated opportunities, including in support of COVID-19 recoveries. Greater connectivity, digital skills and education opportunities for all are imperative to ending inequalities and furthering gender equality.

Challenges associated with digitization also need to be addressed. Digital technologies provide new ways to connect, transact and educate, but they also carry risks, including by enabling technology-facilitated abuse and harassment, and aiding the spread of disinformation and misinformation that can cause harm and divide communities. It is therefore important that efforts to bridge the digital divide also guard against potential negative impacts by incorporating adequate safeguards to protect the vulnerable, respect privacy and human rights and enhance media and information literacy.

The transformational potential of digital connectivity for the SDGs will be best achieved when governments, the private sector, civil society and other stakeholders work towards a common goal. Now more than ever, ‘whole-of-society’ and ‘whole-of-government’ approaches are needed to identify solutions and shape a common digital future. This entails greater collaboration within and between ministries and sectors, as well as regulatory tools and mechanisms which include a broad array of policy makers, regulatory authorities, private sector, investors, and stakeholder groups through consultations.
Whole-of-society approaches are key to implementing the sustainable consumption and production patterns needed to enable greater connectivity, while also limiting any potential rebound effects from the increased use of digital technologies. Greater sustainable consumption and production patterns can also limit the severe risks posed by digital toxic waste by-products to human health and the environment, and allow for maximizing on the value of e-waste raw materials, estimated in 2019 at approximately $57 billion dollars, as an underutilized engine of economic activity.\(^1\)

789 million people globally still do not have access to electricity, and they will need energy to achieve digital connectivity. The digitalization of energy systems will be a key component to leverage new finance, generate better data, and maximize energy efficiency’s potential while closing energy access gaps. Global digital connectivity can also facilitate gathering and analyzing the global data needed to achieve the SDGs. Digital financing also has significant potential to help unlock the funding needed to achieve the SDGs. As the pillars of the global economy undergo digital transformations, there are opportunities to systemically embed sustainability data, analysis and normative goals within the emerging digital ecosystem and incentive structure. As algorithms and code begin to underpin all transactions and interactions in the digital economy, greater digitalization must contribute towards efforts to achieve sustainable and resilient civilization.

Investments and multilateral mobilization for digital infrastructures during the pandemic recovery can be an important pathway to ending the digital divide. At the same time, addressing this divide in a holistic, forward-looking way is becoming increasingly important in view of the converging clusters of new technologies – such as artificial intelligence, robotics, biotechnology, nanotechnology and various digital technologies. These technology clusters co-evolve rapidly, with advances in one spurring advances in another, as seen, for example, in recent advances in telemedicine or with the Internet of Things (IoT). National economies require ever more sophisticated infrastructure, technology capabilities and policy capacities to reap commensurate benefits from these rapid developments, and to ensure that value created is fairly distributed at the global and national levels. These capacities, however, are often limited in developing countries, particularly the Least Developed Countries. Failure to address these challenges may further deepen inequalities and divides that could threaten multilateralism in the years to come.

Connecting the Unconnected is estimated to cost 428 billion dollars by 2030\(^2\), and will reap significant rewards and increases in economic growth.\(^3\) The UN is where global challenges are met with global responses. As we reflect upon the UN’s 75\(^{th}\) year, and as the world contends with compounding crises, now is the time for the international community to commit to enhancing actions that can end the digital divide and ensure equitable digital empowerment for all to help secure the future of the 2030 Agenda.

**Mandate and Objectives**

General Assembly resolution 72/313 ‘recognizes the value of holding interactive inclusive thematic debates on current issues of critical importance to the international community, and calls upon the President of the General Assembly to organize such debates in close consultation with the General

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\(^2\) Connecting Humanity: Assessing Investment Needs of Connecting Humanity to the Internet by 2030. ITU, August 2020
\(^3\) Economic impact of Broadband in LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS: An Empirical Study. ITU and OHRLLS. 2019
Committee and Member States’. The President of the General Assembly has decided to convene this thematic debate in light of the importance of digital connectivity and cooperation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and pursuant to numerous requests from Member States.

The General Assembly has played a leading role in putting science, technology and innovation at the heart of the United Nations’ sustainable development agenda over the last decade. Both the UN Technology Bank for the LDCs (TechBank) and the UN Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM) originated in the General Assembly, and are now essential components of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Most recently, General Assembly resolution 75/233 recognized that “digital technologies can be a key enabler of sustainable development and that unlocking their full potential is essential to attain the Sustainable Development Goals”, and in this regard had recognized the Secretary-General’s Road Map for Digital Cooperation. Moreover, General Assembly Resolution 75/202 recognized the role of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) as the focal point of the UN on STI policy deliberations which regularly reviews progress made in the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (World Summit on the Information Society).

The Thematic Debate aims to:

- Highlight the importance of overcoming the digital divide in a way that supports sustainable development, and to rally Member States, the UN system, and stakeholders in support of the common goal to achieve a resilient and sustainable recovery from the pandemic aligned with the SDGs.
- Provide a platform for frank exchanges amongst relevant UN entities, technology leaders, constituents and stakeholders, to further align work in support of Member States’ needs,
- Build momentum for ‘whole of society’ mobilizations and concrete measures for national, regional and international actors, in view of the Member States’ call in the UN75 Declaration to improve digital cooperation and work towards a common vision of an open, free and safe digital future for all
- Share views and aspirations of working towards a common vision of an open, free and safe digital future for all as reflected in the UN75 Declaration’s call to improve digital cooperation.
- Strengthen existing multi-stakeholder initiatives and partnerships, and support the creation of additional partnerships to accelerate implementation efforts, which could be further discussed during ECOSOC’s STI Forum.