UNGIS Dialogue
on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action

Accelerating the achievement of the SDGs
through better collaboration in the UN System

United Nations Group
on the Information Society

Geneva, 2020

UNITED NATIONS
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INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Group on the Information Society

In April 2006, the United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) was endorsed by the Chief Executives Board (CEB) of the United Nations (UN) as the new inter-agency mechanism to coordinate substantive and policy issues facing the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

UNGIS' main objective is to develop extensive collaboration and partnerships among the CEB members in order to contribute to the achievement of the WSIS objectives, to help to maintain ICT-related issues as well as science and technology at the top of the UN Agenda and finally to mainstream ICT for Development issues in the mandate of CEB members. To this end, UNGIS seeks to complement and add value to existing programmes and projects by facilitating synergies and joint efforts, so as to maximize coordinated action, coherence and effectiveness of the support to countries in their efforts towards achieving the WSIS goals agreed upon by the international community.

UNGIS is comprised of 31 member agencies.

The Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action

The rapid rise of digital technologies is transforming economic and social activities. Affecting all parts of our societies and economies, digitalization poses both opportunities and challenges for attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is thus of high relevance to the entire UN System. The present crisis related to the COVID-19 virus has made the link between digitalization and development abundantly clear, including by highlighting the significant divides that exist.

In this context, UNGIS has initiated the *Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action* to raise awareness of both the importance of digitalization in achieving the SDGs and of the unique opportunity that UNGIS presents for more effective collaboration in this area within the UN System and beyond.

For this Dialogue, all Heads of UNGIS member agencies were invited to contribute a brief think piece, focusing on the following questions:

- How is digitalization affecting efforts at achieving the SDGs that are the most relevant to your agency?
- How can more effective collaboration in the UN System support your agency in promoting inclusive development outcomes through digitalization?

All contributions to the Dialogue can also be found on the UNGIS website.

**United Nations Group
on the Information Society**

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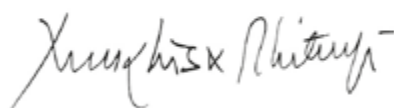
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MESSAGE FROM THE UNGIS CHAIR

During this global pandemic, the value of digital solutions has become even more evident, as online conferences, remote work, e-commerce and telemedicine are being used to keep society going. At the same time, we are being reminded of the huge divides that exist across countries in terms of the readiness to participate in ever more digitalized economies and societies.

The contributions to the *UNGIS Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action* express a shared view that digital technologies have been critical during the COVID-19 crisis and are essential to speed-up progress in delivering the 2030 Agenda. They show how digitalization affects a myriad of global concerns, such as those related to poverty and hunger, the future of work, global health, gender equality, economic development, access to education and climate change, to name but a few. The think pieces also highlight the importance of international cooperation in harnessing the potential of digitalization in an inclusive, resilient and sustainable way. This calls for a strengthening of the role of UNGIS in supporting and coordinating digital cooperation within the UN System.

Over the course of the Dialogue, UNGIS received contributions from 22 Heads of agencies. Between June and October 2020, all contributions were published online and promoted on social media by UNGIS and its participating agencies. During this period, the Dialogue received over five thousand web visits and about two hundred thousand social media views. On behalf of the Vice-Chairs, I would like to express my gratitude to all the Heads of the participating agencies for their insightful contributions.

New technologies have often spurred social and economic disruption, yet the current wave of technological changes under the "digital revolution" is unprecedented in terms of speed, scope and scale. The urgency of responding to COVID-19 presents us with a unique opportunity to unite in speeding up the development of a global digital society.

I encourage you to read the short think pieces collected in this publication as they stress in more detail the importance of finding suitable policy responses, more international collaboration, more policy dialogue and smarter partnerships in order to leverage digital technologies for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Mukhisa Kituyi

Secretary-General
United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

UNGIS Chair 2020-21

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THE UNGIS DIALOGUE

UNGIS initiated the *Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action* to help ensure that the digital dimension is adequately reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to harness the UNGIS network for digital cooperation. The Dialogue was launched on 15 June 2020 by the UNGIS Chair and Secretary-General of UNCTAD, Mr. Mukhisa Kituyi. Over the course of the following five months, 21 more think pieces by UNGIS Heads of member agency were published online.

With only one decade remaining to meet the 2030 Agenda, the Dialogue shows a shared sense of urgency for the international community to step up its efforts. Especially now that the COVID-19 pandemic is generating an unprecedented crisis that threatens progress towards achieving the sustainable development goals.

The contributions point to the fact that digital transformations have affected all aspects of social and economic organization around the world and acknowledge that digitalization provides many opportunities to accelerate progress towards the SDGs, whether it is in the area of health, tourism, energy, agriculture, cyber security, smart cities or the future of work. In many respects, the COVID-19 pandemic has further stressed this link between digitalization and sustainable development.

At the same time, the contributors acknowledge that digitalization has disrupted economic sectors and public institutions and the continued presence of significant digital divides has exacerbated pre-existing socio-economic inequalities. Providing universal access to affordable and reliable broadband internet has become more urgent than ever before, as has the need for support to make full use of available digital tools and opportunities.

The Dialogue demonstrates that digital solutions are extremely relevant to all parts of the UN System to fulfill their mandates and many agencies have developed digital initiatives. For instance, UNICEF is reaching more children through their digital products, UN-Habitat has been coordinating GIS and data-science based urban and neighborhood profiling, WHO is launching a 'Digital Clearinghouse' to assess digital health solutions and the IAEA is using remote monitoring equipment to keep an eye on nuclear facilities.

All contributions stress the importance of international cooperation to achieve a shared digital future that connects UN agencies, governments, donors, NGOs, the private sector or individuals. The Dialogue highlights many examples, such as the *Connect 2030 Agenda*, the *Generation Equality Action Coalition*, the *United for Smart and Sustainable Cities* initiative or the *eTrade for all* initiative.

Still more can be done, especially in the promotion of inter-agency coordination and support within the UN System. This is why UNGIS has launched the digital transformation repository. This repository of projects by UNGIS members on digital transformation will be used as a reference guide for all UN Agencies on different initiatives showing the direct impact of the WSIS Action Lines on SDGs.

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MAKING DIGITAL WORK FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW

**UNITED NATIONS
UNCTAD**

By **Mukhisa Kituyi**

Secretary-General, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and UNGIS Chair 2020-21

15 June 2020

Today's rapid pace of digitalization is transforming our economies and societies, creating both opportunities and challenges, both hope and uncertainty. As during previous technological revolutions, it is upon governments, in collaboration with other stakeholders, to formulate and implement national and international policies that help to foster inclusive and sustainable development outcomes. In most developing countries, national efforts will need support from the international community.

Against this background, urgent attention needs to be given to bridging existing and emerging digital divides. If left unaddressed, the yawning gap between under-connected and hyper-digitalized countries will widen and exacerbate existing inequalities. The development challenges of digitalization require a coordinated multilateral response, which can also help countries build resilience and facilitate responses to other cross-cutting challenges, such as climate change and the current COVID-19 pandemic.

As the current Chair of UNGIS, I am pleased to launch this *UNGIS Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action*. It offers a timely opportunity for me and my peers in the United Nations System and beyond to reflect on how digitalization is affecting our efforts at accelerating the achievements of the SDGs and how we, by working better together, can enable more inclusive development outcomes.

As digital technologies are disrupting entire industries, affecting global trade, innovation and investment patterns, they play an important role in the efforts of my own organization, UNCTAD, in helping developing countries to deal with related opportunities and challenges. In this context, close collaboration with different UN agencies and other stakeholders, such as through the eTrade for all initiative, has been essential in addressing existing knowledge gaps, promoting policy dialogue and expanding our technical assistance and capacity-building work related to e-commerce and the digital economy. However, more donor support is needed for us to cope with growing demand from developing countries.

> " *Urgent attention needs to be given to bridging existing and emerging digital divides.*

This is a special year. It signifies 75 years since the founding of the United Nations, which was designed to end war and promote peace, justice and better living for all mankind. It is also 15 years since the conclusion of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). This summit raised awareness of the benefits that information and communications technologies (ICTs) can bring to humanity and the manner in which they can transform people's lives.

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The WSIS also led to establishment of the United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) as an inter-agency mechanism for advancing policy coherence and programme coordination within the United Nations on matters related to ICTs in support of internationally agreed development goals. It now comprises 30 international organizations.

> *With only one decade remaining for us to meet the SDGs, we can do more and better by working together.*

With only one decade remaining for us to meet the SDGs, we can do more and better by working together. This includes making full use of existing mechanisms, such as UNGIS, to share good practices and avoiding duplication of efforts. Indeed, finding suitable policy responses requires more international collaboration, more policy dialogue and smarter partnership.

It is my hope that this online Dialogue will bring out good practices, generate new ideas and inspire the overall efforts of the United Nations to leverage digital cooperation in a manner that leaves no one behind.