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Submissions from entities in the United Nations system, international organizations and other stakeholders on their efforts in 2021 to implement the outcomes of the WSIS

Submission by

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

This submission was prepared as an input to the report of the UN Secretary-General on "Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels" (to the 25th session of the CSTD), in response to the request by the Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 2006/46, to the UN Secretary-General to inform the Commission on Science and Technology for Development on the implementation of the outcomes of the WSIS as part of his annual reporting to the Commission.

Implementing the WSIS outcomes in Africa
November 2021

1. Executive Summary

The work of the UNECA to support the WSIS objectives is carried out at a sub-programme level. In this context, ECA played a key role in the growth of the African Internet Governance space and also continued its work on undertaking policy research on ICTs, innovation and science & technology fields and producing evidence-based policy briefs to African policy- and decision-makers.

The race to respond to COVID-19 stimulated innovation and creativity across the continent, which showed the continent's potential towards accelerating industrial development, including based on home-grown technologies. The pandemic has plunged countries into uncharted territories and the adoption of digital technology during these difficult times. ICT sector experiencing mixed impact: increased demand (remote working, e-education, mobile money, etc.). This has, however, a positive side that necessitated people to go online while in self-quarantine.

Nevertheless, Africa is still relatively left-behind to gain from digital technologies. The use of digital technology in Africa remains low, and there are still critical barriers that limit the potential of digital technologies for Africa's transformation.

Therefore, ECA is highly engaged in supporting African countries to implement the WSIS outcomes to cope with the pandemic and facilitate economic and social recovery in partnership with several partners (Government, African Union Commission, ITU, UNWomen, World Bank, UNIDO, UNESCO, UN Agencies, private sector, civil society and other partners.

The following sections describe the work done by the various UNECA sub-programmes to support individual WSIS Action Lines and to promote the use of ICTs for achieving sustained growth and inclusive development in the context of the implementation of the SDGs 2030 and Agenda 2063.

2. Trends in the implementation of the WSIS outcomes

The overall ECA's assessment of the WSIS implementation in Africa shows that over the last decade, African countries have made and continue to make progress toward fulfilling the Tunis Commitment. The growth of the digital economy has been supported by continued momentum in internet penetration across the continent. The Covid-19 has accelerated digital transformation. In this regard, many African governments have implemented policy changes on how to leverage digital technologies, including digital payments, to avoid handling of cash to respond to this pandemic and run the socio-economic activities. Covid-19 has forced telecom operators to increase their data capacities.

Many new opportunities and challenges have emerged that affect the implementation of WSIS outcomes. Today, the continent is undergoing a revolution in ICT: Access to information and communications technologies (ICTs) continued to grow during the year. For instance:

- Mobile cellular signals now reach more than 82.3% per cent of the global population, and it is estimated that 298.6 million African (28.6%) now using the Internet.
- Innovation in Africa is Thriving. There are Tech and Innovation hubs in 34 African Countries. The number of technology hubs across the continent grew 40% to reach to 643 by the end of 2019.
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) is growing and will grow even faster in 2021, the 5G revolution is coming, etc.,

While the pandemic seems set to accelerate Africa's digital transformation, it is important to consider the challenges, such as access to electricity, internet connectivity, infrastructure, policies and regulations, and the ability of people to use the digital solutions

- Only 17.8 per cent of households have Internet access at home, and with the level of households' access to computers at 10.7 per cent. This shows that there is a significant use gap, where individuals who live within the footprint of a network are not using the Internet because of lack of affordability, skills, or meaningful/quality access
- The biggest barrier for Internet access in Africa is cost. The average cost of 1GB of data on the continent is 7.12 per cent of an average income
- With an average bandwidth of 31 kbit/s per Internet user, Africa still lags behind on the overall access to internet at 28.2 per cent of the population
- The continent lags the rest of the world in the availability of and access to broadband. Only 34% have access to broadband
- Social protection initiatives were hampered by the fact that more than 40%t of the population lack an official identity, which is crucial for identifying and targeting beneficiaries
- Concerns regarding cybersecurity, data protection and regulation are increasing.

3. **Overview of ECA's key activities**

ECA is focusing on assisting African countries and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in the formulation, adoption and implementation of new technology and innovation policies in line with WSIS that will help them accelerate the transformation process to improve the competitiveness of their firms, the welfare of their citizens, including ensuring their collective and individual security.

- In light of the current global situation, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in collaboration with the Africa Union Commission and ITU convene in October 2020, the African WSIS Meeting Review as part of the WSIS Forum 2020 to discuss the best ways on COVID-19: a Catalyst to Achieving WSIS as well as progress made by African in the implementation of the WSIS outcomes. The online regional meeting was attended by more than 35 countries and the outcomes were presented at WSIS Forum 2021.

- ECA, in collaboration with Africa Union, organized the Virtual African Internet Governance Forum (vAfIGF vAfIGF-2020) under the Unlocking Africa's Digital Opportunities During and Post COVID-19.AfIGF is a platform for an inclusive multilateral, multi-stakeholder and multilingual discussion on issues pertinent to the Internet in Africa in general and Internet Governance issues in particular. The event

took place from 25-27 November 2020. Two pre-events are included: African School on IG (AfriSIG) and the African Youth IGF held on the 23rd and 24th of November 2020, respectively.

-   ECA organized, in collaboration with Portulans Institute, a virtual panel on the Africa region's progress in network readiness and digital transformation. The webinar facilitated (a) discussions among policymakers and stakeholders on the state of Africa region's progress in network readiness and digital transformation in a post COVID-19 world; and (b) the launch of the Network Readiness Index Report (2020 -NRI Report) for Africa

-   On 18th November, ECA partnered with UNIDO to organize a side event "Making the Fourth Industrial Revolution work for Africa." The session provided many interesting and useful insights into the role that digital transformation could play in driving innovative, gender-responsive, inclusive, and sustainable growth in Africa

-   ECA and partners are involved in the development of a regional cyber security framework that ensures rights are protected. The drafting of the Continental Data Policy Framework that gives member states a framework to ensure privacy and security for Data including digital ID. ECA continues to engage on this process with the AU Commission and member states and has thus far given it's input on the framework. The framework recognises the close relationship between digital identity and data flows and recommends continental cooperation to govern data effectively.

-   Going forward, ECA is supporting several African countries (Cameroun, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Senegal, Kenya, Republic of Guinea, Rwanda, etc.) to implement the Digital transformation strategy to guide and steer the development of the sector in a coherent and purposeful manner.

-   To overcome the lack of strengthening human and institutional capacity building, in October 2021, ECA, in partnership with the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), launched four Centers of Entrepreneurships (COEs) entrepreneurships namely in Kenya, Ghana, Morocco, and Nigeria, which aimed to prepare and mobile the next generation of entrepreneurs to help catalyze local entrepreneurship and future jobs. The Centres will act as a platform to help entrepreneurs access best practices, run capacity-building programmes and training, and host a series of talks and community workshops to address entrepreneurs"and SMEs'challenges. The CoEs brings together thought leaders, businesses, and entrepreneurs. ICC and ECA signed a memorandum of understanding to frame and foster their partnership. A continental steering committee that steers the operations of the CoEs is being established.

-   ECA organized the Africa Peer Exchange on Digitizing Government Payments amid Covid-19 in partnership with the Better Than Cash Alliance. The series delivered a series of knowledge-exchange sessions to share experiences and good practices from Africa. Twelve country representatives attended and developed concrete takeaways on how to digitize national payments responsibly to make them beneficial for government and citizens.

- The much-needed impact at all levels of society from digital skills for young girls and women to the appropriate technical skills for professionals and digital literacy, ECA and partners organized the Connected African Girls, coding camp where technologies was used to increase existing efforts and good practices to expand digital skills and literacy to young girl and women and young girls. So far from the coding camps organized in December 2020 in Ethiopia and July 2021 and in Cameroon there have been more 100 innovations exhibited at the innovation fair and training in coding for the development of 12,000 young female Africans across the continent.

- The African Communications and Information Platform (ACIP) for Economic and Health Action launched in June 2002, with the objective to provide intelligent information to the member state to facilitate intelligent decision-making and resource allocation to implement COVID-19 responses and actions.

- ECA in collaboration with Alibaba Group works on supporting the 10x1000 Tech for Inclusion which is an open and global fintech training platform that enables learners to become drivers of digital economic growth.

- ECA in collaboration with UNIDO, ITU and UNESCO is supporting the establishment of the African Research Center for Artificial Intelligence (ARCAI) in Brazzaville, Congo, under the auspices of the University of Denis Sassou Nguesso to address most of the challenges in implementing the AI technologies in African Continent. The objective of the Artificial Intelligence Research Centre is to undertake cutting-edge research on Artificial Intelligence (AI), focusing on a human-centred approach in order to maximise the benefits and counter the challenges of developing and using AI for socio-economic development of the continent. The Center will be launched in January 2022.

4. Way Forward

A lot of work need to be done in order to bridge the digital divide that still persists particularly with rural Internet access by household compared to urban households and there has also been a widening gender gap compared to the previous year. This highlights the need for more targeted initiatives to bring women and youth online.

Connecting an additional 1.1 billion people online globally by 2030 and bridging the connectivity gap will cost $100 billion, or about $10 billion per year, according to the Broadband Commission. For the continent to truly transition to this new industrial paradigm, there is a strong need to invest in strengthening access to digital infrastructure.

There is a need for a much more enhanced effort in addressing content development particularly local content, which is an important factor in accelerating ICT adoption and usage in the continent.

Coordination and cooperation among continental institutions and strong partnerships at regional and global levels in all aspects of the WSIS action lines, including those being addressed in Internet Governance Forums are key to pursuing the digitalization agenda of the continent.