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This has been an unexpected and unusual year, not least for those of us who monitor WSIS outcomes and the evolution of a digital society. It's a year, of course, that's been dominated by the COVID-19 crisis. One that's tested the progress made since the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and drawn greater attention to the challenges still faced. One that's questioned our assumptions about what an Information Society looks like and our aspirations for the future – and one that's pointed us in new directions for policy, for practice and for governance.

In this summary of where we are and where we're going, I'll focus on three things:

- the impact of COVID-19 on the digital society and what that means for WSIS outcomes;
- other issues in the digital environment that are shaping discussions in CSTD and other fora;
- and what we've learnt from these about WSIS implementation and the digital society as we look forward.

A few words first on where we've come from. One thing is clear from the pandemic. We're better placed today to deal with it and with its consequences than we would have been ten years ago, or at the time of WSIS. The world today is far better connected than it was back then, and that has made us more resilient than we would have been.

2020 has seen a major setback to the world economy – down, it's estimated, by some 4% on 2019 instead of growing by that margin – but the economic hit would have been much greater if we hadn't had today's technologies. There's much to be thankful for about the progress that's been made.

The plus side

On the plus side, we've seen digital technologies – big data and AI – contribute to public health protections and vaccine development. Governments have used new media channels to make sure people know how to protect themselves against infection and what to do if they're infected. Test and trace mechanisms have been implemented, though with varying success.

Most importantly, digital technologies have allowed us to continue with our lives. I've been working with UNCTAD to assess the impact of the crisis on e-commerce. Overall business volumes are down between and within countries as incomes have fallen and movement restrictions have been put in place. But there's been substantial growth in electronic commerce, as people move to trade and shop online.

Millions upon millions of people have been able to work from home rather than from offices, keeping government services, businesses and voluntary organisations running. Education for many young people has gone online. So has entertainment; so have friendships.

It's the way, for instance, that I've been getting to know my first grandchild. Online funerals, too, are the way I've had to say goodbye to friends.

These gains to our resilience, ways of coping with our lives in crisis, have been possible because networks and services online have held up better than expected. Our infrastructure's proved robust.

Many say that it's enabled an acceleration of what is sometimes called 'digital transformation', the shift of life and livelihoods from analogue to digital. Much of that acceleration is likely to prove permanent. A lot of people say, for instance, that they'll continue to work or shop online in future. Some may have less staying power. Many things are better in the physical world than in the online world, from meeting up with friends to watching football.

On the other hand

So there have been big positives from digital technologies in the pandemic – but those positives have been unequal and they've been accompanied by negatives as well.

If the pandemic's shown how digital technologies can make us more resilient, it's also shown the impact of inequalities, 'digital divides' as they are often called.

- Those who lack affordable connectivity have been disadvantaged.
- Office workers have been able to work from home, but manual workers can't.
- Children without access to connectivity and laptops have lost out in education.
- Unconnected households cannot shop online.

It's widely recognised that digital divides have exacerbated social and economic inequalities in the pandemic – and that the pandemic's emphasised the importance of affordable access and inclusion for full participation in increasingly digital societies.

There've been other challenges as well. Early in the pandemic, the World Health Organisation warned about what it called an 'infodemic' – and the risk that it might overwhelm public communications on the crisis.

On the one hand, it was vital for governments and health authorities to get information where it was most needed, so that businesses and organisations, doctors, patients and the general public could take effective action to protect themselves and sustain their livelihoods. New media were extremely valuable for this.

But new media also attracted proliferating misinformation and disinformation – rumours and deliberate distortions that could have the opposite effect to messages put out by authoritative sources. It's hard for individuals to navigate the huge array of content now available, to judge what is reliable and what is not, or indeed identify what may be positively

dangerous. The advent of vaccines will be a big test of the response that governments and social media have made to this.

There've been other challenges as well, which, like the 'infodemic', have focused attention on bigger issues of digital governance. Test and trace mechanisms, for example, have added to discussion about data privacy and personal data protection. The growing use of digital transactions has brought many benefits, but also raised new threats to cybersecurity, particularly for users who are unfamiliar with e-shopping.

Lessons (to be) learnt

The pandemic, then, has been a key theme of the year – for the Information Society as well as other areas of public policy. It's accelerated some aspects of digitalisation, and drawn attention to challenges:

- some of them longstanding such as access and inclusion;
- some growing like cybersecurity;
- some which have had greater emphasis more recently, such as the potential and the risks of big data analysis, the dominance of new digital platforms, and the growing significance of artificial intelligence.

One of the lessons to be learnt from this testbed of accelerated digitalisation is the importance of integrating human and technological dimensions in our thinking. The technologies that have proved most valuable have been those that meet substantial needs quickly and responsively; that add value to large numbers of people without them having to devote a lot of time to learning how to use them. See, for example, the success of simple and straightforward videoconferencing.

Other lessons to be learnt concern the ways society will change as it becomes more digital. Many countries have experienced extended lockdowns. We've seen how dramatic the effects of these can be on city centres, workplaces, retail and entertainment venues; on social isolation and inclusion, equality and inequality. There are lessons to be learnt from this experience about economics and social welfare in the coming Information Society. Learning those now could stand us in good stead. They're important issues for a body like CSTD.

Three sets of issues

I've talked so far about the impact of the pandemic, which is appropriate because it's been the predominant theme in our experience of 2020. I'd summarise three sets of issues that it raises for us here.

First, there are short-term issues concerned with surviving the pandemic: how we've used our digital resources to mitigate the crisis, to get us to a point where, hopefully, societies can begin recovery.

Second are what I'd call medium-term issues, concerned with ways in which digital resources can contribute to that recovery from crisis – how they can help to reinvigorate economies, create new jobs, restore supply chains and small business viability, bring life back to inner cities, help children recover lost time in education. How they can help us, too, to build

resilience against future pandemics and other potential threats to social and economic welfare.

And third, there are the long-term challenges to the world community that lie beyond pandemic and beyond digitalisation: issues of poverty and inequality, health and education, security and environment, racism and political polarisation – the issues that are addressed by the Sustainable Development Goals and other international agreements.

'Building back better'

It would be easy simply to reach back to where we were beforehand: making progress, perhaps more slowly than we'd hoped. But the UN Secretary-General has made it clear that we should aim for more. 'It is time to reset,' he told the General Assembly. Time to build back better. What can the Information Society do to meet that challenge?

It won't be easy. The world economy, as I have said, shrank by 4% last year, instead of growing at that rate; in some countries national economies have shrunk much more. Recovery this year's uncertain. Many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become harder to achieve, with progress that's been made so far knocked back.

Those large-scale issues – and their relationship with digitalisation – haven't gone away during the current crisis. Nor have those raised by rapid change in the nature of the Information Society since WSIS.

Inclusion and equality

There is, for instance, the continued challenge of inclusion and equality. More than half the world's online, but almost half is not. In some countries, the gap in access and usage between men and women, rich and poor, urban and rural is very substantial. It's to do with quality of access, not just quantity; with affordability and skills, not just with connectivity.

Digital divides feed into social and economic inequalities. In an increasingly digital world, these are becoming symbiotic. We can't deal with either unless we deal with both.

Environmental sustainability

There is the challenge of environmental sustainability. Climate change, pollution and resource depletion haven't gone away in the pandemic. They are fundamental challenges for humanity; in the case of climate change, they may be existential.

They represent one of the most important interfaces between the digital and analogue dimensions of public policy. Much is made of the potential for technology to improve efficiency in energy and resource consumption, which is obviously beneficial – but digitalisation is also the fastest growing source of energy consumption and pollution. That growth will continue as data volumes increase, devices proliferate and AI becomes the norm.

There are enormous challenges involved in maximising potential environmental benefits while mitigating environmental costs. For the first time this year, the environment was a main theme at the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). In future it will need to be central to more international discussions about ICTs.

Cybersecurity

There is the challenge of cybersecurity, which grows more complex every year as more data are gathered from more devices and more applications; more people make more transactions; their data are analysed more deeply, used more intensively, and become more valuable to those who wish to use them for harm rather than good. There are many complex issues here and addressing them requires interaction between digital and other policy environments, public and private actors, in all parts of the world.

There's a counterfactual here that has not been sufficiently discussed. We've been transfixed this past year by the impact of a medical virus on our social, economic and political systems. We've been impressed by digital resilience. But what if it had been a digital virus – or, say, a breakdown in communications networks – that had laid our systems low? How well would we have coped with that kind of crisis? Would it have been less or more devastating? Would we have proved just as resilient? How quickly could we have returned to normal? Concern for cybersecurity isn't a luxury, in short; it's central to global well-being.

Digital cooperation

Which brings me to the second major event from 2020's digital experience, with which I will conclude: the Secretary-General's *Roadmap on Digital Cooperation*.

Cooperation was crucial, from the start, to implementing WSIS, and it's central to the SDGs. Cooperation between different stakeholders is often mentioned – but international action also requires multilateral cooperation, cooperation between different UN and international agencies, between old and new media, old and new technology, between (as the Secretary-General has emphasised) different economic sectors and different academic disciplines.

The Secretary-General's *Roadmap* seeks to move digital cooperation – and the WSIS vision – on into the future.

- It is rooted in the WSIS vision of a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society.
- It stresses the importance of connectivity and inclusion in achieving this.
- It recognises the importance of capacity-building, of human rights, of trust and security in online systems.
- It stresses, too, the value of 'digital public goods' in bringing the benefits of digitalisation to SDGs and global welfare.
- It acknowledges the need for governance to respond to changes in the nature of the digital environment since WSIS, including the rise of platforms and big data corporations, the challenges of data privacy and digital identity, the risks associated with surveillance, harassment and disinformation, and the new challenges being posed by artificial intelligence and frontier technologies.

The *Roadmap* sets out ways forward for the UN system in all these areas, including:

- the appointment of an Envoy on Technology;

- convening financial experts and investors to consider ways of financing connectivity in uncommercial areas;
- an advisory body on sustainable and trustworthy AI;
- the potential for an international statement on trust and security;
- and new arrangements to strengthen the IGF.

It's fifteen years now since the second phase of WSIS ended in Tunis. The Summit has been an important part of many of our lives here in this meeting. Its spirit and vision remain and much of what is happening today, in government, business and civil society follow from it. But much has changed since WSIS too. I am clear – when I talk to students in ICTs and computer science – about their preoccupation with innovations now and for the future. WSIS to them is part of the history that's led us where we are, but their focus now looks forward. We should do so too, reflecting on WSIS' influence, its legacy, and the continued importance of its vision.

Progress since WSIS will be considered by the General Assembly four years from now. That progress will be measured by how far

- digitalisation has created opportunity for all;
- enabled prosperity;
- protected us from harm;
- built cooperation between countries, stakeholders and development sectors;
- and, in the light of our experience this year, enabled us to recover from the pandemic that has set back so many aspects of our lives.