

# **COMMISSION ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT (CSTD)**

**Twenty-sixth session  
Geneva, 27-31 March 2023**

## **Submissions from entities in the United Nations system, international organizations and other stakeholders on their efforts in 2022 to implement the outcomes of the WSIS**

### **Submission by**

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

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 26<sup>th</sup> 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.

**DISCLAIMER:** The views presented here are the contributors' and do not necessarily reflect the views and position of the United Nations or the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

**Reporting on the implementation of the World Summit on the Information Society, 2022**

Your input should be brief (2–4 pages single-spaced) and focus specifically on the status of implementation in the action line(s) and/or main theme(s) of WSIS outcomes that your organization is facilitating, implementing or coordinating. It should contain the following three parts:

***Part One: An executive summary (half a page) of activities undertaken by all stakeholders, progress made, and any obstacles encountered.***

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is mandated to coordinate the regional review of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) by the ESCAP resolution 72/10.<sup>1</sup> In response, the ESCAP secretariat has continued to support ESCAP Member States in promoting regional cooperation through theregional cooperative mechanisms named “Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS) initiative.”<sup>2</sup> The AP-IS initiative is a region-wide intergovernmental platform that aims to bridge the digital divide and accelerate digital transformation through promoting digital connectivity, digital technology and digital data. As a result, the projects and activities under the AP-IS initiative contributed to several WSIS action lines, in particular, Action Lines C1 (the role of governments and all stakeholders in the promotion of ICTs for development), C2 (ICT infrastructure), C3 (access to information knowledge), C4 (capacity building), C5 (building confidence and security in the ICT use), C6 (enabling environment), C7 (ICT applications – e-employment), C10 (ethical dimensions of the information society), and C11 (international and regional cooperation).

The Committee on Information and Communications Technology, Science, Technology and Innovation, at its fourth session from 30 August to 1 September 2022, endorsed the AP-IS Action Plan 2022-2026.<sup>3</sup> The Action Plan serves as a regional blueprint for facilitating digital cooperation among members and associate members of ESCAP, as well as other stakeholders, for bridging the digital divide and accelerating digital transformation in Asia and the Pacific. The Action Plan contains 25 actions grouped under three pillars: connectivity for all; digital technologies and applications; and digital data. The 25 actions are interrelated, and each one is linked to the relevant Sustainable Development Goals and targets, as well as the relevant action lines contained in the outcome documents of the World Summit on the Information Society.

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<sup>1</sup> E/ESCAP/RES/72/10

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, ICT and Disaster Risk Reduction Division, “The Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Platform”. Available at: <https://www.unescap.org/our-work/ict-and-disaster-risk-reduction/asia-pacific-information-superhighway-ap-platform>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/ESCAP\\_CICTSIT\\_2022\\_INF\\_1.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/ESCAP_CICTSIT_2022_INF_1.pdf)

**Part Two: A brief (1–2 pages) analytical overview of trends and experiences in implementation at the national, regional and international levels and by all stakeholders, highlighting achievements and obstacles since WSIS and taking into account the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This could include information on the facilitation process of implementation, monitoring, and cooperation among stakeholders.**

To support the implementation of the regional WSIS action-lines, ESCAP conducted analytical studies on the prioritized issues related to ICT connectivity and digital technology. ESCAP shared the findings of these studies with its members, associate members, and other stakeholders through regional policy dialogues, workshops and at other international events. This section summarises the key findings and insights gained from such projects and studies on the emerging trends, challenges faced, and opportunities available for enhancing ICT connectivity and digital technology in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>4</sup>

### **Asia-Pacific Digital Transformation Report 2022<sup>5</sup>**

The Asia-Pacific Digital Transformation Report 2022 is the first edition of a biennial flagship publication series of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). The report aimed to deepen our understanding of the rapid and complex digital transformation process in the Asia-Pacific region, in particular, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the drive to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and its disruptive impacts, many governments, businesses, and people began to rapidly adopt digital technologies, becoming “digital by default,” thereby detonating a “digital big bang.”

In the wake of this “digital big bang,” the report illustrated good practices of rapid digital transformation in the region, including enhanced productivity, investment in networks and infrastructure, e-resilience, expansion of digital finance, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, and strengthened climate actions. However, with digital technologies underpinning all aspects of socioeconomic policy planning and implementation processes, the report revealed that the Asia-Pacific region is now the most divided region of the world in terms of digital transformation, with age, gender, education, disability and geography being the key characteristics of the digital divide. The digital divides have reinforced a vicious cycle of economic inequalities within and across countries.

The report acknowledged that there is a need for policymakers and stakeholders to:

- a) monitor the changing landscape of digital transformation at regional and country levels. The report proposed a digital transformation framework and index (version 1) as one of the assessment tools constructed by ESCAP. It proposed three development stages of digital transformation: foundation, adoption, and acceleration, together with five actors, namely network infrastructure, government, business, people, and ecosystems;
- b) promote new development paradigms and cooperative national systems to catch up with good opportunities and overcome challenges in the process of digital transformation;
- c) enhance the capacity to coordinate policies and actions for advancing digital transformation.

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<sup>4</sup> For a list of ESCAP studies, please refer to: <https://www.unescap.org/kp>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission of Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), Asia-Pacific Digital Transformation Report 2022: Shaping our Digital Future, August 2022. Available at: <https://www.unescap.org/kp/2022/asia-pacific-digital-transformation-report-2022-shaping-our-digital-future>

The report suggested three pathways (tracks) for actions, which are not mutually exclusive, at regional and country levels, in aligned with the Action Plan 2022-2026 of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative, namely, 1) strengthening the development of cost-effective network infrastructure that reaches all (supply side); (2) promoting digital applications and their use through capacity building programmes and digital literacy (demand side); (3) enhancing use and management of digital data

Finally, the report highlighted the need for political commitment at the highest level to bridge the digital divide and accelerate digital transformation. It encouraged Ministers to support the “Asia-Pacific Digital Ministerial Conference 2022”, being organized by the Government of the Republic of Korea in cooperation with ESCAP, for the first time, under the theme “Shaping Our Common Future,” scheduled for 9-10 November 2022 in Seoul, as an important means of promoting multi-stakeholder partnerships on digital transformation in Asia and the Pacific.

### **Regulatory sandbox and Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC)<sup>6</sup>**

Frontier technologies carry a promise to fast-track Sustainable Development Goals through supporting innovative, forward-looking policies and solutions. There are, however, numerous risks and complexities of digital technologies that come along with those opportunities, as well as policy and regulatory challenges. In recent years, relatively new approaches of policy experimentation and regulatory sandboxes have emerged among countries and have proven to be effective in creating a more conducive and contained space where governments, in partnerships with relevant stakeholders, can experiment and trial with digital technologies and innovations at the edge or even outside of the existing policy space and regulatory framework.

The ‘National Study on Central Bank Digital Currency and Stablecoin in the Maldives’ assessed the opportunities, risks, and challenges for the implementation of CBDC and Stablecoin in the Maldives. The study explored the potential implications and risks of digital currencies, examined technical considerations, and compared the socioeconomic conditions and likely objectives in the Maldives with other countries. It also identified current regulatory gaps and the monetary policy issues raised by digital currencies, the use of the sandbox concept to promote CBDC/Stablecoin products via experimentation and proof of concept projects. The study further discussed how the various stakeholders, notably the government and the Maldives Monetary Authority, as well as the private sector, might be involved. The study concluded with a recommendation that the Maldives may consider implementing a regulatory sandbox under the auspices of the Maldives Monetary Authority for experimenting with a CBDC.

### **Analysis of the impact of the digital divide and COVID-19: Impact on the socioeconomic development in Asia and the Pacific<sup>7</sup>**

The paper discussed the importance of information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure in the continuation of businesses, governments, and education during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, vulnerable groups, in particular the people without access to the Internet, who are more likely to suffer losses as lack of effective digital tools to deal with the various constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, had been impacted negatively by the

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission of Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), September 2022. Available at: <https://www.unescap.org/kp/2022/national-study-central-bank-digital-currency-and-stablecoin-maldives>

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission of Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), “The Digital Divide and COVID-19: Impact on the Socioeconomic Development in Asia and the Pacific”, June 2022. Available at: <https://www.unescap.org/kp/2022/digital-divide-and-covid-19-impact-socioeconomic-development-asia-and-pacific>

digital divide. The paper analyzed that digital transformation toward a digital economy with emphasis on digital connectivity, digital technology applications and digital data has become a key to achieving economic recovery and promoting sustainable development.

**Promote digital connectivity to bolster technical development and shaping the digital economy in South-East Asia<sup>8</sup>**

The paper examined the intersection of connectivity and the digital economy in South-East Asia, particularly in Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Thailand, and Viet Nam. The paper found that the availability of meaningful and affordable connectivity is a top policy priority to shape an inclusive digital society. The paper provided recommendations to policymakers, government officials, and intergovernmental organizations on bolstering information and communications technology development and paving the way to a sustainable, inclusive, and resilient digital economy in South-East Asia.

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, “Digital connectivity: Bolstering technical development and shaping the digital economy in South-East Asia “, May 2022. Available at: <https://www.unescap.org/kp/2022/digital-connectivity-bolstering-technical-development-and-shaping-digital-economy-south>

**Part Three:** A brief description (1–2 pages) of:

- (a) Innovative policies, programs and projects which have been undertaken by all stakeholders to implement the outcomes. Where specific targets or strategies have been set, progress in achieving those targets and strategies should be reported.**

The AP-IS Action Plan 2022-2026<sup>9</sup> serves as a blueprint for regional cooperative actions to bridge the digital divide and accelerate digital transformation. The actions are interrelated and each one is linked to the relevant Sustainable Development Goals and targets, as well as the relevant action lines contained in the outcome documents of the World Summit on the Information Society. The Action Plan aims to promote digital cooperation in closing the digital connectivity divide, ensuring digital skills training, strengthening digital connectivity, addressing digital trust and security, and promoting an inclusive digital economy and society. In this regard, the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS) initiative was identified as one of the useful regional platforms for the promotion of digital cooperation at the Committee on CICSTI10 at its fourth session in September 2022.

To realize the implementation of the Action Plan, the AP-IS Steering Committee established three working groups (one for each pillar) as implementing vehicle, which consist of one Chair or two Co-Chairs, up to three Vice-Chairs and members. The bureaus of the working groups operate in line with the terms of reference of the Steering Committee for an initial period of three years, which may be extended for another two years until 2026, by when the Action Plan is expected to have been implemented. The working groups will report periodically to the Steering Committee on progress made under each pillar. The Chair of the Steering Committee will then submit a report, including key recommendations and decisions, to the Committee and ESCAP at their upcoming sessions.

- (b) Future actions or initiatives to be taken, regionally and/or internationally, and by all stakeholders, to improve the facilitation and ensure full implementation in each of the action lines and themes, especially with regard to overcoming those obstacles identified in Part Two above. You are encouraged to indicate any new commitments made to further implement the outcomes.**

In ESCAP resolution 78/1, members and associate members committed themselves to strengthening digital cooperation and expressed the intention to cooperate at all levels, including the ministerial level, in closing the digital connectivity divide, ensuring digital skills training, strengthening digital connectivity, addressing digital trust and security, and promoting an inclusive digital economy and society. In response, the ESCAP secretariat is supporting the Republic of Korea to organize the “Asia-Pacific Digital Ministerial Conference 2022” in Seoul, the Republic of Korea, on 10 November 2022<sup>11</sup> with the theme “Shaping our common future.” The high-level intergovernmental event will act as an important platform for promoting multi-stakeholder partnerships on digital cooperation and transformation in Asia and the Pacific.

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, “Action plan for implementing the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative, 2022–2026,” ESCAP/CICTSTI/2022/INF/1, May 2022. [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/ESCAP\\_CICTSIT\\_2022\\_INF\\_1.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/ESCAP_CICTSIT_2022_INF_1.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/ESCAP\\_CICTSTI\\_2022\\_4.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/ESCAP_CICTSTI_2022_4.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.unescap.org/events/2022/asia-pacific-digital-ministerial-conference-2022-shaping-our-common-future-and-asia>

In order to enrich the discussions and deliberations of the Ministerial Conference, ESCAP, in cooperation with the Ministry of Science and ICT of the Republic of Korea, is also organizing the “Asia-Pacific Digital Transformation Forum” on 9 November 2022. Among the side events, the “high-level policy dialogue on digital transformation” at the highest level will provide a good opportunity for high-level senior officials from member States, United Nations agencies, international and regional organizations and civil society on ICT/Digital agendas, as well as donor agencies, to discuss and consider new digital business opportunities and cooperative actions towards an inclusive digital society and economy.