ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL
Coordination Segment

Session on: Closing the digital divide: towards achieving a global digital transformation

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New York, 1 February 2024

- We are in a digital era. However, we are not at the same level of digitalization. As the CSTD discussions in the recent years have revealed, the pace of countries towards digital transformation varies greatly and the digital divide has become a serious concern for the international community, as it severely impacts on development, particularly in the developing countries, including the least developed countries. Unsurprisingly, the world is currently grappling with widening digital divides.

- For example, in respect of internet connection, in 2021, an estimated 2.9 billion people were still offline.[1] The concentration of the offline population in regions like Asia-Pacific (1.7 billion people) and Africa (738 million people) illustrates a disparity between different parts of the world. This divide is more pronounced in lower-income countries, contrasting sharply with high-income countries. Although high-income countries account for 16 per cent of the world's population, they account for only 4 per cent of the total offline population.

- Internet access varies greatly between urban and rural areas. This divide is often attributed to the lack of infrastructure in rural areas. However, other factors like lower income levels, education, and ICT skills in these areas also play a crucial role. These factors are interconnected and contribute to lower internet usage in rural areas compared to urban ones. These factors create a scenario where certain populations become mere data providers or consumers, unable to fully leverage the benefits of the digital age.

- There is also a notable gender divide in internet use, with more men having access to and using the internet compared to women. This gap can be attributed to various socio-cultural and economic factors that limit women's access to technology and the internet.

- Digital divides have significant implications. Those with limited or no internet access are often excluded from the benefits of the digital economy, which includes access to information, services, job opportunities, and the ability to participate in the digital marketplace.

- As we move towards a more data-centered world, we often neglect areas where data are scarce or unavailable. Data divides lead to "invisibility" of marginalized communities, including women, tribal groups, castes, religious and linguistic minorities, and migrant workers. The invisibility of these communities in national or global data landscapes can result in their voices being muted and limit their active participation in social, economic, and political spaces. Relying heavily on automated data collection methods can

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[1] ITU (2022). Global Connectivity Report 2022.

inadvertently exclude these already vulnerable groups. This exclusion can further deteriorate their trust in digital tools and potentially amplify biases that affect the performance and accuracy of data analytics.

- The concentration of data capabilities and skills in a few hands means that only a select global minority can fully leverage the benefits of data-driven technologies to enhance their lifestyle or economic status. This imbalance creates a scenario where the potential for diverse life choices and opportunities is unevenly distributed, favoring those with greater access and understanding of data technologies. Furthermore, the concentration of data capabilities in the hands of a few means that the vast majority of people have limited control over how their data is used and are unable to capitalize on the value of this data.

- The overarching majority cannot effectively navigate or exert control over their data, leading to a divide in how various groups can safeguard their digital rights. In many scenarios, individuals are compelled to make choices that are not entirely voluntary but are necessitated by circumstances or a lack of viable alternatives in the digital world. This can stem from the need to use certain digital services for work or social interaction, even when these services do not fully respect user data privacy or autonomy.

- If we identify effective policies for data and technology governance, we could foster more prosperous societies and significantly boost climate action. The opportunities are diverse, ranging from creating entirely new markets to advancing healthcare and accelerating scientific breakthroughs.

- Discussions on data governance should be inclusive and the UN provides a neutral platform for inclusive participation from all regions and all countries. At present, regions like Africa, South and Central America, and Central Asia are underrepresented in global data governance debates. This raises concerns about neglecting local knowledge, cultural pluralism and global fairness. Fragmented debate on the benefits and risks of data driven technologies such as AI cannot generate a full picture. For example, the equitable sharing of benefits from the productivity gains enabled by data and AI technologies in the international political order is often overlooked in ethical debates.

- The CSTD at its forthcoming 27th annual session from 15 to 19 April will discuss the issue of data for development, looking at the benefits and challenges brought about by generating and using data, as well as data governance. I welcome you to participate in the CSTD's discussions on data for development.

- Addressing the digital and data divides requires a concerted effort from governments, the private sector, and international organizations. This includes investment in infrastructure, especially in rural and low-income areas, education and training programs to improve ICT skills, policies to ensure affordable access, and initiatives specifically targeted to bridge the gender gap in internet usage. Only through such comprehensive efforts can the benefits of the digital age be made accessible to all, thereby reducing inequalities and fostering inclusive growth.

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