INTERSESSIONAL PANEL OF THE UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT (CSTD)

Geneva, Switzerland
21-22 October 2024

Contribution by United Kingdom

to the CSTD 2024-2025 priority theme on "Diversifying economies in a world of accelerated digitalization"

Digital and digital development themes span multiple departments in UK Government. We have focused more on the remit of digital development (Diversifying economies in a world of accelerated digitalization). I have provided some responses to the UK's ongoing approach with regards to access to digital innovations and emerging technologies for development/in developing countries; and where we think CSTD could add value.

(a) Economic diversification driven by digitalisation and leading to inclusive growth requires an approach to digital development that first of all strengthens the digital foundations of partner countries, ensuring digital transformation is inclusive, responsible and sustainable.

The benefits of AI and other emerging digital technologies are not automatically evenly distributed across the world. Without rapid, careful and concerted policy efforts, the onset of AI could substantially exacerbate existing inequalities between and within countries. Developing countries risk being left further behind and unable to harness AI to accelerate the SDGs.

As part of managing this risk, we should strive for a digital future where developing countries can not only access AI/digital technologies and adapt them to their needs and context, but also contribute towards shaping technological innovations. For this we work to support developing countries to achieve a digital transformation that is inclusive and leaves no-one behind in a digital world.

With specific regards to meaningful connectivity and digital skills, the UK works with country stakeholders to improve policies, regulations and standards, and increase the capacity of relevant institutions, to enable and catalyse digital inclusion. We also support local organisations to test and demonstrate scalable or replicable technology and business models that can sustainably close the digital gap at the last mile, in underserved communities and for marginalised groups (e.g. women and girls, people living with disabilities). The UK's Digital Development Strategy is here.

We recognise the value of country case studies, rather than a more generic / high-level analysis as these will provide a greater insight into the unique needs and requirements of each country. These studies could build on the OECD's Innovation for Development work, particularly if the idea is to develop best practice which is an area of OECD's particular strength. The G20 has also convened some useful work on digital connectivity in its Working Group.

1. What are the specific challenges your economy is facing to develop or adapt frontier technologies and AI?
    a. Limited compute and data centre availability.
    b. Limited talent, effectively competing in a zero-sum game.
    c. Limited uptake/diffusion of frontier technologies.
2. Can you provide successful examples of AI and other frontier technologies uptake in your country?
    a. Data on the growth of the UK AI sector.
3. Has your country put in place inclusive policies for innovation and economic diversification specifically tailored to diffusion of digital technologies and AI?

a. The previous UK government's Innovation Strategy placed an emphasis on this. The UK has a new government now. This theme will likely be considered as part of the new Industrial Strategy (currently under development).

4. Do you have examples of policy instruments in place to favour the diffusion of frontier technologies in the economy and targeting specific sectors?

    a. See answer to Q3.

5. Has your country put in place mechanisms to strengthen industrial capabilities through partnerships among different stakeholders (e.g., university-industry, or private-public)?

    a. See answer to Q3.

6. How can international cooperation support the uptake of new technologies and the development of technological capabilities in your country and ensure that industrial policies will benefit all and do not worsen inequality?

    a. By reaching agreement on the need for inclusive dialogues and developing a scientific/evidence-based understanding of where and how new tech could most effectively be developed/deployed, building on case studies of countries at different stages of development.

7. What can the UN CSTD do to support an economic transformation that enhances your country productive capabilities and foster an inclusive digital transformation?

    a. See answer to Q6.

(b) UN CSTD could add value within the specific area of economic diversification through digital transformation:

- by serving as a multilateral platform for exchange of knowledge, evidence, and models from different member states;
- by identifying critical evidence gap and encouraging research and analysis on the application of digital technologies to industrial upgrading, digitalised supply chain, and other forms of productivity gain through technology;
- by helping to link research activity with evidence-driven policy and investment in the inclusive digital transformation of partner countries.