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Statement by
Rebeca Grynspan
UNCTAD Secretary-General

President of TDB

Excellencies

Distinguished delegates

Ladies and gentlemen

Eight months ago, we launched the Digital Economy Report 2021, which focuses on Cross-Border Data Flows and Development. Since then, the topic discussed in the report has only gained in importance. This issue is now at the top of the multilateral agenda.

This April, at the fifth session of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts on E-commerce and the Digital Economy, and at eCommerce week, member states met to discuss how to recover from COVID-19 in an increasingly digital economy. The growing role of digital platforms and data / was at the centre of the discussion. Indeed, it was noted that in 2020 global Internet bandwidth use / rose by 35 per cent, the largest one-year increase since 2013.

Beyond UNCTAD, data-related issues are featuring high up on the agenda. For example, the Indonesian G20 Presidency has invited UNCTAD to serve as knowledge

partner for the work of the Digital Economy Working Group on Data Free Flow with Trust.

The African Union has adopted a Continental Data Policy Framework.

The European Union has adopted new legislation, such as the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act.

And several new civil-society initiatives have been launched, such as the "Datasphere initiative" from the Internet / and Jurisdiction Policy network.

Across the UN system, the role of data and data flows, and how to address them, is also getting more attention. For example:

The Secretary-General's report, Our Common Agenda, highlights the need to avoid fragmentation of the Internet and provide people with options as to how their data are used.

Data privacy is core to the work of the UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights and to UNICEF to protect children online.

For UNCTAD, UNCITRAL and the WTO, links between data, trade and development are explicitly acknowledged as key.

The pandemic has underlined the importance of handling data to address global challenges, not least in the context of developing new vaccines and tracing the virus.

And the IPCC in its recent report on Climate Change recognized the need to reduce the energy use of data centres, networks, and connected devices in order to foster low-carbon digitalization.

At the forefront of these discussions, our Digital Economy Report suggests that the current trajectory of global digitalization is not sustainable. The acceleration of the use of digital tools and technologies is happening against the backdrop of huge digital and data divides, and a highly unequal distribution of the benefits from data.

Meanwhile, our Report also demonstrated the fragmented nature of the current landscape of data governance. Given economic, political and cultural differences between countries, it is understandable that there are also diverging views about how to deal with data. Conflicting interests can lead to tensions between countries as well as within countries between various actors – such as individuals, communities, large and small private companies in the digital or other sectors, as well as civil society and Governments.

It is nonetheless crucial to look for global governance solutions that can harness the opportunities and mitigate the risks of fast evolving data-driven economies and societies. Only then will we be able to successfully tackle the issue of data inequality – right policies need right governance structures. Our Digital Economy Report makes that very clear.

And we are not alone in thinking this. At the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, the Heads of State and Government of the world declared, and I read: "shaping a

shared vision on digital cooperation and a digital future that show the full potential for beneficial technology usage, and addressing digital trust and security, must continue to be a priority as our world is now more than ever relying on digital tools for connectivity and social-economic prosperity… the United Nations can provide a platform for all stakeholders to participate in such deliberations."

With this in mind, I would encourage all member States – as you reflect on the analysis and recommendations in the Digital Economy Report – to consider what you think UNCTAD, in collaboration with other parts of the UN system, should do to foster the dialogue needed to shape a shared vision towards effective global data governance.

We have the political awareness. We have the policies. What is needed is the leadership and the will to make this work.

Our Digital Economy Report proposes some key features that this digital governance agenda should have: First, it must an appropriate mix of multilateral, multi-stakeholder, and multidisciplinary involvement. Second, it must ensure the full involvement of all countries, be flexible enough to take into account existing divides and imbalances, and devote the necessary resources to help countries that are trailing behind to strengthen their ability to harness data. And third, finally, it might need a new coordinating body that has the right skills to focus on assessing and supporting the development of this comprehensive global digital and data governance agenda.

While Member States need to be in the driving seat to move the process forward politically, this Secretariat stands ready to support you through research & analysis – as illustrated by the Digital Economy Report consensus-building – through the IGE and the TDB or other means as appropriate, and through capacity-building and technical assistance – based on the needs identified at national and regional levels.

Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends:

Time is of the essence. How we handle data will determine our ability to meet the SDGs, which are quickly running out of reach. I look forward to listening to you on how we can move forward together.

Thank you.