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Submissions from entities in the United Nations system, international organizations and other stakeholders on their efforts in 2023 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 27th 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.

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 continue work in implementation of the World Summit on the Information Society action lines including through regional reviews. [1]

In addition, the ESCAP Commission in May 2023 adopted resolution 79/10 to promote digital cooperation and inclusion through the Action Plan for implementing the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Initiative, 2022–2026. [2] In particular, the Commission through the resolution decided to convene a ministerial conference on digital inclusion and transformation to accelerate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and regional technology initiatives, including the Asia Pacific Information Superhighway initiative, in line with the provisions of the conference structure of ESCAP. The Commission also welcomed the offer of the Government of Kazakhstan to host such a ministerial conference in 2024.

The ESCAP secretariat has continued to support members and associate members in promoting digital inclusion and transformation through regional cooperative mechanisms including the "Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (APIS)" initiative[3] and its Action Plan 2022-2026. The 25 actions agreed to in the Action Plan 2022-2026 are aligned with 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).

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 WSIS action lines, the ESCAP secretariat conducted analytical studies related to ICT connectivity and digital transformation including the development of a flagship publication titled the Asia Pacific Digital Transformation 2022. The ESCAP secretariat shared the findings and policy recommendations of these studies with members, associate members, and other stakeholders during regional meetings, capacity building workshops, and other ICT-related 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 digital connectivity and digital transformation in the Asia-

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[1] GA/A/70/125

[2] E/ESCAP/RES/79/10

[3] 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

Pacific region.[4]

Promoting digital transformation in Asia and the Pacific through the Action Plan for Implementing the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (APIS) Initiative, 2022–2026.[5]

ESCAP promoted regional policy dialogues among members and associate members at the Seventy-ninth session of the ESCAP Commission in May 2023 with supporting documents including the APIS Action Plan 2022-2026.[6]

The supporting documents highlighted that the rapid adoption of digital technologies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed the socioeconomic structures, business practices and digital demands of citizens. However, businesses and people without reliable and affordable Internet connections or the necessary digital skills are not able to access the benefits and opportunities of the digital economy.

According to ITU statistics, the lowest broadband Internet access rates are in South and South-West Asia and in Pacific small island developing States, while the highest access rates are in East and North-East Asia. For mobile-broadband connection, the divide persists, even though overall access is greater, and the gaps are narrower. Mobile-broadband connection rates range from 58 per cent in Pacific small island developing States to 115 per cent in East and North-East Asia. There are also notable digital gaps between urban and rural areas within countries. Only two subregions of ESCAP – East and North-East Asia and North and Central Asia – of which fixed and mobile broadband connections are considered affordable.

The Asia-Pacific region is the most divided in terms of digital transformation status, with the largest difference between ICT advanced countries and ICT less advanced countries. In addition, the business sector emerged as an important driver of research, innovation, and development of frontier technologies for digital transformation.

In response, the Seventy-ninth session of the ESCAP Commission[7] underlined the importance of digital technologies and applications, digital skills, and the sharing of knowledge and good practices to bridge the digital divide and accelerate digital transformation for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and addressing the challenges of climate change.

Furthermore, it was crucial to promote the development of an inclusive digital economy through regional digital cooperation, specifically utilizing the regional pathways outlined in the APIS Action Plan 2022-2026. This regional cooperation primarily focused on enhancing ICT infrastructure connectivity, digital technologies and applications, and digital data within the region.

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[4] For a list of ESCAP studies, please refer to: https://www.unescap.org/kp
[5] ESCAP/79/18
[6] https://www.unescap.org/events/commission79
[7] ESCAP/79/26

Asia-Pacific Countries with Special Needs Development Report 2023: Strengthening Regional Cooperation for Seamless and Sustainable Connectivity – ICT connectivity[8]

An ESCAP secretariat note at the Seventy-ninth session of the ESCAP Commission informed members and associate members that broadband access in countries in special situations are below the Asia-Pacific's regional average, with small island developing States lagging the furthest behind. This digital divide has constrained countries in special situations from fully exploiting the new socioeconomic opportunities offered by digital technologies.

The secretariat note further stated that the geographical features of countries in special situations pose significant challenges in promoting digital connectivity. In least developed countries, dispersed rural communities across a large geographical area imposes costlier ICT infrastructure deployment. This contributes to larger gap in the use of mobile services between urban and rural areas. In landlocked developing countries where population densities are low and the terrain is mountainous, laying fibre-optic cables can be economically unviable, while, in small island developing States, broadband access remains low, expensive, and unreliable due to their geographical remoteness, dispersed smaller populations, and high susceptibility to natural disasters.

For countries in special situations, mobile broadband is typically three times as expensive as the Asia-Pacific regional average, and fixed-broadband data remains particularly expensive. The lack of affordable broadband Internet is partly caused by underdeveloped last-mile digital infrastructure. Limited competition in the telecommunications sector also leads to lower private investment on digital infrastructure and fewer digital innovations.

However, access to broadband services is more affordable in several landlocked developing countries in North and Central Asia, partly due to publicly funded programmes such as "Digital Kazakhstan", a digital infrastructure programme that is focused on connecting people living in rural areas.

To close these gaps and advance affordable and resilient digital connectivity, the geographical diversity of Internet traffic routes, with a combination of multiple connectivity modalities, including fixed, mobile, and satellite-based digital connectivity, are key to reducing the risk of disruptions to Internet infrastructure networks. Several options are available to countries in special situations to enhance Internet-resilient connectivity. For example, scientific monitoring and reliable telecommunications (SMART) submarine cables carry Internet traffic and monitor climate and natural disasters using sensors in the cables' repeaters. Low Earth orbital satellite technologies offer another option to create more affordable and resilient Internet connectivity. Several global technology companies provide such satellite services, which have wider coverage, lower latency and lower installation costs than stationary satellites.

As a result, the ESCAP Commission[9] emphasised the importance of ICT connectivity for socioeconomic development, addressing climate change and increasing resilience to disasters. It

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[8] ESCAP/79/5
[9] ESCAP/79/26

highlighted the significance of digital connectivity, technology transfer and digital technology applications in monitoring climate change and building resilience to natural disasters. While improvements have been made in mobile connectivity in countries in special situations, affordability, and reliability remains a challenge. Partnerships and multistakeholder engagement through regional digital cooperation mechanisms, such as the APIS initiative, played a vital role in strengthening resilient and affordable connectivity of countries in special situations.

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

(a) Innovative policies, programmes 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 APIS Action Plan 2022-2026 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 of the World Summit on the Information Society. The Action Plan aims to promote digital cooperation in closing the digital divide, ensuring digital skills training, strengthening digital connectivity, addressing digital trust and security, and promoting an inclusive digital economy and society.

In 2022-2023, ESCAP supported the operation of the respective bureaus of APIS Working Groups 1 (Connectivity for all); Working Groups 2 (Digital technologies and applications); and Working Group 3 (Digital data) in monthly virtual sessions, which brought different stakeholders and partners in the region to exchange information and good practices on respective projects and initiatives on digital transformation.

As a result of the monthly sessions, Working Group 1 highlighted the importance of digital infrastructure connectivity as a necessary foundation for digital transformation. Working Group 2 recognised the importance of digital technologies such as cloud computing, central bank digital currency and fintech, artificial intelligence, satellite technologies for disaster resilience for an inclusion digital society. Working Group 3 recognised the importance of the secured management of digital data for an integrated government services with good practices from Kazakhstan, the Republic of Korea, and Sri Lanka.

In this connection, the Ministry of High Technology and Industries of Armenia with the support of the ESCAP secretariat committed to hosting the Seventh session of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Steering Committee on 8-9 November 2023. This event will facilitate multi-stakeholders' dialogue to review the implementation of the APIS Action Plan 2022-2026 as well as the implementation of the WSIS Action Lines in Asia and the Pacific.

To support the implementation of the APIS Action Plan 2022-2026, two new projects were implemented by the ESCAP secretariat in 2023, focusing on (a) strengthening the policy capacities of ASEAN member States on digital technology applications and data, for the clean air, for a sustainable ASEAN (CASA); and (b) advancing a cross-border data sharing platform.

(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.

A series of major events including high-level policy dialogues and analytical research are planned for 2024 to promote digital connectivity and transformation through the implementation of the APIS Action Plan 2022-2026.

In contribution to the implementation of ESCAP resolution 79/10,[10] the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Digital Inclusion and Transformation will be held in Kazakhstan in October 2024 to facilitate high-level policy dialogue on digital inclusion and transformation, for an accelerated implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and regional technology initiatives.

A theme paper on "Leveraging digital innovation for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific" will be prepared to promote the Commission's regional dialogues on digital transformation in April 2024. In addition, a flagship publication titled the "Asia-Pacific Digital Transformation Report 2024" will be prepared for the Ministerial Conference on Digital Inclusion and Transformation in October 2024 and the Commission in 2025.

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[10] ESCAP/79/10