COMMISSION ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT (CSTD)

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Submissions from entities in the United Nations system, international organizations and other stakeholders on the progress made in the implementation of the outcomes of the WSIS during the past 20 years

Submission by

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

This submission was prepared as an input to the report of the CSTD secretariat that will inform the substantive discussion at the CSTD on the progress made in the implementation of the outcomes of the WSIS during the past 20 years during its 28th annual session in April 2025, in response to the request by the Economic and Social Council, in its resolution E/RES/2023/3, to the CSTD to conduct such substantive discussions and to report thereon, through the Economic and Social Council, to the General Assembly.

United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development

Twenty years in the implementation of outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

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Date of response: 15 November 2024

I. What is your organisation's formal role and responsibilities concerning WSIS implementation?

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is mandated by General Assembly resolution 70/125 to work on the implementation of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) action lines, including through regional reviews. ESCAP resolution 72/10 also requests the secretariat of ESCAP to coordinate the regional review of the implementation of the WSIS action lines.

The ESCAP secretariat has been promoting the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (APIS) initiative as a regional multi-stakeholder platform, aims to bridge the digital divide and accelerate digital transformation by promoting digital connectivity, digital technology and data use in the Asia Pacific region.

Through ESCAP resolution 79/10, the Commission welcomed the endorsement of the Action Plan for Implementing the APIS Initiative, 2022–2026 by the ESCAP Committee on ICT, Science, Technology and Innovation. The Action Plan has three pillars: Connectivity for all, Digital technologies and applications, and Digital data. The Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (APIS) Steering Committee established three working groups to implement committed actions of each pillar effectively, while the Steering Committee provides monitoring, coordination and advisory functions. As of 2024, more than ten virtual and hybrid workshops were conducted under the APIS Action Plan in aligned with the WSIS action lines

II. What have been your organization's main contributions to the direct implementation of the WSIS outcomes and related areas of digital development since the Summit, particularly since 2015?

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 and its Action Plan 2022-2026 as well as the organization of the high-level policy dialogue mechanism such as the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Digital Inclusion and Transformation which was held in Astana, Kazakhstan from 3 to 5 September 2024.

The 25 actions of the APIS 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). Under the framework of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Action Plan, the ESCAP secretariat has conducted regional programmes for technical assistance, system-building projects and analytical research for knowledge building for the implementation of WSIS action lines.

In implementing the APIS Action Plan 2022-2026, the three Working Groups of the APIS Initiative have brought together diverse stakeholders and partners including government officials and business sectors in the region to exchange information and good practices on respective projects and initiatives on digital transformation. Working Group 1 focuses on bridging digital divides and promoting regional connectivity, such as through co-deploying ICT-energy and transport infrastructures and the Internet Exchange Points in the Pacific region. Working Group 2 focuses on leveraging digital technology applications, such as using digital technology to address climate change impacts and air pollution. Working Group 3 emphasizes the development and utilization of digital data to accelerate digital transformation, focusing on fostering sound ecosystems for digital data development in the Asia-Pacific region.

The eighth session of the APIS Steering Committee and the Regional Review of the World Summit on the Information Society took place on 25-26 September 2024 in the Republic of Korea in collaboration with the Korean Federation of the Cooperative Credit (KFCC) under the Ministry of Interior and Security, along with the International Forum on Community Development and Digital Financial Inclusion, organized by the Korean Federation of Community Credit Cooperatives and ESCAP. The participants requested the ESCAP secretariat to continue supporting ESCAP members and associate members on:

1. Leveraging frontier technologies including artificial intelligence solutions for sustainable development;
2. implementing the APIS Action Plan, with a particular focus on countries in special situations (LLDCs, LDCs and SIDS) in the framework of the key recommendations of the Astana Ministerial Declaration and APIS Action Plan 2022-2026;
3. supporting the work of the Committee of the Pacific Internet Exchange Incorporated, particularly on seeking funding support and promoting new memberships to the Pacific Internet Exchange incorporated from other Pacific Island countries and stakeholders; and
4. promoting a matchmaking platform of which the ESCAP secretariat is to explore, including within the context of the proposed digital solutions centre, the possibility of establishing a joint 'matchmaking' online platform, drawing inspiration from the G20 Indian Presidency's Global Digital Public Infrastructure Repository (GDIPR) initiative, the Singapore's IMDA Open Innovation Platform and China's Hubei Science and Technology Innovation Supply Chain Skynet Platform. This platform could serve as an open crowdsourcing platform matching businesses to solution providers. The event also included a regional review of the WSIS action lines within the framework of the APIS Action Plan 2022-2026.[1]

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[1] https://www.unescap.org/events/2024/eighth-session-asia-pacific-information-superhighway-steering-committee-regional-review

Through ESCAP resolution 79/10[2] and 80/1[3], the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Digital Inclusion and Transformation was held in Astana, Kazakhstan on 3-5 September 2024. The Ministerial Conference brought together over 1000 participants from 33 member states, including 62 ministerial-level participants. The member States adopted the Astana Ministerial Declaration on Digital Inclusion and Transformation in Asia and the Pacific, as a visionary blueprint for regional cooperation to accelerate digital inclusion and transformation. Among others, the Declaration underscores the critical need to bridge the digital divide, strengthen digital connectivity, address and enhance digital trust, and promote inclusive and sustainable digital economies and societies leaving no one behind.

Endorsing the Declaration, Governments recognized the pressing need to overcome the major impediments that developing countries face in engaging with and accessing new technologies such as an appropriate enabling environment, sufficient resources, connectivity infrastructure and investments. They further emphasized the importance of enhancing secure and affordable access, and promoting digital literacy and education for all including youth, older persons, women, persons with disabilities, and remote and rural communities.

In alignment with the WSIS action lines, the ESCAP secretariat also developed two flagship reports on digital transformation such as "Asia-Pacific Digital Transformation Report 2022: Shaping our Digital Future" and the "Asia-Pacific Digital Transformation Report 2024: Digital Innovation for Smarter Climate Action". The secretariat also conducted analytical studies on priority issues related to ICT connectivity and digital technologies, including on tracking e-resilience readiness[4], assessing intellectual property and digital technology policies[5], and exploring regulatory sandboxes for financial technologies[6]. The ESCAP secretariat shared the findings of these studies with ESCAP members, associate members, and other stakeholders through regional meetings, capacity-building workshops, and other ICT-related events.

Under the framework of the APIS Action Plan 2022-2026, the ESCAP secretariat, four side events were organized during the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Digital Inclusion and Transformation in Astana including a side event on regional reviews of the WSIS action lines. In addition, eight virtual workshops were conducted including the regional workshops on universal service fund and the good practices of AI. The

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[2] ESCAP/79/10

[3] E/ESCAP/RES/80/1

[4] United Nations Economic and Social Commission of Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), "Tracking E-Resilience in North and Central Asia", October 2023. Available at: https://www.unescap.org/kp/2023/tracking-e-resilience-north-and-central-asia

United Nations Economic and Social Commission of Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), "Tracking E-Resilience in China, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea, India and Sri Lanka", November 2023. Available at: https://www.unescap.org/kp/2023/tracking-e-resilience-china-mongolia-republic-korea-india-and-sri-lanka

[5] United Nations Economic and Social Commission of Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), "Assessing the policy and regulatory frameworks for fostering the markets of intellectual property and copyright patents on digital technology, products, and services in Mongolia", November 2023. Available at: https://www.unescap.org/kp/2023/assessing-policy-and-regulatory-frameworks-fostering-markets-intellectual-property-and

[6] Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), "National Study on Central Bank Digital Currency and Stablecoin in the Maldives ", September 2022. Available at: https://www.unescap.org/kp/2022/national-study-central-bank-digital-currency-and-stablecoin-maldives

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), "National stakeholder survey on Maldives capability to implement Central Bank Digital Currency ", September 2022. Available at: https://www.unescap.org/kp/2022/national-stakeholder-survey-maldives-capability-implement-central-bank-digital-currency

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), "Regulatory sandbox framework for central bank digital currency in the Maldives ", June 2023. Available at: https://www.unescap.org/kp/2023/policy-brief-regulatory-sandbox-framework-central-bank-digital-currency-maldives

ESCAP secretariat has also implemented numerous projects which contribute to WSIS action lines, such as:

- A UN Development Account-13 project in partnership with UNDESA, to improve the institutional capacity of Bangladesh, Kazakhstan, and the Maldives to develop policy experimentation and regulatory sandboxes on new technologies to accelerate the progress of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- A UN Development Account-14 project aimed at strengthening the capacity of government officials to develop innovative strategies for improving rural digital and transport connectivity for socio-economic resilience, implemented in Bangladesh, Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Samoa.
- A UN Regular Programme for Technical Cooperation (RPTC) project strengthening efficient Internet traffic management in Fiji and Samoa with the support of New Zealand through a shared Pacific Internet Exchange Point.
- A project on strengthening cooperation in Asia and the Pacific for digital inclusion and transformation, in North and Central Asia and beyond, supported by Kazakhstan.
- The Clean Air for Sustainable ASEAN (CASA) project, supported by the Republic of Korea, focused on combating air pollution in ASEAN Member States by enhancing understanding, improving data access, increasing preparedness, and developing regional policies to bolster government officials' abilities to use digital technologies for air pollution monitoring and mitigation.
- A two-year project on strengthening the policies and regulatory frameworks of digital public services for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in North and Central Asia, supported by the Russian Federation, aimed at enhancing policies and frameworks to benefit SMEs, particularly women-led enterprises, by promoting digitalization and creating new digital platforms.
- The SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development, a subsidiary body under the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA), composed of senior policymakers, researchers, decision-makers, and other stakeholders in innovation and technology from the seven participating SPECA countries, namely Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

III. What does your organization see as the main achievements, problems and emerging issues arising from WSIS and from digital development in its areas of responsibility since the Summit, particularly since 2015?

WSIS as a multi-stakeholder platform is a UN mandated process for digital governance. Its related mechanisms – IGF, WSIS Forum, UNGIS and others have been important implementing platforms for global digital cooperation including high-level policy dialogues with policymakers, regulators, academia, and the private sector.

However, with the rapid acceleration of digital transformation, ever more opportunities and challenges to sustainable development are present. In this regard, WSIS and its action lines need to ensure relevance in supporting digital development with the emergence of unprecedented digital paradigm shifts. For example, the rise of artificial intelligence and new technologies is bringing tremendous opportunities for sustainable

development, yet comes with risks and challenges that need to be addressed. New and emerging technologies may also widen disparities along the same fault lines as the digital divide.

The 20-year-old WSIS process needs to be updated to adapt to the evolving digital landscape and development challenges of today. With the convergence of digital innovations across all development challenges – from climate change, to disaster management, to energy transition, to social development –, the WSIS process needs to adapt quickly to the fast-paced and evolving global context as well as rapidly advancing technology landscape, and continue to ensure multistakeholder engagement, inclusion and partnerships. In this regard, strengthening the monitoring of WSIS action lines will be important for evidence-based policymaking and impact measurement of initiatives.

IV. Lessons learned in the implementation of the Summit outcomes in your organisation's specific areas of responsibility

Closing the digital divide is a priority in the digital innovation process towards an inclusive digital society. Asia and the Pacific is the most digitally divided region in the world. As highlighted in the theme study of the 80th session of the Commission, the Asia and the Pacific is emerging as a hub of global digital transformation and is uniquely positioned to scale up digital innovation technologies. Its sociodemographic profile, including a digitally literate youth population and rapidly growing urban middle class, economies of scale and rapidly expanding access to digital infrastructure provide fertile ground for the further diffusion and adoption of digital technologies. [7] In recent years, infrastructure development has greatly expanded Internet coverage.

However, significant accessibility gaps remain. The Asia-Pacific region is confronted with several barriers to the broad-scale adoption of digital solutions. While 96 per cent of its population[8] live in areas covered by mobile broadband networks, it is estimated that only one-third productively uses internet services and up to 40 per cent lacks basic digital skills[9]. Moreover, while four out of five people in urban areas use the Internet, in rural regions, this figure is only 52 per cent[10]. Such gaps in meaningful access are due to digital divides that broadly follow age, income, education and geographic fault lines, with the gender divide underlying all these aspects. Mobilizing investments in new infrastructure and connectivity, scaling up digital solutions, and expanding digital skills training and lifelong learning, are critical for unlocking the full potential of digital innovation for the SDGs.

Strengthening regional cooperation is essential for digital inclusion and transformation. Given the transboundary nature of economic, social and environmental challenges, it is beyond the ability of any single country to address them on its own. Intelligently deployed and properly governed digital solutions, based on a common understanding, shared approaches and collaborative governance, form the foundations for the

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[7] ESCAP (2024). Seizing the Opportunity: Digital Innovation for a Sustainable Future.
[8] GSMA The Mobile Economy Asia Pacific 2023 https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-economy/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Mobile-Economy-Report-Asia-Pacific-2023.pdf
[9] ESCAP/79/7 https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/ESCAP_79_7_E.pdf
[10] ITU Measuring digital development - Facts and Figures 2023 https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/%20facts-figures-2023/

attainment of the 2030 Agenda. It is therefore imperative that Governments throughout Asia and the Pacific engage in regional cooperation in order to build an inclusive digital future, extend connectivity to all and harness new technologies for sustainable development.

V. Observations or recommendations concerning the future of WSIS and digital development, taking into account the outcomes of the Summit of the Future in September 2024

Digital developments provide ever more opportunities for and challenges to sustainable development. In this regard, strengthening evidence-based policymaking is critical. Measuring and monitoring WSIS action lines, including at the regional level, remains a priority. The collection of data and the tracking of ICT indicators should be scaled up and strengthened, such as the development of updated digital development indicators, the updating of WSIS targets and creation of new targets as appropriate, in line with evolving global priorities. For example, new goals/targets should enable a better understanding of the contribution of digital and emerging technologies to achieving the SDGs. The methodology going forward should reflect lessons drawn from the WSIS implementation experience over the past decades. In addition, building the capacities to measure digital development remain critical, particularly for developing countries.

Strengthening the linkages between WSIS and the Pact for the Future, in particular the Global Digital Compact, will be crucial for coherent and coordinated actions towards achieving WSIS goals and the SDGs through to 2030 and beyond. It will be critical to understand how these global processes can complement each other such that they promote joint efforts and synergies to achieve outcomes related to new technologies, the transfer of technology, science, technology and innovation policies, and emerging digital priorities.

VI. Please identify publications, reports and other documents by your organisation which you consider can contribute to the work of the review.

- ESCAP (2024) Seizing the Opportunity: Digital Innovation for a Sustainable Future. https://www.unescap.org/kp/2024/seizing-opportunity-digital-innovation-sustainable-future
- ESCAP (2024) Asia-Pacific Digital Transformation Report 2024: Digital Innovation for Smarter Climate Action. https://www.unescap.org/kp/2024/asia-pacific-digital-transformation-report-2024-digital-innovation-smarter-climate-action
- ESCAP (2024) Asia-Pacific Countries with Special Needs Development Report 2024: Leveraging Digitalization for Productivity and Decent Employment. https://www.unescap.org/kp/2024/leveraging-digitalization-productivity-and-decent-employment
- ESCAP (2022) Asia-Pacific Digital Transformation Report 2022: Shaping Our Digital Future. https://repository.unescap.org/handle/20.500.12870/4725?locale-attribute=es

Contributions should be submitted by 15 November 2024 to the CSTD Secretariat at cstd-wsis20@unctad.org. They will be made available on the CSTD website for consideration by the Commission unless contributors specifically request that their submissions should not be published.