



## **Digital with Purpose: Accelerating Action & Transformative Pathways for Delivering on the SDGs and Recovering from COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Video recording:** <https://www.southsouth-galaxy.org/events/digital-with-purpose-accelerating-action-and-transformative-pathways-for-delivering-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-and-recovering-from-covid-19-pandemic/>

### **Background:**

The United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), in collaboration with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the Global Enabling Sustainability Initiative (GeSI) organized a joint webinar on 8 July 2020 as a side event at the 2020 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

### **Objective of the Webinar:**

The session made the case for accelerating action for an inclusive digital transformation as a pathway to deliver on the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, the SDGs and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The adoption of meaningful digital technologies and solutions, ICT infrastructure and leveraging South-South and triangular cooperation will be key to address the existing digital divides in developing countries. The event included:

- Presentation of the Digital with Purpose report findings and movement;
- Recommendations on strengthening the capacities of developing countries through south-south and triangular cooperation to improve, absorb and adapt technology and skills to meet their specific developmental needs;
- Showcase good practices from the Global South on integrating digital technologies, telecommunication/ICT innovation and digitalization in national development agendas, including ICT innovations on COVID-19 responses;
- Call-to-action to strengthen partnerships and the opportunity of leveraging and setting out a pathway to cross-sector collaboration that can deliver on this vision.

### **Speakers:**

- **Ms. Ursula Wynhoven**, Head International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Liaison Office to the United Nations (Moderator)
- **H.E Ms. Milica Pejanović Đurišić**, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Montenegro to the United Nations (Opening Remarks)
- **H.E Ms. Rabab Fatima**, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the United Nations (Opening Remarks)
- **Mr. Malcolm Johnson**, Deputy Secretary-General, International Telecommunication Union (ITU)
- **Mr. Jorge Chediek**, UNOSSC Director and Envoy of the Secretary-General on South-South Cooperation
- **Mr. Luis Neves**, CEO, Global Enabling Sustainability Initiative (GeSI), (Presentation)
- **Mr. Ibrahim Guimba Saidou**, Minister Special Advisor to the President of the Republic of Niger, Directeur Général / CEO Agence Nationale pour la Société de l'Information (Panelist)
- **Mr. Martin Olmos**, Undersecretary of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Argentina (Panelist)
- **Ms. Xiaojun Grace Wang**, Deputy Director of UNOSSC (Closing remarks)

## Summary of Discussion:

**H.E Ms. Milica Pejanović Đurišić, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Montenegro to the United Nations** highlighted the continued importance of digital technologies, especially given the disruptions caused by COVID-19. She emphasized that decisive and collective actions are required to respond to negative socio-economic impacts and build more inclusive green and sustainable economies. Building back better may not be sufficient; there is need to build forward and to transform the economy and reverse the negative trends of climate change, poverty and inequalities that are threatening the implementation of the SDGs.

Due to the disruption caused by pandemic the world has already experienced more digital transformation in the last couple of months than in the last say 20 years. While the pandemic is a humanitarian crisis that continues to take a tragic toll on people's lives, it is also acting as a catalyst of economic, societal, personal and corporate change, on a scale not seen for a long time. It is evident that AI, high performance computing, combining algorithms, biochemistry and molecular screenings will help fight against the pandemic, driven by new mindsets and behaviors the society has started to adapt. Activities that have proven to be efficient during this time may continue to exist even after the crisis is over and more digital transformation can be expected in months to come.

The fast-paced digital transformation also leads to the widening of the digital divide. Greater attention to digital inclusion may not be a choice. Ensuring that each member of society is able to engage effectively and contribute and benefit from the digital economy follows the principle of “leaving no one behind”. It is a joint responsibility, particularly for the UN, in bringing everyone together towards ensuring better connectivity and digital capacity-building. The regular UN General Assembly debates, an active Group of Friends on Digital Technologies and the Secretary General's initiatives on Roadmap for Digital Cooperation and the global declaration on digital response to COVID-19 demonstrate a high level of engagement in the UN system. She emphasized that implementing the digital cooperation roadmap is of critical importance and in her national capacity, every opportunity is being used to invite member countries and other relevant stakeholders to continue sharing national achievements, strategies, policies, best practices and other engagements in digital transformation.

Key examples from Montenegro rolled out in response to the pandemic, in collaboration with multiple stakeholders. included:

- A successful learn-at-home project which enabled students to study at home and stay healthy during the pandemic helped strengthen the education system.
- The first online hackathon was organized, in cooperation with the UNDP, government, NGOs, digital community and private sector promoting a range of creative ideas for better solutions for business, education and health.
- Several e-commerce platforms were created enabling many small farmers to start using tools for retailing their local agricultural products online.
- The e-social card system was upgraded, with support from UNDP, enabling ad hoc payments to the poorest families to help them through this financial hardship
- Creative projects supported artists and architects to work from home towards fostering economic revitalization through restoration of cultural heritage and development of creative industries.

These examples show that we can be optimistic while engaging in building an inclusive and safe digital presence and future. She pointed out that a crisis like this is an opportunity to raise awareness about the importance of being interconnected and significance of working on mitigating vulnerabilities of the economic system and promoting the principle of solidarity and multilateralism as the most effective tool for digital, sustainable global action.

**H.E Ms. Rabab Fatima, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the United Nations** welcomed the discussion which comes at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic is challenging the global progress made and recognized the enhanced importance of digital technology to tackle the pandemic and to build back better and stronger.

Bangladesh's digitalization is led by the Prime Minister's vision to create a digital Bangladesh by 2021. It has stimulated the development of the telecom network, expanded internet connectivity and fueled the growth of digital applications. As the country continues to bridge the digital divide growing internet penetration and mobile phone subscribers, tangible progress is seen in social and economic development that has had an impact in areas including women's empowerment, development of the rural economy, education, Disaster Risk Reduction, which is now playing a critical role in country's COVID response and recovery efforts. To transform to a smart nation, Bangladesh has prioritized creating the critical foundation for sustainable digital economy, digital inclusion, digital finance, digital information systems and data. Many home-grown initiatives have been undertaken including the landmark project Access to Information (a2i) which received the UN public services award this year. The SDGs tracker is another tool in place to track progress in achieving the SDGs and other national Development Goals through a web-based information repository. This has enabled a more hands-on and stakeholder ownership approach to pursuing the SDGs at the national level.

She further shared examples of the country's investment in digital infrastructure including:

- Making digital services more accessible and affordable which is proving to be effective in delivering much-needed health and education services and social safety assistance during the pandemic by reaching the marginalized members of society.
- A surge in e-commerce and e-services has helped the economy to stay afloat. With the development of ICT capacity, consumer behavior has also shifted to e-commerce and e-services leading to further development of e-banking, penetration of mobile in smartphones and digitalization of other services. Investment in the digitalization of the basic services especially in the retail sector and in health and education remain central to country's recovery efforts.
- Due to the lockdown the country has experienced a sudden upsurge of demand for home Internet services which goes well with the government's efforts towards growing digitally. The Government will include in its recovery plan necessary policy measures to support and sustain this enhanced demand.
- The government is looking at initiatives and programs to enhance the foundation for a digital economy leading to creation of more and better jobs and more private investments including private investment and digital entrepreneurship projects and setting up the first digital entrepreneurship hub in the country.
- The Fourth Industrial Revolution has unlocked new opportunities for business and economy and in order to take advantage of this, the government is undertaking a program to enhance digital governance to build a robust platform against future crises, which has helped digitalized SMEs and strategic industries in their efforts to become sustainable.
- Finally, considering that digital technologies can offer new opportunities for women and youth in the post-pandemic area, the government is planning to establish a digital leadership academy and some centers of excellence.

But despite the progress, efforts and investments, there are still many challenges and universal access to Internet is to be achieved. She pointed out the need for closing the digital divide with international support to build the capacity of the developing countries through facilitating technology transfer in a meaningful manner and investing in infrastructure development. She highlighted that South-South and triangular cooperation can play a vital and complementary role in accelerating digitalization in the post-COVID-19 era. Through its three platforms namely: i) the South-South Network for Public Service

Innovation (SSN4PSI); ii) Alliance for Asian Apprenticeship; and iii) the South Asia Civil Registration Network, Bangladesh is working with southern partners to bolster cooperation through sharing knowledge, experiences and best practices and finding innovative solutions.

She reiterated that Bangladesh's experience has shown how digitalization can contribute toward social development and economic progress towards building a more inclusive society. To fight the pandemic and to sustain the hard-won development gains, it has become more urgent and imperative to invest in ICT and to ensure a digital defense against future shocks.

**Mr. Malcolm Johnson, Deputy Secretary-General, International Telecommunication Union (ITU)** highlighted the appreciation and emphasis placed on the important role and capacity of ICTs during the lockdowns as it has given billions of people around the world the ability to continue their work, studies, take care of others and stay connected. He also recognized the role of network operators and platform providers who have been able to respond successfully to the huge increase in demand over the past few months. He further added that although this demonstrates the resilience of digital technology, not everyone has been able to benefit from it as 3.6 billion people from around the world are still not connected to the internet and most of these people live in rural areas and remote communities.

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the fundamental importance of ICT to economies and societies from fighting the spread of the virus through continued access to health care, teleworking, remote schooling and access to essential goods and services and staying connected. In crises such as COVID-19, nobody will be safe until everyone is safe. Therefore, international collaboration, cooperation and coordination between all stakeholders, both public and private is essential, coming together with their comparative advantage, avoiding duplication of effort and pooling resources for the common good.

He further highlighted the need to ensure that digital infrastructure services and applications are beneficial to all, so as to leave no one behind. He added that ITU has a diverse membership of over 900 members mostly private sector companies in the telecommunications and Internet sectors along with 193 member states, committed to work collectively to leverage ICT to help defeat COVID-19 and to accelerate progress in attaining the SDGs. He concluded on the optimistic note that the COVID-19 experience has also brought home the benefits of digital technologies to transform economies and lives for the better and create a more sustainable world, such as the flexibility of working from home, participating in virtual meeting, being efficient and effective, and at the same time having a better work-life balance. Digital technologies with purpose are absolutely vital to meet the ambitious development goals; collaboration and cooperation are key as no single entity can do it alone. All stakeholders including governments, civil society, academia, the UN system and the ICT community need to rise to the challenge and strengthen the collective digital response to these unprecedented challenges so as to promote the sustainable development of society, the environment and economies.

**Mr. Jorge Chediek, UNOSSC Director and Envoy of the Secretary-General on South-South Cooperation** referred to the United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation, held in Buenos Aires in March 2019, that relaunched and revalued the importance of South-South and Triangular Cooperation and importance of the transfer of Technology know-how by both developed countries and among developing countries. He praised the examples of the south shared by the speakers that demonstrated how the incorporation of technologies to the public sector can make a difference in the quality of people's lives. The challenges faced by COVID-19 (such as social isolation and limitation to travel) made the adaptation and the corporation of advanced ICT even more essential in today's world. Massive effort is required to strengthen the infrastructure and access if we want the whole world to take advantage of the potential of these technologies as 50% of the population still don't have access to the Internet. Many professions are undergoing structural changes because of telecommuting but at the at the same time, there are professions that cannot be subject to this reformulation. Use of

technology has also expanded in sectors such as telemedicine, distant education and contact tracing and follow-up of the people.

However, there is need to find a way that these technologies become the more effective, efficient and respectful of human rights, close the gender gap as globally 20% women are less likely to use mobile internet and ensure that technology is oriented towards improving the quality of life particularly of the poorest. In conclusion, he reiterated UNOSSC's commitment to the South-South and triangular perspective. Looking forward to the application of the lessons discussed for the effective and socially oriented incorporation of these technologies. He invited everyone to share experiences and learning through UNOSSC'S South-South Galaxy Platform and work together in the spirit of BAPA+40.

This was followed by screening of [video documentary on Digital with Purpose](#).

**Mr. Luis Neves, CEO, Global Enabling Sustainability Initiative (GeSI)**, presented the digital with purpose report. The report, with the support of Deloitte and 150 experts, looked into seven disruptive technologies including AI, IoT and blockchain among others to understand how the world will look in 2030 and discovered that these technologies can help to impact 103 of 169 targets that comprise the 17 SDGs. i.e. 22% of them will be impacted in a positive manner and these technologies will stop or mitigate the downward trend, though there are many things in the digital world that really need to be addressed.

The key messages from the report included that digital technologies need to look into negative trends in society, economy, unsustainable consumption trends and depletion of natural resources. Digital with purpose is the way forward and the call is for everybody and not only for the digital industry, to recommit to the 2030 agenda, and embrace the technologies that requires us to be transparent, cooperate to collaborate and harness the power of digital technologies to leverage its potential. He further explained that the negative externalities need to be addressed and operate in a responsible manner to address challenges such as energy consumption derived from infrastructure, 5G and other network infrastructures, circular economy, supply chain impacts, privacy and security, trust and responsibility as well as digital inclusion. There is need for contribution of business into the society in a proper manner, so we achieve a more equitable, balanced and sustainable world.

Mr. Gowen spoke about what GeSI and its partners are doing to make this report a reality to address the challenges we face. GeSI is working different stakeholders (such as International chambers of commerce, European network operators, World Ocean Council, foundations and businesses, academia, universities and scientific organizations) by developing a set of ambitious indicators towards 2030, called a race to the top.

These ambitious indicators are in critical areas like climate change, circular economies and digital inclusion and a framework is being developed inviting business and other stakeholders to come together in implementing this agenda by committing, engaging, progressing, pioneering and ultimately leading in the sustainable world through digital technologies. These technologies are developing so extremely fast so businesses to step up and take part in these developments and innovations while abiding by high ethical standards. He further added that this is an open movement where everybody can raise their voice, be critical and work collectively for greater impact.

**Mr. Martin Olmos, Undersecretary of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Argentina** highlighted that the SDGs provide a unique opportunity to improve the quality of life, and development of ICT plays a central role in achieving the SDGs and in reducing inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted ICT as a key instrument for entire population. Recognizing ICT as precondition, Argentina put all efforts into keeping people connected and ensuring that the networks remain resilient for an effective exercise for fundamental rights, without which access to basic rights such as

access to information and free speech become limited, including the key factor of economic development. Due to COVID-19 lockdowns, the importance of ICTs has become even a more fundamental in order to access essential services like health or education and to be able to work – further deepening the inequalities that exist in the country. However, if proper policies are put in place, such as, ensuring universal access to ICT services and closing the digital divide, the socio-economic and geographical asymmetries can be overcome. Some key initiatives undertaken by Argentina included:

- Encouraging agreements of mutual assistance and infrastructure sharing between internet wholesalers and ISPs in the event of network congestion.
- Agreeing with mobile companies to apply zero-rating to educational platforms
- Establishing a mandate to keep the most vulnerable population connected in the event of their inability to pay their bills
- Working with ISPs to ensure connectivity for health facilities
- Working with the streaming platforms to lower the bit rate in order to put some pressure off the digital networks.
- Investing in further strengthening and expanding the federal fiber optics network created in 2006
- Recognizing the need to increase the number of households and businesses with access to fixed connectivity and especially to Fiber to the home (FTTH) connectivity to about 14 million households. Currently, there are only 8.8 million fixed broadband connections and only a little over a million have FTTH. To improve fixed connectivity specific programs are being implemented, together with state and local governments, funded by the Universal Service Fund.
- Working to double efforts to increase the employment of 4G mobile networks. 79 per cent of the population lives in cities with 4G coverage. However, the country has high geographic asymmetries implying that many areas of the country and small towns lack coverage of such services. The Government is committed to increase the employment of 4G networks as first steps toward incorporation of 5G in the country which will allow more people to have access to high-quality connectivity.
- To reach the parts of the country that cannot be reached through terrestrial connectivity, the state-run communications company has started to build a third satellite to bring high-speed connectivity to places that are unreachable through the terrestrial connectivity.

Mr. Olmos concluded by recognizing that the expansion of ICT accessibility is a great opportunity to provide quality of education, health and work opportunities to its people and reiterated the government's commitment to providing and protecting populations with the most opportunities to achieve a better quality of life. More information can be found at: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/>

**Mr. Ibrahima Guimba Saidou, Minister Special Advisor to the President of the Republic of Niger, Directeur Général / CEO Agence Nationale pour la Société de l'Information** provided an overview of how Niger decided to embrace technology and work in innovative ways to address the challenges it faces. Niger is one of the largest countries in the continent, 1.3 million square kilometers with a low density of population, with only 7 percent of population in the capital city. To embrace the potential of technology, Niger followed a whole-of-government approach that is citizen/ service delivery centric. Being the youngest country on earth in terms of the number of the youth population, the country banked its future on its youth.

The country is currently implementing the following initiatives:

- E-governance i.e. use technology to make the government more efficient and digitizing itself by 2028 to be able to drive this transformation. The agenda, at first, seemed ambitious and aggressive, however, the COVID-19 pandemic proved it contrary.
- Setting up an SDGs lab to address the challenges related to SDGs. Niger decided to create a Center which is about 35-40 kilometers from the city centre and invites its partners and also the various components of the government to work together on various clusters such as health, agriculture,

FinTech, environment, to leverage work on technology solutions to address growth and to also work together for greater synergies between the various components of the whole ecosystem;

- Niger is implementing a smart village Program to bring services to people in a sustainable manner and following a whole-of-government approach. As they call it “a carpooling for development approach”. It aims to bring all the partners into the same platform. A village is presented with a complete package, by connecting, at the same time, with the health clinic, the school, a market and providing clean water etc. enabling to have a sustainable approach and to fund solutions on a long-term basis.
- Lastly, building the ecosystem to have activities to promote ICT. Niger organized a national competition on innovation called “Etakara”, which was won by a young girl. It also encouraged youth by boosting their morale and helped address the challenges related to gender. A bootcamp is also organized on technology discussing different topics such as health and education, bringing together the ecosystem, youth, startups to collectively discuss on how technology can help. To respond to the coronavirus, a hackathon was also organized in which instead of the government taking the lead, youth and startups were asked to do so.

To conclude, Mr. Saidou also invited the partners/ community to join their initiatives and appreciated the UN and ITU for their support and partnership. For more information, visit:

- [https://www.itu.int/dms\\_pub/itu-d/opb/str/D-STR-SMART\\_VILLAGE.NIGER-2020-PDF-E.pdf](https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/str/D-STR-SMART_VILLAGE.NIGER-2020-PDF-E.pdf)
- [www.etakara.ne](http://www.etakara.ne)
- <https://www.coronackathon.org/index.php?action=home>

**Ms. Xiaojun Grace Wang, Deputy Director of UNOSSC** summarized the discussion by appreciating the insightful discussions by the eminent panel that was also full of hope. Key takeaways included:

- This is a timely discussion, reflecting not only to respond to issues but also focusing on the future as there's no going back. The pandemic has presented a challenge but also an opportunity to transform. It has already transformed at the behavioral level with new mindsets and this will be paving the way for such a transformation leveraging digital technologies.
- The participants fully realized the existing digital divide and the need for concrete actions. This divide exists between the rich and the poor, between men and women and between people living with different abilities. Hence, leveraging digital technology a must.
- The discussion highlighted experiences at the policy level, both, at national policies with the focus of closing the gap and at global level which can address the most sensitive and challenging issues involved in the digital era affecting countries' common interest. Country experiences at program level were also shared. Examples included initiatives such as home learning for students, creation of online platforms for entrepreneurs, working from home for artisans, access to information by bringing public service to people and integrated planning to build smart villages.
- The need for strengthening digital capacity for governments and youth was also highlighted. From the experience of Argentina, the importance of policies and initiatives to strengthen the digital infrastructure was also stressed.
- The discussion also highlighted the importance of research level evidence-based analysis on how best to leverage digital for our common purpose in GeSI and ITU report on digital with purpose. UNOSSC also launched the report on South-South Cooperation in a Digital Era last year and second volume will be produced this year. There is common purpose here to not only inform policy but as GeSI mentioned, to stimulate competition for the better. The indicator system presented can be a laying a ladder for all partners to be better, higher and closer to our ambition.
- Lastly, the discussion called for a strong clear, timely, decisive and collective actions. We have the privilege to access technology and to connect with each other but the best use of such connectivity is to bring positive changes and translate the words and ideas into real action and act together - at government level, industry level, institutional and individual levels and most

importantly partnership is the key. Examples include partnership between central and local governments, between clusters of economy between public and private sectors through PPP and examples of country working in partnership is encouraging.

Ms. Wang expressed that UNOSSC would like to work with all partners to scale up digital solutions for the global south for developing countries and for least developed countries that are that are proven effective and the indicator framework, being developed by GeSI can also help inform such an initiative.

The webinar ended with a vote of thanks for co-organizers, Excellencies, the Permanent Representatives from the countries, distinguished panelists and participants.