

Draft opening statement for the Executive Secretary

Opening

by

Ms. Olga Algayerova

United Nations Under-Secretary-General

Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

at

ITU x UNECE joint peer-learning roundtable

Accelerating digital development through multi-stakeholder partnerships

6 April 2022, 15:00 (CEST) online

N.B. Anticipated duration of speech: 5-7 minutes

Accelerating digital development through multi-stakeholder partnerships

6 April 2022, Opening - 15:00

Online format, **connection details to be provided**

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you today to the **peer-learning roundtable on Accelerating digital development through multi-stakeholder partnerships**, which the UN Economic Commission for Europe is co-organizing jointly with the International Telecommunications Union in the framework of the **Regional Forum on sustainable development for the UNECE region**.

I am delighted to welcome delegates from across the globe and from a range of organizations – your engagement in accelerating digital development is a testament to our joint commitment and dedication to advancing the issue. We are all connected remotely today – from different time zones and different settings – and this in fact, forms the very base of our partnership, increasingly driven by the demand for digital development in the past years.

As we stay connected despite the global challenges, such as COVID-19 restrictions, there has been an increasing demand globally for advanced technologies and digital transformation. We have entered a new digital era, and it is extremely important that we, as international community, join forces with policy makers, regulators, communities, and, most importantly, youth – to seek collaborative solutions for accessible, affordable, and safe connectivity. Digital development has a huge potential for a positive change, and it is instrumental to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly its SDG 17 “Partnership for the Goals”. It is important to ensure that this transformation is inclusive, safe, and well governed.

The issue of digital cooperation has been very high on the United Nations agenda, and I would like to highlight the following initiatives:

On the global scale, the UN Secretary-General launched a Roadmap for Digital Cooperation which calls for enhancing global digital cooperation, among other priority areas. The Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology has been appointed with a mandate to lead implementation of the roadmap, facilitate dialogue on the recommendations and serve as an advocate and focal point for digital cooperation.

At the UNECE region, member States decided that its 70th Commission session, scheduled for April 2023, will focus on “Digital and green transformations for sustainable development in the UNECE region”. Contributions from UNECE’s governance architecture are being collected in preparation to the session and in the efforts to showcase activities supporting the digital agenda as well as to foster digital development in the region.

In the context of this session, I would like to highlight our longstanding collaboration with the ITU in many areas, including connectivity, smart and sustainable cities as well as on electronic business. I am pleased to share that since March 2020 UNECE has been co-chairing a UN Digital transformation group for Europe and Central Asia jointly with ITU. Together, we seek to deliver a one “UN response” to the cross-cutting priority through cooperation between different UN agencies in the field of digital transformation.

I am truly encouraged by a momentum that we have jointly generated both at global and regional levels and I hope that these efforts will translate into priorities of your national agendas as well. As we embark on the digital transformation journey, we must consider potential challenges down the road. We need to ensure that this transformation is **inclusive, sustainable, and resilient** and that we are mindful of potential environmental and privacy risks. Most importantly, we must make sure that accelerating digital transformation does not contribute to enhancing inequalities and increasing the digital divide.

As you may know, as of 2021, only 63 per cent of the world’s population had access to internet. Which means that at least 3 billion people, mostly in developing countries – are still lacking access to internet and hence do not participate in the digital progress. In the UNECE region, for example in Tajikistan, only 36 per cent of population had access to internet in 2019, according to UNCTAD. Which means that more than 60 per cent of the population do not benefit from digital development, and most of them are women.

We should not contribute to the growing digital divide and to greater inequalities; we should rather collaborate towards closing a digital gap, considering a gender aspect, and connecting more people together in a **safe, inclusive, and affordable way**. At the UNECE, we are working closely with other agencies to address these

challenges and I hope that this event today will be an opportunity to reflect on the past, to assess the ongoing efforts and to pave the way forward. As we recover from the pandemic, as we learn our lessons, we must look forward with determination to thrive.

In closing, let me emphasize that your engagement and participation in the meeting today are a testament to our joint commitment to advancing digital development and delivering on the 2030 Agenda. I am confident that together we can capitalize on digital development potential and accelerate progress towards achieving safe and sustainable internet for everyone.

I look forward to continuing our joint efforts to making this digital transformation a success for everyone and I wish you successful deliberations.