Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region

Peer learning round tables

SDGs 9 & 17 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure & Partnerships for the Goals: Partnerships for inclusive and sustainable digital development

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Substantive inputs presented by: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Switzerland, ARCEP, DG CNECT, ECE-RCEM, ECMWF, Kyrgyz Internet Society, PortugalSpace, Waste Ukraine Analytics, UNEP, UN Women

Report of session
SDG 9 & 17: Partnerships for inclusive and sustainable digital development

1. Information and communication technologies (ICT) and digital development are key to ensure that the overall 2030 Agenda is realized. Partnerships across different stakeholders, sectors, countries and governance levels are necessary to ensure a prosperous digital development and avoid widening divides due to disparities in the speed of adoption of new technologies. The catalytic role of the UN system in supporting digital development at the national, regional and global levels is critical. Instruments like the UN Digital Development Toolbox and Digital Development Country Profiles may help in strengthening a One UN approach on digital matters.

2. Lack of resilient digital infrastructures and the rural-urban digital divide, including unequal school connectivity, remain a major challenge. Landlocked countries, in particular, struggle to provide internet connectivity. More investment in digital infrastructure together with adequate policies and regulations are needed to boost access to the internet. Broadband mapping systems are essential to provide knowledge on the reach and quality of digital networks and services. These systems allow regulators to assess market competition and gaps in coverage requiring funding, while facilitating the selection of service providers by citizens. Affordability of internet access and devices are an important policy concern. The Partner2Connect initiative, established in close cooperation with the UN Tech Envoy Office, provides a platform to catalyze investment and to harness partnerships for sustainable and inclusive digital development, acting at large scale and with impact on the ground.

3. With the growth of the information society, countries aspire to become innovation- driven digital economies but often lack human and institutional capabilities to integrate ICT innovation. Initiatives such as the ITU Innovation and Entrepreneurship Alliance for Digital Development can support bridging those gaps. The ICT sector is particularly reliant on innovation. Yet, lack of access to finance for enterprises, in particular SMEs, limits the ability of businesses to invest in new technologies and innovate, thus hindering competitiveness. Access to finance, grants and voucher systems at all stages of business development can effectively support the development of ICT sectors.

4. Digital government services are a prerequisite for a successful roll out of digital transformation. They are essential for delivering efficient and effective public services to citizens. To provide digital public services, it is essential to develop a resilient e-government ecosystem. Providing digitization as a service through a front-office digitalization platform to service providers is an effective way to digitize public services in a quick, standardized, cost-effective, and scalable manner. Adopting the perspective of users when designing services and providing services into local languages is needed to ensure inclusive and accessible services.

5. Digital development should be human-centered, in particular considering new and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence. Special attention should be paid to the nexus between human rights, good governance and new technologies. Institutions often lack capacities to provide adequate safeguards to address new risks and undesirable impacts brought by such technologies, such as negative social norms, data privacy breaches, cyber harassment and bullying, among others. Countries should establish normative frameworks and update existing legislation to provide safety against these impacts.

6. Digital tools and services should by design address the needs of all women and girls. Gender should be mainstreamed in digital policies to remove barriers to equal access. Stakeholders need to foster a policy of zero tolerance for online gender-based violence occurring through or amplified using technology. Both public and private sector entities should prioritize prevention and elimination. Overall, the Commission on the Status of Women recommendations should be translated into actions.

7. Civil society is concerned by the digital restrictions such as blocking and restricting access to information resources and recommend developing a Digital Bill of Rights in consultation with civil society organizations. Renewed efforts are needed to build digital literacy and digital skills, particularly among older people and vulnerable groups, including on data protection and privacy. This is necessary to build trust and confidence, minimize the negative impact or misuse of disinformation and promote digital inclusion. New technologies are also pivotal to strengthen democratic institutions, improve transparency, accountability, civic participation and decentralization. They can also lower access barriers and reduce inequalities.

8. Digital development should be environmentally sound, socially trusted, and economically prosperous. The ICT sector must continue to become more circular and sustainable to tackle, among others, electronic waste, energy consumption, GHG emissions while being compatible with the Paris Agreement. As demand for earth metals such as graphite, lithium and cobalt is rising rapidly, effective policies and actions by governments are key to address the needs for critical raw materials while avoiding environmental and social harms to local communities.

9. Legislative measures should set criteria for green public procurement of ICTs. Standardization of digitalization, transparency and interoperability of data are essential. Investment in tools to measure and disclose the environmental and carbon footprint of technologies is required. Authorities often lack skills to use analytical tools to predict the cost and dynamics of the circular and low-carbon digital transition. Data collection and storage are needed to support decision-making processes. Collaboration between environmental and ICT regulatory authorities is fundamental. They hold the complementary technical knowledge required to assess the entire lifecycle of digital devices to make precise measurements and projections.

10. Space data (including satellite imagery), Internet of Things and other new and emerging technologies help tracking biodiversity, implement climate mitigation and adaptation measures and provide more accurate forecasts of extreme weather events. Early Warning Systems, using a combination of radar, satellite, and weather station data, with the help of supercomputers and forecast models encompassing latest scientific advances deliver early warnings to extreme weather events and protect populations, including in humanitarian crisis contexts. The Early Warning for All initiative can support countries in deploying such systems. Space data also support greener transportation systems through enabling autonomous automobiles. Energy consumption can be reduced by providing real-time data on traffic and road conditions while ensuring that automobiles are interconnected, including in areas without ground infrastructure.

Full report of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the Economic Commission for Europe region on its seventh session here.