



OUTCOME REPORT

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Cross-Cutting Session on Digitalization :

Digital Transformation for Sustainable Development Goals in the Wake of COVID-19

15 March 2021 | 10:00-12:30 CET

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Cross-cutting Session on Digitalization Digital Transformation for Sustainable Development Goals in the Wake of COVID-19 15th March 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Overall coordination of the session was led by Ms. Elisabeth Turek, Director of the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division of the UNECE and Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder, Head of ITU Office for Europe. This report has been produced by the ITU Office for Europe. ITU and UNECE would like to express their appreciation to **high-level interventions** of H.E. Francisco André, Co-Chair of the Regional Forum for Sustainable Development 2021, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Portugal, Ms. Gwi Yeop Son, Regional Director of Development Coordination Office, for their insightful remarks during the event's Opening Segment, as well as to the **high-level interventions** of H.E. Valeryia Ionan, Deputy Minister in European integration of Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine, who delivered a Keynote Speech, and of Ambassador Vuk Zugic, Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities, who participated in the third part of the Session.

ITU and UNECE would also like to thank the interventions of all honourable guest speakers of the session.

In addition, ITU and UNECE would like to express its gratitude to **co-moderators**: Ms. Sophie Treinen, Information and Knowledge Management Team Leader for the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, and Mr. Clayton Hamilton, Coordinator of the Digital Health Flagship Division of Country Health Policies and Systems at the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe.

Finally, ITU and UNECE express their sincere acknowledgement to all UN Agencies members of the **UN Digital Transformation Group for Europe and Central Asia (UNDTG4ECA)** who participated in the event and shared insightful key policy recommendations through their speakers. Special thanks to FAO, WMO, WHO, UN Women and UNIDO.

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INTRODUCTION

The Cross-cutting Session on Digitalization: Digital Transformation in the Wake of COVID-19 was held online on 15th March 2021. The conference was organized within the framework of the 2021 Regional Forum for Sustainable Development (RFSD) and was co-led by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) together with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). UN Agencies members of the UN Digital Transformation Group for Europe and Central Asia also contributed to the Session, which aimed at strengthening the prioritization of digitalization for the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This event focused on the urgent needs of accelerating digital transformation across different sectors as an immediate response to COVID-19. It provided an opportunity for representatives of UN agencies and multiple stakeholders to highlight a series of actions, activities, initiatives and partnerships that advance digitalization and digitization processes in capacity building and skills development, health, trade, agriculture, governance, and urbanization, among others. It also underscored the importance of meaningful connectivity, equal access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), as well as digital skills and literacy amongst different groups of society.

Overall, the Session aimed at fostering a coordinated approach of UN agencies to support Member States in their implementation of the 2030 Agenda through ICTs. In particular, it targeted all SDGs of the 2021 focus, namely: SDG 1, “No poverty”; SDG 2, “Zero Hunger”; SDG 3, “Good health and well-being”; SDG 4, “Quality education”; SDG 8, “Decent work and Economic growth”; SDG 9, “Industry, innovation and infrastructure”; SDG 10, “Reduced inequalities”; SDG 12, “Responsible consumption and production”; SDG 13, “Climate action”; and SDG 17, “Partnerships for the goals”.

Key topics covered by the session included:

- Topic 1: Ensuring universal digital inclusion
- Topic 2: Accelerating the digitalization of services
- Topic 3: Creating an enabling environment for digital trade

The main outcomes of the Cross-cutting Session on Digitalization: Digital Transformation in the Wake of COVID-19 are outlined in this report, which structures the key points that emerged during each segment.

PARTICIPATION

The Cross-cutting Session on Digitalization was a public event mainly targeting representatives of governmental bodies, regulatory agencies, academia, and the private sector. It allowed an exchange of cross-sectoral viewpoints and the adoption of a multi-stakeholder approach to effective and actionable sharing of best practices. **19** eminent speakers presented and discussed during the Session. Details about the [agenda](#) and speakers, as well as all [presentations](#) delivered, can be found on the event’s website¹.

422 registered participants from **127** countries took part in the conference and around **400** participants were online during the Session (including on livestreams on [Twitter](#) and [YouTube](#)).

¹ <http://bit.ly/3r3V0ey>

Participants included representatives of UN agencies, members of the UN Digital Transformation Group for Europe and Central Asia, representatives of NGOs and Intergovernmental Organizations, high-level government representatives, European Commission representatives, members of the private sector and academia.

The banner features a blue background with white text. At the top left, it says 'COVID-19 RESPONSE' with a globe icon. The main title is 'Cross-Cutting Session on Digitalization : Digital Transformation for Sustainable Development Goals in the Wake of COVID-19'. Below the title, the date and time are listed: '15 March 2021 | 10:00-12:30 CET'. Social media information follows: 'Follow us on Twitter @ITUEurope', 'Join us online!', and a link 'http://bit.ly/3r3V0ey'. On the right side, there is a graphic with the text 'REGIONAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FOR THE UNECE REGION' and an image of a hand interacting with a digital interface. Below the graphic, logos for 'Facilitated by' (including UN Women, UNICEF, UNCTAD, WFP, WHO, and WMO) and 'Organized by' (including ITU and UNECE) are displayed. A row of 17 Sustainable Development Goal icons is at the very top.



Figure 1 - Virtual Group Photo

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Cross-cutting Session 4.2 on Digitalization, co-led by ITU and UNECE, provided key recommendations to accelerate digital transformation across different sectors as an immediate response to COVID-19. The role of ICTs and services, and the digital infrastructure that countries ride and scale on have become central to continued economic and societal activity and to lessening the pandemic's impact. Multi-stakeholder cooperation and a cross-sectoral approach through the development of partnerships, as well as inter-agency coordination at the regional and national levels, are key to capture the potential of ICTs in achieving the SDGs.

The pandemic has exacerbated inequalities, especially amongst migrants, persons with disabilities, women and girls. To ensure universal digital inclusion, policies and programs need to foster neutral acquisition of digital skills, as well as accessibility to ICT sectors and digital services (such as gender-sensitive educational programs). For this, development of infrastructure is a vital prerequisite. The Session further highlighted how digital services are key drivers of economic growth, structural and sectoral resilience. Whether it is through legal, normative or political standards, integrated intersectoral frameworks are needed to foster collection, sharing and interoperability of data, leading in turn to an increased digitalization of services. ICTs also strengthen sustainable trade through promoting inclusive, transparent and traceable value chains. Speakers underscored how international standards for electronic information exchange are an essential tool to overcome financial and technical gaps between different regions and a key driver to spur economic growth and strengthen cooperation.

DOCUMENTATION

The Cross-cutting Session was held virtually. Relevant documentation was made available in electronic form on the event webpage: <http://itu.int/go/JLS6>.

The event was supported with **captioning** facility and the edited caption text will be made available soon on the event page. **Video recordings** of the event, as well as this outcome report, are also made available on the website.

The Cross-cutting Session on Digitalization has also been livestreamed on [Twitter](#) and [YouTube](#). Proceedings are available at the links above.

1. OPENING REMARKS

Mr. Jaroslav Ponder, Head of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Office for Europe

In his opening speech, **Mr. Jaroslav Ponder**, Head of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Office for Europe, introduced the overall Cross-cutting Session, inviting all participants to view it as a meaningful opportunity to accelerate digitalization across Europe and Central Asia through the adoption of a multi-stakeholder approach.

He warmly thanked all UN Agencies participating in the Session who are members of the [UN Digital Transformation Group for Europe and Central Asia](#) (hereafter UNDTG4ECA), alongside all guest speakers from academia, the private sector, and the UN partners, including Development Coordination Officers, and Resident Coordinators for their constant support and cooperation. Specifically, he underlined the importance of adopting a “one-UN approach” across the Region and reaffirmed how this has led to the formation of many successful partnerships and the delivery of projects such as Giga, digitalization processes to adopt ICT solutions in agriculture and health, national reviews of digital skills, development of Smart Cities, and many more. To retrieve more information on joint ITU-UN Agencies initiatives, he invited the audience to consult the [event’s webpage](#) and to read the [Stocktaking Report](#), a collection of the UNDTG4ECA initiatives and programs to advance digitalization in Europe and Central Asia.

He then pointed to the work that ITU is conducting towards the [World Telecommunication Development Conference 2021](#) (WTDC2021), which, under the theme “Connecting the unconnected to achieve sustainable development”, represents a unique opportunity to develop innovative approaches and new models of collaboration to foster connectivity and digital solutions in the final decade of action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The new strategy proposed by the European Union on digitalization, digital skills and literacy, digital inclusion, cybersecurity and infrastructural development presents key priorities to define precise ITU activities and foster partnerships with Member States. Both at the General Assembly level and within the framework of the UN Secretary-General’s Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, ITU is contributing to defining and fostering pathways towards enhanced cross-sectoral and cross-country cooperation to achieve the SDGs through ICTs by 2030.

Ms. Elisabeth Tuerk, Director of the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)

Following Mr. Ponder’s speech, **Ms. Elisabeth Tuerk**, Director of the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division of UNECE, opened her remarks by welcoming all guest speakers, UN agencies’ representatives and members of the private sector. She reaffirmed the importance of the existing cooperation between ITU and UNECE, which, together with continuous dialogue among the members of the UNDTG4ECA, resulted in the successful organization of the Cross-cutting Session on Digitalization.

Ms. Tuerk further highlighted how ICT-based tools and solutions form the backbone of today’s economy and currently represent a fundamental strategy to build back better after the COVID-19 pandemic, by fostering economic growth and enhancing economies’ structural resilience. She then pointed to two central concerns that are currently affecting the digital landscape. The first issue -

which governments, UN agencies, public and private stakeholders are called to extensively address - is the existence of digital divides across countries, and particularly at regional levels. Among these divides, gender-related discrimination in access and affordability represents an pressing obstacle to the achievement of universal meaningful connectivity. According to Ms. Tuerk, existing digital divides could lead to digital shifts which, if not properly addressed, could result in even greater inequalities. Her second concern is related to how digital services and ICT-based tools are supplied in the Europe Region. In fact, most digital solutions are provided by a relatively small number of large companies. The increased market power of this handful of players has fueled concerns about the distribution of the value added, the possibility of guaranteeing consumer protection and the creation of a competitive market. Therefore, to fully harness the benefits of digitalization, Ms. Tuerk reiterated the requirement to address these urgent challenges through the means of international, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder cooperation.

Finally, Ms. Tuerk stated how UNECE is effectively contributing to fostering enhanced cooperation and partnerships to allow for the adoption of more sustainable trade solutions, the creation of traceable value chains and the achievement of environmental sustainability to build back better. She restated how the work of UNECE aims to reduce food waste and loss, protect endangered species, secure exchange of electronic permits, promote sound management of hazardous waste through the implementation of the Basel Convention, support fishing, and introduce blockchain technologies (particularly in the garments and footwear sectors) to enhance the creation of circular economies.

H.E. Francisco André, Co-Chair of the Regional Forum for Sustainable Development 2021, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Portugal

H.E. Francisco André, Co-Chair of the Regional Forum for Sustainable Development 2021 and Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation in Portugal reminded the audience that digital technologies play an increasingly important role in fostering world-wide economies and shaping global societies. According to His Excellency, COVID-19 has accelerated the rise of the Digital Economy, making virtual technologies an integral part of the new normal. Digitalization enabled citizens to overcome existing barriers created as a result of the implementation of confinement measures to reduce the risks associated with the spread of the pandemic. However, the need for enhanced connectivity brought along new challenges that are widening the digital divide within and between countries, further exploiting those who are not digitally connected. Lack of digitalization resulted in lack of education, work, socialization, and healthcare.

In the context of bridging existing digital divides across Europe and Central Asia, His Excellency restated the need to embrace digital transformation across all sectors of the economy. Multilateral systems can effectively and politically steer this process in order to make ICTs more accessible and sustainable. He called for the application of a comprehensive digital strategy to include a broad scope of needs supported by a wide range of stakeholders. His key policy recommendations focused on the need of promoting ICTs accessibility, affordability, and skills development.

Finally, His Excellency stressed how digital transformation is also a priority of the ongoing Portuguese presidency of the EU Council and reported that Portugal has increasingly integrated digitalization policies and programs in its country-based reform and policy-making processes. Particularly, cooperation has been fostered in areas such as telemedicine, digital environment, and e-governance

(through digitalization of civil registries and public administration). Based on these premises, His Excellency noted the crucial importance of guaranteeing safe and affordable access to the Internet, to every citizen, in order to fully realize the potential of digital technologies in accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda through ICTs. He further highlighted that “leaving no one behind is also leaving no one offline”, and that it is essential to invest in digital skills development to build human capacities, foster workers’ adaptation to new production processes, and guarantee access to e-commerce payments, e-health solutions, and distance learning platforms.

Ms. Gwi Yeop Son, Regional Director of Development Coordination Office

Ms. Gwi Yeop Son, Regional Director of the Development Coordination Office, delivered her contribution to the Session’s Opening Remarks. Ms. Yeop Son first restated that the severe impact of COVID-19 in the Region has determined major setbacks across multiple SDGs, reversing development gains and exacerbating pre-existing trends. Over the course of the pandemic, the availability of Internet connectivity has helped maintain business continuity, keep children in school and ensure that people could access essential online goods and services. However, greater need for digital access also meant extensive exclusion for 463 million students around the world, who, for instance, remained cut off from education in 2020 due to a lack of remote learning policies and equipment required for learning at home. On the same grounds, 90% of countries implemented some form of distanced learning policy, and measures have reached approximately 69% of out-of-school children attending school from preprimary to secondary education.

Following this introductory statistics, Ms. Gwi Yeop Son provided other examples of how digital transformation has fostered business adaptation, online shopping, and the competitiveness of micro, small and medium size enterprises. Despite these best practices, urban-rural and gender divides are still widely present and can dramatically slow the process towards the achievement of universal digital inclusion. To address these challenges, Ms. Yeop Son pointed to the meaningful work done by the [UN Digital Transformation Group for Europe and Central Asia](#) and to multiple initiatives to foster cross-sectoral adoption of digital solutions, which are enumerated and can be found in the [Stocktaking Report](#) of the UNDTG4ECA. Among a wide range of best practices and implemented initiatives, the Report, as Ms. Yeop Son stated, displays interesting collaboration between ITU and UN Women to foster female entrepreneurship and close existing gender digital divides. It also includes multiple partnerships between ITU and FAO to enhance use and access to digital tools in the agriculture sector.

Finally, Ms. Yeop Son concluded by reaffirming that, even though the pandemic has exacerbated social divides and challenges, innovative efforts of all UN Agencies to introduce new business models to foster employment, create jobs and favor conditions to socially and economically build back better are in place and should be extensively supported, particularly through the introduction of advanced digital solutions, such as blockchain technologies and Artificial Intelligence. Members of the UNDTG4ECA, alongside UN Country Teams, will drive digital transformation to enhance digital inclusion and target the most vulnerable groups, particularly women and girls, youth, children, persons with disabilities, the elderly, indigenous people, migrants, refugees and people living in remote or rural areas.



2. KEYNOTE SPEECH

Ms. Valeryia Ionan, Deputy Minister in European integration of Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine

In her Keynote Speech, Her Excellency Valeryia Ionan, Deputy Minister in European Integration of Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine, shared with the audience the status of digital transformation in the country, and reported how the Ministry of Digital Transformation is working to enhance the existing digitalization process, with a specific focus on the upcoming three years.

Her Excellency enumerated four of the most prominent strategic goals: foster universal access to the Internet, universally digitalize public services so that they are fully available online, equip 6 million Ukrainians with appropriate digital skills, and extensively develop the IT industry. These projects fall under the national initiative DIA (Digital, Inclusive, Accessible). Her Excellency explained how this national strategy constitutes an ecosystem for the development of multiple national projects. Among those falls a DIA app which was downloaded and used by more than 7 million Ukrainian people to access documents through their smartphones, and it revealed its great usefulness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, DIA business, a national project aimed at fostering development of small and medium size enterprises, was cited and analyzed in its two central components. The first component consists in an online-stop-shop for future and current entrepreneurs, whereas the second introduces very special offline hubs where people who want to become entrepreneurs or already own their business can get free consultations and attend virtual events on 50 priority topics, including advice on Human Resources management, fundraising, and access to finance. The ultimate pillar of the DIA ecosystem is represented by digital literacy, which includes two central components. The first is represented by a national online platform displaying more than 50 different educational series in entertainment format. The second is constituted by a network of offline hubs. Ukraine presents around 6,000 hubs (mainly libraries, centers for public services, schools, universities and even private buildings), accessible to people who can foster their digital literacy and improve their digital skills.

After this detailed presentation of the DIA initiative, promoted at the country-level, Her Excellency Valeryia Ionan reaffirmed the importance of adopting a multi-stakeholder approach to foster digital transformation and support the creation of a safe digital environment through cybersecurity regulation, innovative solutions, and the introduction of child online protection policies and guidelines. In her concluding words, Her Excellency invited all speakers and participants to join the European Digital Week events, taking place between the 22nd and the 28th of March 2021.

3. YOUTH SPEECH

Mr. Daniel Kalemi (Albania), Youth Envoy – Generation Connect - Europe Youth Group (CG-EUR)

After the Keynote Speech, Mr. Daniel Kalemi, Youth Envoy of the Generation Connect, Europe Youth Group, shared with audience and speakers his experience as member of the Youth Group and underlined the key role played by ICTs in enhancing opportunities and participation of youth in the digital transformation process catalyzed by the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Mr. Kalemi stated during his speech, younger generations, increasingly becoming drivers of social change, recognize the strategic role played by meaningful connectivity in fostering sustainable development.

After his brief introduction, Mr. Kalemi explained in detail the work of the [Generation Connect – Europe Youth Group](#), which resulted from joint efforts of 24 young people aged between 18 and 24, coming from all around Europe. These highly motivated young people have been working towards the elaboration of a [Youth Declaration](#), providing their views on the challenges and opportunities related to digital development and sharing their actions in connection to [ITU Regional Initiatives for Europe](#), and as an input to the [WTDC Regional Preparatory Meeting](#).

Over the course of his speech, Mr. Kalemi reported to the audience recommendations from the Youth Declaration and shared a set of selected actions that, according to the Europe Youth Group, Member States should adopt to advance the SDGs Agenda through the use of ICTs. The first focus of action should be capacity development. Among the policy recommendations highlighted during the speech falls the need to enhance digital literacy among youth through high-quality, free online courses (for instance, [ITU online resources](#)) to overcome the issue of skills mismatch and allow for increased access to adequate employment opportunities. With respect to policy regulation and cybersecurity, enhanced involvement of youth in the established regulatory processes could effectively ensure broader protection of youth rights online by limiting their exposure to existing digital threats. In fact, equipping youth with appropriate, comprehensive and up-to-date cybersecurity skills will result in having more digitally literate young citizens who will be well prepared to face future challenges and developments in the digital sector.

Mr. Kalemi further highlighted the role played by ICTs in reducing the ecological footprint to effectively combat climate change. The establishment of the circular economy, including ICT industries and devices, is of primary importance. Additionally, the Youth Group, through its representative, encouraged governments to create professional roles, educational paths, and grants to finance startups and youth initiatives to specifically support sustainable development through technology.

Finally, Mr. Kalemi reported the last pillar of the Youth Declaration, advocating for enhanced universal digital inclusion. Equality of access and effective use of digital platforms by all societal groups must be ensured, especially for those who experience digital exclusion as a result of discrimination based on age, gender, abilities, geographical location, socioeconomic status, or lack of language skills. As he reaffirmed, governments and industry stakeholders should adopt key policy actions to target these group-specific needs while also subsidizing the cost of Internet activity for the poorest and most vulnerable households and providing free Internet access in public spaces to allow for improved affordability and equality of access.

4. CONFERENCE TOPICS

TOPIC 1: Ensuring Universal Digital Inclusion

Focus: Ensuring universal meaningful connectivity, the participation of girls and women in the digital sector and its dynamics, creating a safe and empowering cyberspace for children and youth through capacity building, skills development and the adoption of a multi-stakeholder approach

Moderator: Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder, Head of ITU Office for Europe

Speakers: **Presentation 1**, Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder, Head of ITU Office for Europe; **Presentation 2**, Ms. Oxana Kukharchuk, Board member of “Element”, Private Sector, Russia; **Presentation 3**, Ms. Nino Enukidze, Rector of Business and Technology University, Georgia; **Presentation 4**, Ms. Yvette RAMOS, President WOMENVAI and Swiss Engineering, Geneva, Representative of Switzerland at the World Federation of Engineering Organizations (WFEO); **Presentation 5**, Ms. Kloreanta Janushi, Head of the Communication and Information Dissemination Unit, Directorate of Electronic Certification and Cyber Security, Council of Ministers of Albania.

Key points

- The ITU Report, “[How broadband, digitization and ICT regulation impact the global economy](#)”, offers important and practical guidance for governments of both developing and developed countries on direction and size of investments on ICT solutions to enhance the existing digital ecosystem in the years ahead. Particularly, it underscores the role played by the development of digital infrastructure (both in terms of fixed and mobile broadband) in increasing country-level Development Indexes.
- In Europe, a 10% increase in the CAF Digital Ecosystem Development Index results in a 1.4% growth in GDP p.c. In the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Region, a 10% increase in the ITU ICT Regulatory Tracker yields a positive increase in the CAF Digital Ecosystem Development Index of 1.58%. It is therefore fundamental to foster investments in digital infrastructure and regulation through partnerships formation and the adoption of a multi-stakeholder approach.
- Based on the ITU Report, “[Connecting Humanity](#)”, 33 billion USD will need to be mobilized to connect the unconnected in Europe and Central Asia. Moreover, the ITU Report, [Digital Trends in Europe 2021](#), describes the overall approach to connectivity in the 46 countries of the Europe region, focusing on the evolution of trends in the mobile market, fixed and satellite broadband access and use, digital skills development, gender divides, ICT prices and regulation.
- Even though the European mobile market is very advanced (38 out of 45 countries exceed 100 mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants), there is urgent need to bridge regional digital divides and close existing disparities in access between EU and non-EU countries. Moreover, in terms of affordability, Europe has the most affordable prices, closely followed by the CIS region. However, the Europe region presents persistent challenges in terms of gender gap in accessibility (which remains at 5 percentage points in Europe), and registered levels of ICT skills. Particularly, levels of standard and basic digital skills are well above 50% across the Region, and 13 countries

have attained levels of basic skills above 60%, but 5 countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania and Albania) have standard skills levels below 20%. Based on this evaluation of digital gender gaps and digital skills development, it's fundamental to adopt a multi-stakeholder and "one-UN" approach to actively work at the country-level and foster universalism in connectivity and access.

- There is an urgent need to bridge existing gender digital divides, which have been dramatically exacerbated over the course of the pandemic. According to UN Women, in Europe and Central Asia, a quarter of self-employed women have lost their jobs compared to a fifth of men. Based on statistics provided by the International Labor Organization (ILO), overall female employment is 19% more at risk than male employment. This is primarily attributed to the fact that women are overrepresented in low-paid jobs, which are currently facing the highest unemployment rates due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Empowering women economically and digitally would help them strengthen their financial independence and possibility to economically sustain their families and communities.
- The project "[UNIDO as a platform to promote women's economic empowerment and entrepreneurship](#)", a joint initiative supported by the Russian private sector and UNIDO, aims at ensuring equal participation of women and girls in the digital sector and its dynamics, with a special focus on the repercussions of COVID-19. The initiative includes the development of an online training course, "Digital Business Innovations for Women Entrepreneurs and Managers", in English and Russian. The project team finalized the first three pilot modules on basics of digital technologies, digital marketing and digital project management and is currently completing the development of three additional modules on e-commerce, social media marketing (SMM) and customer relationship management.
- Only by promoting women's entrepreneurship as an opportunity to gain economic independence and strengthen resilience, especially in the face of COVID-19, can women's capacities and skills can be effectively expanded to address current digital transformation challenges in the industrial sector, sell women-designed products and services online through user-friendly capacity-building tools and foster the chance for women and girls to access new job opportunities.
- In Georgia, women-led startups receive just to 2.3% of overall startup funding. Women and girls constitute an underrepresented group of entrepreneurs. The cost of Internet connection is particularly high for women, and, especially in developing countries, affordability of digital tools and platforms is still far from becoming the norm. Digital literacy and digital skills development are additional burdens precluding a comprehensive achievement of SDGs 4 and 5.
- Digital inclusion should not be considered in isolation, but rather as an integral part of a well-functioning and resilient social context. Many projects and country-based initiatives, both in developing and developed countries, need to be promoted to foster broader female labor force participation through access to digital skills and literacy. The Women in Tech (WIT) project, promoted by the Business and Technology University of Georgia, aims at supporting values such as gender-neutral acquisition of digital skills and universal digital inclusion. Particularly in the industrial sector, highly dominated by men due to discriminative and stereotypical attitudes, the

project aspires to empower young talents as well as to open conversations on how to make the tech industry a more inclusive place for women to advance their careers.

- Only by developing human-centered business models and adopting a multi-stakeholder approach, resulting from participation of all social groups and sectors, can smart economies become the norm and enhance existing investment returns. If appropriately fostered, women's participation in the economic sector, more specifically in the tech sector, can add up to 20 million USD in GDP across countries, and it has been proven that women-led start-ups are more than twice more productive than men-led start-ups per each dollar invested (Boston Consulting Group).
- To implement efficiently and effectively the 2030 Agenda through ICTs, coordination among governmental stakeholders, civil society groups, UN agencies, global partners, NGOs, engineering societies, science faculties, local authorities must more than ever be prioritized in order to overcome widespread political fragility, barriers posed by climate change and gender discrimination.
- Although technologies are becoming increasingly affordable, the acquisition of basic digital skills remains a barrier, and the digital divide persists. Developing digital skills, building human capacities to match the needs of the XXI society, and creating new job opportunities through ICTs for youth and women constitute key priorities. Technological solutions must be provided to fight sexual harassment and violence at school, at the university campuses and at the workplace. Reinforcing quality education through activities where women are the main role models can improve employment opportunities and ensure effective sharing of cross-disciplinary expertise. A collaborative approach to leadership is necessary to reflect learners' needs and lead to a transformed school culture in partnership with local communities and local actors.
- Providing safer Internet for children and youth in Albania is one of the strategic objectives of the "National Strategy for Cyber Security 2020-2025" in the country. Family, peers and school are the three environments of children's socialization, while the digital space has become the fourth. This specific dimension provides education and growth opportunities for children and young people, specifically in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also increasingly exposes them to the threats of the online world. Protecting children online requires specific and articulated actions to be defined in a simple and clear manner. The Albanian National Strategy for Cybersecurity aims to create the necessary mechanisms to enhance children's safety in cyberspace and make the youngest generation capable of exploiting the potential of ICTs to meet future development challenges.
- The cooperative work done by the Authority for Electronic Certification and Cybersecurity in Albania and ITU led to the [official roll-out of the Child Online Protection \(COP\) guidelines](#) at the country-level, expanding the knowledge on COP for youth and children and raising awareness for parents and carers in order to effectively reduce online risks faced by children and young people, allowing them to fully benefit from the opportunities offered by the digital environment.

TOPIC 2: Accelerating the Digitalization of Services

Focus: Digital technology as an engine for agriculture development in Europe and Central Asia, a tool to foster the implementation of mHealth solutions in Europe, and, if complemented with the adoption of open data policies, a mechanism to forecast and reduce the impact of climate change associated risks

Co-moderators: Ms. Sophie Treinen, Information and Knowledge Management Team Leader of FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia; Mr. Clayton Hamilton, Coordinator of the Digital Health Flagship Division of Country Health Policies and Systems of WHO Regional Office for Europe.

Speakers: **Presentation 1**, Ms. Sophie Treinen, Information and Knowledge Management Team Leader of FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia; **Presentation 2**, Ms. Eszter Varga, Senior Researcher at Institute of Agricultural Economics of Hungary; **Presentation 3**, Mr. Milan Dacic, Representative for Europe at World Meteorological Organization (WMO); **Presentation 4**, Ms. Ana Maria Carriazo, Senior Advisor at the Regional Ministry of Health and Families of Andalusia, Spain; **Presentation 5**, Mr. Stefano Quintarelli, Chair of the Advisory Group for Advanced Technologies in Trade and Logistics of the UN-CEFACT.

Key points

- In Europe, establishing a regulatory framework that ensures safe and standardized data exchanges, and respects data ownership and privacy while supporting business development opportunities, represents a key priority. In the agricultural landscape, developing digital skills, investing in user-friendly software interfaces for farmers in local languages, addressing energy-related issues, showcasing evidence of the returns of technology investments, and promoting public-private partnerships are all effective mechanisms to tackle issues such as the youth rural-urban migration phenomenon, the increasingly ageing farming population and the diffused low propensity to invest in agricultural digital solutions.
- The joint publication by ITU and FAO, "[Status of Digital Agriculture in 18 countries of Europe and Central Asia](#)", aims at exploring the scope and current stage of digital development in the agricultural sector across specific countries of the ECA Regions. The "[Digital Excellence in Agriculture](#)" initiative, promoted by ITU and FAO, collects good practices in the field of digital agriculture and provides a mechanism for identifying outstanding projects in the agricultural sector to be further scaled up to comprehensively enhance their cross-country efficiency and inter-operability potential.
- Across all sectors, it is fundamental to work towards the objective of closing the existing triple divide (digital, rural-urban, gender-based), specifically affecting Europe and Central Asia. In the agricultural sector, there is an urgent requirement for investments in supply and demand-side factors, in the view of increasing technology adoption rates. On the supply-side, rural networks, coverage and availability of digital applications represent a key priority. On the demand-side, digital skills and literacy, especially for farmers and smallholders, are fundamental. Addressing such factors necessitates a range of public policy interventions, and most importantly, a regulatory environment that attracts private sector investments. Additionally, participation of governments

in investments, through public-private partnerships, can ensure that gaps in infrastructure and access are bridged also in rural areas. Guaranteeing access to better quality data and raising farmers' awareness towards the potential of gaining increasing returns from investments in digital solutions represent further priorities.

- From the perspective of digitalization and the role of ICTs, the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) legislative proposals for 2021-2027 will convey multiple opportunities and expectations. The Western Balkans, and particularly pre-accession countries, are increasingly expected to align themselves with the requirements of the EU in all areas, including agriculture and digitalization. The [Digital Strategy of the European Commission](#) presents the European approach towards digital transformation - this should be viewed as reference basis for the introduction of digital policies and reforms in pre-accession countries.
- The cross-sectoral nature of digitalization and digital solutions allows for these aspects to be included in all pillars of CAP - particularly for the pillar of "Competitiveness". Under the CAP pillar of "Environmental care" falls the Farm Sustainability Tool for Nutrients (FaST) instrument. As part of the new CAP proposals for 2021-2027, FaST aims at facilitating a sustainable use of fertilizers for all farmers in the EU while boosting the digitization of the agricultural sector. Mechanisms of this kind are strong enablers of agriculture development through the use of ICTs. Additionally, digitalized administrative procedures and ICT-based quality control systems can substantially lead to cost reduction and increased efficiency for both farmers and Member States. Among the underlying themes of CAP, the [Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System](#) enables the fostering of knowledge exchange between persons, organizations and institutions in the agricultural landscape.
- Climate change represents a threat to sustainable development. Adaptation and mitigation are complementary strategies for reducing the risks of climate change and contributing to climate-resilient pathways for accelerated growth. One of the soft measures of adaptation to climate change is the empowerment of countries to develop or improve their Multi-Hazard Early Warning Systems. Given the global scope of hydrometeorological business, reforming ways of conducting climate-related analyses and updating data systems constitute national, regional and subregional priorities. Digital transformation, ICT-based tools and platforms effectively enable real-time data exchanges, enhancing the quality of information and advisories derived from cloud-based Multi-hazard Early Warning Systems. The breadth of the 2030 Agenda and on-going development of ICTs provide opportunities for a more systematic and ambitious approach to data collection, management and integration in order to guarantee comprehensive weather, climate and water related analyses.
- In order to reduce the impact of COVID-19 and effectively allow countries and civil society to build back better, there is an urgent need to share additional and previously unexchanged data types, such as weather radar data, to foster climate mitigation and resilience. Considering and supporting the role of the private sector in creating digital observations and products, as well as updating existing legislative frameworks to enhance maintenance and exchange of digital information for producing forecast and warnings constitute additional priorities countries and

governments must take into consideration to implement greener policies and be prepared for the upcoming World Meteorological Congress in 2021.

- COVID-19 has pushed governments and health authorities to adopt a so-called “dual health system response”, as governments were called to allocate resources to strengthen their national healthcare systems and, in parallel, reorganize their medical workforce to enhance preparedness to face future health crises. On the same grounds, health authorities were increasingly expected to introduce digital solutions and utilize data-driven approaches to sustain up-to-date medical research. The pandemic has paved the way for the adoption of transformative approaches in the delivery of healthcare and has entailed an increased use of digital solutions in medical research and development.
- Digital solutions in the healthcare sector should be targeted to country-based needs and national priorities. This explains why the present digital revolution does not entail application of a “one-size fits all” approach. Fostering well-targeted use of data in healthcare and universal meaningful connectivity through policy reforms and awareness-raising campaigns promoted through close collaboration between governments and national health authorities constitute current fundamental priorities.
- The [European mHealth Innovation & Knowledge Hub](#), funded by the European Commission and first launched in February 2020, is the result of close collaboration between ITU, WHO, and the Ministry of Health and Families of Andalusia. The Hub aims at fostering the use of ICTs - specifically mobile technology (or mHealth) - to find cost-effective ways to overcome major challenges in the European healthcare landscape. Through the contribution of almost 20 partners coming from 12 European countries, the initiative’s central objective consists in collecting and sharing national experiences on mHealth to support countries and regions in the set-up of large-scale mHealth programs. Main functionalities of the Hub include mHealth assessment frameworks, evidence-based mHealth solutions on non-communicable diseases (NCDs), approaches towards integration of mHealth into health systems (covering aspects such as governance, interoperability, national assessments), support to large-scale implementation of mHealth programs (in this regard, a number of technical papers and case studies from [Austria](#), [Portugal](#) and [Italy](#) has been incorporated in the platform), contribution to policy frameworks on mHealth topics, cross-border adoption and assessment of innovations, and sharing of expertise on ethical norms and standards. The Hub has also included a [repository of COVID-19 apps](#), constituting a preliminary list of leading economic initiatives developed in Europe to tackle the pandemic.
- In the current state of digital transformation, one of the key priorities fostering the SDGs is to have trustworthy and widely recognized digital identity - both for citizens of Member States, and for goods and products in international value and supply chains. Policy goals should focus on establishing and promoting the use of trustworthy digital identification, which allows for secure and efficient sharing of information within relevant scope, while giving data owners transparency and appropriate control over the ways in which their data are shared and managed. Self-sovereign identity (SSI) is an approach to digital identity that gives individuals control over their digitalized personal information in a legal and safe manner.

TOPIC 3: Creating an Enabling Environment for Digital Trade

Focus: Spotlighting the importance of new technologies to support trade and trade facilitation for more resilient and responsive economies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

Moderator: Ms. Elisabeth Tuerk, Director of the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division of UNECE

Speakers: **Presentation 1**, Ms. Haruko Okusu, Chief of Section at CITES Programme Management; **Presentation 2**, Mr. Mathias Lörtscher, Head CITES MA of Switzerland at the Federal Department of Home Affairs; **Presentation 3**, Ms. Maria Cardenas Fischer, Senior Programme Management Officer at the Basel Convention; **Presentation 4**, Ambassador Vuk Zugic, Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities.

Key points

- The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) is a multilateral agreement regulating trade for wildlife species and products. Digitalization is an important aspect of the Convention's continued efforts to provide tools and services that help parties ensure that wildlife trade remains legal. Strong regulatory processes must be put in place to ensure that value chains are both traceable and sustainable. The use of online means allows a fostering of species-identification processes, documentation and visualization of trade trends. Exploring cost-effective means for automating national CITES-permitting mechanisms represents an additional priority. Specifically, implementing an electronic permit procedure requires the adoption of four distinct phases: data integration for transparent cross-border declaration; automated generation of reports; exchange of electronic permit data across all entities and stakeholders involved; and application of data standards and sharing of best practices to enhance the implementation and the exchange of electronic permits' related information.
- Trade permits are issued based on their adherence to existing legal frameworks. After the introduction of [e-CITES](#), permits' processing time was reduced from 10-20 days to 5 hours / max 5 days. Moreover, 98% of permits were processed through the system, which engages over 270 companies and more than 700 users. Through an enhanced process of resource allocation, savings for industries are considerable. Following this line, CITES is working towards the implementation of e-Control and e-Exchange, in order to respectively allow border agencies to use electronic CITES information to crosscheck with electronic customs declarations and exchange electronic permits between authorities in different countries. These mechanisms aim at promoting and fostering the use of fully automated national CITES systems, the adoption of common technical standards and the creation of a framework of trust through the implementation of international agreements.
- The Basel Convention is an international treaty designed to reduce the movement of hazardous waste between nations, and specifically prevent transfer of hazardous waste from developed to less developed countries. Through the adoption of new technologies (such as blockchain) and the digitalization of processes, the Basel Secretariat is promoting and implementing the eBasel solution. This aims at fostering sustainability of value chains through digitalization, enhancing equity and equality in waste management between rich and poor countries, achieving close

cooperation between UN agencies, and providing increased support to all Convention members in the areas of compliance and enforcement, science and capacity building. The Convention specifically explores options for the creation of a system introducing automated processes and the electronic exchange of information related to notification of movement of hazardous and other waste.

- Through the adoption of an inclusive and multi-stakeholder approach, aimed at engaging governments, private sector, civil society, and international organizations, the integration of digital technology into existing and new trade infrastructure has the power to increase economic resilience and international trade flows. If properly established, digital cross-border trade facilitation measures make international trade faster, greener, more sustainable, and less prone to eventual external shocks like pandemics, further enhancing positive neighborly relations, security and stability. ICT-based solutions and digital transformation processes can effectively contribute to a sustainable and green recovery. Since the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the founding document of the OSCE, and through further OSCE Ministerial Council Decisions, commitments are shaped around the idea that connectivity through trade and transport can be a driving force for reducing inequalities and fostering economic development, prosperity, stability and security in the OSCE region. Thus, OSCE and [participating States](#) represent a platform to facilitate dialogue, support cooperation, and share lessons learned in the dimension of trade enhancement through digitalization.

5. CLOSING REMARKS

Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder, Head of Regional Office for Europe, ITU, and Chair of the event, thanked participants, panellists, moderators and co-moderators. He then summarized the excellent content emerged through the various panel discussions of the Cross-cutting Session. In his closing remarks, Mr. Ponder reaffirmed the importance of shaping a future where digitalization becomes accessible, safe, smart, Cross-cutting and the new normal. As stated by Mr. Ponder, the outcomes of the Session's fruitful discussion will positively enhance the ongoing digital transformation process in Europe and Central Asia, embracing all sectors through the coordinated work of the UNDTG4ECA, which is ready to support Member States along this journey. Referring to the UN Digital Transformation Group's work and joint efforts, he drew the audience's attention to the [Stocktaking Report](#), a collection of ICT-based solutions, initiatives, and projects implemented by all UNDTG4ECA members at the national and regional levels.

He also emphasized the importance of continuing the discussion in other meetings taking place in Europe in March and April, such as [ITU Regional Forum for Europe on Digital Skills](#), and the [World Summit on Information Society \(WSIS\) 2021](#) where, on the 26th of April, the UNDTG4ECA will hold a special session further underlying the role of digitization and digitalization as Cross-cutting tools to advance on the 2030 SDGs Agenda.