

2nd Expert Group Meeting on an ITU Index

Virtual Meeting

17 April 2020

SUMMARY REPORT

1. The 2nd Expert Group Meeting on an ITU index took place on 17 April 2020. Due to the growing global concern over the COVID-19 outbreak, the meeting was conducted via remote participation only. The meeting attracted 186 participants from 59 Member States, along with Resolution 99 (Rev. Dubai, 2018), ITU-D Associates and experts in the field of ICT development. Mr. Alexandre Barbosa, head of the Regional Center for Studies on the Development of the Information Society (Cetic.br), Brazil, chaired the meeting.
2. Following the roadmap agreed at the 1st Expert Group Meeting of 10 February 2020, this second Expert Group Meeting was organized with the aim to present and discuss the draft index framework and methodology for an ITU index. A background document circulated ahead of the meeting provided participants with a revised draft conceptual framework that is based on associating digital technologies with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), built around the '5 Ps' of People, Prosperity, Planet, Peace and Partnership. This forward-looking new index aims to assess how digital technologies may impact the ability of countries to achieve the SDGs. The background document, complemented by an annex table describing possible indicators associated with the thematic topics outlined in the framework under each of the five pillars, presented work in progress to be discussed at the Meeting. The objectives of the meeting were to 1) identify a consensus on the proposed structure of the framework; and 2) receive comments and suggestions on the topics identified under each of the five pillars and on the preliminary list of possible indicators that could be included in the index.
3. The Chair of the meeting, Mr. Alexandre Barbosa, welcomed the more elaborate revised framework that took into account feedback and contributions from Member States, and conveyed appreciation for the efforts made by ITU to actively engage with experts and UN agencies in the development process. The Chair highlighted the shared responsibility between ITU and Members to develop a reliable and relevant index. Mr. Barbosa recalled that the approach of linking ICTs to SDG was endorsed in the previous meetings.
4. Ms. Doreen Bogdan-Martin, Director of the Telecommunication Development Bureau, opened the meeting by recalling that fundamental problems encountered in the revision process of the ICT Development Index (IDI) in terms of quality and quantity of data and flaws in the process of constructing the index have prevented ITU from publishing the index since 2017. In order to find a solution, ITU initiated a consultation process in 2019 and organized two meetings in 2020 (the 1st Expert Group Meeting of 10 Feb 2020 and the 25 March 2020 briefing for TDAG in the form of

a Web Dialogue) to discuss the concept of a new measurement framework.¹ Ms. Bogdan-Martin highlighted that the new SDG-focused approach would enable ITU to better deliver on its core mission, which is the promotion, the facilitation and the fostering of digital networks, services and applications, and their use for social, economic and environmentally sustainable growth and development. The index would rely not only on data collected by ITU, but also on metrics from across the UN system, building on strong relationships with sister UN agencies.

5. Ms. Susan Teltscher, Head a.i. of the ICT Data and Analytics Division, presented the background document² and the revised framework, which represented work in progress. Ms. Teltscher explained the logic behind the proposed structure and noted that the topics were not to be seen as exhaustive or final, and provided possible examples of a few preliminary indicators that could populate the framework. The presentation outlined the next steps based on the previously discussed way forward, including refinement of the methodology, data collection, indicator testing, statistical analyses and preparation of the draft report with the aim to launch the new indicator at the World Telecommunications ICT Indicators Symposium in December 2020. Ms. Teltscher invited participants to submit comments and suggestions also in writing following the present meeting.³
6. The overall approach of linking ICTs to SDGs in the new index and the 5-pillar structure (People, Prosperity, Planet, Peace and Partnership) received support by many delegates.
7. Some Member States questioned whether it was possible to conclude that the original version and the proposed revision of the IDI should be discontinued.
8. Several delegates commented on the development process of the new index. In the discussion, some expressed their support with the strategy followed by ITU, others highlighted the need for thorough consultation with Member States. Proposals suggested leveraging on the expertise of the Expert Group on Telecommunications/ICT Indicators (EGTI) and the Expert Group on Household Indicators (EGH), or relying on an Expert Group made up of statisticians from all Member States to develop the index, or even fully handing over the development process to Member States.
9. Some Member States expressed concern for ensuring that the development of a new index is in accordance with Resolution 131 of the Plenipotentiary Conference of 2018. Suggestions included agreeing first on the process before discussing technical details of the methodology. Several comments underlined that the new index should be approved and adopted by Member States during official meetings – i.e., ITU Council 2020 or the Plenipotentiary Conference in 2022.
10. A number of Member States proposed extending the timeline outlined during the presentation for developing the index. Key arguments centered on the uncertainties due to changed business

¹ All information on the first Expert Group Meeting is available here: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/events/egmITUindex2020/default.aspx>. A Summary Report of the TDAG Web Dialogue will be made available at: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Conferences/TDAG/Pages/TDAG25/default.aspx>. Presentation available at: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Conferences/TDAG/Documents/2020%20TDAG/TDAG%2020%20ITU%20index%20presentation.pdf>.

² Presentation available at https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/events/2ndegmITUindex2020/EGM_ITUindexPresentation_17April%202020.pdf.

³ The proposed deadline for submitting comments was 24 April. During the meeting, it was extended to 1 May 2020.

practices amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and the complexity of the proposed framework which implies that it may take longer time to fully develop and test, while Member States governments need to further review and fully familiarize themselves with the new tool, which may include cross-sectoral discussions. Participants also requested extending the deadline for providing written comments on the current version of the document.

11. Delegates noted the complexity of the framework and that the diversity of data sources presents a challenge, as well as the possibility that some topics can be allocated to multiple pillars. Some delegates expressed concern about the inclusion of a diversity of sources (including private ones) for indicators. Several Member States requested that data should originate from official sources only – governments, national statistical offices or regulators –, in the spirit of the UN World Data Forum’s Action Plan related to the use of global SDG indicators, and of Res. 131. At the same time, it was proposed to exploit big data if supported by feasible methodologies. Delegates reiterated the importance of not increasing the burden on Member States for collecting additional data.
12. Data availability for the indicators was a key concern for many countries, calling on developers to pay close attention to ensuring a broad geographical coverage of countries at different levels of development, considering also the development of statistical systems and the costs of collecting certain data. It was proposed to select indicators that are sensitive to measuring improvements in rural areas as well. Delegates highlighted that collecting the broad range of indicators may be challenging: some specifically mentioned that even existing interview-based data collection will be problematic in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, others inquired about proxy measures or alternative options in case that data is not available or representative from sources other than ITU. It was suggested that the topics covered by the index could be reviewed in light of data availability.
13. A few Member States reiterated the comments raised in earlier meetings that the new measurement tool should not include a ranking in order to avoid inducing unwanted competition between countries. Regarding the aggregation of indicators, some suggested making the index actionable by publishing sub-indices in each pillar.
14. A number of specific indicators were proposed. These included adding indicators related to network quality and performance, or a breakdown by speed; indicators on individual online consumption such as online retail sales or mobile payments; using a more gradual measurement for the indicator related to cybersecurity legislation rather than dichotomous measures; or adding an indicator in the respective pillar on the number of jobs generated by the IT sector. Some delegates cautioned that certain ICT indicators are more relevant for the least developed countries, e.g. where mobile telephony is more pervasive than fixed. Comments pointed out the potential overlap between indicators (online services and digital services), the importance of reflecting in the framework the ICT skills indicator most recently adopted by EGH and the challenge of keeping all component indicators timely with updates on an annual basis. Others emphasized the importance of using standardized terms when defining indicators and paying attention to differences in age cohorts across countries, i.e. with respect to defining youth.
15. Implementation of a broader new indicator framework implies that Member States may need to coordinate with other ministries and international organizations to ensure that indicators are updated. Some Member States viewed this as an opportunity for fostering partnerships, while others highlighted the complexity involved as the index would inform policy makers indifferent

sectors. It was also noted that changing indicators (i.e. as part of household surveys) involves the cost of re-training surveyors.

16. Finally, four countries requested that their statements be reflected in this report. Their edited statements are in the Annex.

ANNEX

Edited Statements

Bahrain

The Kingdom of Bahrain has no objection to the idea of considering a new index nor acceptance to its current form, but wants to stress that the appropriate process must be followed, which is through the Expert Group, and should allow sufficient time for Member States to study and consult on the proposal itself.

Second, the Kingdom of Bahrain reiterates its position first expressed during the previous Expert Group meeting in February that the process for introducing this new index is not clear. It is the responsibility of the ITU Expert Group – not of the BDT Secretariat – to propose and agree on indices or their amendments.

Third, we have an in-force resolution that is PP-18 Resolution 131. The Kingdom of Bahrain suggests that ITU should publish the IDI in 2020, which many of the colleague representatives have agreed on, as there is insufficient time to agree on the new proposed index. In terms of methodology, it should be, in order of preference, the new methodology, the new methodology with amendments or the original IDI.

Fourth, in the Expert Group Meetings on 10 February and 17 April, 2020, reference was made by the Chairman and the BDT to the IDI having been 'cancelled' and that the way forward cannot include publication of the IDI in any form. To date, no explanation has been provided to clarify on what basis the IDI is considered to have been abrogated. Such a position cannot be accepted until and unless clearly agreed by the Member States through the appropriate channels and processes.

Fifth, the BDT has stated in the Expert Group Meetings that the 'new' IDI (approved in 2018) cannot be implemented due to difficulties in data gathering and accuracy of information. However, no details on what these challenges are or options for addressing them were circulated for consideration by the Member States and the Expert Groups.

India

India congratulates the ITU Secretariat for their presentation. It supports the new Index but has certain concerns it wishes to raise. First, the proposed ITU index is very complex and it comprises 45 indicators. Getting data for so many indicators for most Member States poses a huge challenge. It needs to include indicators that the majority of countries can provide data for. Already with the IDI, which included only 14 indicators, ITU could not publish the IDI in 2018 and 2019. We don't want to have a similar failure.

Second, in the background document, there are multiple sources mentioned against an individual indicator. Getting data from multiple sources for the same indicator may result in inconsistencies as each agency might have a different definition of the same indicator, so the data will be different if we have multiple sources.

Third, data for some of the indicators related to health and wellbeing is proposed to be taken from OECD. Many countries are not members of OECD and in such case, India would like to know what ITU suggests getting data for the countries which are not members of OECD?

Fourth, India recommends that indicators focus on the outcome, rather than the means to achieve that outcome. For example, indicators need to focus on results achieved either through mobile technology or fixed technology, computer, tablet or smartphone, etc., but not on the means to achieve the results. More generally, Indicators must be closely and objectively analyzed and in a timely manner. India wishes to thank ITU for considering inclusion of affordability as an indicator in the new index, which takes into consideration the affordability for different telecom/ICT services.

Fifth, the index must consider the demography of countries, as well as geography, the challenges of rural areas, so that countries facing these challenges are not penalized. In addition, India notes that indicators give a static position of the state of ICT development. The index should also consider what efforts are being made by Member States to improve the ICT infrastructure and the ecosystem. India would welcome the inclusion of a parameter that assesses the effort made by a country – not just the level.

Finally, discussing 45 indicators during this meeting is not possible and ITU has given only one week for feedback after this meeting, especially in the context of COVID-19. ITU should give Member States enough time for seeking written comments and should not hurry to finalize the index which might lead to another failure. Finalizing the index by June of 2020 is too optimistic.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia in principle agrees with the overall idea for a new ITU index but would like to raise several concerns.

The first one is that according to the roadmap, the next step would be for the Council to decide on the indicators. However, the experts should decide in an Expert Group Meeting, as the Council members are not the experts.

The second concern is that the components of the new index are not clear. Some parts are missing, other parts are not clear, while some of the targets are not clear. We should also be more focused, like for the Regulatory Tracker and the Global Cybersecurity Index, because if we measure everything, we are measuring nothing. More details are required before we can proceed.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia notes that according to the presentation if there are data for only 50 countries, the indicator will be taken into consideration. However, if we go back to the old IDI, it was required to have data for almost two thirds of the membership before including that indicator.

Finally, Saudi Arabia wishes to highlight that PP-18 Resolution 131 states clearly and directly that the data that ITU includes in its composite indices should be based on official data provided by Member States. According to the background document, some data will be taken from private sector sources, and quasi private sector entities, which Saudi Arabia does not agree with.

Taking all of this into consideration, Saudi Arabia wants to highlight that the ITU is for the membership. The membership will be the client of this indicator. It is therefore very important to get the buy-in from all membership and considering all of this. Saudi Arabia highly recommends that we give this indicator more time to mature, to get the approval and the acceptance from all membership. Given this, Saudi Arabia cannot accept that the next step is to present this to the Council for approval. We need to work on the indicators for some more time. It is in the right direction. However, some countries have specified that this index needs to be rethought and considered and is given some time to prosper and mature.

United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates expressed several concerns with respect to the development of the new index. The first concern is about the legal procedures of developing the new index in accordance with PP-18 Resolution 131.

Second, Member States have worked for two years in the context of a subgroup of the Expert Group on Telecommunications/ICT Indicators to review the previous set of 11 indicators in the IDI, and the revised framework of 14 indicators was subsequently approved by Member States at the WTIS 2018, so it cannot be concluded that the process was unsuccessful. The United Arab Emirates also notes that only 37 administrations were present at the 10 February meeting, and inquires who has taken the decision not to go forward with the previous IDI.

Third, the TDAG Web Dialogue of 25 March 2020 cannot be taken into consideration for the development process of an index, as TDAG, with all due respect, did not consist of experts. Resolution 131, issued by the Plenipotentiary Conference and which governs how to work on the IDI, clearly says that ITU must work through the Member States or the Expert Group to approve the IDI or develop the IDI.

The United Arab Emirates does not necessarily have a problem to go ahead with the new index, provided that it follows the proper process, which is through the Expert Group and which takes good time. The methodology is not yet known for the development, while data provision and calculation of the index needs to be analyzed by Member States, as these will have implications for administrations.

The United Arab Emirates further observes that ITU is the specialized agency for ICTs, as per its constitution. However, the new framework focuses not only on ICTs but also contains other indicators covering different parameters and sectors. This requires a careful consideration of the legal, regulatory and economic implications as well as of implied work by the regulator, requiring due time. Furthermore, many new indicators originating from different international organizations make it difficult for telecom regulators to follow them and to meet requirements, as other ministries or entities may be responsible for these indicators.

Finally, the United Arab Emirates emphasizes that if the decision to abandon the old indicator is not taken by Member States in a proper meeting or proper conference, the development process cannot go ahead. If the proposed index is totally new, which appeared to be the case, it was necessary to wait until any update to the Resolution 131 at the next Plenipotentiary Conference in 2022 before a new index can be released in order not to exceed the mandate.