

## **Regional Conversation Series on Building Back Better “Accelerating Digital Connectivity and Leveraging Innovation” (Virtual Meeting), Wednesday 19 August 2020**

### **Summary Report**

#### **Introduction**

In commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations, the Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, convened the first of the Regional Conversation Series on Building Back Better focused on [‘Accelerating Digital Connectivity and Leveraging Innovation’](#).

The event was opened by Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, followed by Mr. Fabrizio Hochschild Special Adviser to the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration.

The objective of the Regional Conversation was to discuss pathways to digital inclusion and innovation drawing from the perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders, such as Ministers from member States and pioneers and leaders in space science and digital technology-led innovations. The eminent speakers that participated were:

- Dr. Mukai Chiaki, M.D., Ph.D., Astronaut, Senior Advisor, Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA)
- H.E Mr. Mohamed Maleeh Jamal, Minister, Ministry of Communications, Science and Technology, Maldives
- Ambassador (ret) Ted Osius, Vice President for Government Affairs and Public Policy, Asia Pacific, Google
- Mr. Sami Farhad, Senior Director, Globalization Office, Alibaba Group
- Mr. Fabrizio Hochschild, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the UN’s on the Commemoration of the United Nations 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and UN lead on the SG’s Roadmap on Digital Cooperation

The conversations were centered around issues related to the transformative potential of digital technologies and innovative applications of science, including opportunities that advances in space and geospatial applications offer. Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, technology innovation for diversification of economies and sustainable development; as well as the role of international technology platforms in ensuring inclusive and digitally driven growth were considered. Financing through public and private partnerships to improve societal well-being, investments and initiatives for the transformation of digital societies and the role of international cooperation in bringing universal, safe, affordable and reliable access to the Internet by 2030 were also discussed.



## Key take-away

- (1) The Regional Conversation Series on Building Back Better is very timely and starting the series with digital cooperation is highly relevant because COVID-19 has aggravated the consequences of digital divides and threatens to unleash new inequalities and undermine the realization of the sustainable development goals. Globally, there are 3.6 billion people who still remain unconnected, who are often the most difficult and costly to connect and most often excluded from other services. These are usually rural communities from remote areas, the poor and women. Women are less connected than men globally, a trend that is worsening.
- (2) Space technology and geospatial applications have opened up new horizons on the opportunities to tackle future planetary fragilities and challenges. As a result, space technologies can increase our resilience and contribute to the achievement of the sustainable development goals. Interestingly even space habitation may not be that far in the future.
- (3) Lack of digitalization in Asia-Pacific developing economies hampers the contributions of digital technology to inclusive growth. Digital technology has a critical role to play in a post-COVID economic recovery. Thanks to online platforms, companies and entrepreneurs have a way to connect with their customers and keep their businesses running, bringing immense cumulative impacts. Online platforms can connect entrepreneurs with millions of potential customers around the world without the need of big investments and can allow the creation of online businesses at no cost. This can be particularly beneficial and empowering to female entrepreneurs, who are often underrepresented in more traditional industry structures.
- (4) Given these challenges, governments and societies have the opportunity now to better adapt to the future, especially for the post-COVID-19 era. This adaptation, however, requires a change in mindsets. Notably, digital infrastructure is still seen as a luxury. A change in mindsets is needed so that it becomes a critical and essential infrastructure, as roads and powerlines are. Furthermore, sustained efforts are needed in terms of government collaboration with key stakeholders, in particular with the private sector and non-governmental organizations.



## Policy recommendations

As a result, the panel highlighted the following policy recommendations:

- (1) Increase the use of space technology products and services for sustainable development and in disaster risk reduction. With the use of satellite data and digital elevation models, space technologies allow the creation of maps of those areas that are difficult to access from the ground, providing key information that enables a more effective monitoring of not only disasters but a range of environmental problems, such as air pollution.
- (2) Reform government legislation, policies and frameworks to meet rising aspirations of the region's youthful society by increasing Internet speed, affordability, and accessibility. Governments need to accelerate the phasing out of conventional technologies and better adapt to newer technologies.
- (3) Strengthen public-private partnerships and involve other relevant stakeholders including marginalized communities to tackle both supply and demand side bottlenecks. Governments need to be in a learning mindset, with cross-ministry and multi-stakeholder cooperation, dynamic and flexible policy environment to promote innovation, technology and digital transformation; targeted measures to support small and medium sized enterprises in the digital context; better alignment of infrastructure investment strategies with long-term development objectives; strengthened efficient logistics networks; and promote inclusive financial services.
- (4) Increase international cooperation to bridge digital divides and make the need to achieve universal safe, affordable, and reliable access by 2030 a global priority. The forthcoming 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary Declaration provides political momentum.
- (5) Such a priority needs to be supported by ambitious and sustained cooperative actions at the regional and national levels with capacity building efforts, scaled up to match the magnitude of the problem.

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