Progress made in strengthening regional digital cooperation in Asia and the Pacific

Note by the secretariat

Summary

In its resolution 80/1, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific encouraged all its members and associate members to strengthen regional and multi-stakeholder cooperation and to work together closely for the promotion of research and development in digital technologies and the fostering of human development and a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship with a view to expediting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In the present document, the secretariat discusses global and regional initiatives on digital cooperation, notably the Action Plan for Implementing the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Initiative, 2022–2026, and highlights key issues related to digital inclusion and transformation for the accelerated implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It also discusses policy recommendations for regional digital cooperation among members and associate members, notably those that came out of the seventh session of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Steering Committee.

Participants in the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Digital Inclusion and Transformation are invited to review the information in the present document and provide further guidance to the secretariat on strengthening regional digital cooperation, notably through the implementation of the Action Plan for Implementing the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Initiative, 2022–2026, in support of global cooperation.

* ESCAP/MCDIT/1.
I. Introduction

1. Comprehensive digital transformation, which is a critical enabler for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, is not only about technological advancement but also about creating an inclusive digital society that caters to the needs of all segments of the population.

2. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has been a consistent promoter of digital inclusion and transformation across the region. The engagement of members and associate members in global and regional frameworks, such as the World Summit on the Information Society process and the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative, has shaped regional development strategies, placing a focus on creating an inclusive and sustainable digital future.

3. The present document contains an overview of key global and regional digital cooperation initiatives, notably those implemented by the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Steering Committee and its three working groups, and key issues related to digital inclusion and transformation are highlighted. The common understandings of these issues that emerge among members and associate members and their engagement in regional cooperation initiatives are vital for identifying strategic actions and developing policies that will drive digital transformation.

II. Global initiatives on digital cooperation

4. The current global digital landscape is characterized by rapid technological advancements and increasing reliance on digital solutions. Such advancements and solutions are critical in addressing challenges such as obstacles to sustainable economic growth, climate change, the increased risk of disasters and widening economic disparities. Key global initiatives include the World Summit on the Information Society process and the Summit of the Future, as part of which a global digital compact is currently under negotiation. These initiatives and their relationship to regional initiatives in Asia and the Pacific are described below.

A. World Summit on the Information Society process

5. The World Summit on the Information Society, which was held in two phases, the first in 2003 and the second in 2005, contributed to building a foundational framework for global digital cooperation by setting out a vision to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society. In addition to 10- and 20-year reviews of the implementation of its outcomes, it has also given way to the World Summit on the Information Society Forum, an annual gathering for facilitating cooperation among stakeholders from across the globe, including representatives of Governments, businesses, non-governmental organizations and academic institutions, and for promoting exchanges of information and lessons learned from efforts to implement the World Summit on the Information Society action lines.

6. The World Summit on the Information Society process has served to advance the application of digital technology innovations for public goods and pursue the objectives of ensuring more equitable access to and use of innovative technologies and promoting inclusive and sustainable growth. In

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1 The 10-year review was held in 2015 (A/RES/70/125) and the 20-year review is to be held in 2025.
combination with sustainability initiatives, this kind of global framework makes it possible to leverage technological innovations and solutions to tackle climate-related and environmental challenges. In the light of these benefits, it is vital to continue to promote multilateral collaborations as a means of developing robust digital solutions that enhance digital trust, security and resilience.

7. ESCAP has actively supported the realization of global agendas and efforts by facilitating multi-stakeholder regional policy dialogues, sharing best practices and promoting the alignment of national strategies with the World Summit on the Information Society action lines and regional strategies, including through the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative. This ensures that the challenges and opportunities specific to the Asia-Pacific region are considered as part of broader global strategies, thereby fostering a cohesive approach to building resilient and inclusive digital societies.

B. Summit of the Future

8. The proposal for the Summit of the Future, to be held in September 2024, originated in Our Common Agenda, in which the Secretary-General set out proposals on how to better respond to current and future challenges and proposed a global digital compact, to be agreed at the Summit of the Future. In its decision 77/568, the General Assembly outlined commitments to facilitate open, transparent and inclusive intergovernmental consultations on such a global digital compact.

9. A global commitment for digital cooperation was also a key theme in the 2019 report of the High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation entitled “The age of digital interdependence”. In addition, the Secretary-General’s vision of an open, free and secure digital future for all underpins the Road Map for Digital Cooperation, launched in 2020.

10. In line with these global initiatives, the ESCAP secretariat, through the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative, has supported members and associate members in strengthening their capacity to leverage digital transformation for sustainable development.

11. In particular, the secretariat has developed knowledge products to promote regional policy dialogues, including a digital transformation framework to provide a better understanding of the drivers of digital transformation in the region. In addition, it has facilitated regional policy dialogues and the sharing of good practices and lessons learned among stakeholders, including other United Nations agencies, international organizations and businesses.

III. Regional initiatives on digital cooperation

12. In the Asia-Pacific region, there has been significant momentum behind digital cooperation efforts, with the secretariat playing a pivotal role in coordinating the efforts made by members and associate members.

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2 A/75/982.
3 A/74/821.
13. The Action Plan for Implementing the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Initiative, 2022–2026,⁴ has contributed to regional digital cooperation. The Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative⁵ is aimed at bridging the digital divide and accelerating digital transformation through regionally coordinated actions promoting digital technology and applications, digital connectivity and the use of digital data. The endorsement of the Action Plan by the Committee on Information and Communications Technology, Science, Technology and Innovation was welcomed by ESCAP in its resolution 79/10 in May 2023.

A. Outcome of the seventh session of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Steering Committee

14. At the seventh session of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Steering Committee, held in Yerevan on 8 and 9 November 2023, 73 representatives of ESCAP members and associate members, international organizations, businesses, civil society organizations and academic institutions committed to strengthening digital inclusion and transformation through regional digital cooperation platforms. Alongside the seventh session, ESCAP, in collaboration with the International Telecommunication Union, held the annual regional review of the progress made in implementing the action lines of the World Summit on the Information Society.

15. At its seventh session, the Steering Committee recognized the transformational potential and risks of artificial intelligence, as well as the related work of the United Nations on artificial intelligence to foster a globally inclusive approach on artificial intelligence governance.⁶

16. The Steering Committee also recognized that realizing gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls would make a crucial contribution to progress across all of the Sustainable Development Goals and emphasized the need to target science, technology and innovation strategies to address the empowerment of women and girls and to reduce inequalities, including bridging the gender digital divide. It also proposed that the secretariat consider undertaking a study focused on digital innovation and climate change as a substantive input to major global and regional initiatives and events, including the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Digital Inclusion and Transformation.

B. Initiatives of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Steering Committee

17. As part of the implementation of the Action Plan for Implementing the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Initiative, 2022–2026, a series of online workshops were organized in 2023 and 2024 to facilitate knowledge-sharing between government officials and other stakeholders.

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⁴ See ESCAP/CICTSTI/2022/INF/1.
⁶ The outcome report of the seventh session of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Steering Committee is available at www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/(Final)%20Outcome%20report%20APIS%20SC-7.pdf.
18. An online workshop on the cooperative framework of artificial intelligence in the Asia-Pacific region was held on 19 January 2024. The workshop was aimed at enhancing the understanding of artificial intelligence by examining ongoing global and regional discussions on artificial intelligence applications and regulations, sharing good practices and addressing challenges in the development, use and regulatory governance of artificial intelligence. Discussions were also focused on identifying and prioritizing ways to leverage artificial intelligence to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, emphasizing the role of ESCAP. In addition, participants explored cooperative modalities for promoting the contribution of artificial intelligence to the achievement of the Goals within the framework of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative and discussed the potential establishment of an artificial intelligence trust fund to help developing countries overcome artificial intelligence disparities and to foster a more inclusive digital transformation.

19. A workshop on leveraging the opportunities presented by artificial intelligence for an inclusive digital society was held on 26 July 2023. Good practices were shared on using artificial intelligence to enhance competitiveness, and a case study from the Republic of Korea was presented. A technical presentation was delivered on the vision of the Government of India and its approach to using artificial intelligence in support of government services for its citizens. A case study from China was presented on the use of artificial intelligence for multimedia applications. Participants recognized that, while research and development on artificial intelligence had grown rapidly in several countries with advanced information and communications technology (ICT) sectors, such as China, Japan and the Republic of Korea, other countries with less advanced ICT sectors lacked the capacity to adopt a comprehensive policy-planning process in order to leverage the opportunities of artificial intelligence for an inclusive digital society. That gap undermined efforts to bridge the digital divide and raised serious concerns that the digital divide could evolve into a more pernicious artificial intelligence divide that would amplify development inequalities in the Asia-Pacific region.

20. A workshop on digital data and innovation was held on 1 November 2023, aimed at enhancing awareness and facilitating the exchange of information on the latest advancements in digital data utilization and innovations, as well as sharing key initiatives and challenges within the Asia-Pacific region. Good practices and lessons learned on the development and utilization of digital data to accelerate digital transformation were shared. It also served as a platform to discuss ways to foster sound ecosystems for digital data development in the Asia-Pacific region.

C. Regional programme of technical assistance implemented by the secretariat

21. The secretariat has worked to strengthen the capacities of government officials to develop and implement policies for equitable access to digital connectivity and technologies, particularly for vulnerable populations, including people living in rural and remote areas, women and people with disabilities. The secretariat’s activities have been implemented at the regional and subregional levels as described below.

22. In partnership with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the ESCAP secretariat is assisting the monetary authority and relevant government ministries in Maldives to evaluate the opportunities and risks of implementing a national central bank digital currency. Maldives is adopting an iterative
approach to the potential introduction of such a currency and financial technologies by initially developing a regulatory sandbox framework. This involves extensive staff training and preparation for the testing of the currency and financial technologies in a controlled environment. The primary policy objectives are to enhance the efficiency of national payment systems, promote financial inclusion and support a payment system tailored to the tourism sector. Other Governments in the region, such as those of China, India, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation and Thailand, are also exploring the possibility of piloting a central bank digital currency.

23. The secretariat has started a project to advance cross-border data-sharing with a focus on digital public services in selected countries through the development of digital data-sharing conceptual frameworks and pilot applications. Another project currently under way is aimed at enhancing the capacity of government officials in pilot countries, namely Bangladesh, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Samoa, to develop innovative strategies for improving rural digital and transport connectivity for socioeconomic resilience. In 2023, workshops were held in each pilot country to evaluate research and assessment findings in order to formulate actionable strategies for enhancing digital and transport connectivity, to disseminate those findings and to foster dialogue and cooperation.

24. In South-East Asia, the secretariat is implementing a project aimed at enhancing the policy capacity of Association of Southeast Asian Nations member States for the utilization of digital technology applications and digital data, including geospatial data, to analyse and mitigate air pollution. Exposure to poor-quality air disproportionately affects the most vulnerable populations, particularly people living in poverty with limited access to health care. The project provides policymakers with the opportunity to acquire technical skills, knowledge and best practices.

25. In the Pacific subregion, the secretariat, in cooperation with the Government of New Zealand, has been providing capacity-building workshops and online consultations to help government officials from Fiji and Samoa improve Internet traffic network management by establishing an Internet exchange point. A Pacific Internet exchange point task force, consisting of government officials and other relevant national stakeholders, has been meeting virtually on a bimonthly basis to discuss the establishment and operation of a Pacific Internet exchange point for Fiji, New Zealand and Samoa. In 2023, the task force agreed on a constitution to operationalize the exchange point, and in June 2024 the Pacific Islands Internet Exchange Incorporated was registered as a not-for-profit society in New Zealand. The Pacific Internet exchange point will connect national Internet exchange points and Internet service providers in Fiji, New Zealand and Samoa, ensuring that Internet traffic remains local within the Pacific. Other Pacific island members and associate members that opt to connect to the Pacific Internet exchange point through any of the three project countries will benefit from more efficient Internet traffic management, resulting in faster and more affordable Internet services. The secretariat will continue to encourage Pacific island members and associate members, Internet service providers and other relevant stakeholders to join this subregional initiative.

26. In North and Central Asia, the secretariat launched a new project in 2024 to strengthen the policies and regulatory frameworks of digital public services for small and medium-sized enterprises, supporting the Action Plan for Implementing the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Initiative, 2022–2026. Special focus has been given to policies designed to enable women
entrepreneurs to digitalize their business models and processes and to create new digital platforms.

27. The fifth session of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia thematic working group on innovation and technology for sustainable development, which was organized by ESCAP and the Economic Commission for Europe, was held on 27 June 2024 in Bishkek. The working group comprises senior policymakers, researchers, decision makers and other stakeholders in innovation and technology from the seven participating States of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The working group provides a platform for supporting progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, with a focus on those directly related to innovation and technology development, including Goal 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure).

28. The secretariat’s projects have benefited from the willingness of Governments with developed economies and advanced ICT sectors to share expertise. Funding for projects is provided under the regular budget of the United Nations, which includes the Development Account and the regular programme of technical cooperation. Extrabudgetary resources have been provided by the China-ESCAP Cooperation Programme, the Korea-ESCAP Cooperation Fund, the Russian Federation-ESCAP Cooperation Fund, the Government of Kazakhstan, the Ministry of Science and ICT of the Republic of Korea, the Korean Federation of Community Credit Cooperatives and the Islamic Development Bank.

IV. Issues for consideration by the participants in the Ministerial Conference

29. The participants in the Ministerial Conference may wish to share information on their national digital strategies and the projects they are implementing through global and regional digital cooperation frameworks, such as the World Summit on the Information Society process and the Action Plan for Implementing the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Initiative, 2022–2026, to ensure cohesive and harmonized approaches to creating an inclusive digital future in support of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.