Session 2. Leaving no one behind: Lessons learned from accelerated digitalization during COVID-19 in North-East Asian Region

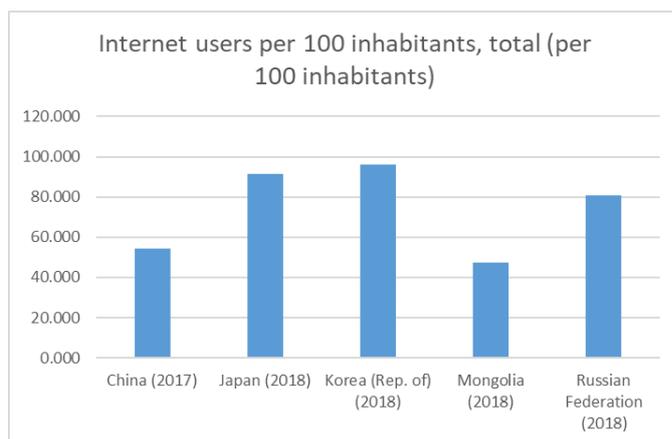## Concept note

Background

While the digital revolution plays a crucial role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), penetration of digital technologies varies widely across countries in North-East Asia, with different challenges. For instance, according to the Inclusive Internet Index by the Economist Intelligence Unit, readiness and availability are key challenges in Mongolia, while affordability is a major bottleneck in China[1].

The Digital Divide, or the digital split, is a social issue referring to the differing amount of information between those who have access to the Internet (especially broadband access) and those who do not have access. Broadly speaking, the difference is not necessarily determined by the access to the Internet, but by access to Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) and to Media that the different segments of society can use.

While the digital divide between countries is a key challenge for sustainable development, it also persists within countries and societal groups, including between urban/rural areas, high-income/ low-income groups, men/women, the young/old and the educated/uneducated people[2]. In particular, access to internet plays a crucial role during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(*Data Source*: ITU, The ITU ICT SDG indicators, indicator 17.8.1. Proportion of individual using the internet, https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/SDGs-ITU-ICT-indicators.aspx)

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[1] The Economist Intelligence Unit, https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com
[2] ESCAP (2020), "Connecting the Last Miles: Accelerating Inclusive Broadband in Asia and the Pacific", AP-IS Working Paper Series https://www.unescap.org/resources/connecting-last-miles-accelerating-inclusive-broadband-asia-and-pacific

The COVID-19 pandemic induced a faster digital transformation in a few months than we have seen in the last decade[3]. The impact of COVID-19 has accelerated the shift of technological weight and influence in the whole society as major part of the communication on daily life was forced to be replaced by digital communication. Digital communication facilitated distance education, remote work and social interaction, and thus improved psychological well-being during the time physical meetings are extremely limited. Information technology also contributed to tracing the infection. However, with business, education and health care moving online at unprecedented speed, limitation in access and skills in communication and technology have deepened disadvantage and vulnerability of those without it. For example, those without internet are further restricted in their access to education, social services, information to support scheme, etc., that are offered online. Some research suggests almost 60% of small or medium-sized businesses do not yet have a presence online in Japan[4], an indication of some gaps in ICT skills.

The scale and speed of the pandemic challenged some governments, whose capacities were already stretched in responding to the health crisis, to adjust or formulate policies on digitization which are inclusive and work towards achievement of SDGs.

Thus, the session highlights initiatives and actions taken by various stakeholders to embrace the digitization and help the disadvantaged groups in the context of pandemic.

Aim

To accelerate transformative pathway and actions for the achievement of SDGs, this session aims at:

1. Recognizing the issues and benefits emerged or widened with accelerated digitalization during the COVID-19 pandemic in the NEA region through sharing field stories of solutions and actions offered by various stakeholders to

    A. Utilize the digitization to enhance inclusiveness

    B. Reduce the inequality arising from the digitization

Date & Time: 17:00-18:00 (GMT +9), 3 November 2020

Organizer: Korean human right group of Korea SDGs Network

Partners: APRCEM-ENEA sub-region group

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[3] UNIDO (2020), "COVID-19 Implication & responses, Digital Transformation & Industrial Recovery"
[4] Nikkei Asian Review, 30 June 2020, "Closing Asia's digital divide should be a post-COVID priority"
https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Closing-Asia-s-digital-divide-should-be-a-post-COVID-priority