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Keynote for Expert Group Meeting
In Preparation for the UN E-Government Survey 2022

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Distinguished experts,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Introduction

I am pleased to join you at this Expert Group Meeting in preparation of the 2022 edition of the United Nations E-Government Survey -- a major publication of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).

I would like to acknowledge the presence with us today, of distinguished experts from different countries, and of diverse backgrounds and disciplines.

Thank you all for taking time out of your busy schedules to share with us your experience and perspectives. Your contributions will go a long way in further improving this publication, which is gaining increasingly high profile.

I was told that you have had a rich, stimulating discussion the past two days – sharing insights and foresights about the Future of Digital Government, and how we could improve and strengthen the technical and analytical methodology of the E-Government Survey.

Why leaving no one behind and leaving no one offline?

The last session today, focussing on leaving no one behind and leaving no one offline -- is arguably the most important thrust of our discussion - to put people at the centre of digital government and sustainable development.

Inclusion sits at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We are now six years into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Despite the commitment to the shared vision by all countries, progress was off track and uneven in early 2020. And this was made worse by the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many countries find themselves in an unprecedented situation where parallel threats of health, economic and social crises left governments struggling to contain the pandemic while ensuring everyone continues to have access to essential services.

Governments are forced to turn to digital means with the increased demands for remote work, distance learning and e-commerce, as well the need for new digital tools to support social distancing.

The pandemic has not only exposed digital divides but also increased the urgency of closing the digital gaps. It was estimated that the pandemic is set to push between 88 and 115 million people into poverty this year, threatening to erase decades of progress[1]. Two thirds of the world's school-age children have no internet access at home, while over 888 million continue to face disruptions to their education due to full and partial school closures[2].

The pandemic has also disproportionately impacted women and girls, older people, persons with disabilities as well as the minorities. These vulnerable segments of the population struggle with a variety of conditions and have faced many barriers throughout the pandemic. Simply put, we are far worse off today than one year ago in terms of bridging the digital divides and addressing inequalities. Those who were already behind are now being left even further behind.

Three questions on leaving no one behind in e-government

Distinguished experts,

UN Secretary-General António Guterres recently called for a 'new social contract' as part of post-pandemic recovery -- based on inclusivity and sustainability. He also highlighted the need for Governments to prioritize investment in digital literacy and digital infrastructure for social cohesion.

Through that lens, I would like to raise three questions that could help fuel your discussion on this important topic.

1. How to leverage on digital government and new technologies for inclusion?

First, how do we leverage digital government and new technologies for digital inclusion, and not exclusion? How can governments tap into technologies to make real difference in people's lives?

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[1] Source: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/07/covid-19-to-add-as-many-as-150-million-extreme-poor-by-2021
[2] Source: https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086232

The pandemic has effectively forced governments to deploy innovative quick-to-market solutions in the development and adoption of new technologies such as artificial intelligence and robotics to ensure continued provision of existing and emergent healthcare and public services. At the same time, unfortunately, the pandemic also shows how 'digital by default' services exclude those who need them most.

For example, persons with disabilities have greater difficulty engaging in essential activities or accessing preventative measures, and therefore experience disruptions to the physical and mental support they normally rely on. Likewise, older people and those in lower-income group are not able to access online information and services, as compared to those in the higher income groups generally, because of the lack of Internet connectivity or digital devices, or both.

2. How to ensure gender balance in e-government services?

Second, a more specific question that is important on the UN agenda - gender parity ---- how can do we achieve gender balance in e-government services?

To achieve digital inclusion for women, there is a need to understand the differences between access and accessibility. On accessibility, we need to recognize and cater to the specific needs of women and girls, for example, by featuring services that meet their basic needs; and by providing platforms to facilitate their engagement in public policy dialogues and decision-making; and by training girls in digital literacy skills.

To make any progress on this, governments must address the issue of the gendered digital divide honestly – recognising the true breadth and depth of the issue. This requires governments to provide digital services that are truly targeted to and designed for women and girls, and to be available in spaces that they can reach and where they can feel safe. It requires governments to provide alternatives through a whole-of-government integrated approach – complementing digital with analogue or in-person services; to support women and girls to fully benefit from digitalised government services; and to not penalise or underserve them simply because they cannot get online.

It is also important to reflect that the gender digital divides are products of socio-economic and socio-cultural settings – even in advanced economies – such as the perception that girls are not good at coding. Affordability is not the only critical barrier for women and girls to access digital government services– but is also interwoven with other aspects of being "left behind", and that the value to being connected may be overlooked in the face of other needs and priorities.

3. How to build and maintain people's trust in digital government and technologies?

Third, how do we build better and maintain people's trust in digital government? How can government enhance e-participation --- that can also lead to increased trust, usage, usability and usefulness of government services?

There is a growing sense of 'technology tribalism', as we move towards a network-structured society running on platforms and apps. Technology is shaping the way we live and work and the societies of the future. But there is an increasing deficit of trust in technologies, associated with a broader notion of distrust in digital government and also distrust in tech companies.

Governments have a role in ensuring public trust for technologies and innovation that can bring about sustainable development, including through digital government itself.

For each and every person to truly benefit from the potential of the Internet and digitalization for development, it is important to build a culture of trust – a trust of all people in using the Internet, and trust of all people in using e-government services.

Indeed, the future of digital government and digital inclusion is hinged on digital trust.

Distinguished experts,

The impacts of COVID-19 have clearly shone a spotlight on the <u>current</u> roles and challenges of digital government. Likewise, it does focus attention also on the <u>future</u> roles and challenges of digital government, especially in ensuring digital inclusion of all people.

Digital government will play a critical role not just in post-COVID-19 recovery, but in this Decade of Action and Delivery for the Sustainable Development, for all people including the most vulnerable groups.

I hope these three questions will be addressed from multiple angles and contexts in today's discussion.

I look forward to your insightful recommendations as outcomes of the Expert Group Meeting. I wish you a lively and fruitful discussion.

Thank you.

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