Webinar on: "Launch of The UN 2020 E-Government Survey"
Keynote Address: Remarks on findings of e government survey

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Friday, 10 July 2020

Excellencies, distinguished colleagues,

Epic Significance

1. The launch of the 2020 edition of the eGovernment survey, 20 years after its inception by both UNDESA and ASPA has an epic significance in the wake of the pandemic. The imperative of eGovernment/digital/smart government has been propelled to a standing of critical significance.

2. The survey vision, methodologies and tools proved a valuable benchmark "incontounable" for policy-planners all around the globe for ranking, mapping measuring and most importantly foreseeing trends and guiding policy decisions in both government and industry.

3. A young LinkedIn friend, Hend Saud, who I met virtually at the occasion of this event told me that she believed in this survey because of its integrity and independence, trustworthy methodology and evaluation processes. She put up insightful recommendations that I would happily share with you, including her wish to see digitization in the DNA of the whole of the government, to terminate the sponsor model and start looking for "Digital First " strategy for each government Service provider. She shared her passion for digital transformation and for public service.

4. I am honored to share the same passion with a group of global experts: the CEPA committee working with DESA on Promoting effective governance and institutional reform to accelerate the delivery of the SDGs. Technology in Government is one key area of our work. We had put up a call to the 2020 HLPF for 'fast-track' reform based on innovative breakthroughs. But COVID was faster and propelled multiple waves of unsuspected technology dividends pushing governments around the world to rethink their strategies and take extraordinary steps quicker than we had envisioned.

Technology dividends

5. When COVID-19 struck digital transformation itself was disrupted. Previous editions of the survey indicated that E-Government as a whole was on a gradual, but longer-term rise. Yet many countries were not ready with "the capacities and capabilities to face crushing demand bottlenecks and points of failure and shift to 100 percent digital operations and for an unknown period of time". (Wolfgang Drechsler blog, 14 june 2020)

6. Indeed, COVID changed in no time the face and the future of education, of work, of public service, and made all human beings realize the powers of technology, the depth of the forthcoming digital divides and what it means for humanity and for Agenda 2030. COVID pushed us to reprogram our use of office and home space, our investment in travel, the way we move, measure productivity, take decision, regulate and the way we envision governance. New realities are emerging but this is only the tip of an iceberg of deep social, economic and environmental transformation that are yet to unfold.

7. The social value of ICT applications revealed more important than initially thought. Applications developed on the basis of 5G, AI, cloud, and big data played a significant role, in remote education, telework, entertainment, etc. enabling people to resist isolation and survive the quarantine.

8. The governance value of ICT was put forth with applications enabling governments to cope - or not - with crushing demands for unemployment benefit, control of the pandemic and for cushioning the economic fallout.

9. Public private partnerships were also put forth with GSMA and telecom carriers worldwide playing a vital role in unleashing the power of connectivity, helping industries, government and society at large to

recover. Temperature detection and pandemic tracking applications helped contain the spread of the virus. Remote consultation in field hospitals helped save lives. In Africa the TECH4ALL initiative in support of UNESCO's Global Education Coalition, helped tackle challenges impacting education.

10. In short, Covid turned to be a powerful disruptor and a great ally to technology. Before COVID-19 we knew that investment in digitalization is "incontournable" for transformation. Now we know that they will be even more important during the recovery phase.

11. The 2020 Survey cannot be timelier to forecast what is next. It does so well by pointing to the power of Global Collaboration as it calls for major changes in internet governance, in the spirit of multilateralism and solidarity. It highlights political will, poor infrastructure, data inclusiveness, and economic empowerment through technology. Furthermore the survey provides a much-needed framework for thoughts for digital government transformation based on nine key pillars. More importantly it confirms the way forward in the post-covid-period and in the short time left to us to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

Vulnerabilities are widening the e-governance Gap

12. In the spirit of SDG 16 and 17, the 2020 survey emphasizes how inclusion and partnerships are crucial. It rightly points to systemic vulnerabilities that are inextricably linked; vulnerabilities that menace to overwhelm government and societies.

13. In some ways, inequalities increased within a single country as well as between countries. During Covid, we found out that in England four in ten pupils were not in regular contact with their teachers during the closures. That In the USA, many children in public schools were missing out on learning while in Estonia, 87% of schools were already using e-solutions before the crisis. Estonian teachers were trained in digital education and internet. The country had set itself the goal of digitizing all its educational materials as early as 2015.

14. Vulnerabilities are widening and we need to rapidly react. Around 70% of new value created over the next decade will be based on digitally enabled platform business models. Nevertheless more than half of the world's population is still offline, broadband access in many places is still lacking. We are probably far from achieving the 75% global broadband-internet user penetration goal set for 2030. Millions of young people lack the skills needed to use digital devices. They will be left-out underpowered and excluded from the digital economy of today and of the future.

15. These are times of great paradoxes. While industry is moving to cutting-edge connect-and-compute functionality, supercomputing in the cloud, quantum computing, etc., this risk of exacerbated exclusion and unequal concentration of power and wealth is a sure recipe for social instability.

16. Government and societies have together to face this huge challenge at a time when resources are limited and capacities and capabilities insufficient. At a time when challenges that relate to data security, privacy, and human rights have multifaceted significance.

E-Government Challenges and the 11 principles of effective governance

17. E-government would theoretically allow public institutions to address the forces of exclusion but this is function of capacity and political will. In many countries' public leaders and bureaucrats still do not view the citizen as a customer of government nor a participant in decision-making. They do not adhere to the ultimate calls for rethinking ways the government functions are carried out. (Al-Hashmiand Darem, 2008).

18. In many contexts, e-government is still considered a matter of giving government officials computers or transform traditional information processes and practices into bits and byte, whereas it is an important determinant of the structure and the strategy of the organizations that use it. Public servants tend to look at technology as a peripheral concern rather than as a core management function and IT professionals are often isolated from functional and executive oversight (Holden, 2003, p. 56).

19. An interesting opportunity for technology to serve as an equalizer may be brought by the 11 principles of effective governance that we worked with DESA at developing. The principles may serve as interesting vehicles for technology transformation as they are based on the 3 pillars of 1)effectiveness which comprises competence, sound policy making and collaboration, 2)accountability which comprises integrity, transparency, and independent oversight the principle of leaving no one behind, and

3) inclusiveness which comprises non-discrimination, participation, subsidiarity and intergenerational equity – all 3 pillars can become potent enablers when combined with technology

20. When technology solutions are built on the premise of principles: effectiveness by design, accountability by design, inclusion by design, human rights by design, they become a powerful tool for empowering people to participate in the processes that affect their lives thus bringing us closer to SDGs.

21. The transformative power of digital technologies implies the need for a new social contract between the state and its citizens. The use of the principles in service design and delivery is a pathway towards efficient and inclusive outcomes ensuring a buildup of trust in the digital ecosystems underpinning daily life.

22. Operationalizing the principles for digital transformation would also require us to join hands with civil service training schools in police, judiciary, finance, administration, etc. It would realize the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) 1985 recommendation to promote computing as a main skill to be taught in MPA programs (Northrop, 2003, p. 2),

Three systemic vulnerabilities for the MENA region

23. In the context of competing views about the future and the urgency to act while thousands of lives are lost every day, and more falling into poverty and unemployment, I would like to focus on three systemic vulnerabilities particular to the MENA region: the first is Trust, the second is capacity, and the third is peace

On TRUST

24. A reminder that citizens embrace the digital revolution when it is transparent, inclusive and to the benefit of all. Trust feeds on merit and accountability of public service and a belief that everyone, not only the happy few, will reap the rewards of technological progress. With a large, expensive, often coercive state apparatus vulnerabilities would be exacerbated.

25. Trust is also function of transparency, prudence and accountability in public money management. Technology is determinant in reducing malpractices in government payments and tax receipts, E – procurement, fraudulent payments, tax evasion and monitoring international and domestic markets for price comparisons and timely actions that ensure efficiency, transparency and accountability.

ON capacity and capabilities:

26. A reminder that weak capacities in core government institutions would stand in the way of agility, adaptability, and positive transformation. Governments in fragile and conflict ridden countries are unlikely to make it alone without international, industry support and long commitment to the SDGs.

27. Public-private cooperation and whole of society cooperation can accelerate digital connectivity and bridge the capacity gap. In MENA countries multilaterals and industry need to step up cooperation in some cases with citizens initiatives palliating for government deficiencies to improve connectivity, applications and skills.

28. In Lebanon, a country facing an unprecedented economic financial and governance collapse, youth driven by civic conscience and collaborative spirit, acted against the skyrocketing threat of unemployment by creating the "Jobs4Lebanon" platform linking job seekers with the Lebanese diaspora worldwide thus providing a virtual alternative job market paid in foreign currencies.

29. Tabshoura in a box is another example of a digital curricula brought by local educators with skin in the game to refugee camps and won the Mallalh foundation award.

ON Peace:

30. In MENA, the world least peaceful region, stage to an unprecedented flow of refugees - the biggest since World War II – around 1/5 of children and youth are today unschooled. About 435 million inhabitants 2/3 of them are under 30 years of age endure recurrent wars conflicts occupation, and violation of the right to self-determination. Accessibility and preparedness to use technology would spare the growth of a "lost generation" that would otherwise be particularly prone to crime and violent conflicts.

31. The intensity and duration of conflicts in the region on GDP, inflation fiscal and financial positions, and on economic and governance institutions diminish prospects of recovery and readiness for a better future. Donors and investors may hesitate to implement large-scale digital infrastructure projects needed for digital transformation.

32. Acknowledging the interdependence between these two paradox, the question remains how could we leave millions of people facing uncertainty for years while the gap is widening? What role digital technologies can play in building reconciliation and mutual confidence? and how can they support the transition from violence to stability?

33. A commitment to peace based on just solutions is the best promise Agenda 2030 might bring to a young generation whose educational attainment may be lost incessantly in the accolade of wars.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude on two notes:

34. The first note is a reminder that the 2018 survey told us that betting on technology was the right thing to do. Countries such as Serbia listened and topped OECD's Observatory of Public Sector Innovation during Covid-19. Estonia, high ranking on EGDI is a living lesson. Investments in innovation, in platform government, paid off and made these countries resilient, agile able to bring-in creativity in times of crisis. But the lesson to learn is that contract of trust between government and citizens make sustainable success.

35. The second note is a "clin d'oei"l to people whose resilience and value system was put to trial during this pandemic: health care workers whose dedication was celebrated everywhere, but also tech people who did a wonderful job in the limelight and still did not receive equal exposure. Their ingenuity and dedication have gone above and beyond the call of duty to ensure their fellow citizens have uninterrupted access to education, healthcare, unemployment benefits, and other services.

36. Lastly, a big thank you to Vincenzo Acquiro, to DESA staff and experts and to all who contributed under the leadership of Liu Zheimin to this excellent report.

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