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United Nations system support for Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

The present report provides an overview of the main activities undertaken by the United Nations in support of the Agenda 2063 of the African Union. In the context of the negotiations for the global digital compact, to be adopted in September 2024, the report is focused on the contributions of the digital transition to sustainable development in Africa.

The report provides an overview of the potential of digital technologies for economic growth through innovation and job creation and an assessment of how digitalization can help to enhance governance, economic inclusion, social cohesion, peace and stability and increase resilience and climate adaptation. It contains a review of the work of the United Nations and a summary of major advocacy efforts.

The report contains highlights of progress made in promoting stronger coordination among United Nations entities and with the African Union.

* E/AC.51/2024/1.

** The present report was submitted to the conference services for processing after the deadline for technical reasons beyond the control of the submitting office.

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 78/244, in which the Assembly endorsed the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee for Programme and Coordination on United Nations system support for Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. In its report on its sixty-third session (A/78/16), the Committee commended the work undertaken by the United Nations to support African countries in unleashing food systems' potential for economic growth; strengthening human capital through enhanced nutrition; promoting the inclusion of the most vulnerable, including women and youth, through agricultural projects; and promoting social cohesion, peace and stability, resilience and sustainability through food and agriculture. The Committee recommended that the General Assembly endorse the proposal by the Secretary-General to approach food systems as an accelerator for the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa and, in that regard, call upon the international community to scale up efforts to transform food systems on the continent (see E/AC.51/2023/8).

2. In line with its mandate, throughout 2023, the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa continued to promote closer collaboration among United Nations entities and with African Union institutions and African Member States on food systems as an engine for economic transformation on the continent (see section III of this report). These efforts resulted in an acknowledgement by United Nations system entities that achieving food sovereignty[1] in Africa is not only key to building resilience on the continent, but it would also have ripple effects improving health and nutrition, creating decent work, supporting educational attainment and, consequently, raising living standards and addressing root causes of poverty.

3. The Committee also recommended that the General Assembly request the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa to extend the progress made in the field of food security to other key sectors for the development of Africa. In that context, the Secretary-General has proposed six areas where transitions are needed[2] that are essential for achieving sustainability: food systems; energy access and affordability; digital connectivity; education; jobs and social protection; and climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

4. Following reports focused on energy (E/AC.51/2022/14) and food systems (E/AC.51/2023/8), the present report provides a review of United Nations support for Agenda 2063 through an assessment of the programmes, projects and other activities implemented by the United Nations system to promote digital transformation in Africa. In the light of the intergovernmental negotiations for a global digital compact, the report presents an overview of the contributions made by the United Nations system to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063 of the African Union through the promotion of digital transformation. The potential for using technology to accelerate the two agendas is significant: digital technologies are instrumental in addressing education deficits linked with the lack of schools and teachers in Africa (Agenda 2063 goal 2; Sustainable Development goal 4), expanding the coverage of health systems (Agenda 2063 goal 3; Sustainable Development Goals 3); and curbing food insecurity by increasing agricultural production (Agenda 2063 goals 1 and Sustainable Development Goals 2). Furthermore, inclusive digital transformation is essential to close the digital divide

[1] Food sovereignty refers to the capacity by a country or group of countries to determine their food policies and implement them effectively by promoting local agriculture and traditional practices that approach food not as a commodity but a holistic system. For more information, see Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), "Food security and sovereignty", 2013.

[2] António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, remarks to the high-level political forum on sustainable development, 18 September 2023.

and achieve gender equality (Agenda 2063 goal 17 and Sustainable Development Goal 5). Regarding economic growth and development (Agenda 2063 goals 1, 4, 5, 6 and 18 and Sustainable Development Goals 1, 7, 8, 9 and 10), digital technologies can help to end poverty by promoting financial inclusion, contributing to creating decent jobs, increasing the efficiency of grids and infrastructure and achieving the promise of industrialization of Africa. Considering governance and social cohesion (Agenda 2063 goals 11, 12, 13, 14 and 19 and Sustainable Development Goals 16 and 17), digital technologies can improve service delivery, transparency and participatory processes, increasing trust in public institutions. With regard to environmental sustainability (Agenda 2063 goal 7 and Sustainable Development Goals 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15), digital transformation is indispensable to adopting and designing climate-smart solutions and achieving environmental sustainability and climate adaptation. Lastly, from a financial perspective, digital technologies are essential to operationalize effective domestic resource mobilization systems that will enable African countries to control their financial flows and take ownership of their development processes (Agenda 2063 goal 20 and Sustainable Development Goal 17).

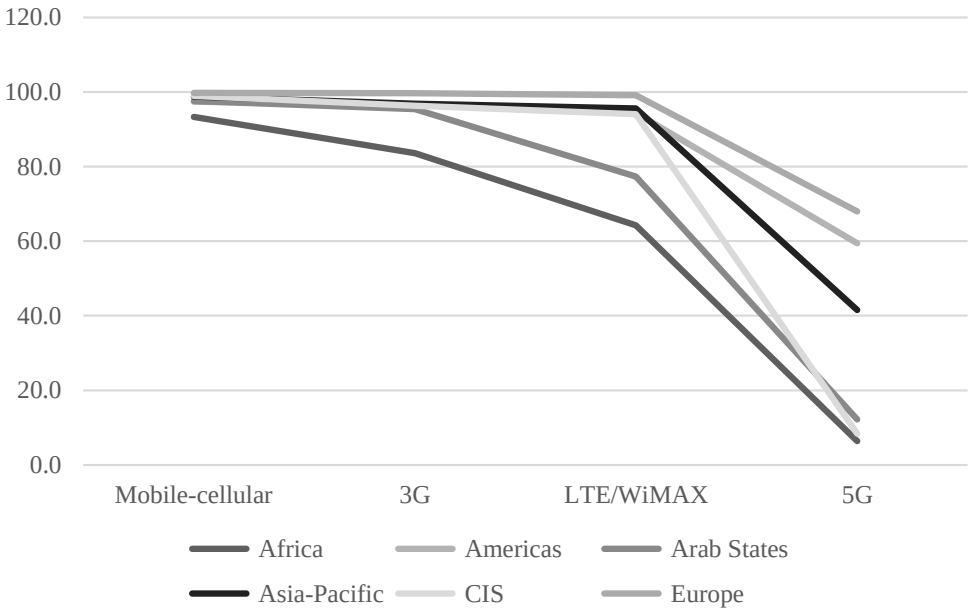
5. Digital transition is deeply intertwined with economic transformation. Implementing digital technologies in the different areas of development will lead to a redeployment of production inputs, most notably labour and funding. This shift will improve the competitiveness of African countries in global markets. Furthermore, digital technologies can contribute to substantial reductions in transaction costs, boosting intra-African trade. In other words, achieving the digital transition is essential to unlocking the transformative agenda for Africa.

6. The present report indicates strategic areas where the United Nations system can maximize the positive impact of digital technologies in addressing inequalities, promoting economic growth, enhancing climate adaptation and strengthening governance. It contains recommendations to ensure that global efforts aimed at establishing a common framework for digital transformation meet the realities and needs of African countries and lay the foundations for digital transformation as an accelerator for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063. It also provides an update on coordination mechanisms within the United Nations system and with the African Union at the operational and strategic levels.

II. United Nations support for digital transformation

7. In recent years, some progress has been made in Africa on Sustainable Development Goal 9. Innovation in developed countries, however, has outpaced progress in implementation of the Goals in Africa. Thus, unless decisive action is taken, the divide between African countries and developed countries will only widen. The evolution of mobile networks as Internet access points is a good example; as shown in figure I, the gap between Africa and developed nations increases as new technology is rolled out.

Figure I
Population covered by mobile networks, by region (2023)



Source: International Telecommunication Union (ITU) key information and communications technology (ICT) indicators.
Abbreviations: 3G: third generation of mobile services; LTE: long-term evolution; WiMAX: Worldwide Interoperability for Microwave Access; 5G: fifth generation of mobile services.

8. One of the world's fastest-growing regions and home to some 1.2 billion inhabitants, Africa will need to act quickly and boldly and mobilize the international community to avoid being left behind. As shown in figure I, the difference in not only the starting point but also in the pace of adoption of new technologies are not conducive to sustainable development on the continent. Young people in Africa, who comprise over 75 per cent of the continent's population, are being deprived of essential tools that are available to their counterparts in other regions of the world. This comparative disadvantage perpetuates the current global economic model, in which African countries are viewed solely as providers of raw materials, leading to dependence on other economies for higher value added products.

9. Africa faces numerous barriers to closing the digital divide. One such barrier is affordability. For example, in Africa, there are only 48 mobile broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, compared with 92.3 cellular phone subscriptions. This difference suggests that, beyond coverage, the cost of broadband subscriptions is a factor that undermines digital access. The lack of adequate infrastructure, including energy access, and of technological equipment is also a challenge. Nearly 300 million Africans live more than 50 kilometres from a fibre or cable broadband connection, which explains the low rate of fixed broadband subscriptions on the continent (0.8 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants) and presents a hurdle for digital transformation. Limited digital skills, local content and technological awareness also constrain the transformative potential of digitalization. A lack of consistent policies and regulatory frameworks aimed at creating an enabling environment and promoting digital connectivity is another hurdle.

10. Despite this worrisome picture, digital technologies and the digital economy offer an opportunity to accelerate sustainable development on the continent. Efforts to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 can benefit

from the utilization of big data and artificial intelligence to create digital public goods in the form of actionable real-time and predictive insights (A/74/821, para. 22), which can serve to, inter alia, optimize the energy mix, forecast and prevent future pandemics and support effective decision-making processes. That is the objective pursued by the United Nations in its support to African countries to advance their digital transformation and leverage it as a tool for sustainable peace and development.

Strengthening human capital through digital transition

11. The outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) brought to light the criticality of digital technologies during long-term lockdowns. Many countries turned to digital technologies for public service delivery. Businesses channelled their activity to the Internet in order to continue to generate income. In this context, African countries faced the constraints of limited access to digital technologies throughout the continent. For example, as noted in a joint study of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank, Central Africa, East Africa, West Africa and Southern Africa were the global subregions most affected by the remote learning paradox, under which differences in access to education spiked during the pandemic as a result of two major challenges: the lack of Internet access at home among children and the lack of preparedness to provide remote learning on the part of education systems. For example, according to UNICEF, over 640 million children and young people in Africa had no Internet access at home, with lack of access affecting mostly the poorest 20 per cent of households.[3] Similar impacts were observed in other basic services.

12. The United Nations reacted swiftly to support African countries in overcoming this challenge. The Secretary-General noted how the pandemic had reaffirmed the urgency of digital cooperation and warned that the digital divide was "a matter of life and death".[4] In that regard, he called upon the international community to increase efforts to reach three overarching goals: connect, by providing universal, safe, inclusive and affordable Internet access; respect, by centring on human rights and human dignity; and protect, by tackling abuses and reducing the danger of fragmentation. In response to the call issued by the Secretary-General, United Nations entities stepped up efforts in all areas of development. From the perspective of human capital development and in particular the impact of the digital divide on education, United Nations entities sought to increase the connectivity of education systems and support African countries in developing e-learning solutions, following the call by the Secretary-General to harness the digital revolution for the benefit of public education.[5] For example, in Senegal, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), UNESCO, UNICEF and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) launched a project to ensure learning continuity for the most vulnerable. Under the project, the Government of Senegal was supported in its efforts to provide Internet access to vulnerable households, with a particular focus on girls.

13. In addition to providing immediate support to vulnerable children, the United Nations system has also focused on increasing the preparedness of education systems and identifying ways in which digital technologies can help bridge existing gaps. For

[3] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and International Telecommunication Union (ITU), *How Many Children and Young People Have Internet Access at Home? Estimating Digital Connectivity During the COVID-19 Pandemic* (New York, UNICEF, 2020).

[4] António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, remarks to the virtual High-level Meeting on the "Impact of Rapid Technological Change on the Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals", 11 June 2020.

[5] See the Vision Statement of the Secretary-General on Transforming Education, entitled, "Transforming education: an urgent political imperative for our collective future".

example, the Learning Passport is a learning platform launched by UNICEF in collaboration with Microsoft to ensure that children can continue to learn when schools are closed. The platform is live in 40 countries worldwide, including 12 African countries,[6] and is being deployed in another 12 countries.[7]

14. Beyond the efforts to mitigate the risk of potential school closures, United Nations entities are working with African countries to make schools a centrepiece of the digital transformation, an endeavour that involves, first of all, ensuring the connectivity of schools. To that end, ITU and UNICEF launched Giga, an initiative to connect every school in the world to the Internet by 2030. Support provided under Giga is structured in three steps: mapping, financing and connecting. In the first step, machine learning is used to identify schools from satellite images and assess their connectivity status. In the Niger, an algorithm that estimated the location of 4,758 previously unmapped schools was developed under Giga. Mapping is not only used to check connectivity but has also been leveraged to support Governments' general education policies. In Sierra Leone, the mapping exercise included an assessment of the distance between communities and their closest school, which can help authorities to identify factors behind low school attendance. So far, over 280,000 schools in 23 African countries have been mapped under Giga.[8]

15. The second step in supporting the connectivity of schools is bridging the financial gap, which entails not only the mobilization of financing but also the generation of economies of scale to reduce costs. For example, the Government of Rwanda managed to reduce the cost of connecting schools by 55 per cent under its collaboration with Giga.[9] Once financing has been mobilized, Governments receive support from Giga in identifying regulatory barriers and potential levers, surveying market conditions and assessing infrastructure resilience with a view to launching competitive procurement processes that will enable the connection of schools under the framework of national plans and policies. Giga has helped to connect over 1,500 schools in four African countries.[10]

16. Connecting schools is a crucial step, but one that needs to be complemented by other measures aimed at enhancing the preparedness of education systems to leverage the digital transformation. In this context, Generation Unlimited,[11] Giga and UNICEF launched the Reimagine Education initiative, which is aimed at going beyond connectivity by identifying and scaling up digital learning solutions, supporting the upskilling of teachers for digital learning, raising awareness and building policy and institutional capacity. In Africa, under a five-year partnership with Airtel, the benefits of the initiative will be brought to learners in 13 countries.[12] The Reimagine Education initiative responds to a call to action for digital learning launched at the Transforming Education Summit held in 2022. Another new initiative that emerged from the Summit was Gateways to Public Digital Learning, a joint initiative by UNESCO and UNICEF aimed at strengthening access for developing countries to digital learning resources. The need for accelerated action and support to prepare schools and teachers for digital

[6] Egypt, Eswatini, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Libya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, the Sudan, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

[7] Botswana, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda and South Africa.

[8] Benin, Botswana, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Namibia, the Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Sudan, the Sudan, Togo, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

[9] UNICEF and ITU, "Giga annual report 2022", 2023.

[10] Botswana, Kenya, Rwanda and Sierra Leone.

[11] Generation Unlimited is a public-private-youth partnership that was launched by the Secretary-General in 2018.

[12] Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, the Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia.

learning was a key component of the policy brief of the Secretary-General on transforming education, which is an important input in the preparations for the Summit of the Future.

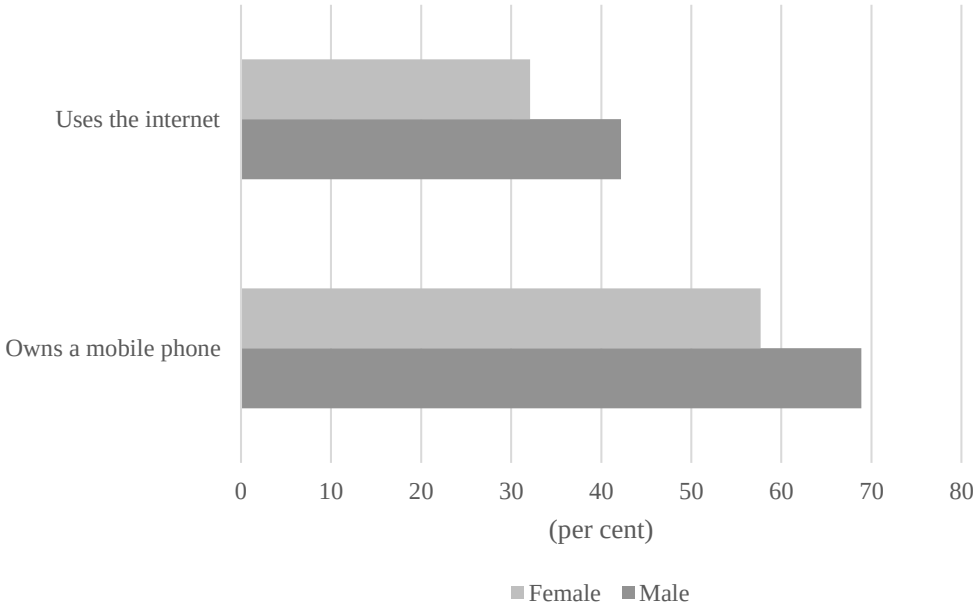
17. Promoting education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics is also essential to equip young people in Africa with the skills needed to join the digital revolution. United Nations entities support the mainstreaming of education in these fields in curricula at all levels. For example, in Sierra Leone, UNESCO contributes to the expansion of science, technology, engineering and mathematics education by delivering microscience kits. In Somalia, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) promoted science, technology, engineering and mathematics education at schools as a tool to diversify skills and advance industrialization. In Togo, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is supporting the development of innovation curricula for vocational training centres.

18. Similarly to education, health services can benefit from digital technologies, which can be used to overcome infrastructure limitations and ensure adequate health coverage throughout the continent. United Nations entities have been supporting African countries in their efforts to leverage digital technologies for health, following the lead of the global strategy on digital health of the World Health Organization (WHO). UNDP is working with the Governments of Sao Tome and Principe, South Sudan and Uganda to implement the smart facilities for health project, under which the Internet of things and new technologies are used to overcome structural gaps in health systems, from storage and supply chain to laboratories and inpatient-outpatient management. Through the BeHe@lthy, Be Mobile initiative, ITU and WHO are supporting 12 countries, 6 of which are in Africa,[13] in leveraging mobile technology to fight non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes, tobacco addiction and breast cancer. In West Africa, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), in collaboration with ITU, launched the “Tech4Youth” initiative, whose aim is to expand access to information and support on sexual and reproductive health and rights through a digital platform focused on young women in particular.

19. A key success factor in leveraging digital transformation for human capital development is ensuring that the transformation contributes to enhancing inclusion. Currently, access to technology follows patterns similar to access to other services, resulting in a situation in which the digital divide is widened by other factors, such as the gender divide and the urban/rural divide, as shown in figures II and III, respectively. To transform digital technologies into a tool to reduce the gender divide, the United Nations system is promoting initiatives in which skill development among women and girls is targeted and prejudices and stereotypes regarding women and technology are challenged. For example, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) is implementing the African Girls Can Code initiative in collaboration with the African Union Commission, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), ITU, UNESCO and UNICEF. The initiative is aimed at training a minimum of 2,000 girls to become computer programmers, creators and designers. It entails the organization of coding camps, the establishment of learning centres, the provision of equipment and the delivery of training to trainers to maximize impact. In addition, ITU is reviewing the curricula of gender-focused digital skills courses to identify gaps, developing new material to cover those gaps, making existing material available in more African languages and stoking interest among women and girls in undertaking digital specialization courses.

[13] Burkina Faso, Egypt, Senegal, the Sudan, Tunisia and Zambia.

Figure II
Access to technology in Africa by gender (2023)



Source: ITU Key ICT indicators.

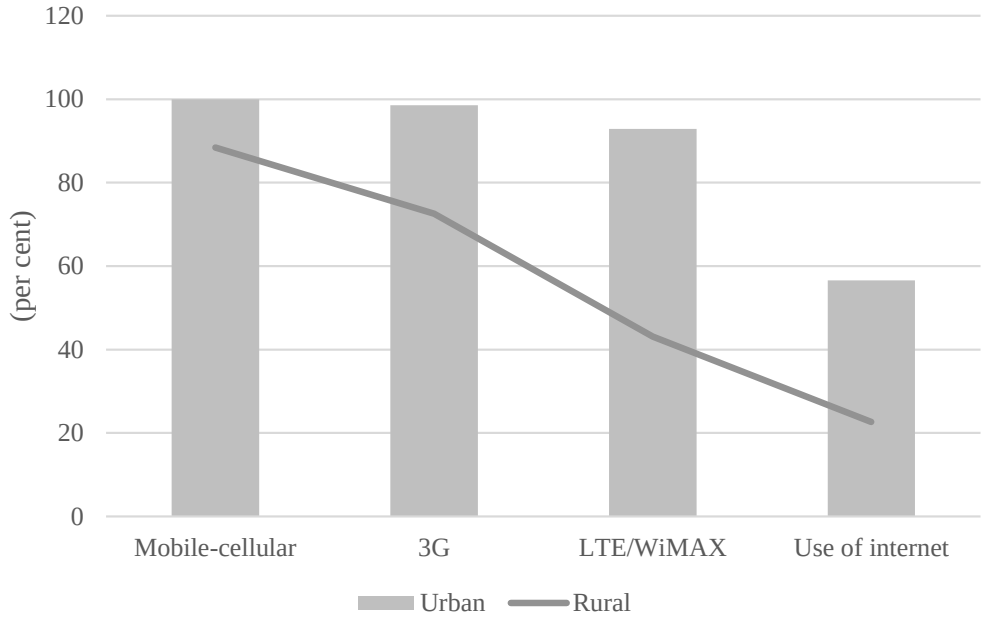
20. In addition to contributing to the development of digital skills among women, United Nations entities are also using digital technologies to support women in other areas of development. In Sierra Leone, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Capital Development Fund, UNDP, UNESCO and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) are implementing a project focused on increasing access to finance for businesses led by women and members of other vulnerable populations. The objectives of the project are to build business development skills and digital financial literacy, train mobile money agents and facilitate access to digital loans for 2,000 beneficiaries. In Ghana, UNIDO supported the establishment of a centre of excellence for the circular economy, which is promoting digital value chains to increase women-led enterprises' access to financial, business and government services. In Burkina Faso, UNDP has launched a digital platform to facilitate networking among women, creating a space for exchange, organization of social and economic movements and promotion of innovations.

21. Differences in technology access are even starker when the urban/rural divide is considered. One of the main drivers of lower levels of technology access is the lack of appropriate infrastructure. Limited energy access in particular is a fundamental hurdle, as energy is a driver of development and a precondition for connectivity. Disparities in technology access can lead to increasing economic inequalities and contribute to amplifying the impact of the absence of State presence in certain regions,[14] which in turn can undermine the legitimacy of public institutions and have repercussions on peace and stability. United Nations entities are supporting African countries in using digital technologies to improve service delivery and enhance the inclusion of rural areas. For example, through the Smart Villages project in the Niger, ITU has established connectivity and operationalized ICT-enabled services in 12

[14] For a detailed analysis on the impact of the absence of State presence on peace and stability, see the report of the Secretary-General on the promotion of durable peace and sustainable development in Africa (A/78/234-S/2023/553).

villages selected by the Government. The objective of the project is to create a model for digital inclusive services through the use of a single integrated platform for service delivery in different sectors and through efforts to increase the digital literacy of potential users.

Figure III
Mobile network coverage and Internet use in Africa by area (2023)



Source: ITU Key ICT indicators.
Abbreviations: 3G: third generation of mobile services; LTE: long-term evolution; WiMAX: Worldwide Interoperability for Microwave Access; 5G: fifth generation of mobile services.

22. Social protection policies are one of the most effective ways to promote socioeconomic inclusion. To that end, the Secretary-General launched the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions. With an approach based on the three pillars of integrated national policies, integrated financing and enhanced multilateral cooperation, the aim of the Global Accelerator is to promote digital inclusion and support Member States in increasing resilience by undertaking a digital transformation and leveraging that transformation to create decent jobs and enhance social protection systems. In this context, United Nations entities are working with African countries to leverage digital technologies to enhance social protection systems through digitalization. For example, through the Global Flagship Programme on Building Social Protection Floors for All,[15] the ILO promotes the use of ICT to improve the governance of social protection programmes and supports the digital transformation of social protection operations, such as cash transfers and claims management.

Leveraging digital technologies for economic transformation

23. As noted above, digital technologies, if complemented by, inter alia, electricity, energy, and education, have the potential to trigger economic transformation in Africa. Internet access, in itself, has a strong causal impact on job creation.[16] Furthermore, the

[15] African countries that are beneficiaries of the programme include Burkina Faso, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Morocco, Rwanda, Senegal and Togo.
[16] Tania Begazo, Moussa P. Blimpo and Mark A. Dutz, *Digital Africa: Technological Transformation for Jobs* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2023).

use of digital technologies entails a reallocation of productive resources that will lead to higher productivity levels on the continent. In this regard, the digital revolution provides an opportunity for countries across the continent to play a different role in global and regional supply chains, shifting existing production and trade paradigms.[17] Nevertheless, the potential of digital technologies remains untapped. The unaffordability of Internet access and digital technologies constitute a major obstacle for African enterprises. A basic Internet package of 1.5 GB data per month amounts to about one third of income for 40 per cent of Africans. Furthermore, only 8 per cent of youth-led and 2 per cent of women-led microenterprises use computers. To help African countries to overcome such hurdles, United Nations entities are contributing to six areas: policy development; infrastructure; industry enhancements; trade; job creation; and financing.

24. In their work on policy development, United Nations entities seek to support decision-making processes for an inclusive digital economy. For example, the United Nations Capital Development Fund has developed the inclusive digital economy scorecard, a tool used to measure and track the level of development of a digital economy in support of the adoption of decisions to advance market development. The scorecard is currently available for 14 African countries.[18] United Nations entities also seek to contribute to an enabling environment for digital transformation. In Mozambique, ITU, in collaboration with the European Union and a local non-governmental organization, launched VaMoz Digital!, a project aimed at boosting the potential of the local digital economy by strengthening institutional capacities to stimulate and manage new economic dynamics.

25. From an infrastructure development perspective, the United Nations is supporting capacity development at the national level and regional cooperation. For example, ITU is working with the Government of the Central African Republic to strengthen the national centre for fibre optics to transform it into a model for the region. At the same time, ITU is promoting the regional benchmarking of ICT infrastructure to boost competitiveness and enhance governance and transparency in the region.

26. United Nations entities also support national authorities and economic actors in the use of digital technologies to improve industrial productivity. In Ethiopia, the United Nations Global Compact and UNIDO are implementing a project with textile export companies, under which ICT applications are used to monitor performance and enhance information management between local producers and international buyers. In Ghana, UNESCO is supporting the Government in the use of scientific research and technology to develop smart policies and digitalize value chains.

27. With a view to helping African countries to maximize the impact of digital technologies on trade, United Nations entities are contributing to the development of strategies and platforms across the continent. For example, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) supported the Economic Community of West African States in the design of a new regional e-commerce strategy and worked with Kenya to develop a similar strategy at the national level. The International Trade Centre is implementing projects in Ethiopia and Ghana to foster trade competitiveness in agribusiness services through the use of digital technologies. The International Fund for Agricultural Development and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations are supporting the development of a

[17] *Economic Development in Africa Report 2023: The Potential of Africa to Capture Technology-Intensive Global Supply Chains* (United Nations publication, 2023).

[18] Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Madagascar, Malawi, the Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia.

digital marketing platform to provide greater access to products produced by smallholder farmers and rural entrepreneurs.

28. The United Nations system supports skill development and the creation of decent jobs through the digital economy by providing training to entrepreneurs and supporting targeted action. For example, ILO and ITU are implementing a project in six African countries[19] aimed at developing the capacities of young people in digital technologies, promoting the creation of decent jobs linked to the digital economy and improving labour market intermediation through pro-youth employment strategies to match trained programme participants with new job opportunities.

29. With a view to mobilizing investments to advance digital transformation and bridge the gap of financial inclusion, the United Nations is working with African countries to maximize the contributions of digital technologies to financing. To support the mobilization of funds, Giga uses scalable, blended finance solutions to bring connectivity to African schools. The Common Fund for Commodities supports the digitalization of agricultural value chains in Africa to ensure full digital traceability of agricultural products, allow for pricing transparency and provide data for certification in the smallholder farming sector. The Joint Sustainable Development Goals Fund works as a catalyser that creates market opportunities for investment in the Goals. In Cape Verde, the Fund, in collaboration with UNDP, supported the Government in its efforts to leverage the review of the integrated national financing framework to mobilize financing for the actors that make up the real economy. Drawing on a digital business platform that had been created during the COVID-19 pandemic and with financial support from the UNDP rapid financing facility, the Government created a digital marketplace for sustainable investment where innovators search for investors and seed funding.

30. Lastly, United Nations entities are also boosting the use of digital technology to promote digital inclusion and streamline financial transactions between Governments and their populations. For example, in Egypt, ITU is contributing to the implementation of the Financial Inclusion Global Initiative at the national level by conducting an assessment of the ICT ecosystem and developing a road map for inclusive digital financial services. In Ethiopia, Gabon, Malawi and the Niger, the United Nations Capital Development Fund is developing a programme for digital finance for resilience aimed at improving digital finance policies and regulations and creating digital finance ecosystems that support low-income individuals. In Nigeria, the Joint Sustainable Development Goals Fund is supporting the digitalization of traditional cash transfer mechanisms to improve confidentiality and facilitate the management of complaints.

Governance and digitalization

31. The work of the United Nations in the area of governance and digitalization is structured around three main pillars: (a) establishment of frameworks at the global and regional levels; (b) design of national regulatory frameworks and development of capacities of national Governments; and (c) use of digital technologies to support social cohesion and peace.

32. Contributions by the United Nations to establish common frameworks for digital cooperation follow the publication of the Road Map for Digital Cooperation, the decision by the General Assembly to prioritize this area (see A/RES/75/1) and the proposal by the Secretary-General to develop a global digital compact, to be adopted at the Summit of the Future. Since January 2023, the Office of the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Technology has supported the intergovernmental negotiations

[19] Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal and South Africa.

for the global digital compact. In this context, ECA organized the Regional Review Meeting on African contributions towards the global digital compact, which was held in July 2023. ECA and the Office of the Envoy, in collaboration with ITU and the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, are currently working with the African Union Commission to mainstream the Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa 2020–2030 of the African Union into the global negotiations and ensure that global discussions on artificial intelligence take into account the unique challenges and opportunities of artificial-intelligence-driven digital transformation in Africa. In addition, United Nations entities are working to develop specific aspects of the compact to support its implementation. For example, the Office of the Envoy, in collaboration with UNDP, is implementing the Universal Safeguards for Digital Public Infrastructure initiative, which is aimed at supporting Member States in identifying and implementing safeguards to minimize risks and mitigate any potential negative impact associated with the development of digital public infrastructure. ITU and UNDP are leading the Open-Source Ecosystem Enabler initiative, which is aimed at creating a framework that provides practical guidance for Governments to use open-source solutions for the delivery of digital public goods; establishing open-source technical facilities to provide technical capacity support for implementation of open-source technologies; and creating a global knowledge hub for open-source public services. ITU is also implementing a project to promote and support policy decisions that lead to universal and meaningful digital connectivity. Fostering universal and meaningful digital connectivity entails not only focusing public investments on the development of infrastructure but also on taking measures to ensure that users have a safe, satisfying, enriching and productive online experience at an affordable cost. ITU and the Office of the Envoy coordinated a multi-stakeholder working group that defined the targets for universal and meaningful digital connectivity, and ITU developed, as part of the project, a dashboard that can be used to track progress towards universal and meaningful digital connectivity in participating States and territories, including all African countries.

33. The United Nations system also supports the development of policies and regulatory frameworks at the regional and national levels to increase the effectiveness of digital technology utilization. The Policy and Regulation Initiative for Digital Africa, a joint initiative of ITU, the African Union and the European Union, is aimed at developing new policies for radio frequency spectrum management across the continent to foster harmonization and obtain efficiencies in spectrum utilization. The project is expected to contribute to a predictable, stable market environment that stimulates investments in wireless broadband access, thereby generating socioeconomic benefits for end users and creating opportunities for the private sector. In the United Republic of Tanzania, UNESCO is supporting the Government in its efforts to develop ethical standards, norms and frameworks for action to meet the challenges of innovative technologies and digital transformation. In Burkina Faso, UNDP is providing holistic support to the Government in the mainstreaming of digital technologies under a project including such actions as the development of a national vision for digital transformation, the deployment of a digital document management system for administrative files, the establishment of a digital platform for the civil registry and the structuring of internal capacities for training civil servants in the use of digital technologies. In Uganda, Global Pulse and UNDP are supporting the Government in its efforts to design a national data strategy. The goal is to build sustainable data ecosystems on the national and municipal levels, including through pilot projects. The provision of training and skill development for national Governments is another area where United Nations entities are contributing to the strengthening of the digital capacities of African countries. For example, in South Africa, ITU is supporting national authorities in the establishment of an African

digital transformation centre by deploying technical assistance and providing training.

34. In addition, United Nations entities are supporting African countries in their efforts to strengthen peace and stability through digital transformation. In the light of the role played by effective public service delivery in promoting trust in public institutions and, by extension, strengthening social cohesion and contributing to peace and stability, ITU launched the GovStack initiative aimed at enhancing digital service delivery in the Horn of Africa by supporting authorities in Djibouti, Kenya and Somalia in the development of a digital government strategy and road map, design of a use case for e-government services and strengthening of civil servants' technical and methodological skills with a view to digitalizing government services. In Sao Tome and Principe, UNDP is implementing a similar initiative with a view to improving accessibility, convenience and efficiency in public service delivery through increased use of digital technologies.

35. To support African countries in their efforts to prevent and address human rights challenges associated with digital technologies, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) launched B-Tech, a project under which support is provided for the implementation of the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in the technology space. In the context of the project, throughout 2023, OHCHR worked with stakeholders to develop a continental framework for responsible technology in Africa through workshops and forums in Arusha, the United Republic of Tanzania, Cape Town and Nairobi.

36. The United Nations system also supports African countries in using digital technologies to address transnational challenges. For example, in Ghana, IOM is supporting efforts by the authorities to enhance traveller entry and exit data collection and analysis through digitalization. The project also includes regional-level integration of digitalized systems to address transnational movements of people.

37. Digital transformation can be a tool to not only strengthen government capacities but also improve the way in which the United Nations supports African countries in maintaining peace and security on the continent. With this in mind, the Department of Operational Support, in partnership with the Office of Information and Communications Technology, has launched the Strategy for the Digital Transformation of United Nations Peacekeeping. The strategy is aimed at strengthening United Nations capacities with a view to leveraging technology to improve the performance, safety and security of peacekeepers; address disinformation and misinformation; and enhance situational awareness by providing real-time information on the operational environment. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic started using the new enhanced situational awareness capacity on a pilot basis in April 2023.

Environmental sustainability, resilience and climate adaptation

38. Digital technologies can play a fundamental role in supporting climate adaptation but can also create new risks for environmental sustainability. Acknowledging this dual role and following the launch of the Road Map for Digital Cooperation, a multi-stakeholder alliance launched the Coalition for Digital Environmental Sustainability in 2021. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), UNDP, the International Science Council and the Governments of Germany and Kenya act as its secretariat in collaboration with the Office of the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Technology. The Coalition seeks to promote global environmental sustainability through three pillars: (a) promote alignment of values and objectives; (b) mitigate and prevent the negative impacts of digitalization; and (c) leverage digitalization for sustainability. Following that approach, United Nations entities have been promoting

a global convergence of views and strategies, supporting African countries in mitigating the environmental risks of digital technologies and boosting the opportunities such technologies provide for climate adaptation and resilience.

39. One of the most direct environmental risks of digital technologies is linked to the mining of critical minerals that are indispensable for new technologies. The rise in demand for new technologies is expected to increase the demand for mineral inputs by 500 per cent by 2050.[20] The exponential increase might constitute a threat to the environment, local livelihoods and even, in some contexts, peace and stability, if measures are not taken to ensure the sustainable extraction of critical minerals. African countries are particularly exposed to this threat, as they are home to around 30 per cent of mineral reserves globally, many of which contain critical minerals.[21] Against this backdrop, the Secretary-General launched an initiative to harness critical minerals for sustainable development in the least developed countries and the landlocked developing countries. Under the initiative, knowledge tools will be developed to overcome some of the challenges of critical minerals extraction and the identified solutions will be tested in pilot countries. A total of 17 African countries[22] have been identified as potential beneficiaries. In addition, United Nations entities contribute to the mainstreaming of the Africa Mining Vision in national frameworks. For example, ECA provides capacity development to national and local authorities on the implementation of the Africa Mining Vision guidelines.

40. Another important aspect of mitigating the negative impact of digital technology is the implementation of a circular economy. Africa generates 2.9 metric tons of e-waste annually, of which only 0.9 per cent is properly recycled.[23] To assist African countries in approaching this challenge as an opportunity for job creation and sustainability, the United Nations system provides policy advice and technical capacity support. The United Nations Institute for Training and Research, the Sustainable Cycles Programme and ITU monitor e-waste at the national, regional and global levels and produce monitoring reports to support decision-making. UNEP has issued a study containing recommendations for designing a circular economy for the electronics value chain in Africa[24] and has led a project to apply that approach in Nigeria, which is the leading importer of electrical and electronic equipment in Africa. UNIDO is providing technical assistance to Egypt for the implementation of a similar project. United Nations entities are also supporting Member States in sustainable management of e-waste. UNEP is supporting the implementation of nationally determined contributions in the waste sector in Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal.

41. Beyond the risks associated with their development and implementation, digital technologies represent an opportunity for sustainability. United Nations entities are supporting African countries in their efforts to leverage technology to enhance the management of natural resources and production processes. For example, in Egypt, ITU is implementing a project for smart groundwater management, aimed at developing a data-based model to ensure the viability of irrigation systems in newly reclaimed agricultural land. Under the Africa Low Emissions Development Strategies

[20] Mo Ibrahim Foundation, "Africa's critical minerals: Africa at the heart of a low-carbon future", October 2022.

[21] For example, Guinea holds almost 25 per cent of global bauxite reserves, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo accounts for over 70 per cent of cobalt mined globally.

[22] Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, the Sudan, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia.

[23] Vanessa Forti and others, *The Global E-Waste Monitor 2020: Quantities, Flows, and the Circular Economy Potential* (Global E-Waste Statistics Partnership, 2020).

[24] Kostyantyn Pivnenko, *Towards a Circular Economy for the Electronics Sector in Africa: Overview, Actions and Recommendations* (Nairobi, United Nations Environment Programme, 2022).

project promoted by UNEP and the European Union, modelling is used to support long-term decision-making consistent with climate objectives and development priorities in seven African countries.[25] The Climate Technology Centre and Network uses digital technology to help local communities in Mozambique implement the water-energy-food nexus. In Somalia, UNIDO uses digital technologies to assist small and medium-sized enterprises in adopting cleaner production solutions.

42. United Nations entities also promote digital technologies to increase preparedness and fight climate change. For example, under the UNESCO-led project, Biosphere Reserves as Observatories for Climate Change Adaptation in Southern Africa, artificial intelligence is used to predict flooding patterns in Mozambique. In the Niger, the Climate Technology Centre and Network is using artificial intelligence to predict the level of hydric stress that different areas will experience during the year and support authorities in proactively adopting adequate measures to prevent damage to crops and livestock. In Seychelles, UNDP is implementing a climate-smart farming project under which digital technologies for irrigation are implemented to save water and energy. Through the African Climate Policy Centre, ECA supports African countries in their efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change through the use of such tools as Weather and Climate Information Services for Africa and through the development of software simulations for assessment of the socioeconomic implications of disaster risk reduction efforts.

Global advocacy

43. The United Nations has also undertaken global advocacy efforts to bridge the digital divide and promote the use of digital technologies to achieve sustainable development. At the ninth African Regional Forum on Sustainable Development in February 2023, the Deputy Secretary-General underscored the need to ensure that the emerging green and digital economies better served the continent's people and natural environment. At the same meeting, the Acting Executive Secretary of ECA presented the 2023 Africa Sustainable Development Report and underscored the critical need to bridge the digital divide to trigger economic transformation in Africa. The report, which was prepared by the African Development Bank (AfDB), the African Union Commission, ECA and UNDP, contained an assessment of progress towards, inter alia, Sustainable Development Goals 9 and 17 and the corresponding Agenda 2063 goals. In the report, attention was drawn to the limited availability and accessibility of data on the digital economy. The concern was expressed that such data were not sufficient for informed decision-making, which could undermine the progress made in the digital economy and economic transformation.

44. United Nations entities and senior leadership have also promoted inclusive digital transformation. In March 2023, at the ministerial-level round table held during the sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, the Deputy Secretary-General called upon world leaders to take decisive steps to curb gender inequalities in digital technologies. In particular, she noted the pernicious impact of gender-biased algorithms and the inequalities in access to the Internet and science, technology, engineering and mathematics education. She also condemned gender-based online harassment and abuse and announced that the United Nations was working to advance a code of conduct for information integrity on digital platforms. The sixty-seventh session of the Commission also featured an event organized by the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa in collaboration with the Permanent Missions of Malawi and Nigeria to the United Nations and Renew Our Earth, a non-governmental organization, on the topic "Closing the gender gap in science,

[25] Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique and Zambia.

technology and innovation in developing countries", which was focused on examples of how Malawi and Nigeria were leveraging digital technologies to promote inclusive science, technology, engineering and mathematics education.

45. The role of digital transformation in spurring economic transformation has also been the focus of advocacy efforts by the United Nations. At the Transform Africa Summit in April 2023, the Secretary-General of ITU pointed out that African countries accounted for almost half of all mobile money users in the world and highlighted that the growth of digital services in Africa had made the continent a perfect investment opportunity. In May 2023, at the high-level policy dialogue of the Africa Dialogue Series organized by the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, the African Union Commission, the secretariat of the African Continental Free Trade Area, the Common Fund for Commodities, ECA and UNCTAD, the Secretary-General of the United Nations underlined the role played by digital technologies in supporting African countries in their efforts to leapfrog towards the fourth industrial revolution and create decent jobs for all. The 2023 Africa Dialogue Series also featured discussions on the need to regulate trade in digital services in the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area, to maximize the potential of such services. The United Nations Global Compact organized the Global Africa Business Initiative, held in September 2023; at the event, opportunities for Africa to become the world's innovation hub were explored.

46. On the margins of the Sustainable Development Goals Summit in September 2023, ITU and UNDP launched a high-impact initiative on digital public infrastructure, with the objective of catalysing collective action to strengthen digital public infrastructure in 100 countries. To support implementation of the initiative, UNDP and its partners[26] launched the 50-in-5 campaign in November, which is aimed at rallying 50 countries to design, launch and scale up at least one component of digital public infrastructure in five years. As of November 2023, 4 of the 12 countries that had joined the campaign were in Africa.[27] On its part, ITU has launched the Partner2Connect Digital Coalition, a multi-stakeholder alliance for mobilizing and announcing new resources, partnerships and commitments to achieving universal and meaningful connectivity.

47. The risks and opportunities of digital transformation for the promotion of African cultural interlinkages and cultural inclusion have been another focus of United Nations entities. To mark the occasion of Kiswahili Language Day, UNESCO, in collaboration with States members of the East African Community and the Southern African Development Community, organized an event on unleashing the potential of Kiswahili in the digital era. Despite the fact that Kiswahili is one of the 10 languages most widely accepted for use in ICT worldwide and has over 200 million users, significant progress is still needed to integrate the language effectively into ICT systems. At the event, attention was drawn to the concern that limited integration of Kiswahili in software development could lead to digital exclusion and undermine efforts to boost digital literacy on the continent. At the same time, leveraging the number of Kiswahili users and their presence across the region could be instrumental in promoting socioeconomic integration through digital platforms.

[26] Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Centre for Digital Public Infrastructure, Co-Develop and the Digital Public Goods Alliance.

[27] Ethiopia, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

III. Coordination of the United Nations system and with the African Union in support of the continent's development

48. Throughout 2023, the interdepartmental task force on African affairs continued to support the coordination of the United Nations system with African Member States and African Union institutions. Following the selection of food systems as the theme for the 2023 discussions, the interdepartmental task force structured its workplan into four meetings. At the first meeting, held in March, key components were identified for a framework for the transformation of food systems in response to the reality and needs of Africa. The second meeting, which was held in July as a special session of the United Nations Food Systems Summit +2 Stocktaking Moment and chaired by the Deputy Secretary-General, was focused on the role of agribusiness and smallholder farmers in promoting a transformation agenda for food systems in Africa. At the third meeting, held in October, the financing aspects of the transformation agenda for food systems were discussed. At the fourth meeting, held in December, participants took stock of the discussions with a view to leveraging food systems transformation for acceleration of the Goals on the continent and agreed to focus the 2024 discussions on digital transformation.

49. With the prioritization of digital transformation, the members of the interdepartmental task force seek to provide input to intergovernmental consultations on the global digital compact, ensuring that the specificities and needs of African countries are taken into account; support the digital transformation of public administration in African countries; and contribute to the establishment of a secured digital single market in Africa by 2030, in line with the progress towards implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

50. At the operational level, the Regional Collaborative Platform for Africa continued to support the continent's development and transformation process. Regarding digital transformation in particular, opportunity and issues-based coalition 3 of the Regional Collaborative Platform for Africa was focused on new technologies and digital solutions for transformational education, youth and women's empowerment and well-being. Under the lead of ILO, UNESCO and UNFPA, the coalition is implementing two flagship initiatives aimed at promoting the use of new technologies and digital solutions to transform education in Africa and improve access to schooling, on the one hand, and to enhance universal health coverage and primary health care through digital health governance, on the other, with the aim of increasing youth and women's empowerment.

51. During the reporting period, notable progress was made in the collaboration of the United Nations system with the African Union Commission, within the context of the African Union-United Nations Framework for the Implementation of Agenda 2063 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with the establishment of two new mechanisms to strengthen strategic coordination: the high-level strategic dialogue on sustainable development and the college-to-college meeting.

52. In May 2023, the Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission and the Deputy Secretary-General chaired a high-level strategic dialogue on sustainable development to discuss measures to "enhance partnership between the African Union and the United Nations in furthering the socioeconomic development and transformation of the continent".[28] To that end, they agreed to establish and oversee thematic college-to-college meetings between principals from the United Nations and Commissioners from the African Union Commission to advise the high-level strategic

[28] African Union and United Nations, Concluding statement from the high-level strategic dialogue meeting, Addis Ababa, 1 May 2023.

dialogue on sustainable development on efforts to achieve closer strategic alignment and foster collective implementation of key priorities for transformative impact.

53. In November 2023, at the seventh United Nations-African Union Annual Conference, chaired by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission and the Secretary-General, it was confirmed that the role of the high-level strategic dialogue on sustainable development was to "consider and address priority issues of strategic importance in the joint partnership of the United Nations and the African Union on sustainable development, providing recommendations for consideration at the United Nations-African Union Annual Conference".[29] At the Conference, the advisory role of the college-to-college meetings was also reaffirmed, as a forum "where Commissioners from the African Union Commission and relevant principals from the United Nations will engage regularly on shared priorities and policies". New mechanisms for strategic coordination on development were adopted, and the recommendation that finance be a strategic priority for collaboration between the African Union and the United Nations on sustainable development in 2024 was endorsed. To that end, the Chairperson and Secretary-General called for a reform of the international financial architecture and for enhancement of domestic resource mobilization systems as the most effective way to reduce the dependency of African countries and improve country risk profiles. Challenges to peace and security on the continent were also addressed,[30] and the African Union-United Nations Framework on Human Rights was signed.

54. At the operational level, coordination between the African Union Commission and the United Nations contributed to the assessment of progress in the implementation of the first 10-year implementation plan (2014–2023) of the African Union Agenda 2063 and the development of the second 10-year implementation plan. A technical working group composed of the African Union Commission, the African Union Development Agency-New Partnership for Africa's Development, the African Capacity-building Foundation, the African Peer Review Mechanism, AfDB, ECA, UNDP and UNICEF prepared an evaluation of the first 10-year implementation plan and extracted lessons learned on the basis of national consultation reports. The key findings and recommendations from the evaluation were presented and validated by the Executive Council of the African Union at a ministerial retreat held in Kigali in October 2023. They subsequently informed the development of a second 10-year implementation plan for the period 2024 to 2033. The evaluation report and the second 10-year implementation plan were formally adopted by the Heads of State of the African Union at the 37th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union in February 2024.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

55. Advancing the digital transition in Africa is essential for the world to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Nevertheless, existing inequalities between and within countries, compounded by the exponential pace of progress in digital technologies, risk amplifying the existing development gap. Collective action and multi-stakeholder collaboration are essential for closing the digital divide. The ongoing negotiations for the global digital compact provide the perfect framework for the international community to ensure that the digital revolution will not leave African countries behind.

[29] African Union and United Nations, Joint communiqué from the seventh United Nations-African Union Annual Conference, 28 November 2023.

[30] For more details, refer to the report of the Secretary-General on strengthening the partnership between the United Nations and the African Union on issues of peace and security in Africa, including the work of the United Nations Office to the African Union (S/2023/629).

56. Digital technologies can help to unlock economic transformation on the continent, but technology is more than a means to an end. Making the potential value of technology a reality requires the guidance of strategic frameworks that steer the digital transition toward meaningful development outcomes, which implies leveraging technology as a tool to empower African countries by operationalizing digital governance as an enabler of development, enhancing domestic resource mobilization through digital technologies to finance the development of Africa and maximizing the interlinkages between the digital transition and the other five transition areas with a view to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. As demonstrated throughout the present report, the United Nations is committed to supporting the African Union and African countries in their efforts to grasp this opportunity. In that regard, the following recommendations are made for consideration by the Committee for Programme and Coordination:

(a) **Promote an approach to digitalization that acknowledges the disparity in technological readiness among African countries and between Africa and other regions and leads to differentiated provisions tailored to the actual starting points of countries;**

(b) **Support programmes that enable equitable access to digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, between and within countries, in order to reduce the digital gap for, inter alia, women and girls, rural populations, and people with disabilities and to promote equitable digital transformation in order to achieve all 17 Sustainable Development Goals and sustainable development in its three dimensions: economic, social and environmental;**

(c) **Endorse measures that address access to and affordability of digital technologies, such as lifeline support for low-income consumers and public auctions of spectrum licences to increase competition;**

(d) **Support programmes aimed at enhancing the use of digital technologies by contributing to the development of digital skills and local content in African countries;**

(e) **Encourage African countries to mainstream digital technology in all productive sectors and in particular to maximize the positive impact of digital technologies in e-commerce and implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area through such measures as the adoption of open standards and systems, the simplification of cross-border e-commerce and the protection of digital rights;**

(f) **Call upon the international community to make digital and data investments integral to the design, implementation and tracking of development cooperation across all sectors and scale up artificial intelligence for good to bridge the digital gap.**