Introduction of the Report of the Secretary-General on Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit of the Information Society at the regional and international levels

Statement by
Ms. Shamika N. Sirimanne
Director, Division on Technology and Logistics
UNCTAD

Wednesday 29 March 2023, Geneva

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to introduce this Report of the Secretary-General on the progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels.

The report has been prepared by the secretariat based on information provided by 32 UN entities and other international organizations and stakeholders concerning their efforts to implement WSIS outcomes in 2022.

In this introduction, I will focus on three key aspects of the implementation of the WSIS outcomes in a year marked by economic uncertainty, significant developments in the digital space, and conflict, both real-world and digital. These are:

- The changing context of digital cooperation,

- The impact of conflict and the risk of cyberconflict, and

- Data governance

The changing context of digital cooperation

Ladies and gentlemen,

Achieving digital development continues to present serious challenges that require the global community to come together through digital cooperation. For example:

- The world remains too far away from truly universal inclusion in the digital economy;

- We still need to fully integrate the digital dimension into actions to address poverty, gender equality, and climate change;

- Cybersecurity, including cybercrime raise increasing concerns

None of these challenges can be tackled successfully without digital cooperation.

Take the digital divide. Although 63% of the world's population is connected, least developed countries still only count 27% of their populations as internet users. As the CSTD has noted in the past the persistent connectivity can lead to a serious development divide, stalling the progress to achieve the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. Digital cooperation, technology sharing and partnerships remain crucial for connecting remote and underserved populations.

Work on the establishment of a Global Digital Compact (GDC) opens opportunities for positive developments in this regard. The ongoing process of consultations will outline shared principles for an open, free, and secure digital future for all, which will be key components of deliberations at the Summit of the Future in 2024. Digital cooperation is recognized as central to this future.

The CSTD, with its longstanding experience and the stock of knowledge it has accumulated in its work on the WSIS outcomes, enjoys unique advantages to contribute valuably to the success of a the GDC.

The impact of conflict and the risk of cyberconflict

Conflicts in which digital technology plays an increasingly central role have become one of the most salient effects of digitalization on society and politics globally.

Digital technology is becoming increasingly weaponized in sophisticated ways. From cyberattacks that disrupt infrastructure and services to the theft of sensitive information and the destabilizing potential of deep fakes and fake news, information technologies are increasingly often among the major causes and means of conflict.

Countries lacking the cybersecurity infrastructure to protect themselves from these threats are liable to suffer disproportionately, amplifying global power imbalances.

But digital technologies can also provide solutions in conflict situations. They provide tools promoting accountability and accuracy and enable the challenging of dominant narratives. They can also facilitate peacebuilding and help document and discourage human rights abuses.

Data governance

Distinguished delegates,

Now let me turn to the importance of data governance. The report argues that the multidimensional impact of digital data on all aspects of societies and economies continues to necessitate global conversations around regulation and governance. Areas of concern are wide-ranging and include the geographical concentration of digital innovation and data management, problems of cross-border jurisdiction, competition policy, consumer rights, and content moderation.

The regulatory challenges created by those questions are complex, particularly where the need for international enforcement interacts with differences in national laws and norms. International forums are increasingly concerned with such issues. For example a growing number of initiatives aim to address the ethical dimensions

of emerging technologies such as machine learning and artificial intelligence, raising the question of the risk of fragmentation in the treatment of these matters.

The emerging data divide is among the most salient examples of how, as noted earlier, a digital connectivity divide can ultimately lead to a significant development divide. There as risk that the data economy will be permanently dominated by a few stakeholders from a handful of technologically advanced economies, even though their activities directly impact the lives and economic prospects of citizens in developing economies.

With its long-standing role in digitalization and development, the Commission should be able to bring stakeholders together to collaboratively navigate these complex questions and help develop solutions that serve the global public interest.

Closing

Distinguished delegates,

As the Secretary-General pointed out in this report on WSIS, although today's information society differs significantly from what was envisaged in 2005, the WSIS's commitment to building "a people-centered, inclusive, and development-oriented information society" remains highly relevant.

The General Assembly will review the WSIS in 2025. Given the CSTD's central role in two decades of follow-up and monitoring of WSIS implementation, the Commission should be able to help member States and other stakeholders to use the review to achieve a clear and actionable understanding of the persistent and emerging challenges of digitalization and development, the possibilities that were realized as well as those that were missed and the new ones that may be opening. It could thus help strengthen global consensus on the vision of our digital society's future and how that vision can be articulated with the Global Digital Compact and other global processes.

To conclude my statement, I wish to convey our gratitude to all the WSIS stakeholders that work tirelessly on the implementation and the WSIS vision. It is to them that this Commission, as the focal point of the United Nations for science and technology for development, has a vital responsibility to provide an inclusive space for reflecting and working on the present and the future of digital development.

Thank you for your attention.

<center>*****</center>