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**High-level roundtable 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”**

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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
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14 May 2019, Geneva

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to introduce the Report of the Secretary-General under this Agenda item. The report has been prepared by the UNCTAD secretariat and reflects information provided by 33 United Nations entities and other international organisations and stakeholders concerning their efforts to implement WSIS outcomes in 2018. I would also like to draw your attention to the conference room paper (E/CN.16/2019/CRP.2) that we have prepared to complement the information provided in the Report of the Secretary-General.

I will present a brief summary of three main aspects of the contents of the Report:

- First, key trends on ICT access and use;
- Second, recent trends on ICT developments with a focus on the digital economy;
- And third, the impact of emerging technologies in societies and individuals that were prominent in international debates in 2018;

I will conclude my presentation with some of the main findings and suggestions from the Report.

1. Trends in ICT access and use and the global connectivity gap

The report shows that in 2018, for the first time, the number of people that used the Internet exceeded half the global population. However, regional divides remain. Estimates show that last year around 80% of people in Europe were estimated to be online, while fewer than 25% used the Internet in sub-Saharan Africa and fewer than 20% of the population of the least developed countries had access to the Internet.

Although a landmark has been achieved in terms of connectivity, almost half of the population of the world remains offline. Without connectivity these billions of people will be excluded from the benefits of the digital revolution. The data also show continued challenges in terms of affordability within communities. These are related to underlying structural inequalities in income, literacy and educational attainment. Much remains to be done to address gaps within and between countries and groups of the society, including developed and developing countries, women and men, and rural and urban populations. The task of addressing the digital divide requires integration with wider efforts to achieve empowerment, gender equality and sustainable development.

2. Trends on ICT developments

The report highlights the profound impact on labour markets of the development of ICTs since the time of the WSIS. The globalization of communications and the growth of online services have modified employment patterns significantly. Rapid technological change is accelerating the digitalization of a wide variety of occupations, and even deeper changes are anticipated for the near future. The emergence of the platform economy, in which workers undertake short-term assignments that are managed online, provides new opportunities for employment for people in developing countries, although it also raises concerns about changes in the relationship between employers and workers, such as less stable contracts, reduced access to social protection benefits and weaker bargaining power for workers in an atomized labour market. Also, artificial intelligence, automation and robotics are expected to displace many routine jobs as well as enabling new types of work to emerge. Automation may also have gender implications since women tend to hold jobs that are more likely to be automated and they also are less involved in the STEM occupations that are likely to benefit from these technologies. Life-long occupations are being replaced by others characterized by the need for lifelong learning. Adaptability is becoming essential. Countries will need to equip their

labour force with the digital and non-digital skills required to thrive in this new world of work.

Allow me to elaborate on the issue of digitalization and development since it is directly related to our work at UNCTAD. Beyond its impact on work, digitalization is advancing fast in all other aspects of production and commerce. Digital technologies transform design, manufacturing, sales and after-sales, bring down transaction costs, expedite trade flows and increase the volume of trade in services including across borders. The decline in trade costs could be especially beneficial for small and medium-sized enterprises and firms from developing countries.

Our latest estimates of digital trade show that global e-commerce sales grew by 13% in 2017, hitting an estimated \$29 trillion. The number of online shoppers jumped by 12% and stood at 1.3 billion people, a quarter of the world's population. Further, cross-border business-to-consumer (B2C) sales reached an estimated \$412 billion, accounting for almost 11% of total B2C e-commerce – a 4% hike on the previous year's numbers.

The data shows that e-commerce is growing in magnitude. But we need to ask: how do we make sure that everyone is benefiting from it? To try and answer that question UNCTAD held its e-commerce week last month. More than 1,500 people came to discuss the most pressing issues related to e-commerce, digitalization and development and how they are shaping our societies and the way we live, work and engage with each other.

We at UNCTAD are also working hard to ensure that those who need the most to engage in this discussion can do so. Last December, we organized the first Africa e-commerce week in collaboration with the African Union and the European Union. More than 2,000 people from 60 countries took part in this event representing government officials, the private sector, civil society, youth and academia. Finally, to mitigate the lack of policy-relevant statistics on the digital economy in developing countries, earlier this year our Trade and Development Board approved the creation of a new Working Group on Measuring E-commerce and the Digital Economy. The first meeting of the group will take place in the last quarter of this year.

3. The impact of emerging technologies on societies and people.

The Report notes the tremendous opportunities as well as the challenges presented by the so-called “frontier technologies”, which include machine learning, artificial intelligence, algorithmic decision making, among others. These technologies already contribute strongly to efforts to deliver sustainable development, from e-commerce-driven entrepreneurship to e-health, e-government or humanitarian support. However, frontier technologies are also creating challenges that we need to address. There are concerns about the growing decision-making power of devices and algorithms that use machine learning and large-scale data analysis in ways that may lack transparency and reduce the autonomy of individuals. Worries about cybersecurity and privacy issues affect every country, but not all have the means to protect their citizens adequately. The low participation of women in STEM can perpetuate gender bias as women are less involved in the development of applications. Moreover, the increasing interaction between ICTs innovations and other “frontier technologies” also need to be taken into account, both in terms of possibilities to address long-standing problems and of the need to deal with potential unintended consequences, including in genetics, nanotechnology and advanced materials.

The report provides rich information about the implementation of WSIS outcomes at the regional and the international level, the facilitation of multistakeholder implementation and of various action lines. It also notes important events that happened last year as well as some exciting new initiatives to identify ways to promote innovation in financing and cooperation among stakeholders. In the interest of time, let me highlight just three among them:

- The 13th meeting of the Internet Governance Forum took place in Paris in November 2018. More than 3,000 people participated in discussions under the general theme of “the Internet of Trust”. The next Forum will take place in Berlin from 25 to 29 November this year.
- The United Nations Secretary-General established a High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation, co-chaired by Melinda Gates and Jack Ma. Ms Akaliza Keza Ntwari, a member of the High-level Panel on Digital cooperation, is here

today and will share some words on the work of the panel as part of her presentation

- The Secretary-General launched his Task Force on Digital Financing of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Task Force, which brings together experts from Government, business and civil society, will recommend ways in which the digitalisation of financial services can support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Distinguished delegates,

Before closing, I would like to summarize three key observations from the Report.

First, in 2020 it will be fifteen years since the World Summit on the Information Society and five since the General Assembly conducted its 10-year review of the implementation of the WSIS outcomes. The Information Society has changed profoundly in these years, transforming lives and bringing new opportunities to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. However, despite all the important progress that has been made in access, use and applications of ICTs, much more needs to be done to ensure that the benefits and development opportunities of digital innovations are available to all. Notably, much more needs to be done to ensure that the LDCs are not left behind, particularly considering that at the current pace of access growth, it is highly unlikely that we will achieve the SDG target of universal and affordable access to the Internet in these countries by 2020.

Second, rapid digital innovation is changing expectations about social, economic and cultural development. The impact of the changing information society is likely to be more far-reaching in the coming years than in the time since WSIS. Emerging issues present new and complex challenges that will require an improved understanding of ongoing and future developments along all the dimensions of the information society. We need to start thinking about how the WSIS implementation should take into account rapid technological progress and the increasing complexity of the information society.

Third, all actors in the digital space need to come together to share experiences, expertise and ideas about the new policy balances that should be found to address

the emerging challenges of the information society and their implications for equality, security, inclusiveness, sustainability, innovation and prosperity. Cooperation and dialogue between stakeholders will be crucial. We will also need innovation and greater cooperation concerning governance, technology and services. Finally, we will need to do more to build our evidence base, anticipate future technological developments and consider appropriate policy approaches.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The final point of the report, and of this presentation, is that as we approach the WSIS+15 milestone the nature itself of the information society and the prospects that unfold from it have changed enormously and will continue to do so at an accelerating pace. Delivering on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in a context of rapid technological change should guide our common effort to progress towards a people-centred, development-oriented and inclusive Information Society.

I thank you for your attention.