



Statement by His Excellency Ambassador Munir Akram, President of the Economic and Social Council and Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations in New York, to the High-Level Thematic Debate on Digital Cooperation and Connectivity

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Excellencies, colleagues, and friends,

I would like to extend my gratitude to the President of the General Assembly for convening today's meeting and for inviting me to speak on this occasion.

Mr. President,

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the world's dependence on digitalization. The world would truly not be able to function without the internet. Business, commerce, production, health systems, education- all are now relevant and dependent on remote connectivity.

The United Nations itself would not have been able to continue its work last year without digital tools. The ECOSOC's work this year has been conducted very largely in virtual meetings. Of course, after 40 or 50 zoom calls a week, many of us can develop aggressive tendencies towards our computers. We long to get back to the interpersonal interaction, which is the essence of our profession. Yet, we cannot deny that the future of our societies and our nations will be increasingly digital.

International cooperation will be essential to optimize the opportunities offered by digitalization and the associated frontier technologies. Among these opportunities are higher productivity in all sectors; agriculture, manufacturing, services, finance, trade, and communications; job creation, the fastest growth in employment is now in work related to the ICT sector and expanding digitalization; access to knowledge and information, enabling our people in the remotest corners of the world to be included and to benefit from a globalized internet; and importantly, in creating a green global economy.

The central issue, of course, is the digital divide, as mentioned by the President of the Assembly. 87% of people are online in the advanced countries while only 19% in the poorest countries. Women are doubly disadvantaged, especially in the developing countries. While we conduct our business utilizing the digital space, the large part of the developing world lives isolated, cut off, and sometimes neutrally in darkness.

The Secretary General has proposed a roadmap to bridge the digital divide. We need to elaborate the specific actions to implement this roadmap. Bridging the digital divide will require investment in both hardware and software. It is not sufficient to provide poor people



with a mobile phone and satellite connections. They cannot access the tools required for education, for commerce, or production with this software. We need to invest in the infrastructure- infrastructure for broadband, the internet, cables, and the last mile solutions that are required to connect the world. This will need public and private investment in digital infrastructure. Investment in software encompasses developing the skills in education to utilize the existing and fast-emerging technologies and techniques of the digital world and the ability to access the computers and other devices at affordable prices. Indeed, with appropriate national support and international cooperation, developing countries can aim, not so much to emulate the existing development models in the advanced economies, but to leapfrog with the help of a digitalized knowledge and skills into the economy's future. This has been done by some developing countries and can be done by all developing countries.

The key to their success is the political will of their governments to invest in the essential hardware and software, and to foster participation in the emerging frontier technologies: 5G, robotics, artificial intelligence, the cables, and broadband required for connection. There are, as we all know, the dark sides of the web; a world which lives on the spread of disinformation and misinformation for narrow, national, and partisan objectives, a world which is used to propagate terrorists, a world which it is used to purvey pornography, to defame people and states, to target minorities and vulnerable groups, to intrude personal privacy, to conduct cyber warfare against sovereign nations, and to meet and to instigate conflict and rivalries. We must develop the digital tools to identify such malicious activities, to defend against them, and to neutralize them. It is self evident that these objectives, to optimize the opportunities offered by digitalization and to defend against its misuse, cannot be achieved without inclusive international cooperation among all stakeholders.

The role of the private sector is critical. 70% of the ICT infrastructure is owned by private companies and this ownership is highly concentrated in a handful of companies located in two countries. These companies collect most of the data generated by internet use; data as has been said is the “new gold”, and is enabling decisions on marketing, production, services, trade, and much else. The policies of this companies on tax, on profit-shifting and transfer pricing, on free and fair competition, on propagation of hate, violence, and terrorism, on privacy and security, and on responsible management of data are all issues for consideration in our efforts to promote safe and productive digitalization to avoid bottlenecks in the application of frontier technologies, governments in the international community of the megatrends in the digital space. The explosive growth of data volumes, the fast-paced and unpredictable changes in digital technologies, the ever-stronger force with which digitalization is driving on the course of our economic, social, and cultural changes, the dominance of the ICT data management companies.

Excellencies,

The international community is at an incipient stage in addressing the issue of digitalization. This debate will hopefully identify the major issues that need to be addressed. It could attempt



to identify how and where these issues will be addressed, and a coherent system constructed for effective digital governance.

The United Nations and its functional agencies and bodies possess the legitimacy and convening power to promote and serve as the venue for international cooperation and governance of the digital space. For example, the Economic and Social Council Commission on Science and Technology and the forthcoming Forum on Science, Technology, and Innovation offer indispensable venues for inclusive consideration of digital cooperation and governance.

Mr. President, I will end finally by expressing the hope that while seeking to bridge the North-South digital divide, we will be cautious not to trigger an equally debilitating an East-West digital divide. The competition to harness technology in our world today should not become the face of tomorrow's trade wars. It will divide the world and erode the premise for accelerated global growth and transformation and the realization of a world which is sustainable, green, and equal.

I thank you, Mr. President.