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Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations  
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**Opening Remarks (as prepared for delivery)**

**Policy Statement**

**Eightieth Session of the Commission**

**Monday, 22 April 2024**

**ESCAP Hall  
09:51-09:58 hrs.**

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**Excellency, Ms. Battsetseg Batmunkh, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia and Chair of the eightieth session,**

**Excellency, Mr. Srettha Thavisin, Prime Minister of Thailand,**

**Excellencies, Distinguished delegates,**

It is my honor to welcome you to the opening of the eightieth session of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

We are meeting at the former Sala Santhitham, the Hall of Peace. On behalf of the secretariat, I should like to express our deepest appreciation to the Royal Thai Government for its unwavering support of our Commission over the decades.

**Excellencies,**

Our region today faces economic, environmental and social risks of unseen complexity and uncertainty.

Strategic competition has reshaped trade, finance and technology flows as well as economic cooperation in Asia and the Pacific.

Climate change remains our most defining challenge, with last year the warmest on record. Its steady onset -- with impacts on agriculture, health and human settlements -- has profoundly affected our lives.

A demographic shift is taking place. In countries where the labour force has yet to peak, reaping the demographic dividend calls for investment in education, health and youth employment. As the population slowly ages, we must then refocus our policies towards those fostering greater technological change while providing social protection and fiscal stability.

These interconnected risks transcend borders. They also lie beyond the ability of each country to single-handedly address.

### **Excellencies,**

We likewise stand at a critical juncture to deliver on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as the pivotal path to build peace and shared prosperity.

With limited progress made towards meeting the targets of the 2030 Agenda, implementation remains uneven. If opportunities continue to elude women, youth and persons with disabilities, inequities will continue to grow.

Special attention will also need to be given to the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States as they concurrently attempt to overcome their structural and geographic constraints.

Despite this convergence, our region has remained remarkably resilient and resourceful as it continues to innovate.

The Bangkok Declaration, adopted two years ago to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of our Commission, recognized the need for a common agenda to advance sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific.

It noted the extraordinary progress made in the region to lift millions out of poverty and establish some of the world's most dynamic economies since 1947 in the spirit of unity, solidarity, multilateralism and international cooperation.

It also reaffirmed our commitment to the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

## **Excellencies,**

The theme of our session this year is “Leveraging digital innovation for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific.”

The 2030 Agenda recognized the potential of information and communications technology and global interconnectedness to accelerate human progress, to bridge the digital divide and to develop knowledge societies.<sup>1</sup>

It also recognized technology, together with finance, trade and capacity-building, as a means to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and

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<sup>1</sup> A/RES/70/1, para. 15.

innovation as one of the major drivers of productivity, inclusive economic growth and job creation.<sup>2</sup>

**As our region propels the global economy, innovation resulting from digital transformation is especially critical.**

Merchandise trade within Asia and the Pacific comprises 60 per cent of global trade, an increase from 40 per cent only three decades ago. As digital integration drives the post-pandemic recovery, the digital economy is expected to generate an additional \$1 trillion by 2025 in South-East Asia alone.

**Second, the region is now a hub for digital innovation.**

In the finance sector, the value of digital transactions is projected to reach \$6.7 trillion by 2026. Digital finance has improved access to banking and insurance, especially for women, micro-enterprises as well as people in remote and marginalized communities.

Smart city technologies are transforming urban development. Intelligent infrastructure linked with the Internet of Things optimizes resource management, promotes energy efficiency and strengthens the circular economy through improved use of information and less materials.

Digital government platforms are likewise enabling public services to reach all citizens more effectively and efficiently.

**Third, improved climate adaptive capacity and disaster resilience have made us more prepared for unforeseen crises.**

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<sup>2</sup> A/RES/70/1, para. 67.

Digital innovation, including artificial intelligence that integrates analyses of both ground and geospatial big data, is revolutionizing early warning systems. It is now possible not only to forecast typhoon tracks with pinpoint accuracy, but also to provide timely information on their anticipated impacts. Fatalities have consequently decreased significantly, despite the increasing frequency and severity of weather events.

### **Excellencies, distinguished delegates,**

Given this backdrop, allow me to highlight three policy issues that we must now focus on to ensure sustainable development:

#### **Inclusive policies are essential.**

Government spending must target persistent inequalities, gaps and divides, be they income, gender or digital, and prepare us for the emerging demographic shifts. Improved quality and access to healthcare, education and social protection that directly benefit marginalized and vulnerable populations are key.

#### **Improved financing is necessary.**

This requires more effective mobilization of public revenue through the digital transformation of tax administrations, with enhanced analytics and data management capabilities. Efforts to allocate resources more efficiently and in the process, catalyze climate action are concurrently needed.

The international community could, in parallel, also consider increasing the availability of affordable, long-term financing to developing countries.

**Third, regional cooperation is imperative to accelerate digital innovation for sustainable development.**

With this in mind, the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Digital Inclusion and Transformation to be held in September in Kazakhstan will consider a blueprint for such cooperation.

As we move forward, we must embrace emerging digital innovation platforms, cultivate competencies necessary for a holistic understanding of digital ecosystems and harmonize policy, legislative and regulatory frameworks.

Intelligently deployed and properly governed digital solutions, based on a common understanding, shared approaches and collaborative governance, form the foundations for the collective push necessary for the attainment of the 2030 Agenda.

This is the opportunity in front of us.

Thank you.