

*Excellencies,*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I am grateful to the Executive-Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) for this opportunity to join you – albeit virtually – to offer some opening remarks as prelude to your important discussions on the critical subject of ***'Leveraging Digital Innovations for Sustainable Development in the Asia-Pacific Region'***.

As technology and digital progress advance rapidly, it is imperative that we keep pace with these innovations – and maximize on ways to utilize the new digital tools at our disposal to achieve sustainable development.

Consistent with the core principle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of *leaving no one behind*, our strategies should be designed to address the challenges peculiar to the countries in each region of the world.

The Asia-Pacific region is incredibly diverse – encompassing a variety of ethnicities, religions, and languages, spread across islands, archipelagos, mountainous steppes, vast flood-plains, coastal states, and landlocked countries.

It is, therefore, your collective duty as countries in the region to ensure that the 2030 Agenda benefits everyone, everywhere.

**(BRIEF PAUSE)**

*Excellencies,*

Digital inclusivity is paramount in these efforts.

However, significant disparities remain across the Asia-Pacific.

For instance, there is a pronounced urban-rural divide in access to essential technological benefits – with **80 percent** of the urban population being online, compared to only **52 percent** of rural populations.

There is also a gender gap, with **63 percent** of women using the internet compared to **69 percent** of men.

Furthermore – while **75 percent** of the region's inhabitants use mobile phones, **25 percent** are without access to such technology.

In today's world, access to smartphones and digital connectivity can no longer remain luxuries for a few – but necessities, in fact, tools for all.

This is particularly true at this time when - if properly regulated - rapid advancements in artificial intelligence and communication technologies — are reshaping the already dynamic global economic landscape.

**(BRIEF PAUSE)**

Closing these digital divides is crucial.

In this endeavour, we must also be highly vigilant about the risks associated with new digital technologies.

While enhancing cybersecurity is essential, we must also address the potential macroeconomic disruptions – due among other things, to increasing job automation.

It is vital to reskill and upskill the labour force and upcoming generations – to ensure they can prosper in this new era of technological progress.

Additionally, we must consider the environmental impacts of technological developments.

Currently, digital devices, the internet, and their supporting infrastructure account for **2 percent** of the global carbon footprint.

Innovation must be sustainable, aiming to mitigate or reverse adverse environmental effects.

**(BRIEF PAUSE FOR A CLOSE)**

*Excellencies,*

As I close, I wish to share with you that during **Sustainability Week** – which I convened from April 15-19 – it was emphasized that we are significantly off track in our journey to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Throughout the Week's discussions, the potential power of cutting-edge technologies and digital innovations was frequently highlighted – as a strategy to compensate for lost time, and drive progress across the SDGs.

Building on these conversations, I trust that the insights and momentum generated at this 80<sup>th</sup> ESCAP session will inform initiatives beyond the Asia-Pacific region – and influence other upcoming regional conferences.

Furthermore, I encourage the members of ESCAP to actively pursue the Asia-Pacific Superhighway initiative.

This initiative – which ESCAP is leading – promotes multi-stakeholder cooperation to enhance digital connectivity across the region. Its aim is to bridge the digital divide and drive digital transformation, ensuring inclusive access to technology.

I also hope these efforts will cumulatively contribute to the success of the **Summit of the Future in September**.

Let us move forward, with resolve, to ensure that everyone –  
everywhere – can affordably access the benefits of digital innovation.

**I thank you.**