Draft Statement by:

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Bridging the Digital Divide between People and Countries
Astana, 26 May 2016

Your Excellency, Mr. Dauren Abaev Minister of Information and Communication of the Republic of Kazakhstan,

Hon. Mr. Saken Sarsenov
Vice-Minister for Investment and Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Ministers,

Distinguished Representatives,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here with you today at this beautiful city of Astana – the capital of Kazakhstan.

We are deeply grateful and appreciative of the warm hospitality extended to us by the Government of Kazakhstan.

We congratulate the Government for convening this annual Astana Economic Forum, bringing together government leaders and world-renowned experts.

The agenda of this year’s Forum, focussing on the theme of “New Economic Reality: diversification, innovation and knowledge economy”, highlights the nuanced challenges and unique opportunities facing the world today.
In September last year, world leaders committed to a shared vision with the adoption of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets will provide critical reference points for governments and relevant stakeholders in designing strategies and plans to eradicate poverty and achieve a better, more sustainable world.

The common agenda and convergence of issues that are discussed at this Forum, and the 2030 Agenda, are by no means a mere coincidence.

As the UN Secretary-General recently highlighted, we can end global poverty by 2030; we can build a life of dignity for all; we can build healthy economies and a healthy planet; we will leave no one behind.

But we know the true test will be implementation\(^1\).

Information communication technologies (ICTs) are key enablers, multipliers and accelerators in supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

ICTs have become a part of everyday life.

ICTs have penetrated into almost all corners of the globe, contributing to economic growth and development in all sectors, enabling new business models and creating new opportunities for social interaction.

In December last year, at its review of the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the United Nations General Assembly gave clear prominence to the remarkable progress of ICT and its pivotal role to achieve the SDGs.

As we celebrate the advancement of ICT, we must not forget that many forms of digital divides remain, both between and within countries and between women and men.

In 2015, only 34 per cent of households in developing countries had Internet access as compared with more than 80 per cent in developed countries, and only around 43 per cent of people globally had Internet access.

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\(^1\) UN Secretary-General\'s remarks at event on Sustainable Development Goals in Mauritius, 9 May 2016
An estimated 80 per cent of online content was available in only one of 10 languages\textsuperscript{2}, when there are approximately 7,000 different languages used around the world.

Many women, men and children continue to live on the margins of societies. Many are isolated, whether in rural areas or in cities, and lack access to infrastructure, resources and information.

It is a concern that there are disparate factors hindering access to ICTs, such as discrimination, affordability, geographical distance, physical environment, language, culture, and lack of access to digital and other technologies, both between and within countries.

It is a concern that the gender digital divide persists, which affects women’s access to and use of ICTs, including in education, employment and other areas of economic and social development.

It is also a concern that such digital divides may be widened with the advancement and diffusion of ICTs and the Internet, through big data, cloud computing, cognitive computing, Internet of Things, and among others, …

… even though the advancement is in itself a positive trend.

That brings me to the theme of our workshop organized by the Division for Public Administration and Development Management of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in cooperation with the Ministry for Investments and Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

“Bridging the Digital Divide between People and Countries”.

There is a need for innovative, sustainable solutions to double the current efforts, or more, to bridge these digital divides.

These include, but are not limited to: strengthened enabling policy environments, and global and regional cooperation to improve affordability, access, education, capacity-building, multilingualism, local content, cultural preservation, investment and appropriate financing.

Against this backdrop, I would like to highlight three key areas to contextualize issues for this important workshop, for your indulgence and your expert opinion:

\textsuperscript{2} Outcome document of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the overall review of the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society, A/RES/70/125
First is about inclusion

ICTs can create more inclusive societies through participation and inclusive decision-making.

E-participation is expanding all over the world.

With increased and easier access to mobile technologies, social media and other ICT channels, an increasing number of countries now proactively use networking opportunities to engage with people and evolve towards participatory decision-making.

My second point relates to optimizing the potential of availing online services to all people including the poorest and the most vulnerable.

E-government has grown with a rapid pace over the past 15 years, since the first attempt of the United Nations to benchmark e-government in 2001.

Today, e-government has become a development indicator and an aspiration in and of itself.

Looking back, e-government development process has been shifting away from a staged process or progression to non-sequential, overlapping and connected building blocks. This allows for leap-frogging and quick wins while calling for longer term sustainable strategies.

However, just as digital divides, e-government divides persist between and within regions, between developed and developing countries.

In Session 1, My colleague Richard Kerby will share more about insights that we observe through the 2016 edition of the United Nations E-Government Survey – a flagship publication of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

My last point is about data and indicators.

What gets measured gets done.

While we need to better grasp and make use of existing data, there is a need for more quantitative and qualitative data and indicators in assessing the situations of the poorest and most vulnerable.
Particularly urgent is to increase the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data -- geospatial data, user-generated data, open data and big data -- disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other relevant characteristics.

Moving forward, I would like to conclude my intervention posing a couple of questions that will help sharpen the role of the global community, of which we are all a part of, in bridging the digital divides:

So my questions to all of us are:

What is right approach towards a fully inclusive development to bridge all digital divides and overcome challenges? In particular, what has Eurasia done that are illustrative for other regions and countries to replicate as best practices?

Among others, the 100 concrete steps set up by Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev to implement the five institutional reforms last year, could shed some light on the path forward.

Wow do we enhance global and regional cooperation, including North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation, and public-private partnerships in bridging digital divides?

One concrete example can be the Eurasian’s information super highway project to boost Internet connection speed. But I am sure the other speakers will provide more cases as good practice.

At this workshop, we look forward to listen to your answers, among the competent panellists and the distinguished participants who are here with us today.

It is my sincere hope that all of us here, together, working as one, can generate meaningful and concrete recommendations which will guide the collective work of the global community in bridging the digital divides.

And because the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) is the central platform for the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and it will be convened in New York from 11 to 20 July 2016 with the theme of “Leaving no one behind”, …

… it is also my great hope that our efforts can bring about valuable inputs to that Forum.
In closing, let me thank the Government of Kazakhstan once again for bringing this great community together here at this workshop in Astana.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to thank all of you for your participation at this event. I look forward to your active engagement and a productive outcome.