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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: review of relevant United Nations plans and programmes of action pertaining to the situation of social groups: World Programme of Action for Youth

Policies and programmes involving youth

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to Commission for Social Development resolution 59/1. It focuses on collective action on, for and with youth concerning digital technologies, including addressing digital divides and their intersection with health, education and employment. The report examines the role and impact of digital technologies and digital divides on youth in the evolving coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. It looks at how technologies affected recovery and how divides are being closed to advance the implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The report was prepared on the basis of input from Member States, United Nations system entities and youth organizations. Key recommendations are provided for consideration by the Commission.

* E/CN.5/2023/1.
I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 59/1 on policies and programmes involving youth, the Commission for Social Development requested that the Secretary-General submit a comprehensive report to its sixty-first session on the implementation of the resolution, including progress on the achievements and challenges in the realization of the World Programme of Action for Youth, as well as the linkages with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In the resolution, the Commission recognized that young people often lack job-relevant digital skills needed to ensure access to the labour market, and that in order to reduce the proportion of youth not in education, employment or training, it is necessary to increase the proportion of youth with relevant skills for decent jobs and entrepreneurship. It also acknowledged that digital technologies can facilitate a transition to a more inclusive, equitable, resilient and sustainable society. To inform the report of the Secretary-General, the Secretariat consulted Member States and United Nations system entities that are members of the Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development; and youth organizations. Responses were received from 22 Member States,1 16 United Nations entities2 and a number of youth-led or youth-focused partners.

2. Section II of the present report focuses on the implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

3. Section III provides an overview of the global context of digital technologies and digital divides, looking at relevant policies and programmes; their impact on structural changes in society and the economy and the effects on youth; and various measures aimed at closing digital divides.

4. Section IV pertains to focus areas and looks at the impact of digital divides on youth in the areas of education, employment and health, and provides information on actions taken by Member States and the United Nations system to address issues and achieve the World Programme of Action for Youth and the 2030 Agenda, with a particular focus on the period since the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic in early 2020.

5. Section V reviews activities of youth-led and youth-focused organizations.

6. The report concludes with recommendations in section VI.

II. Implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

7. The unique role of youth in global development and society has long been recognized. The United Nations sought to better enable youth contributions through the adoption by the General Assembly of its resolution 50/81, on the World

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1 Austria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, China, Colombia, Egypt, El Salvador, France, Germany, Greece, India, Jordan, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, Mongolia, Nicaragua, Slovakia, Sweden and Türkiye.

2 The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Organization for Migration, the International Trade Centre, the International Telecommunication Union, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Office of the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Department of Global Communications, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Children’s Fund, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the World Health Organization.
Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond, and the strengthening of that commitment in General Assembly resolution 62/126, providing Member States with a policy framework and practical guidelines for improving the situation of youth.

8. The World Programme of Action for Youth comprises 15 priority areas,\(^3\) which are addressed in targeted international strategies\(^4\) and in broader international frameworks, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (General Assembly 70/1). In its resolution 75/1 on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations, the General Assembly highlighted the importance of multilateralism, setting out 12 areas of action for responding to current and future challenges.

9. One commitment in the report of the Secretary-General entitled “Our Common Agenda” (A/75/982), is to listen to and work with youth, as they will live with the consequences of action and inaction of today. This aligns with earlier commitments by Member States in the World Programme of Action for Youth to take concrete steps to enable one of the largest cohorts of youth in human history to reach their full potential, as well as improve the situation of young people in a manner that leaves no one behind. Our Common Agenda also extends commitments to future generations.

10. The international community has consistently recognized the potential gains that could be achieved through the use of technology in pursuit of sustainable development, and the risks thereof. In Sustainable Development Goal 4, target 4.4, Member States committed to substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship; in Goal 5, target 5.b, to enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women; and in Goal 8, target 8.2, to achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value added and labour-intensive sectors.

11. The need to harness digital technology to serve humanity is underscored in Our Common Agenda. For that reason, technology needs to be affordable, provide reliable, accurate information and be safe for young people to navigate. Our Common Agenda proposes that universal access to the Internet be a human right. It also notes the destabilizing risk that technology can pose, as well as recent concerns of trust and mistrust associated with technology and the Internet.

12. The impact of technology on the Sustainable Development Goals has been noted by the General Assembly in resolutions 72/242 and 73/17; and in 2020, the Secretary-General issued his Road Map for Digital Cooperation (A/74/821) to advance a safer and more equitable digital space through the following actions: universal connectivity by 2030; promotion of digital public goods; digital inclusion for all; strengthened digital capacity-building; protection of human rights; supporting global cooperation on artificial intelligence; promotion of trust and security; and building a more effective architecture for digital cooperation.

13. Unlocking the benefits of technology in terms of access to decent jobs, education and health care requires capacity-building for service users and providers

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\(^3\) Education, employment, hunger and poverty, health, environment, substance abuse, juvenile justice, leisure-time activities, girls and young women, the full and effective participation of young people in the life of society and in decision-making, globalization, information and communication technologies, HIV/AIDS, armed conflict and intergenerational issues.

and the extension of infrastructure. The World Programme of Action for Youth promotes ongoing technology training for youth. In 2021, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched its Rewired Global Declaration on Connectivity for Education to maximize the benefits of technology for education. In its Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, the International Labour Organization (ILO) commits to ensuring a just transition to a sustainable future of work, including by harnessing technology and promoting skills acquisition across the life cycle.

III. Focus area: digital technologies and digital divides

A. Snapshot of the current situation on digital technologies and digital divides

14. Digital connectivity continues to grow, and nearly 95 per cent of the world’s total population is within range of a mobile broadband network. COVID-19 spurred Internet usage, with global data surges of 40–50 per cent during lockdowns. However, digital divides persist, which both mirror and exacerbate wider socioeconomic inequalities. Despite the potential for a higher access rate, just 63 per cent of the global population use the Internet. Wide disparities in Internet use exist between regions: Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Americas are close to 95 per cent usage; and the expansion of use continues in Arab States (66 per cent); Asia-Pacific (61 per cent) and Africa (33 per cent). Further Internet usage divides persist between urban (76 per cent) and rural (39 per cent) populations; as well as between men (62 per cent) and women (57 per cent), with men in all regions, except the Americas, more likely to use the Internet.

15. Young people (between the ages of 15 and 24) use the Internet more than all other age groups. However, just one third of youth in low-income countries use the Internet, compared to almost universal usage in upper-middle income countries. Education is another key factor in the divide, as 94 per cent of those with tertiary education use the Internet, compared to 85 per cent of people with upper secondary or secondary education, and a far lower rate of usage among those with lower secondary or primary education. Existing inequalities were magnified by COVID-19. In April 2020, at the height of the first wave of COVID-19 lockdowns, over 1.5 billion students and youth were affected by disruptions to education. An estimated 706 million learners have no Internet at home, and were unable to participate in online learning. Evidence is largely consistent that there were losses in average learning across countries, with poorer students falling further behind, and higher dropouts among older children, although most countries did not collect systematic data on either outcome.

16. A number of barriers to digital technology and connectivity exist. An estimated $428 billion are required to provide universal Internet access by 2030, including investments in infrastructure and the provision of broadband; and some $40 billion are needed to develop information and communications technology (ICT) skills and

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7 Ibid.
8 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), “1.3 billion learners are still affected by school or university closures, as educational institutions start reopening around the world, says UNESCO”, press release, 29 April 2020.
content. Household ICT survey respondents, including young people, in 49 countries most frequently cited the following as barriers to use: no need for the Internet; the high cost of equipment; and the high cost of service. Enabling access to fast and affordable Internet while boosting the skills needed to make productive use of the Internet are necessary steps to achieve universal usage and enable young people to fully benefit from access. Looking to skills, of the 77 countries for which data were available, only 8 have reached the target of 70 per cent of the population having basic ICT skills, and 11 countries out of 76 registered 50 per cent of the population having intermediate skills. As the use of digital technology increases, it is important to universalize access and capacity to benefit, and avoid further exclusion of, already marginalized groups of young people, including for young persons with disabilities through the provision of assistive technologies.

B. Policies and programmes to reduce digital divides

17. The international community responded to the COVID-19 pandemic as the threat evolved in early 2020, developing joint operational response strategies for the United Nations system and partners along three axes: (a) the health response; (b) the socioeconomic and humanitarian response; and (c) a transformative and sustainable recovery. System-wide resources were channelled through the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19, and the COVID-19 response and recovery multi-partner trust fund, with the clear emphasis that recovery would require a particular focus on people more likely to be in vulnerable situations, including youth. Both funds noted the need to promote digital systems to support and boost livelihoods and the provision of social service delivery, and funds were delivered to projects including those with a focus on youth education, jobs and livelihoods and health.

18. Digital technology is a key enabler for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, and the expansion of its use offers numerous opportunities to address the challenges of COVID-19, to increase digital inclusion and to build back better. Accelerated digitization of public services has enabled the remote provision of health services, including the provision of information, health consultations and online training for health professionals. Social protection delivery in response to COVID-19 and as part of recovery efforts relied heavily on digital technology, often involving public-private partnerships and leading to higher rates of inclusion. Public education was profoundly affected by social distancing measures and was extended to the home, as over 90 per cent of ministries of education enacted policies to promote digital and remote learning. Jobs also moved online, with an exponential increase in e-commerce, and efforts to reach remote and vulnerable populations, who are often

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engaged in micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises included enhancing supply-chain interactions and support for business-to-business platforms.\footnote{16}

19. Strategic intervention is needed to ensure the benefits of technology are available to all, and do not amplify existing inequalities. Measures include expanding digital infrastructure, providing access to affordable digital devices and increasing capacity to use resources and gain access to a range of accurate information. Digital strategies and programmes have been introduced in Member States, including El Salvador, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malaysia and Mexico, to promote equitable access to technology infrastructure and capacity. In Mauritius, the 2021/22 budget included provisions for low-income families to receive free broadband access. In order to close capacity gaps in digital use, in 2020, the United Nations launched the Verified campaign, an initiative to increase the volume and reach of trusted, accurate information on COVID-19 in response to the flood of misinformation on social media and digital platforms.

C. Context of structural changes in society and the economy as a result of trends in technology and globalization, and the impact on youth

20. Humanity is experiencing one of the most transformational moments in history. Decisions on global warming, new technology, social protection and urbanization will affect future generations. Structural transformation – the movement of labour from low- to high-productivity activities – is captured in Sustainable Development Goal targets 8.2 and 9.2.

21. The role of young people in structural change has been pivotal at several moments in history, as new entrants to the labour market drive the transition to new modes of working with upgraded technologies. However, the fourth industrial revolution, involving global technological shifts and the widespread automation of production stands to delink productivity growth from employment growth, with early deindustrialization or stagnation of manufacturing partly the result of technology.\footnote{17}

22. New technology offers the potential to leapfrog older technologies and modes of structural change, as in Africa where less carbon-intensive “industries without smokestacks”\footnote{18} have grown more rapidly than traditional non-mineral export industries. Unless deep reductions are made in greenhouse gas emissions, global warming of 2°C will be exceeded during the twenty-first century.\footnote{19} The Secretary-General has stated that the analysis by Working Group I as part of the Sixth Assessment Report of the International Panel on Climate Change is “a code red for humanity”.\footnote{20} As stated in Our Common Agenda, in order to bequeath a liveable world to those who will follow, a renewed social contract is required, delivering more for young people and

\footnote{18} Industries without smokestacks generate tradable products, offer high value-added per worker, high job creation for workers with low- and medium-skills and have the capacity for technology change and productivity growth, without the smoky chimneys associated with manufacturing industries of the industrial revolution. Examples include high-value agriculture including cut flowers, tourism, business services, telecommunications, mobile money and other financial services. Richard S. Newfarmer, John Page and Finn Tarp, Industries without smokestacks – industrialization in Africa reconsidered (United Nations University-WIDER Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), 2018).
\footnote{20} Statement by the Secretary-General, 9 August 2021.
succeeding generations and correcting a glaring blind spot in how we measure economic prosperity and progress.

23. Closing digital divides will be an enabler for socially just sustainable development and the fulfilment of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, including through international cooperation to support developing countries in strengthening their human, institutional and technological capacity (see General Assembly resolution 76/300). Access to technology and the skills to use it can help to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all (Sustainable Development Goal 8), and to promote access to education and better health outcomes, including for young people. In the context of the Road Map for Digital Cooperation, the Secretary-General notes the unique opportunity offered by digital common goods in terms of empowering digital public services, social enterprises and engaging young people as co-designers.

IV. Focus area: impact of digital technologies and digital divides on youth in the areas of education, employment and health

A. Education

1. Overview

24. Digital divides have an impact on the delivery and outcomes of education, as referred to by the General Assembly in its resolution 62/126. The spread of global technologies and increased reliance on ICT have exacerbated existing inequalities, creating even greater disparities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and unequal capacities regarding the use of technology will continue to affect well-being across the life cycle.21

25. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic included school closures and the adoption of online remote learning, regardless of whether students had access to, or the ability to use, the Internet, or whether teachers and schools had the capacity to teach online.22 As many as a third of students globally had no access to education for over a year;23 even when households had Internet access, many relied on mobile broadband connections, which can be inadequate for data-intensive activities such as remote schooling.24

26. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the impact of digital divides on education and deepened global inequalities. Socioeconomic groups with limited or no access to the Internet are at a greater relative disadvantage than in the pre-pandemic period.25 The COVID-19 pandemic reversed progress on gender equality (Goal 5), and since the reopening of schools, teachers are reporting that girls are noticeably absent. Refugees and displaced learners continue to struggle in gaining digital skills owing to the lack of connectivity, which affects their educational and employment opportunities.26

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25 Ibid.
2. Action by Member States

27. In order to remove financial barriers in terms of access to technology and the Internet, Member States adopted financial support measures to increase access to remote education and build ICT capacity. Colombia launched a programme offering 90 per cent tuition fee forgiveness for students who complete masters programmes in information and communications technology abroad. In Greece, the Digital Access initiative provided financial support for students and special categories of beneficiaries to purchase technological equipment. Mauritius put in place measures to provide free Internet access to vulnerable households and tablets to students in upper secondary education who are on the social register.

28. Azerbaijan, Bahrain, China, Germany, Jordan, Mauritius, Nicaragua, Sweden and Türkiye invested in creating online alternatives to in-person educational facilities and resources. India now provides an open-access online platform that hosts all classes taught in upper secondary and postgraduate classes. India also launched an initiative to boost digital learning and digitize classrooms.

29. In order to combat the gender divide in digital education, Jordan, Luxembourg, Mauritius and Türkiye adopted digital skills training initiatives specifically targeting women and girls.

30. A range of measures were developed to address digital divides between urban and rural areas. Azerbaijan trained information technology experts in rural areas. Latvia prioritized the provision of digital skills training in all municipalities, including rural areas. India launched the Digital Saksharta Abhiyan programme, which has provided 4.25 million citizens with digital literacy and skills. In addition, the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyaan programme aims to make 60 million people in rural areas, between the ages of 14 and 60, digitally literate and enable them to perform basic functions on computers and other digital devices.

31. With a view to better targeting its youth-focused policy, France has conducted research on young people’s use of digital technology. Part of the investment in ICT in schools includes training educators to better utilize technology and teach students how to use ICT for their benefit. Germany, Sweden and Türkiye launched programmes to improve the digital skills of educational staff, and Luxembourg provides training on the safe use of the Internet for children and youth in primary and secondary schools.

32. Member States also adopted training initiatives aimed at equipping young people with digital skills. China provides digital skills courses to the public and has set some up in schools and universities to target youth. Mauritius provides digital skills courses at training institutions and in schools and higher education institutions. Slovakia launched training courses for digital skills aimed at people working with youth, as well as for young people.

3. Action by the United Nations

33. United Nations entities and youth groups have highlighted the increased importance of technology in education and observed how inequalities in access to technology have deepened divides. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and World Health Organization (WHO) emphasized how the school closures due to COVID-19 disproportionately affected some groups, particularly those who were already disadvantaged, including but not limited to, youth with disabilities, migrants and those with limited access to the Internet. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) observed how the COVID-19 pandemic excluded millions of young people from education owing to increased digital inequalities and
is working with other stakeholders to create a digital environment for youths to access education. Entities including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) provided support to countries during the transition to online platforms and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

34. The digitalization of education was a key focus of the Transforming Education Summit, convened by the Secretary-General in September 2022. The Summit saw the launch of a global call to action on quality public digital learning for all, as well as a partnership on gateways to public digital learning, led by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and UNESCO, which seeks to create and strengthen inclusive digital learning platforms and content. The Summit also highlighted the Giga initiative launched by ITU and UNICEF, which aims to connect every school to the Internet and every young person to information, opportunity and choice. In Indonesia, IOM supported the Government’s ministerial regulation on the implementation of education in coronavirus disease emergencies, which included providing an Internet allowance to students.

35. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Office of the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth recognize the importance of including youth in development efforts and have each consulted with youth regarding education and technology. ITU organized the inaugural Generation Connect Global Youth Summit in 2022, during which 5,000 young people from around the world participated and built digital skills, as well as interacting with international decision makers. The Office of the Envoy on Youth has also worked to address the impact of digital divides on education, including through collaboration with ITU to hold a digital youth consultation, which shaped the youth call to action, entitled “My Digital Future”, presented at the World Telecommunication Development Conference in 2022.

36. UNDP facilitated youth consultations worldwide, including an online youth consultation on technology for democracy in 2021. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) country office in Guatemala also held online events to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and employment from a human rights perspective. UNCTAD organized and co-organized several sessions on the topic of bridging the digital divide and the use of digital technologies in education.

37. UNICEF conducted extensive research with youth in South-East Asia and was able to conclude that digital divides are often misconceptualized globally as being centred on equipment and infrastructure when the reality is that resources, digital skills and supporting youth and those who interact with youth is just as important. The importance of digital skills training has been emphasized, including by ECLAC. The Commission highlighted the need for progress in digital skills training and in advancing the digital rights of individuals. The ILO-ITU Digital Skills Campaign encourages investment in digital skills for young people. ITU also runs the EQUALS Her Digital Skills Badges project, which provides a digital skills training and certification programme for girls and young women.

### B. Employment

#### 1. Overview

38. Youth employment and employability are major concerns globally, and their interplay with digital technology has been underscored by COVID-19. Goals relating

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to full and productive employment and decent work in the 2005 World Summit Outcome (General Assembly resolution 60/1) were reemphasized by the General Assembly in subsequent resolutions, including in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (resolution 70/1). In September 2018, the Secretary-General launched Youth 2030: The United Nations Strategy on Youth, and the Generation Unlimited global partnership aimed at ensuring access to education, learning, training or employment for every young person by 2030. General Assembly resolutions on policies and programmes involving youth set out growing commitments to close digital divides among youth; to ensure that information and communications technologies are incorporated into education and training (resolution 72/146); to promote youth innovation (resolution 74/121); and to boost the future employability and social inclusion of young people by recognizing that building digital skills is crucial (resolution 76/137).

39. The pandemic exacerbated existing youth labour market challenges and digital divides. In 2020, the global ratio of youth not in employment, education or training had risen to 23.3 per cent, and by 2022, some 73 million youths could not find a job (up by 6 million from 2019), with young women more affected than young men.28 Technological infrastructure gaps in access to electricity, the Internet and technological hardware (such as computers, tablets or smart phones) deepened the inequalities in access to education, training and decent jobs.29 Without significant intervention, progress made on Sustainable Development Goal target 8.6 to substantially reduce the proportion of youth who are not in employment, education or training will be jeopardized, which will negatively affect career and income prospects for affected persons.30

40. Structural changes of the fourth industrial revolution present opportunities for youth, who are typically early adopters of new technology, as well as challenges, as they face the greatest risks of job loss through automation. The hiring rate of young people will decline as automation expands and new vacancies will not be created; and job-to-job transition will be more difficult as the employment share of mid-skilled jobs will hollow out. Targeted and adaptive responses are essential as young people with technical and vocational education training are more likely to be employed in automatable jobs, and since jobs with related skill sets also risk automation. While secondary and higher education facilitates retraining or adjustment, youth with experience in automatable jobs often end up unemployed or inactive. Although public employment services and job matching can be boosted through technological advances, face-to-face services remain important to ensure no one is left behind, including people who are digitally illiterate or without access to technology.31

2. Action by Member States

41. Governments are working to bridge digital divides and boost youth skills for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship (Sustainable Development Goal target 4.4), and the use of information and communications technology to promote the empowerment of women (target 5.b), as well as to build back better from the impacts of COVID-19. New policies, strategies and targets have been introduced with components on digital transformation and youth employment in Colombia, El Salvador, Mexico and Türkiye. International policy cooperation has also encouraged commitments, for example, the 2022 declaration on strengthening

31 Ibid.
cooperation between the youth institutions of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico.

42. To increase youth employment and promote a just transition through the climate crisis and the fourth industrial revolution, Member States worked to raise awareness of priority issues. The Ministry of Youth in Jordan hosted a youth leadership in climate action event that discussed technological solutions to limit climate change. Youth forums and campaigns were held to showcase innovators, promote networking and incubate ideas in Bahrain, Jordan, Malaysia, Mexico, Mongolia, Nicaragua and Sweden.

43. Access to training and education related to ICT has been boosted, including through increasing the use of digital platforms. Some campaigns were focused on vulnerable and excluded groups. For example, Austria targeted a campaign towards the needs of young people with disabilities; Bahrain, India, Luxembourg and Slovakia had programmes aimed at supporting women; and in Türkiye, training was extended to refugees and host communities. China launched its Internet and vocational skills training programme and its 100-day free online skills training action, which provide digital training for youth in more than 100 occupations. Greece has several public digital training programmes targeting youth that are tailored to projected growth sectors, including digital marketing, tourism, the blue economy and green skills.

44. To ease the school-to-work transition and boost youth employment and entrepreneurship, online technical training platforms have been rolled out or expanded, a process that accelerated by the measures to respond to COVID-19, and public employment services have been upgraded and digitized in, for example, Bahrain, China, El Salvador, France, Germany, India, Mexico, Mauritius, Nicaragua and Türkiye. These platforms provide a range of services, including access to live and recorded classes, training and career guidance for which students can receive certification; as well as links to jobs, traineeships, sources of funding and events. Industry partnerships have been developed to align training to future demand and blend online learning with practical traineeships, to build capacity in digital aspects of entrepreneurship (Malaysia) and enhance public platforms (Egypt). Public-private partnerships have also expanded training on widely used software brands, in Egypt and Mexico.

3. Action by the United Nations

45. Research and policy dialogue have been leveraged to inform adaptive policies to promote decent work within the context of digital divides, economic challenges and climate change. ITU and UNICEF, through their Giga initiative, have noted the positive spillovers from linking schools to broadband networks and using open-source software as communities gain access to digital public services, thereby enabling access to online banking, information, entrepreneurship and employment opportunities. In 2021, ECLAC noted that roughly half of the jobs in Latin America are potentially automatable, with women and young people between the ages of 15 and 29 most at risk of losing jobs to automation. The Youth Forum Declaration adopted in 2021 in the lead-up to the fifteenth session of UNCTAD highlights the need for young people to have digital skills for the labour market. The “#YouthLead Solutions” campaign and #YouthLead Innovation Festival launched by the Office of the Envoy on Youth both showcase youth-led practical innovations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals for the future we want. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) notes the link between digital skills and employability

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to counter unemployment and associated risks of substance abuse and other negative outcomes.

46. United Nations entities have increasingly leveraged technology to reach young people with high-quality online training and opportunities. The International Trade Centre (ITC) has provided e-commerce and digital entrepreneurship training and information to narrow the capacity gap. Under its #FastTrackTech project, over 2,100 people, including youth, in countries including Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Senegal and Uganda, were trained in digital skills, and training moved online during COVID-19. Another ITC project, Switch ON, aims to build youth capacity to find meaningful employment in Rwanda, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia; and its youth and trade project promotes youth entrepreneurship, including through the “Ye! community” online platform connecting young entrepreneurs with resources, tools, mentors, opportunities and a network of peers. UNCTAD also aims to empower young digital entrepreneurs through its eFounders Fellowship Programme. Generation Unlimited, YouthConnekt Africa, and Youth Co:Lab, including its Movers Programme, offer such services as webinars, courses and resources on business incubation, including in the context of COVID-19, for youth-led small and medium-sized enterprises, social entrepreneurs and young leaders.

47. Working with people in vulnerable and excluded situations, IOM launched a project to promote the digital inclusion of migrants, known as “Migrant E-inclusion”, under the Joint Global Initiative on Diversity, Inclusion and Social Cohesion, which is supported through the MigApp and includes digital tools to support migrants and social cohesion, safe migration and better social and employment outcomes. In order to boost decent jobs for youth in the agrifood system, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations supported different digital transformation initiatives, such as: in various African countries, the participatory guarantee systems developed jointly with the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements; the certification process of products through the development of the KilimoMart application, a web and mobile-based platform, connecting farmers and consumers; an ICT project for self-development of the fishing community in Burundi; in migration-prone rural areas of Guatemala, the ChispaRural digital platform for self-employment supported young people by connecting them and improving their business presence online; and the African Youth Agripreneurs platform, an online community for agricultural entrepreneurs, or “agripreneurs”, enabled rural youth organizations connect, share and learn as part of their journey to decent and profitable work.

C. Health

1. Overview

48. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital divides resulted in unequal impacts on youth health. Youth who had access and capacity to engage in online education or work were able to socially distance and benefit from accurate online health information and e-health consultations, and had lower chances of contracting COVID-19. For vulnerable youth, COVID-19 amplified negative health consequences linked to unequal access to digital technology.


49. Dependence on digital technology can lead to negative health impacts on youth, for example, the negative effects of the lack of movement during lockdowns and quarantines, cyberbullying and stress from increased screen time. Young people are more likely to use social media as their main source of news, thereby increasing their exposure to misinformation and potentially undermining trust.

50. A range of responses are available to address the impacts of the digital divide on youth health. Legislation aimed at protecting youth health on digital platforms can be enacted at the national and international levels. Educating parents can help them to cultivate the digital skills needed to assist youth in finding accurate health information online. Moving forward, youth at risk of mental health issues need greater access to digital literacy tools to protect against the potential negative psychological effects of the increased use of digital technology.

2. Action by Member States

51. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Member States made use of digital technologies to address youth health issues. In 2020, 95 signatories, comprising 94 Member States and the European Union, signed a joint statement of support, in a letter addressed to the Secretary-General and to the President of the General Assembly, regarding the policy brief entitled “COVID-19 and the need for action on mental health”, which addressed youth health and digital technologies during the pandemic (see A/74/894/Rev.1). As a follow-up to that statement, Member States bolstered mental health services for youth and other vulnerable groups, for instance, by introducing awareness-raising initiatives for youth populations regarding safety online.

52. As part of efforts to safeguard youth mental health online, France started a programme in February 2021 to provide free mental health consultations to university students by means of teleconsultation. India used the “It’s Ok To Talk” online platform for youth to seek support on mental well-being. In Jordan, the Ministry of Youth tackled online safety by incorporating artificial intelligence and digital skills in its Al Hussein camps. Mauritius provided counselling services over a messaging application for youth athletes from Rodrigues, an autonomous outer island. Slovakia created an action plan for the national concept of child protection in the digital space. Mongolia provided digital counselling services for youth, including to address harmful habits. Türkiye has provided family counselling through online meeting


40 Susan Walker, Technology Use and Families: Implications for Work-Family Balance and Parenting Education.

platforms, including individual counselling for youth, and has also launched a campaign for combating digital addiction.

53. To extend youth access to e-health services in China, the All-China Youth Federation and the General Administration of Sport launched online national fitness programmes in 2022. In Colombia, electronic medical records were set up to enable health providers to exchange patients’ clinical data and provide e-health services nationwide. El Salvador developed online courses for youth on reproductive health and addiction prevention. Germany developed a lifestyle initiative to promote e-health literacy for disadvantaged youth. In Malaysia, youth and sports skills training institutes initiated e-sports tournaments to keep students engaged in healthy physical lifestyles. Nicaragua introduced a digital platform, “Fuerza Bendita”, to promote the inclusion of individuals with disabilities, including youth.

54. Linking technology and the response to COVID-19 in Bahrain, the King Hamad Youth Empowerment Award to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals went to youth-driven solutions to COVID-19, some of which were digital in nature. Greece launched a collaborative initiative that offered the incentive of a 50-gigabyte data package to youth who received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

3. Action by the United Nations

55. United Nations entities have used a range of tools to reduce the impact of digital divides on youth health. UNDP research has highlighted youth mental health as a key part of the “inequality pandemic” that has emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic.^^42^^ ITC research revealed that e-health services for youth remain reliant on software solutions, and there is a lack of hardware innovation for youth e-health. The WHO global strategy on digital health 2020–2025 indicated key challenges regarding digital technologies, including challenges relating to privacy of health data and the need to increase access among low-income communities.

56. Infrastructure and skills capacity-building efforts have been made for e-health service providers, for example, IOM supported the protection of migrant students’ mental well-being online. WHO set up a virtual counselling project and, with partners, developed a course used to train more than 150 national digital health focal points and over 400 digital health professionals from 106 countries; and through its project involving Scalable Technology for Adolescents to Reduce Stress (known as STARS project), developed digital interventions for youth facing severe mental distress.^^43^^

57. To raise awareness of youth health, the Office of the Envoy on Youth launched a mental health webinar series for youth audiences, using the hashtag #CopingwithCOVID, and collaborated with Twitter on a “Youth Activist Checklist” initiative. The East Africa Regional Office of OHCHR utilized digital technologies to increase public awareness of health issues affecting youth, such as nutrition and domestic violence. UNDP developed an Engage to Disengage programme to help youth use online media in a healthy way. UNODC developed an e-learning platform to implement the Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence for youth mental well-being. WHO led collaborative initiatives to raise awareness of youth health, including: a joint initiative with Kahoot!, an online game-based learning platform, to address, through courses called “kahoots”, health issues ranging from immunization to misinformation; and a joint initiative with Angry Birds Friends, called the Self-Care Tournament, that targets youth audiences.

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V. Engagement of youth at the United Nations

A. Youth Delegate Programme

58. The Youth Delegate Programme of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs has continued to enable the active participation of youth in United Nations processes, through the inclusion of young people in national delegations at intergovernmental meetings. Among the official delegations represented during the seventy-sixth session of the General Assembly held in 2021, there were 71 youth delegates from 36 Member States and one delegate from a Permanent Observer and in 2022, during the seventy-seventh session of the Assembly, 65 youth delegates from 31 Member States and regional groups participated.

B. Economic and Social Council youth forum

59. The Economic and Social Council youth forum is convened by the President of the Council and co-organized by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Office of the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth, in collaboration with the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development. The forum is co-convened by the children and youth major group and the International Coordination Meeting of Youth Organizations. In 2021, the forum was held virtually under the theme “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development” and focused on Sustainable Development Goals 1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 12, 13, 16 and 17. The 2022 forum was also held virtually, under the theme “Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” and reviewed progress on Sustainable Development Goals 4, 5, 14, 15 and 17. In both 2021 and 2022, extensive regional and thematic youth consultations were held ahead of the forums with the goal of increasing the number of youth engagement opportunities.

C. United Nations Strategy on Youth

60. Youth 2030: The United Nations Strategy on Youth, was launched in 2018 to transform the organization’s work for and with youth. Four years on, the strategy has seen significant progress, with 49 United Nations entities and 130 United Nations country teams participating in its implementation. Even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations system continued to put the Youth Strategy into action, accelerating work across the priority and foundational areas of the strategy and engaging young people meaningfully.

61. Guided by the High-level Steering Committee for the Youth Strategy, and with the strong support of the technical leadership group, solid foundations for system-wide implementation have been laid. Accountability tools were developed and a baseline was established as part of the strategy. Reporting on the progress of the strategy was institutionalized across the United Nations system, and Youth Strategy indicators were integrated into the quadrennial comprehensive policy review process. To support implementation of the strategy, several knowledge products have also been produced, and a public-facing dashboard to track progress is in development. A secretariat has been established in the Office of the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth for system-wide coordination regarding the strategy. The establishment of
the United Nations Youth Office was recently approved by the General Assembly, in its resolution 76/306, to encourage greater United Nations system-wide collaboration.

D. Youth-led and youth-focused organizations

62. The children and youth major group reached out to youth members for information on their activities and had an exceptional response rate, which highlighted the importance of digital divides to young people. Respondents underscored the need to close digital divides, given their impact on employment, education and health outcomes for young people. They noted that technology can empower young people and promote networking and connections, but without intervention, it can also divide people and societies, meaning young people need training to identify accurate sources of information and increase their resilience to the negative psychological and health impacts of high levels of screen time and of the use of online media.

63. Organizations noted that digital divides mirror and heighten income divides and that shared approaches can close the divides. They have engaged in campaigns to increase digital inclusion and promote access for young people to technology, including through the provision of training and education, events and networking sessions along the themes of building youth capacity to use technology, and increasing awareness of the uses of technology in education, employment and health. Some organizations noted their use and provision of open-source software to enable individuals and other organizations to freely benefit from technology and to access wider services. Other methods for reaching vulnerable and excluded young people include using free mobile chat applications to deliver training that empowers young people to gain access to decent jobs, as well as online learning tailored to specific groups, including refugees. Finally, some organizations have been able to provide access to grants and scholarships for education.

VI. Conclusion and recommendations

64. The present report focuses on the impacts of digital divides on young people in the areas of education, employment and health. Inequalities in access to technology and in the capacity to use technology that were present prior to the COVID-19 pandemic became highly apparent as a result of physical distancing measures taken to curb the pandemic.

65. The closure of schools, places of education and places of work, the transition to online provision of government, health and education services, as well as the move to a remote set-up for many work activities, meant that the people left behind were at risk of further exclusion and worsened socioeconomic outcomes.

66. Thoughtful and forward-thinking measures are needed to close digital divides and to leverage technology as a public good. In addition to increasing technological infrastructure to enable access to broadband in geographically remote areas, and within poorer and excluded households, it is necessary to bridge capacity divides to enable young people to use the Internet productively, as well as safely, and to identify reliable services and sources of information.

67. On the basis of the information received and analysis performed, the following recommendations are made to Member States, working with civil society and the private sector, as appropriate:

   (a) Extend access to digital technology in educational institutions to facilitate affordable community-wide access and the expansion of access to online
digital health, education and employment services; improve the digital skills of educational staff and parents; and provide targeted assistance to low-income families, those with limited online access and to persons with disabilities facing accessibility challenges;

(b) Take an age-, disability- and gender-sensitive rights-based approach to: expand the adoption and use of digital public goods and open-source software; build digital literacy skills to utilize open-source software and other technology productively and safely; and take legislative measures to protect youth health, including mental health, on digital platforms;

(c) Adopt participatory, collaborative approaches in the design and implementation of interventions that are online or use technology in education, employment and health for youth so as to meet the demands of affected young people and enable longer term sustainability; encourage public-private partnerships for enhancing digital inclusion; and in the area of employment, include youth in collective bargaining and social dialogue to strengthen their representation at the workplace, including in informal sectors;

(d) Recognize that digital transformation and the fourth industrial revolution are intersecting with the climate crisis, increase capacity-building in technology to empower young people and society to build and harness new approaches to combat climate change, promote decent work and enable a socially just transition.