Digital Public Infrastructure for Accelerating Implementation of SDGs in Asia-Pacific

(Side event of the 80th session of ESCAP)

22 April 2024
Bangkok, Thailand

Jointly organized by:
Embassy of India to Thailand,
Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR), Government of India, and
Asian and Pacific Centre for Transfer of Technology (APCTT) of the
United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)

Meeting Report (Draft)

A. Summary of discussions

1. Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) is being widely recognized as a key enabler to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With an objective to explore the role that DPI can play in enabling achievement of SDG targets in the Asia-Pacific, this side event on '***Digital Public Infrastructure for Accelerating Implementation of SDGs in Asia Pacific***', was jointly organized by the Embassy of India to Thailand, Department of Scientific & Industrial Research (DSIR), Government of India, and the Asian and Pacific Centre for Transfer of Technology (APCTT) of ESCAP.

2. The side event provided a platform for member States to explore the role of digital public infrastructure (DPI) in achieving various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Asia-Pacific region. The session deliberated on mature and emerging DPI systems in the region, and the need to scale up the DPIs using innovative digital technologies, enabling policy and regulatory frameworks, capacity building, technical assistance, and financing.

3. The session brought together nearly 40 participants from member States of ESCAP attending the Commission session. The participants included policymakers and government officials and participants from national agencies, research organizations and enterprises engaged in the development and deployment of digital technologies.

4. It was noted that digital public infrastructure enables the improvement of public services, such as healthcare and education, reduces financial transaction costs and facilitates data-driven governance

and decision making in countries. Key examples from the Asia-Pacific region include digital identity (Aadhar) and the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) of India, the eCitizen portal and SGFinDex of Singapore, PromptPay of Thailand, the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) system of Bangladesh, and ePhilID and InstaPay of the Philippines.

5. There are promising futuristic DPI concepts to bridge the digital divide and support SDGs, e.g., Blockchain-enabled financial inclusion platforms (SDG 1), AI-powered predictive healthcare systems (SDG 3), Quantum computing for infrastructure optimization (SDG 9), and Internet of Things (IoT) for Smart Cities (SDG 11).

6. Evidence shows that DPI unlocks the value of innovation in society and catalyzes societal transformation across sectors. In India, the usage of digital technologies has been tremendous and evident in addressing many development challenges. For example, DPI has played a crucial role in the financial sector providing about 80% of the population access to the banking system.

7. India has pioneered the establishment and widescale usage of DPIs in many sectors (e.g., Aadhar, UPI, DigiLocker, DigiYatra and others) contributing to support the SDGs through poverty reduction, healthcare, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, and climate action among others. Specific application areas include telemedicine, e-health, digital health records, e-learning platforms, smart grids and energy management, climate data and analysis, and eco-friendly transportation solutions. India's diverse examples of DPI platforms have shown far-reaching impacts ranging from improved governance, empowering citizens, and improved healthcare to a thriving digital economy which is more inclusive, vibrant, and sustainable.

8. The session noted the important role of digital tools and digital public infrastructure in evidence-based policymaking in countries. Digital connectivity and cybersecurity partnerships promoted by USAID across 21 nations, many in the Asia-Pacific, have helped in increasing capacity of people, businesses and civil society, and enhancing their capacity to engage in policymaking. Key initiatives are high quality digital connectivity through undersea cables in the Pacific, facilitating digital government services, open access networks, and cybersecurity training for small businesses.

9. The GovStack of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is a multistakeholder, community-driven initiative, focused on accelerating national digital transformation worldwide drawing upon the expertise from contributors in the private sector, civil society, and governments. It promotes a whole-of-government approach to digital public infrastructure that can deliver reusable digital services at scale with a greater return on investment. It helps countries build their services based on Building Block specifications, identify and prioritize applications which can then be demonstrated, tested and explored in sandboxes, benefit from capacity building (e.g., e-learning, implementation playbook, workshops), and exchange knowledge through Communities of Practice.

10. Towards achieving the SDGs, it becomes imperative for countries to use DPIs for providing services to people at the grassroots level, women and underserved people. DPIs can help in connecting villages

and rural areas through digital networks and centers. For example, Bangladesh has established about 9,000 digital centers to connect rural areas of the country and deliver public services including remittances, financial services, micro credit, microfinance among others.

11. The session highlighted some of the key challenges for countries to establish robust DPIs. These include access issues, lack of digital literacy, data privacy and security, cyber security threats, lack of investment, inadequate legal frameworks, inter-operability challenges, and public-private partnership.

B. Recommendations

1. Strong and robust digital public infrastructure would require enhanced collaboration between countries through knowledge-sharing, cross-learning and collective decision-making related to technology choice, cyber-security, interoperability, and data portability.

2. The implementation of DPI necessitates robust policies and regulations to safeguard data privacy and ensure security of digital transactions and interactions.

3. It is necessary to increase investment in infrastructure improvements and digital literacy programmes to bridge the access gaps in the population at large.

4. Countries could strengthen their legal frameworks to ensure data privacy and cybersecurity defenses.

5. Establishing interoperable standards and protocols are crucial for the seamless integration of various DPI components and platforms.

6. Collaborative efforts between the government and private sector entities are essential for the sustained development and maintenance of DPI.