

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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VIDEO MESSAGE TO THE CLOSING OF THE 15TH ANNUAL INTERNET GOVERNANCE FORUM INTERNET GOVERNANCE IN THE AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

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It is a pleasure to address this closing session of the fifteenth annual Internet Governance Forum.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on the importance of digital technologies and transformation, and on the urgent need to enhance the role of the IGF as a platform for dialogue on proposed solutions.

This year has brought new evidence of the benefits of connectivity. Internet access is protecting healthcare, jobs and lives.

But the pandemic is exacerbating inequalities of all kinds, including the digital divide. Those without access to digital technology – almost half the world – are denied opportunities to study, communicate, trade, shop, work and participate in much of modern life.

Close to half a billion students are affected by school closures and the most marginalized, including at least 11 million girls, are at high risk of never returning to school.

And for those online, connectivity has increased vulnerability to harms and abuses of many kinds. The shadow pandemic of disinformation about COVID-19 has put health and lives at risk, and threatens to reduce the uptake and effectiveness of any vaccines that become available.

Meanwhile hate speech and discrimination are running riot in digital spaces.

And the risk of a fragmented internet is greater than ever.

These are critical areas where my Roadmap for Digital Cooperation sets out a way forward, through its vision to connect, respect and protect all people online.

I welcome this Forum's focus on digital inclusion, which is essential to building a strong recovery. We urgently need to address the growing digital gender gap and put digital technology to work for those who need it most: the vulnerable, the

marginalized, those living in poverty, and people suffering from discrimination of all kinds.

The pursuit of inclusion must determine not just our approach to expanding connectivity, but also how we manage data. We need to look at how we can make the best use of digital data for the public good, and develop data governance frameworks that recognize diversity, empower businesses and communities, and advance the Sustainable Development Goals.

Many of you – representing different communities, from governments, the private sector, civil society, the technical and academic communities - are working closely with the United Nations to further the aims of the Roadmap.

These include narrowing digital divides, promoting digital inclusion, achieving universal connectivity and protecting human rights online.

Together, as we seek to build a strong recovery from the pandemic, we can reduce the harmful aspects of digital technology, and unleash its power as a true equalizer and enabler.

I urge all governments to make sure that your response and recovery plans include increasing digital connectivity in a way that is affordable, safe and inclusive.

The Forum's broad-ranging discussions over the last week have been important and meaningful. The IGF has a vital role in connecting the dots on the global digital map. But it cannot fulfil this role unless it reaches decision-makers.

We must now act decisively and urgently to strengthen the IGF, so that it can enhance its unique role in the digital cooperation architecture.

After more than a decade of consultations, we have identified several areas for improvement. These range from increasing the Forum's visibility and funding sustainability, to a proposed multi-stakeholder high-level body within the IGF that can translate its important discussions into concrete impact.

My Roadmap sets out a series of actions to this end, and I intend to move quickly on those that fall under my responsibility.

We need an Internet Governance Forum that is responsive, relevant and impactful.

We need it to be a place where governments, companies, technical experts and civil society from all parts of the world come together, share ideas, debate solutions and agree on common standards and principles.

I congratulate you again on your discussions this week.

Thank you.