

**Concept Note for the Thematic Discussion at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Session of the High-level Committee on South-South Cooperation**

***Accelerating the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: South-South Cooperation as a Driver for Transformation***

**Date:** 28 May 2025, 3:00pm-6:00pm

**Venue:** Conference Room 2, UN HQ

**Background:**

With only 17 percent of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) targets on track, there is an urgent need to accelerate progress and realize the transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda. The 2024 SDG Report and outcomes from key intergovernmental forums highlight significant gaps in progress. Structural barriers, compounded by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing conflicts, climate change, mounting debt burdens, digital divides, and deepening inequalities, have derailed development efforts. Development enablers—such as SDG financing, access to development assistance, capacity-building, and technology transfer—have faced significant disruptions, exacerbating these challenges.

In this critical context, South-South cooperation, as a complement to North-South cooperation, emerges as one of the important modalities for accelerating SDGs achievement. Recent years have underscored the transformative potential of South-South and triangular cooperation on multiple development sectors, demonstrating increased trade and investment among Southern countries, the amplification of voices from the Global South, and successful poverty eradication efforts. Member States have repeatedly emphasized the importance of scaling up and strengthening of South-South and triangular cooperation, as a complementary means of advancing the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, in intergovernmental forums, calling for greater focus on knowledge exchange, capacity-building, technology transfer, policy dialogues, and resource mobilization. These modalities are increasingly recognized as enablers of SDG implementation, particularly in areas such as science, technology, and innovation (STI), digital transformation, trade, financing for development, climate action, and a just green transition.

**Leveraging Science, Technology, and Innovation through South-South and Triangular Cooperation for Sustainable Development:**

Science, technology, and innovation, including the transformative potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI), are pivotal for addressing global development challenges and accelerating SDG achievements. AI-driven innovations from healthcare to education, from climate action to food systems, have the potential to build inclusive, green, sustainable economies and societies.<sup>1</sup> However, for many countries in the Global South, barriers such as limited technological infrastructure, insufficient investment, and limited capacities hinder the full utilization of STI for sustainable development.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2024-02-07/secretary-generals-remarks-the-general-assembly-priorities-for-2024>

Over 2.6 billion people, mostly women and girls, still do not have access to the Internet, highlighting the urgent need to bridge digital divides.<sup>2</sup> Universal connectivity remains a distant prospect in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), where only 35 percent and 39 percent of the population do not have access to the internet, respectively.<sup>3</sup> The digital divide between the North and Global South and within the Global South itself, significantly impacts human development by limiting access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and social services.

Disparities in digital access exacerbate existing inequalities, hindering the ability of vulnerable communities to participate in and benefit from the digital economy. Furthermore, while the rapid advancement of AI promises widespread transformations for societies, economies and the world of work, it also poses significant threats, such as job displacement, data privacy concerns, and ethical challenges, and the potential to widen existing inequalities. Uneven investment, adoption and the use of AI among developing countries threaten to exacerbate the digital divide and further entrench disparities in income and quality of life.<sup>4</sup> According to UNDP, digital exclusion not only limits individuals' ability to engage in the digital economy and access critical services but also reinforces cycles of poverty and inequality.<sup>5</sup> Bridging this divide is essential for achieving inclusive and sustainable development, ensuring that no one is left behind in the digital transformation.

Research and development (R&D) spending also remains low in many regions across the Global South, with most investing less than 1 percent of their GDP in R&D, compared to over 2.5 percent in developed countries. In LDCs and LLDCs, this figure drops to between 0.20 and 0.27 percent.<sup>6</sup> Developing countries risk being left behind in the development of frontier technologies, which are an important aspect of national and sustainable development.

Addressing these disparities is crucial to ensuring that the Global South can fully benefit from STI-driven development. South-South and triangular cooperation, which complements North-South cooperation, offer platforms for addressing these challenges, enabling developing countries to share knowledge, transfer technology, and build capacity in STI and AI in ways that reflect their socio-economic and environmental contexts. The Havana Declaration on Current Development Challenges: the Role of Science, Technology and Innovation, adopted at the Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Group of 77 and China, emphasized the need for enhanced cooperation in STI to drive sustainable development in the Global South. The Declaration underscores the role of STI in economic recovery, digital transformation, and climate resilience.

This collaboration modality is also particularly relevant in the implementation of the Global Digital Compact (GDC), adopted at the 2024 UN Summit of the Future, which highlights the importance of international cooperation in digital transformation, with South-South and triangular cooperation playing an important role in expanding universal and affordable Internet access, particularly in underserved areas and communities. Increased financial support and innovative solutions are essential to bridging digital divides and fostering inclusivity.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/PR-2024-11-27-facts-and-figures.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> UN Office of the SG's Envoy of Technology and ILO, Mind the AI Divide: Shaping a Global Perspective on the Future of Work, 2024

<sup>5</sup> UNDP, From Access to Empowerment: Digital Inclusion in a Dynamic World (Singapore: UNDP Policy Centre, 2024)

<sup>6</sup> UN, The Sustainable Development Goals Extended Report 2023

South-South cooperation is also crucial in scaling up digital capacity-building initiatives, with a strong focus on empowering underrepresented groups such as women, youth, and micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). Such cooperation could support skills development programmes, foster digital entrepreneurship, and create opportunities for MSMEs to participate in the digital economy. Regional partnerships could also facilitate training initiatives, technical knowledge-sharing, and the co-development of digital solutions tailored to the needs of the Global South.

Another critical area advocated in the GDC is the development of digital public goods and digital public infrastructure (DPI) to ensure equitable access to technology and its benefits. They offer opportunities for economic and social development, particularly for low-income countries. South-South and triangular cooperation could drive innovation in digital governance, promote open-source solutions, and facilitate knowledge-sharing on good practices for DPI development. Additionally, responsible and interoperable data governance is essential, balancing the need for data-driven innovation with privacy protection and secure, trusted data flows to ensure mutual benefits among developing countries.

Building on these commitments, South-South and triangular cooperation could be leveraged to support the development of high-quality data sets, affordable computing resources, and localized digital solutions that reflect linguistic and cultural diversity. These efforts can foster joint research initiatives, promote AI-driven innovations adapted to local contexts, and establish entrepreneurial ecosystems that empower startups and enterprises in the Global South to thrive in the digital economy.

To align AI with development goals in the South, it is crucial to tailor technologies to local needs. For example, while AI-powered production lines can enhance industrial efficiency, they may not be suitable in regions with high youth unemployment, as automation could worsen joblessness unless paired with strategies for workforce reskilling and new job creation. Conversely, failing to adopt AI could leave the Global South lagging in the global digital economy. Therefore, a balanced approach is essential—integrating AI in ways that complement human labour, foster innovation, and support inclusive growth.

Both the failure to adopt AI and its uncritical application carry risks: the former may erode global competitiveness, while the latter could deepen social and economic inequalities. Navigating these challenges requires thoughtful policy design, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and robust ethical frameworks. South-South and triangular cooperation can play a pivotal role in this process by facilitating the exchange of best practices and co-developing AI solutions tailored to local contexts. Through these partnerships, AI can become a tool for sustainable and equitable development.

Additionally, STI plays a crucial role in addressing the escalating impacts of climate change by enabling innovative and scalable solutions for mitigation, adaptation, and resilience. AI and advanced analytics are increasingly being used to monitor environmental changes, optimize resource use, and predict climate-related events, helping communities adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change. AI-powered precision agriculture optimizes water and fertilizer use while boosting crop yields, directly addressing food security challenges exacerbated by climate variability. Similarly, renewable energy technologies, supported by South-South and triangular cooperation and regional innovation hubs, facilitate the transition to low-carbon economies by making clean energy more accessible and affordable.

Digital technologies also serve as powerful drivers of financial inclusion, enabling vulnerable communities to access essential services, participate in the digital economy, and secure livelihoods. Through digital platforms, mobile banking, and fintech solutions, previously underserved populations can gain access to credit, savings, and insurance, unlocking opportunities for economic empowerment. South-South and

triangular cooperation frameworks are instrumental in promoting the replication and scaling of such innovations across regions, ensuring that financial inclusion initiatives are tailored to local contexts while benefiting from shared experiences.

Ultimately, STI, leveraged through South-South and triangular cooperation, offers transformative pathways to address climate change, co-developing AI solutions, bridge technological divides, and drive financial inclusion. These efforts enhance the capacity of developing countries to implement sustainable solutions, positioning the Global South as a leader in global resilience and prosperity.

**Objective:**

The upcoming thematic discussion at the 22nd Session of the High-level Committee on South-South Cooperation will provide a platform for Member States to exchange innovative good practices, policies, and strategies to overcome STI-related challenges and promote partnerships to scale innovative solutions. A key focus will be on leveraging South-South and triangular cooperation to bridge digital and technological divides and ensure that STI, including AI, serves as a driver of equitable and sustainable development.

Discussions will centre on:

- **Addressing digital exclusion as a barrier to sustainable development**, recognizing that the inability to engage in the digital economy and access critical services reinforces cycles of poverty and inequality. Discussions will explore South-South and triangular cooperation solutions to bridge this divide, ensuring that digital transformation is truly inclusive and leaves no one behind.
- **Enhancing access to STI tools for all countries in the Global South, particularly through regional collaboration and knowledge exchange**, to drive innovation and resilience in key areas such as climate adaptation and mitigation and financial inclusion. Discussions will explore how STI can support climate-smart technologies, digital financial services, and inclusive economic systems that empower vulnerable communities and enhance resilience against global challenges.
- **Investment in infrastructure, particularly Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)**, innovative mechanisms, and AI development and application to drive digital transformation and economic growth.
- **Strengthening capacity-building and ethical governance of emerging technologies, including AI, while aligning South-South and triangular cooperation with global digital commitments such as the Global Digital Compact (GDC)**. This will ensure the responsible, inclusive, and equitable use of digital technologies and foster participatory digital economies that drive collective progress toward achieving the SDGs.

**Programme Structure:**

<b>3:00 – 3:15 PM</b>	<p><b>Opening Remarks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>H.E. Amb. Omar Hilale</b>, President of the High-level Committee on SSC and Permanent Representative of Morocco to the UN</li> <li>• <b>H.E. Philemon Yang</b>, President of the UN General Assembly</li> <li>• <b>Ms. Dima Al-Khatib</b>, Director, United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation</li> </ul>
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<p><b>3:15 – 3:25 PM</b></p>	<p><b>Keynote Address: Scene-Setting</b></p> <p><b>Moderator: Ms. Janil Greenaway</b>, Senior Engagement Advisor, UNDP</p> <p><b>Speaker: Prof. Yuen Yuen Ang</b>, Alfred Chandler Chair Professor of Political Economy, Johns Hopkins University</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role of South-South and triangular cooperation and its future trajectory to accelerate SDG implementation with a particular focus on STI and digital transformation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3:25 – 4:50 PM</b></p>	<p><b>Panel Discussion (6 Speakers, 10 Minutes Each)</b></p> <p>Each speaker will focus on a distinct but interconnected STI area, highlighting prospects, good practices, and policy recommendations under the framework of South-South cooperation.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Bridging the Digital Divide for Inclusive Development</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <u>Speaker:</u> <b>Ms. Archana Gulati</b> , Deputy Director of Telecommunication Development Bureau, The International Telecommunication Union (ITU)</li> <li>○ <u>Discussion Focus:</u> Digital inclusion remains a critical challenge in many developing countries, particularly in LDCs and LLDCs, where digital connectivity remains significantly lower than the global average. The digital divide exacerbates inequalities by restricting access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and productivity, while also reducing the efficiency and effectiveness of government and financial services. As emerging technologies evolve, new forms of exclusion are also emerging, requiring proactive strategies to ensure inclusivity. South-South cooperation presents opportunities for joint solutions, technology transfers, and innovative partnerships to close the digital gap.</li> <li>○ <u>Key Issues to cover:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Addressing persistent infrastructure deficits, affordability and accessibility challenges that limit digital connectivity</li> <li>▪ Strengthening South-South partnerships to co-develop digital solutions tailored to regional and local needs.</li> <li>▪ Showcasing examples of countries that have successfully implemented breakthrough strategies to close the digital divide.</li> <li>▪ Exploring the role of UN entities in supporting digital inclusion through policy guidance, technical assistance, and resource mobilization.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>2. <b>Establishment of Strategies, Policies, and Legal Frameworks for Digitalization</b></li> </ol>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Speaker:</i> <b>Mrs. Eleonora Betancur Gonzalez</b>, Director-General, Presidential Agency for International Cooperation of Colombia (APC)</li> <li>○ <i>Discussion Focus:</i> Effective policy and regulatory frameworks are essential for guiding digital transformation efforts. Without clear strategies, digitalization initiatives risk being fragmented and failing to deliver inclusive benefits. South-South cooperation can provide a platform for sharing successful regulatory models and policy frameworks.</li> <li>○ <i>Key Issues:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Developing national strategies, legal frameworks and implementation plans for digital transformation.</li> <li>▪ Strengthening policy coherence and cross-sectoral coordination.</li> <li>▪ Ensuring alignment with global digital commitments such as the Global Digital Compact (GDC) and the role of South-South and triangular cooperation.</li> <li>▪ Strengthening institutional capacity for digital governance and policymaking.</li> <li>▪ Case study from the Global South showcasing a successful national or regional initiative in developing digital strategies, policies, and legal frameworks to drive digital transformation.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
	<p><b>3. Developing Digital Infrastructure with a Focus on Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Speaker:</i> <b>H.E. Mr. Parvathaneni Harish</b>, Permanent Representative of India to the UN</li> <li>○ <i>Discussion Focus:</i> The development of digital infrastructure, including digital public infrastructure (DPI), is essential for enabling inclusive digital economies and public service delivery. DPI, including open-source digital identity systems, digital payment platforms, and data-sharing frameworks, can facilitate financial inclusion, e-governance, and social protection programmes. South-South and triangular cooperation can support the exchange of expertise in building resilient and scalable digital ecosystems.</li> <li>○ <i>Key Issues:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Investing in digital public goods and DPI as enablers of SDG progress.</li> <li>▪ Prerequisites needed for effective infrastructure development, including policy frameworks, investment readiness, and technological capacity.</li> <li>▪ Role of regional cooperation in strengthening infrastructure resilience, ensuring interoperability, and facilitating cross-border digital services.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

- Leveraging South-South knowledge-sharing to design inclusive and interoperable DPI frameworks.

#### 4. Harnessing AI and Emerging Technologies for Sustainable Development

- *Speaker:* **Mr. Quintin Chou-Lambert, Chief**, United Nations Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies
- *Discussion Focus:* AI and other emerging technologies hold significant potential for accelerating progress towards the SDGs, but their adoption in the Global South is hindered by unequal access to resources, technical expertise, and regulatory frameworks. South-South cooperation can facilitate capacity-building, and joint research efforts to ensure that AI and frontier technologies are harnessed responsibly and equitably.
- *Key Issues:*
  - Using AI for sustainable development in areas such as healthcare, agriculture, and climate action.
  - Addressing the ethical challenges of AI, data governance, privacy concerns, and job displacement.
  - Strengthening South-South collaboration in AI governance and responsible innovation.
  - Encouraging investment in AI research and development in the Global South.

#### 5. Financing for Digital Transformation and STI Development

- *Speaker:* **Ms. May Ali Babiker**, Director, Cooperation and Capacity Development, Islamic Development Bank (IsDB)
- *Discussion Focus:* Digital transformation and STI development require significant financial investments, yet many developing countries face challenges in mobilizing resources. South-South and triangular cooperation, as a complement to North-South cooperation, can provide alternative financing mechanisms, including regional investment funds, technology transfer agreements, and blended finance models, to support innovation and digital transformation.
- *Key Issues:*
  - Strengthening South-South trade and investment in digital economies.
  - Promoting collaboration among development banks and financial institutions to support digital inclusion projects.
  - Encouraging partnerships between governments, private sector actors, and multilateral organizations to scale up STI investments and the development of innovative financing mechanisms.
  - Addressing intellectual property rights challenges to enhance access to existing technologies, recognizing

	<p>that not all countries have the capacity to independently develop STI goods.</p> <p><b>6. Capacity-Building and Skills Development for the Digital Economy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <u>Speaker:</u> <b>H.E. Amb. Tania Romualdo</b>, Permanent Representative of Cabo Verde to the UN</li> <li>○ <u>Discussion Focus:</u> As digital economies grow, developing countries must ensure that their populations have the necessary skills to participate in and benefit from digital transformation. Digital literacy, technical training, and workforce reskilling initiatives are crucial to fostering inclusive economic growth. South-South cooperation can play a key role in supporting education and capacity-building programmes tailored to the specific needs of different regions.</li> <li>○ <u>Key Issues:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Expanding digital skills training programs, particularly for women, youth, and MSMEs.</li> <li>▪ Strengthening regional cooperation for technical and vocational education in ICT.</li> <li>▪ Promoting digital entrepreneurship through South-South knowledge exchange.</li> <li>▪ Aligning workforce development with emerging trends in digital industries.</li> <li>▪ Showcasing good practices on capacity-building efforts from the Global South</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>4:50 – 5:00 PM</b></p>	<p><b>Discussant:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Dr. Fahad Ali Albalawi</b>, Saudi Authority for Data and Artificial Intelligence, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia</li> <li>• <b>Ms. Cecilia Mercedes Ugaz Estrada</b>, Deputy to the Director General and Managing Director, UNIDO</li> </ul>
<p><b>5:00 – 5:55 PM</b></p>	<p><b>Moderated Interactive Discussion and Q&amp;A</b></p>
<p><b>5:55 – 6:00 PM</b></p>	<p><b>Closing Remarks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>H.E. Amb. Omar Hilale</b>, President of the High-level Committee on SSC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Summary of key takeaways for strengthening South-South and triangular cooperation in STI and digital transformation.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>