<u>**Civil Society input**</u>

Fifth South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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Thank you to UNESCAP, and the Sustainable Development Council of Sri Lanka.

Respected colleagues and dear friends,

SDG 17[1] has been referred to as the "most important UN SDG".[2] This goal refers to global partnerships and cooperation for sustainable development, recognising that successful development agendas are grounded in partnerships formed at global, regional, national and local levels.[3]

The crucial place of data for development is emphasized in Target 17.18, emphasising its interrelationships with the other SDG 17 targets of knowledge sharing and cooperation for access to science, technology and innovation (STI) plus strengthening the STI capacity for least developed countries.

Digital data is the defining paradigm of development today. It is crucial to the attainment of several SDGs. The ability to use big data science is a measure of a knowledge society. Unfortunately, in the mainstream SDGs discourse, the idea of 'data for development' has been reduced to partnerships that undermine self reliance, allowing transnational big tech companies a free rein in shaping and controlling national data infrastructure. The absence of global public financing measures and the democratic deficit in global data governance has seen the legitimisation of a "digital public good" approach in global cooperation that has little to do with public interest, giving Northern companies and countries a powerful channel to cement their economic advantage.

With COVID-19, and the use of contact tracing apps, a variety of concerns have emerged. Firstly, weak institutional safeguards and the absence of rule of law has seen extremely unjustifiable surveillance of citizens by state agencies. Secondly, the absence of public digital infrastructures has made the marketisation of people's data through public-private partnerships and trade agreements inevitable in the face of crisis – entrenching big tech opportunism. Thirdly, the risks of exclusion and disenfranchisement have become heightened for vulnerable populations, such as women and migrant workers, who lack digital access and literacy in the South Asian region.

The first imperative is that data systems in the region must put people at the centre, contributing to the distribution of the gains of scientific advancement for all. This requires that policies and laws are geared to promote an emancipatory vision of technological innovation in the region – one that is based on human rights standards, and equity, social justice and public interest ideals.

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1 Official wording: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development
2 https://www.sopact.com/perspectives/sdg17-most-important-sdg
3 https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/globalpartnerships/

The second imperative is that data governance issues cannot be converted into trade issues. The push for ecommerce agreements at the WTO threatens to undercut the sovereignty and autonomy of data infrastructures in developing countries.

Finally, if data science has to be meaningful to global justice, immediate action is needed towards: a) mobilising ODA investments for the development of public data infrastructure in countries of the region and in the Global South, b) challenging the silence around global frameworks for the just governance of data so that the duty of governments everywhere to protect and promote a rights-based data regime is established, and c) ensuring that data for development is not just about infrastructures of monitoring, but also about laying the foundations of STI capability for people's flourishing and planetary well being.